

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE *366* FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Winter 1986/1987

After five grueling debates within the compass of five months in 1986, the U.S. Congress agreed to President Reagan's request for military aid for the rebels fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Whatever this decision may herald for Nicaragua, for the United States it signals a further loosening of the constraints that have bound U.S. policy since the trauma of Vietnam. And by sanctioning, at least for the moment, the "Reagan Doctrine," it constitutes a step, albeit a small and reversible one, in America's continuing search for a global strategy to replace the one—containment—that was shattered in Vietnam.

To win this victory the President had to overcome misgivings about the conduct of the rebels and the CIA, skepticism about the rebels' prospects, anxiety about the Reagan Doctrine, and public opinion polls showing that most Americans opposed his policies. He won nonetheless by taking advantage of the considerable persuasive powers inherent in his office, and by making good use of the assistance proffered by a minority of Democrats, including some legislators and some activists, who split with their party's leadership. Above all he won because, when the debate was done, his opponents had failed to offer a compelling alternative policy for dealing with Nicaragua. Nor had they offered, on a global scale, an alternative to the Reagan Doctrine. Fear of "another Vietnam" was their most potent argument, but that fear, however justified and however widely shared, could not in itself generate a policy.

II

A new Congress will have to consider aid to the "contras," as the rebels are called, again in 1987. Despite the boasts of some rebel spokesmen, a year will not be nearly enough time, nor \$100 million enough money, to bring the Sandinistas down. And in 1987 the President's party will control neither house. Yet, barring some egregious act on the part of the rebels or some violation of trust on the part of U.S. officials, it is not likely that Congress will choose to reverse direction soon.

Despite the loss of a few seats, the President's cushion of support in the House may be somewhat deeper than indicated by the 12-vote margin by which rebel aid passed in 1986. A couple dozen moderate-to-conservative legislators, mostly Democrats, led by Representative Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), sought to stake out a middle ground, which would have allowed nonmilitary aid to go forward while putting military aid off for a later vote if further attempts at negotiation proved fruitless. When the House Democratic leadership sensed that victory on the issue lay within the President's grasp, it threw its support behind McCurdy's compromise, over the objections of some liberals. The President's legislative triumph thus came on a vote that pitted his position against McCurdy's. But the McCurdy group harbors considerable sympathy for the rebels'

cause (McCurdy was instrumental in negotiating the 1985 compromise providing \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid to the rebels) and might in the future provide additional votes for continuing aid.

The President's position enjoys no similar cushion in the Senate, which in Democratic hands may cause him more difficulty over Nicaragua than the House. Senator Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), a strong opponent of rebel aid, will become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. But this will be offset by changes in the Select Committee on Intelligence, where two supporters of aid, Senators David Boren (D-Okla.) and William Cohen (R-Me.), will succeed two opponents, Senators David Durenberger (R-Minn.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), as chairman and vice-chairman. Although the new Senate will have eight more Democrats, several of them have voiced support for rebel aid. Thus the Administration will have both the need and the opportunity to build upon the lessons in bipartisanship it learned in eking out its previous victories on the Nicaragua issue.

In seeking further aid, the President will be able to argue that reversing course would be a dangerous display of inconstancy. It took America years of pulling and hauling to decide to give the rebels military aid openly and in sufficient quantity to expand their forces significantly. To turn around a year later and cut them off would be a demonstration of fickleness that would worry our friends and tempt our foes in the region and perhaps beyond. Carried to an absurd extreme this argument could justify perseverance in any wrong course, but that is only to say that constancy cannot be the *sole* value guiding U.S. policy. Enough swing legislators, however, are bound to agree that it is one important value that Congress is likely to allow the President's policy to play out at least for a while.

