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ON PAGE 1-D

ELMO ZUMWALT / WORTH BAGLEY

The funding debate

The passionate debate about Nicaragua reflects the two main points of view about American security policy-making in the Third World.

Adherents of the White House view that the Marxist Sandinistas are fair game argue from the realities of Soviet doctrine and action.

No Communist regime is thought to be committed to peaceful change in the world order and they should not be treated as if they were.

THE WHITE HOUSE VIEW

President Reagan's defense program has deterred the Soviets from the type of direct aggression they initiated in Afghanistan under Carter policies. A possible consequence of Mr. Reagan's success, however, is Moscow's increased emphasis on indirect aggression fashioned to avoid confrontation with the United States. That Soviet strategy is evident in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, both objects of Soviet and Cuban military assistance designed to spread armed terror and subversion in Central America.

If America does not respond with non-military and military aid, then the Soviets will be able to accomplish their aggression objectives despite costly U.S. rearming. Should our response not be timely, resisting the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran rebels when they are vulnerable, then our expensive politico-military campaigns might not succeed.

The White House recognizes that the enveloping, indirect Soviet strategy in the Third World could force major U.S. arms transfers, delaying American rearming and drawing U.S. power from other key regions, where direct Soviet aggression might then become attractive.

In that event, our allies would lose confidence in U.S. defense abilities and might seize that pretext to refuse to coordinate in planning defenses in regions such as the Persian Gulf, where U.S. arms alone would be stretched thin under the best of circumstances.

Opponents of the White House views downplay the realities (in Nicaragua).

To defeat those aims of Soviet Third World strategy, the president would prefer to use covert measures where practical to minimize the demands on our central defense resources.

Opposing Soviet armed transgressions in the Third World both protects the free choice of exploited peoples and gives them hope for a peaceful existence. That American response is not inconsistent with the less-violent U.S. reaction to authoritarian states which do not conform with U.S. ideas of democracy, but which resist Communist subversion.

Whatever our differences with Chile, South Africa, and the like, the instrument for showing U.S. displeasure is diplomacy, not arms. The White House believes the United States has enough urgent security problems without creating more on its own volition.

THE OPPOSING VIEW

Opponents of these White House views downplay the realities, emphasizing what they say are the moral imperatives of American behavior.

We should not intervene single-mindedly in Third World rebellions, regardless of Soviet involvement, because oppressed people are seeking their own idea of a better life. If, in the future, those states fall under Soviet influence and host Soviet bases or forces that threaten the United States, we should act then to end that threat.

Instead of U.S. intervention in the Third World, opponents say we should devote our energies to changing authoritarian regimes that pose no threat to the United States but which affront American values. There may be a chance that promoting change in these countries could result in Marxist governments opposed to the United states, but that risk is seen as worth taking.

These White House opponents reject using covert assistance to destabilize a Communist government or to aid its opponents. They imply that any covert U.S. operations are unacceptable by making sure, through the Congress, that those operations become public knowledge. They prefer economic aid, no matter whose hands it will pass through to reach oppressed peoples, and they argue that military aid should be limited so that non-military measures are allowed to have effect.

Elmo Zumwalt and Worth Bagley, retired Navy admirals, are nationally syndicated columnists.

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2

THE ISSUES RAISED

Several issues are raised by these contrary policies.

President Reagan uses U.S. power to avoid or head off confrontations with the Soviet Union so that the risks of nuclear war are kept low. His opponents would delay, limit, or prevent U.S. responses to Soviet transgressions, accepting consequences that could ensure confrontations in the future.

President Reagan would treat admittedly ambiguous threats and situations in the Third World for what they are, managing U.S. military and non-military responses to clarify uncertainties and then directing actions that best satisfy U.S. interests.

His opponents prefer quick, explicit objectives that limit what the United States might do and inform the Soviets what they need to do to succeed. By placing explicit limits on what the United States would do to nurture democracy in the Third World, they allow the Soviets to raise the price of victory for Free World influence to a level the U.S. public generally will not support.

In response to each signal of Soviet politico-military aggression, either direct or indirect, President Reagan warns the Soviets of the risks of proceeding.

The Reagan opponents see each threat of an expanding Soviet influence as a pretext for not responding, arguing that the situation is ambiguous and a U.S. reaction more likely to be provocative than to deter.

The president would resist the inroads of Soviet subversion in the Third World to prevent the cumulative erosion of American strategic positions around the world.

His opponents would accept that strategic erosion until the Soviets chose to exploit it by direct threats to the United States.

It is these issues which should preoccupy the Congress and the American people as the funding for U.S. policies in Nicaragua and in El Salvador are debated in this year's budget.

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