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Perilous Latin Policy

By Robert E. White

WASHINGTON — President Reagan's speech to Congress last Wednesday signals his determination to pursue the course — based on a disastrous self-fulfilling prophecy — he has followed in Central America since coming to office. Instead of trying to contain unrest in Nicaragua and El Salvador, the Administration is apparently going to continue to spread upheaval throughout the region.

The Administration has made a definitive break with the diplomatic principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and nonintervention. Instead, it has directed its resources toward strengthening the Central American military and fighting an ill-defined "Communist threat" with huge Central Intelligence Agency stations and large numbers of military advisers. The result has been to encourage precisely the threat that the President hoped to stop.

To grasp why the Administration sponsored an invasion of Nicaragua from Honduras, look to El Salvador. Many key foreign policy aides understand that the brutal and corrupt Salvadoran Government is falling apart and that no amount of military assistance will enable it to contain the revolutionaries. Yet the White House firmly rejects any direct parleys with guerrillas. Instead, Washington is determined to create an ill-starred, region-wide military battle — hoping in the end to negotiate a region-wide solution on its own terms.

The campaign began in earnest this spring when the Pentagon conducted joint military exercises with Honduras along the Honduran-Nicaraguan frontier and the Honduran military strongman, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, announced that co-existence with Nicaragua was no longer possible. By that time, several thousand Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries, trained, armed and funded by the C.I.A., occupied camps on the Honduran side of the border. In early March, these forces, known as *contras*, invaded Nicaragua.

The true intent of the Administration, in supporting the *contras*, may have been neither to overthrow the Sandinists nor, as Mr. Reagan claimed, to interdict the negligible trickle of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Rather, I believe, the invasion was part of a systematic plan to provoke the Sandinists to cross the Honduran border and attack the counter-revolutionaries' base camps. Honduran troops were poised to repel the invaders and enter Nicaragua in hot pursuit — creating a border war. But even the hot-headed and inexperi-

enced Sandinists refused to fall into so obvious a trap. They ordered their troops to stay well clear of the Honduran border and reiterated their offer to negotiate with Honduras or the United States. Neither country has taken up the offer — and instead both have continued to aid the *contras*.

It is in Honduras, the poorest country in the region, that the worst effects of the Reagan policy may be seen. In the face of widespread misery and despair, many Hondurans oppose their Government's militaristic policies, demanding deep political, economic and social changes. These dissidents are now treated as subversives, and, for the first time in its history, the Honduran military has begun to abduct and kill labor union leaders, intellectuals and others who dissent from official policy. This is the way revolution took hold in El Salvador — with popular outrage against officially sponsored disappearances.

The Administration accuses Nicaragua of exporting revolution to Honduras. In fact, the exact opposite is true. In obedience to our policy, Honduras has become embroiled in militaristic counter-revolution — and is attempting to export it.

The Administration must learn that counter-revolution is precisely the wrong response to a people determined to take power and transform their countries. Our policy toward the region must take into account the security interests of the United States. But where is it written that the people of Central America must remain in bondage so that the United States can remain free?

Do the Reagan policy-makers truly fear that Nicaragua will end up identified with the Soviet Union and Cuba? Or do they fear precisely the opposite — that if we pursued a less aggressive policy, Nicaragua might emerge not as a Soviet lackey but as a nonaligned country? Do we reject negotiations in El Salvador because our policy is based on continued military domination of that country? Do we perhaps reject the consistent offers of good offices from Latin American democratic leaders to help bring peace to Central America because we seek primarily military solutions to political, economic and social problems?

As we examine our actions in Central America, we should recall Florence Nightingale's words: "The first responsibility of a hospital is not to spread disease."

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