III

The President's success climaxed a four-year struggle within the House, which had opposed military aid to the rebels almost from the program's inception. When the issue first came before that body in 1982, it adopted, by unanimous vote, the Boland Amendment, which barred aid to the rebels for any purpose other than interdiction of the flow of supplies from the Nicaraguan government to the communist guerrillas in El Salvador. This narrow scope was accepted by the Reagan Administration in order to forestall a complete ban on aid to the rebels, proposed by Representative (now Senator) Tom Harkin (D-Iowa). Perhaps, too, the Administration recognized more quickly than some of its opponents what an ambiguous thing interdiction could be under these circumstances.

The United States might give the Nicaraguan rebels arms for the purpose of defending El Salvador, but would they use them to fight for El Salvador rather than for Nicaragua? This question was just the beginning of the ambiguity. Nicaragua and El Salvador are not contiguous. Overland shipments from one country to the other must pass through Honduras. Conceivably the Nicaraguan rebels could aid the Honduran army in disrupting these routes. A more direct route for matériel,

however, is not through Honduras at all, but across (or over) the Gulf of Fonseca. The Gulf of Fonseca borders Nicaragua to the west, while the Nicaraguan rebels operate only in the north, south and east of their country. How, exactly, could they interdict this route? The answer is that the rebels cannot directly block Sandinista aid to the Salvador guerrillas; what they can do is to provide generalized military pressure that might convince the Sandinistas to stop meddling in other countries. But how clear is the line that separates a war designed to bring such pressure from one designed to overthrow the Sandinistas outright?

The Administration was able to exploit these ambiguities in the rubric of interdiction, but whether this benefited its policy in the long run is debatable. Given America's reluctance, ever since Vietnam, to embroil itself in violence in the Third World, even in defense of friendly governments, it is no easy task for the Administration to win support for the far more aggressive posture of raising an insurrection against an unfriendly government. Perhaps the program could only have been put across by gradually enlarging its stated objectives, rather than by confronting the public and Congress all at once with the idea of seeking to overthrow the Sandinistas. But by thus finessing the issue at the outset, the Administration sacrificed its ability to make a clear argument for the moral and strategic benefits of the policy it was pursuing and gave the impression that its policy was either uncertain or duplicitous.

By 1983 the House had had enough of such ambiguity and, led by Representative Edward Boland (D-Mass.), voted, by a 33-vote margin, to ban any aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. But the Senate that year approved continuation of the program, and in conference the two houses agreed on a compromise allocating \$24 million for the rebels, roughly half of what the Senate bill would have allowed. More important, the legislators' compromise measure barred the executive branch from spending any discretionary funds to continue the program after the \$24 million ran out unless it first secured congressional approval, something not ordinarily required for covert action programs.

When the President sought such approval in 1984, the House denied it, voting this time by a 64-vote margin against any support for the rebels. And this time it insisted on its position in conference with the Senate, thus shutting off the flow of aid. Although the Senate had again approved aid to the rebels in 1984, the President's strength on the issue had diminished in that body as well. Revelations that year about the CIA's role in mining Nicaragua's harbors and in publishing an instruction manual for the guerrillas that seemed to recommend practices against U.S. law and conscience had soured relations between the agency and the Senate Intelligence Committee, which felt that the agency had failed to keep it properly informed.

Given this outcome, and the fact that congressional momentum was clearly flowing against the Administration, a less ideologically engaged president might well have given up the

fight at this point. But instead President Reagan encouraged private and foreign sources to help keep the rebel movement in operation. Buoyed by his own strong reelection victory and by the apparent gains of the rebels in the months following the cessation of U.S. assistance, he renewed his request to Congress in 1985.

An initial House vote showed that opposition to his program was undiminished: a 68-vote majority rejected military aid for the rebels. In response, the President redesigned his proposal to make it more palatable. He kept the dollar figures low (\$14 million), limited the aid request temporarily to nonlethal equipment (thus the designation "humanitarian"), and linked it to a new attempt to stimulate negotiations between the Nicaraguan government and the rebels. These changes, especially the shift from military to nonlethal aid, made a big difference in the House, but not quite big enough. The package was defeated in late April 1985 by just two votes.

