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The Reagan Doctrine

There are four major anticommunist insurgencies in the world—in Angola, Nicaragua, Cambodia and Afghanistan—and within the last six weeks the House of Representatives has endorsed them all. It gave money to three, and repealed a 10-year-old ban, the Clark amendment, on aid to the fourth (Angola). In effect, the House, the last remaining wildlife refuge for the American dove, adopted the Reagan Doctrine.

The Reagan Doctrine, enunciated in the 1985 State of the Union address, declares, quite simply, American support for anticommunist revolution "on every continent from Afghanistan to Nicaragua." It constitutes our third reformulation since Vietnam of the policy of containment. First came the Nixon doctrine, which relied on regional proxies and sank with the shah. Then came the Carter doctrine, which promised the unilateral projection of American power and disappeared with the Rapid Deployment Force. (Come to think of it, where is the Rapid Deployment Force?)

Enter the Reagan Doctrine, which relies on indigenous revolutionaries to challenge (for reasons that parallel, but need not coincide with ours) the Soviet empire at its periphery. It is the American response to the Brezhnev Doctrine. The Brezhnev Doctrine declares: once a Soviet acquisition, always a Soviet acquisition. The Reagan Doctrine means to test that proposition.

For many Democrats, coming around to this idea has meant reversing field. And that has given the cynics a field day. Cheap symbolism, they say. Easy politics. Besides, this toughness is not serious. It is merely reactive. After the TWA hijacking, the Walker spy ring and the killing of Marines in El Salvador, Congress is cranky. The United States has been kicked around lately, and so have Democrats: some are still smarting from Daniel Ortega's trip to Moscow just hours after the House had voted to cut off contra aid last April.

Now, it is true that the Reagan Doctrine costs little, less than \$50 million a year. Politically, too, it is not very expensive. There are not very many fans of, say, Indochinese communism to be defied (this time around, anyway). And granted, Congress is no island of stability.

Still, Congress, like the two-ton gorilla, can be serious in spite of itself. Whenever it moves, the effects are serious. Democrats may indeed be acting from "political" motives. So what? So did

Vandenberg and the Republicans who in the late 1940s had to abandon isolationism or face political ruin for being soft on communism. That did not make their about-face any less momentous. However cynically conceived, the "Reagan Doctrine" amendments to the 1985 foreign aid bill, have a serious effect. They amount to a significant—and, if sustained, historic—change in the nation's foreign policy consensus.

To be sure, opponents of the Reagan Doctrine have by no means been swept away. A majority of House Democrats are still to be moved. Rep. Tom Downey is one of the leaders of the opposition. He explained his objection to the foreign aid bill thus: "What this bill says is that the threat to use force is part and parcel of our diplomacy, and I think that's a mistake." Rarely has the advocacy of a toothless foreign policy been so forthright. Majority leader Jim Wright voiced a different protest. Contra aid makes us, he said, "accessories to an attempt to the overthrow of the government of Nicaragua." Wright may worry about the knock on the door that brings a subpoena from the World Court. But much of his party doesn't.

Indeed, the Reagan Doctrine gathered some remarkable support from House liberals. Repeal of the Clark Amendment was introduced by the last of the great New Dealers, that indefatigable tribune of the elderly, Rep. Claude Pepper, a man not known as a cold warrior. He led the charge on Angola. Stephen Solarz, one of the leading anti-war Democrats, hatched the Cambodia aid idea. Seventy-three House Democrats voted aid to the Nicaraguan contras. And everybody supports the rebels in Afghanistan.

The great irony is that all these moves have left one man behind: Ronald Reagan.

Reagan proclaimed his Doctrine (and George Shultz elaborated it in a major address in San Francisco), then shied away from taking any political risks on its behalf. On Clark, the administration thought the votes were not there and exerted no pressure. On Cambodia, it had to be pushed by the House. (The State Department opposed the measure. Shultz wants overt aid to come from the ASEAN countries, not the United States.) And on Nicaragua, the president lucked out completely. Last April, he refused to risk his prestige by going on television to support contra aid. It lost in the House by two votes. The only thing that saved it in the end was Daniel Ortega's travel agent.

The president obviously believes in the cause of anticommunist revolution. However, he is reluctant to expend political capital for it. He has other priorities. In the name of these priorities (for example, arms sales to Jordan and more military aid to the Philippines) the White House has even threatened to veto the foreign aid bill.

Imagine: Congress, the Democratic House, adopts the Reagan Doctrine—and Reagan vetoes the measure. That would be one irony too many. At that point, those who support the Reagan Doctrine will have to start thinking about rechristening it.