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ON PAGE ~~8-4~~WASHINGTON TIMES  
19 March 1986

# Fear of Soviet strategic base in Nicaragua nags at U.S.

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The United States will face the end of a long-standing "immunity" from threats to its security in the Western Hemisphere if a Soviet strategic base is established in Nicaragua, U.S. defense experts say.

"The immunity that the United States has long enjoyed in its own hemisphere — which has been the key to the American ability to be reasonably effective in resisting the Soviet threat elsewhere — will be lost," Georgetown University strategic expert Edward N. Luttwak said yesterday.

Mr. Luttwak said the real strategic stakes in Nicaragua don't involve the threat of "somebody marching to Texas" but the fact that Nicaragua's geographical location and its Soviet-style foreign policy will generate guerrilla movements and support for terrorism.

"They will perform in the hemisphere the way the Soviet Union performs globally," he said.

As a result, the United States will continue to experience "a very great and unpredictable diversion of resources from the other fronts like NATO, and that will weaken us very much," Mr. Luttwak said.

President Reagan said in his television address to the nation last Sunday that the strategic threat posed by Nicaragua lies in the country's use by the Soviets as "a privileged sanctuary for their struggle against the United States."

"Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya right on the doorsteps of the United States?" the president asked during his push for aid to the Nicaraguan resistance forces.

A Sandinista regime characterized by the combination of large military forces, sophisticated internal police controls, effective propaganda networks, economic stagnation and lack of social progress "by its existence poses a threat to the United States" because the regime provides a stalking horse for regional subversion, Mr. Luttwak said.

Nicaragua has advantages for expansion over both Cuba and the Soviet Union, he said — over the Soviet Union because it is a Spanish-speaking country and over Cuba because it is a continental, not island, nation.

And in the long term, experts say, Nicaragua's communist regime ultimately could precipitate a repeat of the 1963 Cuban missile crisis — when the United States faced down a Soviet attempt to place medium-range missiles in Cuba — by attempting to introduce the same type weapons to Central America.

A major concern of defense planners who study the long-term consequences of a Soviet base in Nicaragua is the threat to U.S. military supply lanes in the Caribbean — vital to support of American and European forces in wartime.

Nazi submarines caused major damage in the early part of World War II by sinking merchant ships bound for Europe. A Defense Department study shows that submarines in 1941 and 1942 sank more than 280 merchant ships in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

Maj. Fred Lash, a Pentagon spokesman, said Soviet bases in

Nicaragua could cause a re-evaluation of U.S. military strategy toward Europe because shipping lanes vital to support for European allies could be blocked in wartime.

"It's an important consideration," Maj. Lash said. "If Cuba is communist, and if Nicaragua is communist, then that's two areas where they can fly operational aircraft to interdict our flow of equipment through sea lanes."

Shipments through the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico account for 44 percent of all U.S. foreign trade. They would have to carry 60 percent of reinforcements for Europe in the first 60 days of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict, according to a Pentagon study.

Also, 66 percent of U.S. crude oil imports must pass through areas that could be threatened by Cuban and Soviet-supported Nicaraguan naval forces, according to Pentagon figures.

Maj. Lash said most supplies destined for NATO forces in Europe during wartime would be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. But with greater threats to ships from Nicaragua, those supplies would have to be flown over in aircraft rather than

shipped by sea. That would limit the amount of equipment and troops that could be sent.

"With air transports, it takes longer to get as much as a ship" across the ocean, Maj. Lash said. Current U.S. strategy, he said, calls for transferring as much as 75 percent of NATO supplies by ship.

But all-out East-West war isn't the only area in which a communist regime in Nicaragua can threaten U.S. interests.

According to a Pentagon study, security officials see three consequences for so-called low-intensity, or regional, conflicts in Nicaragua's continuing military buildup:

- Communist military superiority will politically intimidate neighboring states into neutralization.

- Nicaragua will become a major staging area for supplying arms to subversive movements that once relied on small arms shipments.

- Cuban and Soviet control over regional insurgent groups will grow through control of arms deliveries.

Communist strategy since 1979, according to the study, has sought to use Nicaragua as a central point for a military takeover of El Salvador.

Collapse of El Salvador then would provide a broad front for a subsequent takeover of Honduras. The combined states would give the communists the resources of a bloc of 12 million Central Americans.

"Encouraged by the successful implementation of their strategy . . . the Soviets would not hesitate to increase military support — Guatemala and Mexico could become the next targets," the paper states.

In the long run, a thoroughly consolidated Communist state in Nicaragua could also present the United States with a strategic dilemma — accepting the introduction into Nicaragua of advanced Soviet weapons capable of threatening U.S. defenses directly or using force to keep them out.

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A defense department study last year on U.S. strategic interests in Latin America examined the possibility that medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) could be deployed in Nicaragua, including the advanced SS-20 and older SS-4 and SS-5 missiles.

"From Managua, the SS-20 would cover the majority of defense installations in the United States, which today could be covered only by [long-range] Soviet bombers, ICBMs and [submarine-launched ballistic missiles]," the paper concludes.

Such deployments, however, would only occur if "Soviet domination of Central America were greatly advanced and if the Soviet leadership were to judge that deployment would not lead to armed conflict with the United States," the paper states.

"Anything could be based there," Maj. Lash said. "They haven't introduced anything like that, but it's all possible."

The Pentagon estimates that the Sandinista regime has received \$600 million worth of Soviet arms since it seized power in 1979 as part of more than \$1 billion in overall Soviet bloc aid.

The most recent Pentagon estimates of Soviet bloc weapons deliveries indicate that more than 44,000 metric tons of arms were delivered to Nicaragua in the past three years, Maj. Lash said.

"For the Soviets, this is the world's best investment," Mr. Luttwak said. "Every ruble spent in Nicaragua to deliver helicopters or tanks generates much more strategic advantage to them because of the fact that we are so confused and divided and paralyzed in responding to it."

Besides "flying tank" Mi-24 Hind D attack helicopters — first deployed in the fall of 1984 — Soviet arms shipments have included scores of tanks, amphibious tanks, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft guns, artillery, chemical weapons vehicles, patrol boats and minesweepers.

So far, no evidence exists that the Soviets have deployed advanced MiG-21 and MiG-23 jet fighters. But satellite photographs have revealed new Nicaraguan air bases with dug-out aircraft shelters almost identical to shelters for MiGs based in Cuba.

On both Nicaraguan coasts — at El Bluff in the east and Corinto in the west — construction is under way on two deep-water ports that could provide naval facilities for Soviet submarine and naval squadrons, according to Pentagon experts.

Other than vessels delivering the arms shipments, however, the Soviet navy has not yet made a port call to any Nicaraguan port, Maj. Lash said.

Manpower in the Sandinista army — in 1979 only 6,000 strong — today includes 120,000 troops, with nearly 70,000 active duty forces, he said. By contrast, the only other Central American military counterforce is the Honduran Army's 22,000 soldiers.

Cuban troops stationed in Nicaragua number 3,000 with about 50 Soviet advisers and an unspecified number of East Germans, Bulgarians, North Koreans, Libyans and Palestinians, Maj. Lash said.

Other recent evidence indicates that international terrorist groups such as Germany's Baader-Meinhoff Gang, Italy's Red Brigades, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Spanish Basque ETA and Iranian and Libyan terrorists have found sanctuary in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas.