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By
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Puzzling friends, pleasing enemies

Nicaragua can't fairly be called a banana republic any longer.

It still has the bananas, but it's even less a republic today than it was.

Even the American friends of the Sandinistas concede that. So it's fashionable now, particularly among the Americans with shame enough not to praise the Sandinistas any longer, to poke fun at the notion that "tiny Nicaragua" poses any kind of threat to the "big" and "powerful" United States.

William Casey, the director of the CIA, argues this morning in The Times that size has nothing to do with the size of the threat.

"The Soviet Union and Cuba have established and are consolidating a beachhead on the American continent," says Mr. Casey, "[and] are putting hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military equipment into it, and have begun to use it as a launching pad to carry their style of aggressive subversion into the rest of Central America and elsewhere in Latin America.

Nicaragua, in this view, is fast becoming to Central America what Beirut is to the Middle East, a focus of international terrorists who are in the employ, whether paid in cash or in kind, of those who plot in faraway capitals in the name of a cruelly intolerant and graceless Marxist gospel.

Nicaragua, with the kind of military resources that Mexico only dreams of, dreams of the day when it can walk through Costa Rica, which has no army, to Panama," says the director of the CIA, "and [then] Cuba can threaten our vital sea lanes in the Caribbean."

A child's knowledge of geography is enough to fathom what comes next. Only yesterday, James A. Kelly, as assistant secretary of defense, told a House subcommittee that the Soviet Union had enlarged their naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam — that's the one we built and left behind for them — so that it is now the largest Soviet base outside the Soviet Union.

This, said Mr. Kelly, dramatically increases the threat against U.S. forces in the Pacific, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Once the Soviets control the sea lanes and the canals, through which

everything passes east and west, what's left? Even Tip O'Neill's Aunt Eunice, the Maryknoll nun who taught the speaker as much as he knows about Central America, knows the answer to that one.

The obstacle to Sandinista consolidation — and the establishment of the Marxist base in Central America — is the Nicaraguan resistance. The resistance, Bill Casey says, "encourages the erosion of, active support for the Sandinistas by creating uncertainties about the future of the regime; by challenging its claims of political legitimacy, and by giving hope to leaders of the opposition."

The man who learned this better than most is Jose Napoleon Duarte, the president of El Salvador, who came to dinner last night at The Times. He believes that democracy has grown in his country almost — almost — to the point that it is irreversible. Some appetites, once whetted, must be satisfied.

Three years ago, he said, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua was the "Cinderella" of the Marxist world — idealized, idolized, and worthy to be imitated. The democratic movement in his own country was dismissed as inconsequential.

But now, he thinks, the Sandinistas are increasingly discredited, while his own government grows in the respect, if not always the esteem, of democratic governments everywhere.

He agreed to talk to the guerrillas in his country, he says, because as a small-d democrat he "must respect the thinking of everyone." But he does not believe the Communists have any interest at all in a democratic solution: "The Communists give no chance to anyone."

The Communists in El Salvador have another hand to play. By talking, they are gaining time — time enough, perhaps, to win in the U.S. Congress what they have not won on the field of battle.

Mr. Duarte concedes that such casual disregard by Americans for their interests — he is too kind to say it just this way — is a puzzle to their friends in Latin America.

But as long as the battleground on Capitol Hill is the friendly one, this is where the fighting is likely to stay.

Wesley Pruden is managing editor of The Times.