Almost at once, however, two events caused the House to have second thoughts. The most widely reported event was external—Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's much publicized visit to Moscow. This undercut a chief argument of the Administration's opponents—that U.S. aid to the rebels was itself the factor driving the Sandinistas into the arms of Moscow. Ortega's move suggested that Managua's ties to the U.S.S.R. were rooted in its own predilections, not in U.S. actions. And he seemed to be almost contemptuous of the Congress.

The second event was internal to the House, but it was no less important. The President's proposal had been defeated in favor of an amendment offered by Michael Barnes (D-Md.), chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.). The Barnes-Hamilton Amendment provided funds for Nicaraguan refugees, notably to resettle contra fighters and their families, and to underwrite the Contadora negotiations. Its authors presented it as a peaceful vehicle for achieving the same goals that the President sought through martial means. But no sooner was the President's proposal defeated than about 100 Democratic representatives reversed themselves and voted against Barnes-Hamilton on final passage, joining with Republicans to send it to overwhelming defeat.

For these Democrats, Barnes-Hamilton had been little more than a device with which to defeat the Administration's approach. *The Washington Post* explained that it had been "designed in part to provide cover for [Democratic] party members who not only oppose Reagan's program of arming and aiding the rebels but also do not like Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government and did not want to be blamed for aiding it." And *The New York Times* cited one typical vote-switcher as explaining that "many Democrats had voted for the earlier proposal because they wanted 'to vote for something' and protect themselves politically. But they voted against the final bill because they were afraid of what legislation would emerge from a conference with the Senate."

For a considerable number of middle-of-the-road legislators who had supported Barnes-Hamilton (including a dozen or so of the more liberal Republicans and a few score of the more conservative Democrats), this reversal was disconcerting. They were uneasy about blocking the President's program without having something to put in its place. Although polls repeatedly showed that large majorities of the American electorate opposed aid to the Nicaraguan rebels (just as they had opposed the increases in aid to the Salvadoran government that President Reagan had fought to wrest from Congress in earlier years), the polls also recorded widespread apprehension about the rise of communism in Central America.¹ The same electorate that invariably tells pollsters that it favors increases in government services and decreases in taxation now was telling them that it was anxious to stop communism in our hemisphere but reluctant to go to much trouble or accept many risks in order to do so. Moderate Democrats in Congress grew fearful that defeating the President's program—unpopular as it seemed—without offering any genuine alternative would leave them open to blame for whatever troubling developments might unfold in the region.

Moreover, the liberals' volte-face belied their protestations that they sought the same goals as the President but by different means. Barnes-Hamilton, as was revealed in the glare of its defeat, was only a cosmetic alternative. The Contadora process was stalled, after all, over substantive issues, not lack of funds, and resettling Nicaraguan rebels as refugees was a fine humanitarian gesture, but no answer to the problems President Reagan said the Sandinistas posed. Not all legislators agreed with his assessment, but those who did were impelled to consider afresh what realistic alternatives to his policies might exist. As a result, an alliance of conservative and middle-of-the-road representatives coalesced behind a compromise of their own that came closer to the President's position than to Barnes-Hamilton and that passed by margins of 36 votes and more on a series of votes. This measure provided \$27 million in nonlethal "humanitarian" aid to the rebels in FY 1986, but barred the CIA and Defense Department from any part in disbursing it. This set the stage for a renewed legislative battle in 1986 over the more controversial question of renewing direct military aid to the rebels.

IV

The five-stage battle over rebel aid in 1986 was characterized by numerous supporters and opponents alike as a "historic" debate. And, indeed, it may well prove to be the most important foreign policy debate that Congress has undertaken, save perhaps some on arms control and strategic nuclear weapons, since the battle over U.S. policy toward Indochina in the first half of the 1970s. No issue since then has posed such fundamental

¹ An April 1986 CBS/*New York Times* poll was typical. A better than 2-to-1 majority opposed President Reagan's request for military aid to the rebels, but a 5-to-3 majority said they agreed that "it's important to the security of the United States to eliminate communism from Latin America."

