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PAGE 12

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Target of US crusade

By Pat Holt

AS the White House escalates its rhetoric in an effort to cajole more money out of Congress for the Nicaraguan *contras* fighting the Sandinistas, it is also escalating its policy.

Three years ago when the covert program of aid to the *contras* first came to light, the objective was to interdict the supplies that were supposedly flowing from Cuba and the Soviet bloc through Nicaragua to the guerrillas in El Salvador — themselves another group of *contras*. From the administration's own evidence, it appears that the amount of supplies was always exaggerated. In any event, as the amount — whatever it was — dwindled, US policy became more ambitious. It sought to pressure the Sandinistas into carrying out internal liberal reforms — elections, freedom of the press, free labor organizations, and the like.

Now the President says that the Sandinistas must accept the *contras* as part of the government. In other words, the *contras* must be allowed to shoot their way into power.

But there is more. Aid to the *contras* is merely part of a worldwide crusade — “a moral duty,” as Secretary of State George P. Shultz put it — to promote freedom, “whether it is in Cambodia or Afghanistan or Nicaragua or whatever.”

This is a very tall order. If taken seriously, it would saddle the US with endless and ultimately ruinous entanglements. It is a throwback to Manifest Destiny and the “white man's burden.”

This new dimension of policy is reminiscent of William McKinley's explanation of how he came to establish US presence in the Philippines, a decision he said was the result of divine guidance: “. . . there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them”

This is not the first time Mr. Reagan has broadened a policy in mid-course. The original mission of the marines in Lebanon was to supervise the withdrawal of the Palestine Liberation Organization. That accomplished, the marines were sent back to act as a buffer between the contending factions, but it was not long before they moved from being a buffer to taking sides in the civil war.

This escalation was justified as self-defense on the marines' part, just as the Israelis said that their invasion of Lebanon was defensive, and just as the administration says its anti-Sandinista policy is defensive. The administration finds proof of the Sandinistas' aggressive intentions in the size of the Nicaraguan armed forces.

Successive US administrations have exaggerated the threat of Moscow's and Havana's ambitions. The USSR has communized Eastern Europe — or has tried to — because it perceives that area to be vital to its national security, much as the US perceives Central America and the Caribbean. In the “infamous” Brezhnev doctrine — Shultz's adjective — the Soviet Union has said it will not permit communist governments to be overthrown.

This is different from a policy of inspiring the establishment of such governments. The governments of Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola, and Nicaragua have all resulted from indigenous circumstances.

Castro's revolution went through a phase of proselytical fervor in the 1960s, but ended with the death of Ché Guevara in Bolivia. Fidel Castro says that revolution cannot be exported. There is abundant evidence that he means it.

The American revolution cannot be exported any more readily than can the Soviet or the Cuban. The US Constitution was widely copied as Latin American states became independent in the first quarter of the 19th century, and in none of them did it work very well. More than 80 years after McKinley set out to “uplift and civilize and Christianize” the Philippines, that unhappy country is mired in corruption and insurgency.

It is characteristic of US governments that the amount of high-level attention they give to a country varies inversely with its size and importance. Nicaragua — and El Salvador, too, for that matter — are merely the latest additions to a list that includes Cuba, Grenada, Panama, and Vietnam, among others. When he was undersecretary of state, George Ball is reported to have said, apropos of a coup in some obscure African country, “God may notice every sparrow that falls, but the United States doesn't have to.”

That remains a sound doctrine.

Pat Holt, former chief of staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, writes on foreign affairs from Washington.