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Familiar echoes on Central

America

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In 1983 when Henry Kissinger agreed to become chairman of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America — what became known as the Kissinger Commission — he asked me if I'd be available to help pull together its report. I said I thought so and, sure enough, a few months later Henry called to say the time had come. So I found myself sitting with the commission throughout its final series of meetings and serving as editor of its report.

The present debate over aid to the Nicaraguan "contras" is giving me an acute sense of *deja vu*.

The arguments have changed little from what we heard in 1983. Those who insist today that it's futile to try to save Nicaragua were insisting then that it was futile to try to save El Salvador. Those now demanding negotiation with the Sandinistas as the path to peace in Central America made the same demands then; and they argued just as vehemently as they do now that it was immoral to help the people battling the Sandinistas and their allies.

The critics' cry then was that aid should be denied to El Salvador because of death squads. And, yes, there were right-wing death squads. But they were not the primary threat.

The point today is not whether all "contras" are pristinely "clean," any more than then it was whether some Salvadoran rightists were guilty of atrocities. Of course some "contras" are not clean, even though most are properly called "freedom fighters."

In a war, you take help where you can get it. There were a lot of ragtag ruffians in our own revolutionary armies two centuries ago. As recently as World War II we made common cause with Josef Stalin in the effort to defeat Hitler. Stalin's crimes didn't invalidate the struggle against Hitler.

Fortunately, those who opposed helping El Salvador lost the argument, and now El Salvador is free.

Today, as they were then, the Sandinistas are guilty of two separate

sets of offenses: against their own people, and against their neighbors.

Their offenses against the Nicaraguan people are sufficient to justify Nicaraguan rebels in taking up arms against tyranny.

And the Sandinistas' offenses against their neighbors amply justify help to the rebels from others in the hemisphere.

The Sandinistas are brutal, committed totalitarians, who display contempt both for democratic principles at home and for peace abroad. They live by the sword. They exalt

force. They shut down opposition newspapers, harass the church, imprison their critics; they have imposed a nationwide system of block committees patterned on Fidel Castro's "thought police" to keep tabs on everyone. With massive Soviet assistance they have built a military machine that dwarfs anything ever known in Central America.

They have broken every promise they've made to the Organization of American States. They're thoroughly bad eggs, who seriously threaten the peace of the region and the security of the hemisphere.

The currently fashionable argument that aid to the "contras" should be withheld for a specified period in order to force them and us to negotiate with the Sandinistas is fatuous. It assumes the Sandinistas are waiting only for a partner willing to negotiate.

Ever since they consolidated their power by crushing the democratic elements of the revolution that overthrew Anastasio Somoza, the Sandinistas have rebuffed every attempt

at serious negotiation. They have adamantly refused to curb their aggressive designs and to share power with the people of Nicaragua. It's they, not we, who have to be forced to the bargaining table.

It has been two years since the Kissinger Commission made its report. While there remained some differences among its members over the precise ways of dealing with the situation, the commission reached a remarkable agreement on the threat Nicaragua posed to its neighbors.

The commission described its months of intensive study as "an extraordinary learning experience." Ironically, for some of its members their visit to Managua, which included a detailed Sandinista briefing clearly based on worldwide Soviet military intelligence sources,

proved to be the key eye-opener.

Among the commission's conclusions was this:

"In Nicaragua, we have seen the tragedy of a revolution betrayed; the same forces that stamped out the beginnings of democracy in Nicaragua now threaten El Salvador. . . . The use of Nicaragua as a base for Soviet and Cuban efforts to penetrate the rest of the Central American isthmus, with El Salvador the target of first opportunity, gives the conflict there a major strategic dimension. The direct involvement of aggressive external forces makes it a challenge to the system of hemispheric security and, quite specifically, to the security interests of the United States. This is a challenge to which the United States must respond."

We still must.

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