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questions about the purposes and methods of U.S. foreign policy. What is at stake, as Representative James Shannon (D-Mass.) noted during the 1984 debate, "is not what we think about the Nicaraguans, but rather what we think about the United States and the role that we are going to play in the world."

In March 1986, the House defeated the President's request for \$100 million in mostly military aid by 12 votes. A week later the Senate approved his proposal by a vote of 53 to 47. The next month Administration supporters in the House failed in an effort to resurrect the Administration's proposal. But in June they prevailed, this time winning by 12 votes, as a handful of key Democrats changed their positions and a few stray Republicans returned to the party fold. Then in August the Senate, again by 53 to 47, adopted a measure corresponding to that approved by the House. In addition to providing \$70 million in military and \$30 million in nonlethal aid, these measures repealed the prohibition on CIA and Defense Department collaboration with the rebels.

To listen to or read these five debates over Nicaragua on the floor of the House and Senate was to observe the clash of two paradigms. On one side was the paradigm that dominated U.S. discussion of foreign policy throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s, which viewed the struggle with and containment of communism as the sine qua non of U.S. policy. This approach was best captured in President John F. Kennedy's oft-repeated declaration that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." On the other side was the paradigm that dominated foreign policy debate from the late 1960s through the 1970s. It was most succinctly expressed in the phrase "no more Vietnams."

To be sure, there was much sound and fury over other issues. Supporters and opponents of the Administration traded atrocity stories, one side focusing on the cruelties of the Sandinistas, the other on those of the contras. There was no doubt some truth and some exaggeration on both sides, but how much of each was hard to tell given the remoteness of the areas where the rebels operate, the secrecy in which the activities of Nicaraguan state security forces are shrouded, and the partisan commitments of most of the sources of the charges and countercharges.

However intrinsically important these issues are in a humanitarian sense, it is doubtful they made any difference in the voting. There was probably not a single hawkish legislator who turned against the rebels because of their alleged abuses, and probably not a single dovish one who turned in their favor because of those alleged against the Sandinistas.

Much the same can be said about some of the other issues raised, such as the Administration's charges that the Sandinistas engaged in drug smuggling or its opponents' claims that the rebels had misspent earlier U.S. funds. Whatever the truth of such charges, they were debating points and changed few, if any, minds.

End

Both sides engaged in question-begging arguments as well. The Administration warned of a flood of refugees at our borders if communism swept over Central America, but if communism did sweep over the region, refugees might be the least of our problems. On the other side, it was often argued, for example as Senator Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) put it, that "it will be far less expensive to eliminate those causes which brought communism into our hemisphere" than to aid the rebels. But poverty and injustice are not so quickly and easily eliminated, and what is to be done about Sandinista militarization and subversion in the meantime?

The opponents pointed out that a majority of the rebels' high command were former members of Somoza's National Guard. The Administration replied that the three top political leaders of the rebel movement had been active against Somoza. The opponents countered that this paralleled the situation in El Salvador where an alliance of some democratic political leaders with the communist guerrillas was viewed by the Administration as a mere figleaf. But supporters of the Administration objected to this analogy, arguing that in contrast to the clear ideological commitments of the Salvadoran guerrillas, the former guardsmen among the Nicaraguan rebels had been soldiers not politicians.

A stronger argument advanced by opponents of the aid was that the Administration had often, over four years, changed its description of its goals in Nicaragua. House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton complained: "The rationale has shifted from the need to interdict alleged arms shipments to El Salvador, to pressuring the Sandinistas to hold elections, to giving the contras a bargaining chip in dealing with the Sandinistas, to forcing the Sandinistas to restructure their government, to forcing the Sandinistas to negotiate with the contras." Though this account was somewhat embellished, Hamilton's essential point was true.

