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A boost for the Contras?

Is it possible that Amy Carter, Abbie Hoffman and a '60s-style march on Washington planned by far-out leftists can start doing for the Nicaraguan Contras what neither Ronald Reagan nor the Contras themselves have been able to do: explain the nature of the Nicaraguan cause to the American public and get a weak-kneed Congress to act with firmness?

The situation in Nicaragua, I believe, is our most important foreign policy issue — and that includes arms control. There are complexities regarding Nicaragua, but from America's point of view there is an overriding proposition at stake.

This: Is there enough support at home to prevent the consolidation of a Soviet surrogate state on the mainland of North America?

There are at least three intrinsic reasons why Congress has been so hesitant regarding Nicaragua.

First is that the issue has not really engaged the minds of the American people. Opinion polls have shown that about half the public doesn't even know whether our government is supporting the Contras or the government Sandinistas.

Second is what American Enterprise Institute scholar Norman Ornstein calls "a congressional mood of post-Vietnam isolationism."

And third is this: In a climate of apathy and isolationism, activist groups wield extra leverage on elected officials. And so, pressure groups have put the heat on.

Some of them are quite respectable. Others are off-the-wall leftists who want American foreign policy to fail whenever it is asserted.

And now it is demonstration season: This weekend there will be a Vietnam-style "Mobilization" march in Washington and civil disobedience demonstration at CIA headquarters, starring that quasi-totalitarian duo of Amy and Abbie,

who believe they can deny a U.S. government agency (the CIA) the right to interview prospective employees at a state university (the University of Massachusetts), a school that Amy does not even attend.

Who's really running the demonstrations? Because labor unions have been asked to participate, John Joyce, president of the Bricklayers Union and chairman of the AFL-CIO Executive Council Defense Committee, investigated the matter.

Mr. Joyce's conclusion: While there are many legitimate groups involved, the steering committee in charge of the show is heavily influenced by radical left-wing organizations that go beyond being against American aid to the Contras and on to open support of the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista government, and the communist guerrillas in El Salvador, as well as the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Therefore, what? These sorts of demonstrations should receive wide publicity. Even with an attempt to put a moderate face on it, the truth of the matter will emerge: People who are against American interests in the world are also vigorously against any American assertion of will in Nicaragua.

Sometimes in politics you have to know who all the players are before you form an opinion. It is political legend that "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." In this case patriotic Americans, including those opposing aid to the Contras, should be asking this: "Is the friend of my adversary, my friend?"

When the demonstrators take their masks off and start denouncing American imperialism, when we see Amy and Abbie trash the CIA for "crimes" in Central America, when we know that pro-Soviet groups are already savoring victory in Congress — that should help tell Americans what a part of the controversy is really about.

In politics, opportunity comes in strange packages. Before this is over, the Contras may be thanking Amy Carter and the radical left for bringing the reality of their case to the American public. Then perhaps even the Congress will shake its isolationist torpor, and listen.

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