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# The New Face of War: Covert Conflicts

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The powerful images of World War II have conditioned us to think of aggression as panzer divisions racing across an international frontier. With some exceptions, such as the Korean War and the last tragic phase of the Vietnam War, the core threat to contemporary world order has been state-sponsored terrorism, guerrilla warfare and other forms of covert attack. Our general failure to focus on these continuing secret wars—whether waged by Cuba, Nicaragua or Libya—has made people forget that while all policy options have warts, a policy of non-action against violence and terrorism may lead to a complete collapse of world order.

Today a variety of radical regimes and movements, sharing an antipathy for democratic values and a belief in the use of force to spread their ideologies, practice this covert aggression. Libya's Col. Qadhafi, for example, is a particularly blatant offender. By publicly denying their attacks and accompanying them with a drumbeat of propaganda, these radical true-believers seek to make their attacks indistinguishable from a global background noise of terrorist incidents and guerrilla activity. Sadly, this strategy is proving successful in avoiding the mobilization of world opinion against these violent attacks. It is also destroying the very fabric of world order by putting an action such as the U.S. bombing of Libya in the same moral light as the terrorist actions it was a response to. It is as though the immune system of international law had gone haywire and begun to attack defensive responses while ignoring the virus of aggression.

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the debate over Central American policy. Despite six detailed State Department white papers, repeated findings of the congressional intelligence committees, the findings of the Kissinger Commission, a plethora of refugee reports, statements of Salvadoran leaders, and media reports, the debate proceeds largely as though the Cuban-Nicaraguan secret war against El Salvador was nonexistent.

The Sandinistas have also fostered a

less well-known campaign of armed subversion, terrorism and destabilization against neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica. In July 1983, 96 Nicaraguan- and Cuban-trained guerrillas were captured by the Hondurans. A year later, another group of 19 similarly trained recruits was captured. Trials of terrorists in Costa Rica have repeatedly implicated Nicaragua in terrorist activities. In February 1985, after nearly 100 terrorist incidents where Nicaraguan involvement was present, Costa Rica ordered Nicaragua to reduce its embassy staff from 47 to 10 people.

The failure to view assistance to the contras as a defensive response to a large-scale and sustained secret war against neighboring states has strongly skewed the debate. As with the democratic response to other such attacks world-wide, it is the contra response rather than the Cuban-Nicaraguan secret war that is scrutinized.

Perceptions of U.S. and Latin American interests focus heavily on the national security threat of a Soviet base in this hemisphere. But the real, short-term issues are the continuing armed aggression of Nicaragua against neighboring states, the importance of maintaining Latin American self-determination against such attacks, and the expanding program of state-supported terrorism and subversion that is being used to destabilize other countries such as Colombia.

Cuban and Nicaraguan bases are a threat, since they might become a second battleground in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization emergency, but these countries' covert attacks against neighboring states are an immediate and continuing assault that is vitally important yet strangely politically invisible. The parade of U.S. visitors to Managua who discuss possible terms of settling the dispute fail to focus on the solemn treaty obligations already binding the Nicaraguan comandantes not to attack neighboring states and on their continuing failure to adhere to those obligations. Some creative commentators even defend the Sandinista incursions into Honduras as legitimate "hot pursuit" against

contra "attacks" rather than as a significant escalation of the Sandinista secret war against neighboring states. Interestingly, House Speaker Tip O'Neill rightly invoked the RIO Treaty—which is the NATO Regional Defense Treaty of this hemisphere—in response to the recent open Sandinista incursion into Honduras. However, there seems to be only peripheral awareness that the continuing secret war against El Salvador and neighboring states should be the real occasion for invoking this hemispheric defense treaty.

President Kennedy—reflecting President Monroe—wisely established as a condition in negotiations during the Cuban

Missile Crisis that Cuba not be used as a launching platform for secret warfare against its neighbors. Congress embodied this principle in the Cuban Resolution of Oct. 3, 1962, declaring that "the United States is determined . . . to prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the use of arms, the Marxist-Leninist regime in Cuba from extending, by force or the threat of force, its aggressive or subversive activities to any part of this hemisphere. . . ." Three years later the House resolved that "any one or more of the high contracting parties to the . . . [Rio Treaty] may, in the exercise of individual or collective self-defense, which could go so far as resort to armed force . . . take steps to forestall or combat . . . [such subversion]." A central choice today for all Americans is whether we will accept as inevitable the secret Cuban and Nicaraguan assault on the integrity and independence of the Americas. Will we understand and act on the wisdom and importance of this Monroe-Kennedy condition or let it sink into an increasing background noise of terrorism and guerrilla attack?

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