The primary argument, from the Administration's side, was that the Sandinistas were turning Nicaragua into a communist state closely tied to Cuba and the Soviet Union. If not stopped, the Sandinistas would subject the Nicaraguan people to all of the miseries of totalitarianism and turn Nicaragua into a base for fostering communist movements throughout the region and the hemisphere, as well as for the Soviet Union's own military forces. Nothing short of force was likely to stop them, and it would be better if that force were exerted by Nicaraguan fighters than by Americans. All of this was somewhat obscured by the Administration's repeated insistence that it hoped to compel the Sandinistas to change course, but few within the Administration or without it actually seemed to believe that the Sandinistas could be stopped except by their ouster.

The Administration's opponents effectively criticized this ambiguity, but this was still a secondary point. Their primary argument was that the President's policies would lead the nation into "another Vietnam." Again and again on the floor of the House and Senate the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was invoked, and dozens of legislators spoke of the parallels they saw between U.S. involvement in Indochina and the course the

President was steering on Central America. As Speaker of the House Thomas O'Neill (D-Mass.) succinctly put it: "The shadows of Vietnam haven't left us."

The argument came in different variants. The simplest was O'Neill's refrain that the President would not be "happy" until Americans were fighting in Nicaragua. A more sophisticated argument was put by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), among others: "The President's claim that U.S. combat troops will not become involved in Nicaragua is inconsistent with his description of what is at stake." The point was telling, but it did not necessarily lead to the conclusion Kennedy had in mind—that the threat was exaggerated. The President's estimate of the stakes was either right or wrong. It could be challenged on empirical or analytical grounds, but it could not logically be challenged on the grounds of its consequences. Indeed, if it were right, then Kennedy's argument meant that the President ought more actively to consider using American troops.

The most compelling variant of the "no more Vietnams" argument held that by backing the rebels the United States was investing its prestige in their battle and building a moral obligation to them. It was also exacerbating Nicaragua's relations with its neighbors. Even though the President might be quite sincere in his protestations that he had no intention to involve Americans in the fighting, circumstances could easily arise in which the United States might feel impelled to rescue the rebels, or rescue Honduras, or rescue American prestige.

Although the President and most of his men, notably excepting Secretary of State George Shultz, rejected this argument outright, their denials rang hollow. In fact, the argument was irrefutable, and the Administration had only one effective answer to it: failure to back the rebels now would make it more likely that the United States itself would have to confront the Sandinistas at some later point. This point was apparently convincing enough to neutralize some of the impact of the Vietnam analogy.

In reality, no one can foresee which course—aiding the rebels further or dissociating from them—is more likely to lead to direct U.S. engagement. There is no denying, though, the truth of the critics' charge that President Reagan's policy contains at least the possibility of such an outcome.

v

Should this possibility be allowed to paralyze U.S. policy? Two years ago, the same warnings were raised, just as vociferously and often by the same voices, about President Reagan's military aid program for El Salvador. Representative Thomas Downey (D-N.Y.) called the 1984 Broomfield Amendment that increased military aid to El Salvador "the modern Gulf of Tonkin resolution." And Senator Patrick Leahy declared that year: "American troops will be used in El Salvador. . . . It's inexorable." It seems clear now that they were wrong. And with the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear too that had military

aid been denied El Salvador, as the majority of congressional liberals urged, the United States might well have been drawn into conflict, either to stave off a communist victory in El Salvador, or in response to other events in the region that such a victory might have precipitated. It should be added that the apparent success of U.S. policy in El Salvador owes something as well to congressional pressures that compelled the Administration to press harder for human rights reforms there.

