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Democrats beware of the Reagan trap

The Soviet Union and its allies in Latin America may be plotting to defeat President Reagan this November, but with some help from the Democrats, they may re-elect him instead.

Events are conspiring to give Ronald Reagan the opportunity to say on the campaign trail this fall: "Moscow, Havana, and Managua are against me. Are you going to vote for them or for America?" Unless the Democrats are careful, they will help Mr. Reagan score a landslide victory by wrapping himself in the flag.

On the issue of Central America,

for example, Mr. Reagan's television speech last week was practically devoid of convincing argument or evidence to back up his policy.

The U.S. government presumably is in possession of radio intercepts, photography and captured documents that might prove that Nicaragua continues to ship weapons and ammunition into El Salvador, despite its denials. A presidential speech that was meant to persuade doubters might have unveiled some of that evidence.

It might also have included a detailed moral and legal justification for aiding covert warfare against Nicaragua. Polls indicate that the American people neither

understand nor support that Reagan policy.

Instead of calming fears and fostering understanding of his policies, the president waved a bloody shirt. He used the word "communist" no fewer than 26 times during his speech, usually followed by "aggression" or "subversion," as if that were the whole of what is going on in Central America.

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To listen to Mr. Reagan, one would have thought that El Salvador was a garden paradise wickedly invaded by outsiders, rather than a violent, poverty-stricken country whose oligarchy has been suppressing its population for generations.

"There is a small, violent right wing as opposed to democracy as are the guerrillas," Mr. Reagan said, "but they are not part of the government." A president who meant to convince doubters would have honestly admitted that some of the right-wing death squads operate in cahoots with government police forces. He might have counseled that only time, patience, Salvadoran dedication, and American tenacity will produce reform.

The fact is that President Reagan was not trying to convince his opposition or win them over; he was drawing a line in the sand. Those who are with him are red, white and blue; those who oppose him aren't.

All too often, unfortunately, the Democrats have been walking right into Mr. Reagan's trap. They did it in an especially clumsy manner on March 20, when major House leaders wrote an obsequious letter to Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega that began "Dear Comandante."

"We regret the fact that better relations do not exist between the United States and your country," they said. "We have beef, and remain, opposed to U.S. support for military action directed against the people or government of Nicaragua."

The letter, from House Majority Leader Jim Wright and several Foreign Affairs subcommittee chairmen, was intended to urge Nicaragua to hold fair elections this November. It sounded, however, like an attempt to collaborate with the Nicaraguans in undermining presidential policy.

"Those responsible for supporting violence against your government, and for obstructing

serious negotiations or broad political participation in El Salvador would have far greater difficulty winning support for their policies than they do today," the Democrats wrote Mr. Ortega.

The Democrats stumbled again on the day after Mr. Reagan's speech. Only 56 out of a total of 268 Democrats voted to support the president's request for military aid for El Salvador, despite a plea from El Salvador's apparent president-elect, Jose Napoleon Duarte, a democratic moderate. The Reagan request passed the House by only four votes, 212-208.

If the administration is right in believing that Cuban-backed guerrillas are planning stepped-up violence in El Salvador this fall, the president surely will say they were encouraged by Democrats who opposed military aid. He may even be right in saying so.

The preferable policy for Democrats would be to vote President Reagan all the money he wants, and then hold him responsible for the consequences of his policies.

An analogous situation is arising in connection with the Soviets, who by boycotting the Olympics and staying out of arms talks are saying that Mr. Reagan is a man they can't work with.

The Democrats should be standing solidly with Mr. Reagan and declaring that they will not reward the Soviets for breaking off nuclear talks. Instead, they seem ready to deny the president funding for the MX missile, thereby giving the Soviets as a gift something they would otherwise have to bargain for in Geneva.

And led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Democratic presidential candidates have indicated that it's somehow America's fault that the Soviets pulled out of the Olympics. Mr. Jackson went to the Soviet embassy in Washington to woo them back.

Gary Hart said that the Soviet boycott was "some spillover from . . . an almost negative arms control attitude on the part of this administration." Walter Mondale urged the president to bargain the Soviets back to the games.

The Democrats have to find a way to make clear their objections to Reagan policy without seeming to sympathize with U.S. adversaries. As yet, they haven't found it.