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Aiding 'contras' harms democracy

OPINION

By Robert E. White

THE 1979 Sandinista victory over the tyranny of Nicaragua's ruler, Gen. Anastasio Somoza, began the mildest revolution Latin American has ever seen, or is ever likely to see.

Unlike the Mexican Revolution early in this century, the Sandinistas have not killed United States citizens, have not effected large-scale expropriation of foreign-owned enterprises, have not persecuted priests and religious.

Unlike the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Nicaraguan rebels have not resorted to people's courts and drumhead executions, have not repudiated the enormous debts piled up by the predatory dictatorship they ousted, and have not quit the Organization of American States.

The Sandinistas have committed their share of follies and excesses. They have censored the opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, introduced Karl Marx into the school curriculum, offended leaders of the Roman Catholic Church by keeping undisciplined priests in government posts, and brought the East-West conflict to Central America by giving Cuban military advisers a role in the new Nicaragua.

The problem with the Sandinistas, however, is not so much that they are Marxists as that they are soldiers. They tend to think of the Nicaraguan people as an army which must have disciplined land direction if they are successfully to defend their revolution against its enemies.

For all its flaws, the first two to three years of the revolution in Nicaragua realized impressive gains.

The popularity of those leaders who had driven the Somoza gang from power was reinforced by ambitious government programs of health care, literacy crusades, and the distribution to poor *campesinos* of lands that had belonged to their former oppressors. In 1983, a year in which all other Central American countries suffered economic decline, Nicaragua's economy achieved a 5 percent rate of growth.

Yet in early 1981, less than two years after the revolution, and well before the inevitable disillusionment of many who had welcomed the Sandinistas, the Reagan administration created a counterrevolutionary force and set in motion the train of events designed to culminate in the overthrow of the Sandinista government.

It is inaccurate for Reagan policymakers to charge that the Sandinistas have "betrayed their revolution" when, from its first days in office, this administration has done everything it could to ensure that the Nicaraguan revolution would fail.

It was easy for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to recruit *contras*. After Somoza's fall, the off-scourings of the Nicaraguan National Guard fled to other countries of Central America. With no civilian skills, many of these former guardsmen survived only by criminal activity such as car theft, cattle rustling, and smuggling.

Others worked in harness with the military death squads of El Salvador and Guatemala. These refugees from Somoza's Army formed the core of the CIA-created revolutionary force.

The *contras* have plundered the fields and burned the silos of Nicaragua; they have tortured and murdered health workers and literacy teachers. Yet the anti-Sandinistas have yet to capture and hold one village inside Nicaragua. They have proved totally impotent to accomplish the task for which the United States created them, to overthrow those who overthrew Somoza.

Indeed, according to the retiring chief of United States forces in Central America, Gen. Paul F. Gorman, the *contras* cannot oust the Sandinistas "in the foreseeable future," with or without US aid. If General Gorman is correct, the Reagan administration does not have a policy toward Nicaragua; all it has is a recipe to kill more and more people.

The creation of the *contras* has had one indisputable effect. It has impeded the emergence of an authentic, unified anti-Sandinista coalition. The US Congress should end all support to the *contras*, not to lessen the pressure on the Sandinistas, but to increase it. As Harry Rositzke, a former CIA operations officer, has written in the *Foreign Service Journal*, "Just as the Bay of Pigs consolidated Castro's position, so the *contras*' operations strengthen the Sandinistas."

Without the funding, guidance, and supervision from the CIA, the *contra* force will quickly disintegrate. With no foreign threat, the Sandinista junta will lack any pretext to curtail liberties and tighten security. Then and only then can the leaders of Nicaragua's still vital independent institutions oppose the Sandinistas free from the taint of being equated with those who took up arms against the Nicaraguan government at the bidding of a foreign power. As the anti-Somoza, now anti-Sandinista, intellectual Emilio Alvarez Montalban told me after a spirited discussion we had in Managua, "You are right about one thing. With peace the democrats of Nicaragua have a chance; without peace we have no chance."

Unless the US Congress stands firm and cuts off all funding for the *contras*, the results will do grievous

harm not only to the cause of freedom and democracy inside Nicaragua, but throughout the region.

Central America is five countries, but one nation — five fingers of the same hand. A *contra* attack has political repercussions in Honduras and encourages hard-liners to oppose negotiations in El Salvador.

It is idle to believe that President José Napoleón Duarte can successfully pursue peace through dialogue in El Salvador when, just a few miles away, the Reagan administration is advancing war in Nicaragua. How can Honduras salvage democracy and respect for the rule of law when United States policy forces this decent but destitute country to violate its treaty pledges and accept the presence on its soil of 10,000 Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries? Many Hondurans are convinced that the primary threat to Honduran democracy and territorial integrity comes not from the Sandinistas, but from the *contras*.

In her seminal work "On Revolution," Hannah Arendt argued that fear of revolution has been the hidden leitmotif of United States foreign policy since World War II. She pointed out that "in the contest which divides the world today and in which so much is at stake, those will probably win who understand revolution ... and such understanding can neither be countered or replaced with an expertness in counterrevolution."

The real fear of the Reagan administration is not that the Sandinistas will identify with the Soviet Union and Cuba; its real fear is that the Sandinistas will *not* identify with the Soviet Union and Cuba.

If, out of the revolution, the Nicaraguan people can forge a democratic, nonaligned state, then what pretext will the United States have to prop up a brutal and corrupt military status quo in Central America instead of accommodating US policy to the indigenous forces of political, economic, and social change?

An end to the Reagan-sponsored *contra* movement will write finish to an unthinking anticommunist crusade which has strengthened the hard-line Sandinistas and harmed those who seek to negotiate a political settlement between Nicaragua and the other countries of Central America.

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