The Nicaraguan situation, moreover, is even less like Vietnam than was El Salvador. In El Salvador, as in Vietnam, the United States was supporting a rather ineffective army against a growing insurgency. In Nicaragua, in contrast, we support the insurgents. And Nicaragua is unlike Vietnam in other important ways; for one thing it is much smaller. Americans tend to think of Vietnam as a small country. It is not. Its total population, north and south, is larger than that of France or England. Nicaragua, in contrast, is a genuinely small country, one-twentieth the size of Vietnam in population. Second, in relation to Nicaragua, the logistical situations of the United States and its adversaries are reversed. In Vietnam, the United States had to reach around the globe to supply its forces and its allies, while the Soviets and the Chinese had, in comparison, short and easy access. In Nicaragua, we have easy reach, while the Soviets have great distances to travel. More important, the battlefields of Indochina lay in the shadow of China's vast People's Liberation Army, which America was loath to confront. Therefore, U.S. planning was constrained by the imperative of avoiding actions that threatened to draw China into the war. One consequence was the decision to avoid carrying the ground war to the north. In contrast, Central America lies in the shadow of the United States, and this constrains what the Sandinistas and their Soviet and Cuban allies can do, for example, in regard to rebel sanctuaries in Honduras.

In the case of Nicaragua, as with El Salvador, the "no more Vietnams" argument is strictly negative and offers little guidance for U.S. policy. The 1985 reversal on the Barnes-Hamilton Amendment was, in this sense, an epiphany. "Another Vietnam" is certainly something to be avoided, but the question is how to do it. The Administration has tried to turn the Vietnam argument around by saying that U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua will result not from giving the rebels aid but from failure to aid them. Administration opponents tacitly concede the plausibility of this when they argue, as many do, even including such outstanding doves as Senator Pell, that they can envision circumstances in which they would favor using American military force against the Sandinistas. Of course, Pell and those of a similar view believe that the President's policies are far more likely to lead to direct military intervention, but their point serves to acknowledge that no sure formula exists for avoiding "another Vietnam" in Nicaragua. Thus this line of argument against the Administration's policy loses much of its force unless it is coupled with the presentation of a compelling alternative policy.

The most serious alternative has been articulated by Representative Stephen Solarz (D-N.Y.), among others. Solarz urges a policy that distinguishes between what he calls "security" issues—the size of Nicaragua's armed forces, the presence of Soviet-bloc forces or bases, and subversion of Nicaragua's neighbors—and what he calls "political" issues—democratization and civil liberties within Nicaragua. While insisting on his concern for the Nicaraguan people, he argues that Nicaragua's domestic conditions are not realistically negotiable because the Sandinistas will not agree to relinquish or share power. But, he argues, the Sandinistas might well agree to satisfy the United States on the security issues in exchange for an end to U.S. aid to the rebels.

Such an agreement would, however, not be easy to enforce. Once the rebel movement is choked off, there will be no resurrecting it. Instead, as most who have argued for this kind of agreement acknowledge, it will only be enforceable by use of American military might. But to use U.S. military force for such purposes is to rely on a blunt instrument. Will we invade Nicaragua if it violates the treaty? Will we send warships to bombard its coast? Even "surgical" air strikes, as the U.S. raid in Libya reminded us, inevitably also inflict civilian casualties. No administration will want to take such action without hard intelligence, and hard intelligence may be difficult to come by.

In addition, public disclosure of intelligence information to justify retaliatory measures (or its use in a private diplomatic protest to the offending party) risks the destruction of the source, as for example is reported to have happened when the Administration, in justifying its attack on Libya, revealed its interception of communications between Tripoli and Libyan embassies abroad. In short, the U.S. government would face recurring dilemmas over whether to risk using military force in response to violations that could not be proven, or to risk ignoring violations that, though unprovable, might well be real and damaging.

Perhaps some kind of verification system could be developed as part of a treaty, involving teams of on-the-ground observers, but the Contadora process has foundered in part over Managua's footdragging on all of the verification issues. And even if Managua were more forthcoming, the practical obstacles are enormous. Nicaragua's border with Honduras runs for 600 miles of rugged, densely foliated wilderness, and the quantity of personnel and matériel that would have to cross it to service guerrilla forces in Honduras or El Salvador is not that great.

