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Perspective

The Navy or the contras?

By William V. Kennedy

The U.S. Department of Defense is in the position of a man who has spent extravagantly to build a house and who finds toward the end of the construction process that he must give up either the wine cellar or the master bedroom.

Whether or not there is some dim prospect for deficit reduction, the fact is that the United States is mortgaged to the hilt with the grandiose Reagan defense build-up no more than two-thirds complete. How, then, can we go on pouring money into support of the contras in Nicaragua and "our" Marxist-Leninists in Angola?

Given the tide of congressional opposition to further cuts in domestic programs and the President's refusal to countenance increased taxes, it seems plain that any money handed out in our various "covert" military actions must come out of the hide of one or another of the U.S. armed services.

If logic had anything to do with it, the money could be obtained easily enough by beginning withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe. Neither Reagan nor Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger seems prepared to budge on that issue, so the money for the contras, etc., is likely to come out of the Navy's shipbuilding program, in particular the escort forces needed to support the 15 aircraft carriers already built or funded. Indeed, Congressional Research Service studies indicate that the escort program already is being "robbed" to protect the gigantic U.S. annual subsidy that enables our NATO allies to provide more extensive social, welfare, medical and rail transportation services than are available to the Americans who pay for a big part of it.

What should be obvious by now is that the scores of millions we shovel into covert-action ventures

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every year disappear forever. To believe that any substantial part of it is used to good purpose requires an act of extraordinary faith. On the other hand, there is more than a little evidence that plenty of it is used for purposes that most Americans would condemn. Keeping that evidence under the rug seems the true connotation of the word "covert."

Money spent on the Navy's shipbuilding program, on the other hand, is likely to provide something tangibly American for some time to come. More important, the ships and aircraft of the Navy can be used to put a stop to Soviet and Cuban adventurism in southern Africa and Latin America without getting us involved with the atrocities our covert "allies" always seem to produce.

There is no high road from Moscow to Nicaragua or Angola. Every Soviet tank or helicopter the Reagan administration keeps showing us on the nightly news came off a Soviet-bloc ship. The Cubans in Angola and elsewhere in Africa and Latin America could not continue their mischief if we removed as contraband the military supplies that sustain them.

The Soviets have had a fine time of it these last 30 years, getting the United States to chase all over the world, twice at enormous expense in lives and many more times than that in treasure ultimately extracted from our own people, without the Soviets risking much. We can no longer afford to do that. Indeed, we never could. If the Soviet incursions—direct or by proxy—in Africa and Latin America are as dangerous as the administration claims, then it is time to confront the Soviets openly on the high seas.

We should have learned long since that the Soviet leadership is not going to risk the Russian homeland for the likes of its motley allies in the Third World, including Castro's Cuba. That was obvious in the missile crisis of 1962 and in the belated U.S. decision to mine Haiphong harbor during the Vietnam War. So it is absurd to suggest that blocking Soviet military support for Nicaragua or the Cubans in Angola is going to create a danger of nuclear war.

Let's quit playing the Soviet game. Let's get on with the build-up of a Navy that can control the high seas and the air above them—and then use it