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Tell Me No 'Nicaraguas'

Washington loathes the word lie. Instead, it prefers such imprecisions as "misspoke," "political rhetoric" or, in congressional testimony, "to the best of my recollection." In that spirit, let me propose a new word for a statement that is—ahem—at variance with the facts: a Nicaragua.

A recent "Nicaragua" was the president's charge that the Sandinistas were "using Stalin's tactic of gulag relocation. . . ." Stalin? The Gulag? What's this man talking about? The Sandinistas are moving people out of combat areas. That may or may not be a nice thing to do, but it is a long way from Josef Stalin and his prison system.

Similarly, the president stretched things a lot when he called the *contras* "our brothers" and "the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers." A whopper of a "Nicaragua" there. Unless

Washington, Jefferson and the venerable Mr. Franklin did some raping on the way to Valley Forge, the *contras* are something less than their moral equivalent. In fact, they are a mostly peasant army created not by Nicaraguan dissidents, but by the CIA, and whose significant leaders are former officers of the brutal National Guard.

Still another "Nicaragua" is the repeated assertion that the Sandinista regime is ruthless and tyrannical. It is not by any means a democracy, and it may, in fact, be heading toward a communist dictatorship, but it is not there yet—not by a long shot. In fact, compared with El Salvador, Nicaragua has an admirable record on human rights. The Sandinistas do not drag people out of their homes and decapitate them in gullies.

Yet another "Nicaragua" is the canard that Nicaragua poses a military

threat to its neighbors. In fact, Nicaragua's army of 40,000 is smaller than El Salvador's and not significantly larger, if the 20,000-man civilian militia is included. It has hardly any air force, and its tanks, Soviet-built T54s and 55s, are 25 to 30 years old—sitting ducks against modern anti-tank weapons or the respectable air forces of Honduras and El Salvador. Moreover, the Sandinistas must know that even a feint toward a neighboring state would bring the wrath of Reagan down on them. Talk about making his day!

So what's going on? Why is the president (and his Charlie McCarthy of a vice president) so exaggerating the faults and the capabilities of the Sandinistas and the attributes and vulnerabilities of their enemies? Why is the administration's rhetoric so out of proportion to the facts? In other words, why so many "Nicaraguas" about Nicaragua?

The answer is Cuba. It's the monkey on the administration's back. The creation of a communist state in our hemisphere is to Reagan's brand of conservatism what the treaty of Versailles was to a generation of Germans—a sellout and a humiliation. Reagan will not permit it to happen again, not again allow what he thinks is the inescapable nature of Marxism to be camouflaged by gains in literacy or health, declarations of peaceful intent, promises of an eventual democracy and the seemingly limitless ability of some Americans, particularly liberals, to be taken in by all this.

You may want to argue with some or all of that, but it is a legitimate enough theory. The trouble is, though, it's not what the president tells the American people. Instead, in the manner of a parent talking to a child, he dispenses with ambiguities and subtleties and even with the future tense. In rhetoric, he has

created a Nicaragua that is already a Cuba and he treats it as such. He makes war against it, forces it to militarize and then cites that very militarization as evidence of aggressive designs. He plants mines in the harbors, saboteurs on land and then cries totalitarianism when the Sandinistas respond with a state of emergency.

Maybe in the end the president will be able to vindicate his own exaggerations. Given his actions and the proclivities of the Sandinistas, Nicaragua may well end up being another Cuba, and then we can all wonder who's to blame—the United States for its hostility or the Sandinistas for causing that hostility. In the meantime, though, Nicaragua is a long way from becoming a Cuba. To declare otherwise simply forecloses policy options—and hastens the day when a lie finally becomes the truth.