These problems led the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America to reject the Solarz approach, on the grounds that the "political" and "security" issues could not be decoupled. It argued in its report:

Because of its secretive nature, the existence of a political order on the Cuban model in Nicaragua would pose major difficulties in negotiating, implementing, and verifying any Sandinista commitment to refrain from supporting insurgency and subversion in other countries. In this sense, the

development of an open political system in Nicaragua, with a free press and an active opposition, would provide an important security guarantee for the other countries of the region and would be a key element in any negotiated settlement.²

In this judgment the commission was expressing its concurrence with the unanimous opinion of Nicaragua's Central American neighbors. These four countries have insisted in the Contadora negotiations that the issue of democratization not be separated from security issues, and that it be buttressed with guarantees no less firm than those on security issues. As the Costa Rican response to the most recent Contadora draft put it: "peace is not valid unless it is based on democracy."

Moreover, the kind of deal that Solarz proposes is precisely what then Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders traveled to Nicaragua to offer the Sandinistas in 1981, which they turned aside. Solarz argues that events since 1981, notably the U.S. invasion of Grenada and the rise of the contra movement, may have softened up the Sandinistas, making them more willing to compromise now. But if so, this is an argument for, and not against, sustaining the rebels. If military pressure by the United States and the rebels has made the Sandinistas ready to accept the compromise they once scorned, does it make any sense to withdraw this pressure at the outset of the long negotiating process that would inevitably be required to translate this deal into an enforceable treaty?

While the Administration argues that the kind of settlement Solarz envisions is unrealistic, he and many of his colleagues say the same about the kind of military solution the rebels seek. "Virtually everybody agrees that with or without American assistance, there is no way the contras [can] overthrow the Sandinistas," he says. But it is hard to see the grounds for such certainty. An insurgency of these proportions against an indigenous communist government is without precedent. The Sandinistas had merely a few thousand men under arms by the time they marched into Managua in July 1979, but they reached even that number only by virtue of snowballing recruitment during the preceding months as the tide of history seemed to be flowing their way. Humberto Ortega, the Sandinistas' chief military commander, revealed in a 1980 interview in the Cuban newspaper *Granma* that the Sandinistas threw 150 men into their penultimate national offensive in September 1978, just ten months before they seized power. That was almost surely the bulk of their available forces. Yet they had been in the field for 17 years! Today's rebels have been at it for five years and have one hundred times as many men. Who is to say what strength they might (or might not) have in ten months, or a few years?

VII

Many of those who rose in Congress to warn of "another Vietnam" in Nicaragua also were alarmed about consecrating the global policy of which the President's Nicaragua program

² Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, Washington: G.P.O., January 1984, p. 114.

was a part. The Reagan Doctrine, they feared, contained the danger of dragging America into "Vietnams" many times over. Often they voiced objection in principle to U.S. support for the overthrow of a sitting government or of one with which the United States has diplomatic relations. But this is probably not the real issue. No congressional voices were raised in protest against the logistical support that U.S. agencies were reported to have given to the rebellious soldiers and officers who toppled Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, with whom we had diplomatic relations and more.

What seems more likely to have been on their minds is that any attempt to overthrow a communist government is sure to entail a long and bitter struggle and to engage the interests of our superpower adversary, while helping to topple the likes of Marcos could be done relatively quickly and painlessly. Once again, the motivation seems to be to avoid "more Vietnams." But this goal is no more adequate a guide for U.S. policy on a global scale than for policy toward Nicaragua.

What, after all, is meant by "no more Vietnams"? If it means no more wars, then it expresses a wish widely shared, but beyond the power of any policy to assure, for a nation may always be subjected to war by others. If it means no more losing wars, then, too, it is a wish widely shared that cannot be assured. Perhaps its meaning is best expressed in a phrase recently coined by *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker: Nicaragua is like Vietnam, he wrote, because it is a "policy war." By this he apparently means a war not imposed on the United States by a direct attack upon our territory or that of allies to whom we have defense obligations, but fought for political objectives or to stave off some danger that seems less than clear and present. In other words, a war of the type Chamberlain and Daladier averted at Munich.

