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Debasing the Language

BOSTON
George Orwell taught us that politicians corrupt words in order to sell corrupt policies. If Orwell were here now, how savagely he would be dissecting the latest example of Newspeak: the Reagan Administration's sales campaign for aid to the Nicaraguan "contras."

"Freedom fighters," Mr. Reagan calls the contras. But what about their connections with the Somoza dictatorship that ravaged Nicaragua for 45 years? When Senator Richard Lugar asked the question, he got this answer from Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams:

"You asked about the allegation that the Nicaragua resistance consists of, or is led by, supporters of the late dictator Anastasio Somoza. We have reviewed the facts carefully and conclude that this charge is incorrect and misleading."

Reagan's statements on the contras

But the evidence of Somoza links is overwhelming. And of course Mr. Abrams knows it.

Edgar Chamorro was a leader of the principal contra force, the F.D.N., until he quit in disgust last year. He said: "The contra military force is directed and controlled by officers of Somoza's National Guard, who fought at the dictator's side until the very end and then fled to Honduras."

Robert S. Leiken of the Carnegie Endowment has been highly critical of the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua. In the March 13 issue of *The New York Review of Books* he wrote: "The F.D.N. high command, with one exception, is drawn entirely from the [Somoza] National Guard, and many were senior officers in it."

Then there is the question of the contras' behavior toward civilians in Nicaragua. The Reagan Administration says that any past tendency toward brutalities has been curbed and that the contras are models of respect for human rights. The eyewitness accounts of what they do show those claims to be utterly cynical.

The contras' "premeditated policy," Edgar Chamorro said, was "to terrorize civilian noncombatants." During his four years as a leader, he said, "hundreds of civilian murders, mutilations, tortures and rapes were committed in pursuit of this policy, of

which the contra leaders and their C.I.A. superiors were well aware."

Americas Watch, a human rights organization, has just published an authoritative report on Nicaragua. It condemned both the Sandinistas and the contras for gross abuses. And it criticized the Reagan Administration for giving "false information" in "an effort to explain away" contra brutalities.

For example, American newspapers reported last summer that a contra force had executed 11 civilians in cold blood in the town of Cuapa. A lawyer for Americas Watch went to Cuapa, interviewed residents and confirmed the story in gruesome detail. But the Reagan Administration denied it.

President Reagan discussed the incident in a report to Congress last November. "According to those on the scene," he said, what happened at Cuapa was "a military-to-military engagement" and "there were no civilian casualties."

Americas Watch asked the State Department who "those on the scene" were. It got no answer for months. After its report was printed, it was told by the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua that no one from there had gone to Cuapa or otherwise investigated the incident.

This week Mr. Reagan said that defeat of the contras would put in jeopardy the "small and fragile democracies" of Central America. But those very countries are unhappy about the Reagan war policy. Costa Rica is trying to close its territory to the contras. Honduras is blocking delivery of U.S. aid to them. Guatemala has called for a regional settlement.

Eight other Latin countries, representing 90 percent of the region's people and land, sent their foreign ministers to Washington last month to urge a halt in U.S. aid to the contras. Indeed, nearly every friend we have in the hemisphere is opposed to the policy. But in the Reagan view they are all out of step but us.

"The world is watching," the President said, "to see if Congress is as committed to democracy in Nicaragua . . . as it was in the Philippines." But in the Philippines we helped with diplomacy, not arms, a movement that arose from the people, not one invented, funded and directed by the United States.

Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist and diplomat, stands in for Orwell in a column in *Newsweek International* this week. He writes: "The debasement of language by President Reagan when he calls [the contras] 'freedom fighters' is as insulting to the history of the United States as to the history of Latin America." □