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## Nicaragua Trickery

House Speaker Tip O'Neill shouldn't have called President Reagan's new "proposal for peace in Central America" a "dirty trick."

The president's Easter-oriented effort to rescue \$14 million for a "covert" counterrevolutionary effort in Nicaragua is tricky. But it was offered as a policy, which means you have every right to take it seriously as the administration's best shot at what it perceives to be a mortal threat to U.S. security.

Looked at that way, it comes off as shallow, shortsighted, reactive and apocalyptic. "If we provide too little help" to the "brave members of the democratic resistance" in Nicaragua, what then? The president's answer has to be quoted to be believed:

"Our choice will be a communist Central America, with communist subversion spreading southward and northward. We face the risk that 100 million people from Panama to our open southern border could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes and threaten the United States with violence, economic chaos and a human tidal wave of refugees."

If that strikes you as a bit much, consider the alternative the administration says will result if Congress will only pay up: a Sandinista regime either changing its Marxist-Leninist spots and negotiating a return to the original democratic principles of the revolution, or being somehow supplanted (we don't say "overthrown").

The chances of the former being scarcely worth weighing, success would seem to depend on the *contras* carrying the day. The president's own military advisers concede that would take "years"—even with U.S. support.

The administration speaks seriously of implanting democracy overnight in a society that suffered for decades under the repression of the Somoza dictatorship. If the necessary ingredients for that outcome are readily at hand (tradition, experience, trained leadership, discipline, economic resources, institutions), you have to wonder why the original Sandinista revolution was so swiftly betrayed.

The president would promise to use the coveted \$14 million only for "humanitarian" support of the *contras* while the Sandinista govern-

ment lays down its arms and enters negotiations to restore democratic principles and processes in Nicaragua. After 60 days, the president would be free to apply the "covert" money to military purposes unless both sides ask him not to. How this would play out, assuming the Sandinistas reconsider their instant rejection, is impossible to predict. The proposal may be appealing enough to win over Congress—without resolving anything in Nicaragua.

So what is the answer? The best critiques I've heard of the Reagan proposal came before it was unveiled. One was a statement from the Inter-American Dialogue, a private group with bipartisan U.S. membership, combined with prominent figures from Latin America and Canada. The other was from the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Dave Durenberger of Minnesota, in a speech late last month to the National Press Club.

Both stressed the sanctity of "non-intervention"—for Nicaragua. Both concluded that any durable solution to the region's security problems would have to be regional rather than unilateral.

"Regional collective action is a tool we have simply overlooked thus far," said Durenberger, whose "first principle" was that any "long-term commitment to policy . . . must avoid senseless confrontation over peripheral issues. . . . If the president makes a \$14 million program the centerpiece of his policy, he will only stoke the fires of controversy in this country."

Leaving aside the difficulty of organizing an effective regional solution to Central America's security problems, the distinction made by both the Dialogue and Durenberger between aspirations and realizable objectives goes to the heart of what's wrong with the administration's approach. It is all very well for Ronald Reagan to wish for a democratic Nicaragua, a reduction in Nicaraguan armed forces, the removal of all unsavory elements.

But an effort to achieve all this by blatant, unilateral U.S. intervention in Nicaragua's internal affairs works against a regional will to resist any external intervention by Nicaragua in its neighbors' internal affairs.