In the aftermath of World War II, Western publics concurred in the painful conclusion that the failure to take up arms against dangers that had seemed distant had led directly to the necessity to confront them on their own shores. For some this bitter lesson was all but canceled by the experience of Vietnam. Not that the policy of appeasement was resurrected. But a new theory was raised that held that the use of force had lost much of its efficacy in the contemporary world. Armed with this conviction—or perhaps disarmed by it—the Carter Administration attempted to pursue a foreign policy of which one chief principle was the avoidance of "policy wars." But within four years that policy had been rocked by such severe setbacks that the President felt compelled to proclaim a new "doctrine" embracing sweeping U.S. commitments to the defense of the Persian Gulf and thus threatening to involve the nation in "policy wars" larger and more dangerous than any before.

But if the lessons of World War II ought not to be quickly discarded, what is to be learned from America's harrowing experience in Vietnam? What Vietnam proved was that the policy of containment—the first expression of our mastery of the lessons of World War II—was flawed. Resisting communist

expansion in a strictly defensive way and wherever it might threaten was ultimately beyond our means, or at least beyond our will.

We have yet to find a satisfactory policy to supplant containment. During the Kissinger years, the United States turned to détente, hoping to create a "vested interest in mutual restraint" and thereby restrain communist expansion with less call upon American force. It is a moot point whether détente would have worked out better had the public and Congress given fuller support to all of its components and the presidency not been paralyzed by Watergate. But from the outset the Soviets asserted their determination to continue supporting "liberation" struggles, that is, to continue to try to expand communism's domain by force. Thus, at best, détente alone could not have been an adequate substitute for containment.

After Kissinger's version President Carter tried his own more conciliatory version of détente, aiming, as he put it, to meet "the great challenge . . . to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that our good will is as great as our strength until, despite all the obstacles, our two nations can achieve new attitudes and new trust." But he himself recognized after the invasion of Afghanistan that this approach severely misconstrued Soviet motivations.

With the failure of détente, in either the Kissinger or Carter variants, the United States repaired, in fact if not in doctrine, to what some call "selective containment": resisting the advance of communism where we feel we can, where it seems important, where we are obliged by treaty to do so. This approach has severe shortcomings. If we declare in advance the perimeter within which we are determined to resist communism, then we virtually invite mischief everywhere else, as may have been the case in Korea in 1950. Leaving the issue vague, on the other hand, creates uncertainties not only in the minds of our adversaries but in those of our allies and ourselves as well. Either way, selective containment means that if the Soviets or their proxies press in the right places they will meet little resistance from us, and that the Third World will hold lots of such places.

These shortcomings may be inescapable, but there is one obvious way in which this policy can be strengthened. That is by what is now called the Reagan Doctrine, to wit, lending support to forces seeking to oust communist governments at the periphery of the Soviet empire. Indeed, the Reagan Doctrine is a natural if not inescapable concomitant to "selective containment." If global containment is impossible, as Vietnam taught us, because we cannot match our adversaries at every point of their choosing, we can compensate by choosing some points of engagement ourselves, points that seem favorable to us and where their assets can be put in question rather than ours. In the process, if a communist government is successfully ousted anywhere, we will reap the added benefit of undercutting communism's claim to represent the tide of history.

If we must discard containment's ambition to resist everywhere, then we must also discard its constraint of resisting only defensively. When the policy of containment was first formulated, some conservatives, such as James Burnham, protested against its purely defensive approach. But at that time the Soviet empire rested entirely in Eastern Europe, and to seek to "roll it back" meant to risk directly a new general war. Today, the Soviet empire stretches far from its borders and can be attacked at its fringes without similar peril.

Without the Reagan Doctrine, selective containment is a policy without promise. Thus as long as the Soviet Union continues to foster the rise of communist governments wherever on the globe it can, there really is no alternative to it. That was the essential truth that the Congress encountered in 1986 as it wrestled with our policy toward Nicaragua.

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