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Cuba, Nicaragua: The parallels are many

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The incumbent U.S. administration says it wants a negotiated solution to outstanding problems but won't negotiate with preconditions. The U.S. sugar quota is cut. A trade ban is imposed. A top politician declares that "the forces fighting for freedom in exile . . . should be sustained and assisted." He complains that the "fighters for freedom have had virtually no support from our government."

A State Department White Paper charges that in the past nine months more than 30 tons of arms valued at \$50 million have been received from the Soviet bloc; that the armed forces are dependent on the Soviet bloc for maintenance of their armed power; that Soviet and Czech military advisers and technicians have accompanied the arms flow; and that pilots have gone to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union for training as jet pilots. It sounds remarkably like events related to Nicaragua in recent years.

In fact, the incidents cited all occurred in the months preceding the unsuccessful April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

The parallels are many. And perhaps not so ironically, although there is no evidence to suggest a cause and effect, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) now ruling Nicaragua was born the same year the Bay of Pigs invasion was launched from Nicaragua.

As with Nicaragua now, the incumbent administration in Washington in the year prior to the Bay of Pigs (then that of President Eisenhower), increasingly alarmed by Soviet influence in Cuba, secretly financed, organized and trained an exile force under CIA direction.

It was a force that President Kennedy was to inherit upon his January 1961 inauguration and he appeared as committed to ridding the hemisphere of Fidel Castro as did Eisenhower.

It was Kennedy during his 1960 presidential campaign against then Vice President Richard Nixon who had complained that the U.S. government had given virtually no support to the Cuban "freedom fighters."

As Philip Bonsal, the last American ambassador to Cuba before diplomatic

relations were broken Jan. 3, 1961, was to later write in his book, *Cuba, Castro and the United States*, "President Kennedy's inauguration in fact brought with it no change in the Cuban policy of the United States government.

"The overthrow of Castro was the objective of that policy — an overthrow to be encompassed by all means short of an involvement on Cuban soil of American armed forces. The program included the economic measures already described plus an American-created military force made up of anti-Castro Cubans to be used in an operation or operations that would lead to the downfall of the regime."

Substitute Nicaragua for Cuba, and it appears to summarize Reagan administration policy today.

Even the arguments of policy critics then and now sound eerily similar.

"The administration's imperfectly secret preparations for an invasion of Cuba by a force of exiles and refugees and the possibility that American armed forces might also participate in such an invasion were responsible for the increasing quantities of arms and military equipment sent by the Russians to Castro after the middle of 1960," writes Bonsal.

It is much the same argument that is given by defenders of Nicaragua's extensive military buildup.

The Herald asked three senior CIA officials, now retired, who were either intimately involved in the planning and execution of the Bay of Pigs or in the postmortem on why it failed, if they saw any parallels between the circumstances and atmosphere in the months leading up to the Cuban invasion and that regarding Nicaragua now.

All three did, while also noting some significant differences. Two of the three asked not to be identified by name.

"There is a considerable amount of parallel," said one ranking former CIA official who was involved in dissecting what went wrong at the Bay of Pigs.

"Nicaragua is highly frustrating as far as the president is concerned, as Cuba was then. As a consequence, Reagan is groping for something to do.

"It's almost usual that if a chief executive is trying to do something with his foreign policy he will look to the CIA as an easy out. That can be done easily and cheaply compared to a military operation. It's somewhere in between diplomacy on the one hand and military action on the other. If it succeeds, he can take credit. If it fails, he can blame the CIA."

This official, as the others, noted that it is much harder to keep a secret today than it was in 1961 — a fact that has brought the debate over Nicaragua much more into the open than was the case with Cuba.

He also sees the rhetoric surrounding Nicaragua, particularly from the administration, as much more shrill than it was regarding Cuba in the period leading up to the Bay of Pigs.

At the same time, he sees the Soviet Union as much more muted in its defense of Nicaragua than it was in its defense of Cuba.

David Atlee Phillips, in charge of propaganda and psychological warfare for the Bay of Pigs operation and later chief of Latin American and Caribbean operations for the CIA, also sees some parallels — as well as major differences — between Cuba then and Nicaragua now.

"Disregarding the myth that everyone expected a spontaneous uprising in Cuba, there were also nightly protests in the form of bombings, sabotage and other indications of internal resistance [in Cuba], much more than you ever read about regarding Nicaragua now."

Phillips believes the rhetoric is considerably more shrill now than it was prior to the Cuban invasion and thinks the American public was even more apathetic about Cuba and Castro than it is about Nicaragua.

"Castro had a marvelous press, he was an astute politician in dealing with the press, the exact opposite of the present regime in Nicaragua," Phillips observes.

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"There was not much public concern about Cuba. If the word apathetic is going to be used it was even more so then than it is now. The public hadn't been stirred up by the administration."

"If there is an historical lesson in the Bay of Pigs it is that we are in danger of putting ourselves in the same situation in Central America, not only with countries but with individuals," says Phillips, the implication being that it should be all or nothing with no half measures. Otherwise we leave our friends hanging.

It's the same concern expressed by another ranking former CIA official, this one directly involved in the planning and execution of the Bay of Pigs.

"We seem to have a history of getting our friends involved in things up to the point of no return when we're not prepared to back them up," says the former official, speaking specifically of Honduras' role in providing a base for the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebel contras.

"Either that system in Honduras is going to fall or the one in Nicaragua is going to fall and I don't see the Hondurans getting the level of aid, training, etc., from us that [Nicaraguan President Daniel] Ortega seems to be getting from the Soviet bloc."

As for the parallels between Cuba and Nicaragua, he says "one of the similarities then and now which bothers me is the depth of division within the Congress and the administration over how to proceed on an operation of this sort. That was certainly the case with Cuba, although it was not as much in the open.

"I don't really see how any thing of this sort has the chance of attaining its ultimate goal when you have these tremendous divisions"