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Nicaragua: What 'Everybody Knows' Is Not Intelligence

For some reason The Post continues to defend the Reagan administration's aggression against Nicaragua by insisting that, somehow, the victim deserved it. When the shooting down of the C123 transport plane revealed the United States as the arms runner, The Post editorialized that while this was bad, Nicaragua's shipments of arms to the Salvadoran insurgents were just as bad, and so there. After Paul Reichler, Nicaragua's American attorney, pointed out that the International Court of Justice had considered the evidence for this and declared it "insufficient" to support the charge, The Post gave space to a letter by Patrick Rogers [Free for All, Nov. 1]. Rogers insists he had the proof and that those, like Sen. Tom Harkin, who say otherwise are guilty of "the big lie."

Rogers lists six "specifics . . . gleaned from press reports and a Defense Department white paper." Leaving aside the credibility of "white papers" at a time when high administration spokesmen resign to protest blatant official disinformation and the secretary of state speaks of the need to surround official truth "with a bodyguard of lies," Rogers' "specifics" are peculiar, not to mention irrelevant.

■ In 1985 a Nicaraguan intelligence patrol is captured in El Paraiso, Honduras, where the main contra camps are located. No mention is made of arms shipments to El Salvador.

■ In 1984 the Salvadoran army captured an FMLN map showing trails from the coast to the interior of El Salvador. The map has no reference to Nicaragua. The

captured canoes Rogers mentions were not traced to Nicaragua.

■ In 1982 Costa Rican authorities raided a house in San José filled with arms allegedly destined for the FMLN. People of five different nationalities (including Costa Ricans) were captured. How one can draw from this the conclusion that the Nicaraguan government is culpable escapes me.

■ In attacking the claim that there has been no evidence of Nicaraguan gunrunning since very early 1981, Rogers cites a 1980 document. The document has been suspect both in terms of its genuineness and the State Department analysis of its contents. In fact, the analyst responsible admitted to The Wall Street Journal in June 1981 that he had relied too much on guesswork and that his analysis was faulty.

■ The Honduran guerrilla affair of 1983 obviously has nothing to do with gunrunning to El Salvador. Honduras, willing and cooperative host to thousands of U.S.-financed contras attacking Nicaragua since 1979, hardly can claim to be an aggrieved and guiltless party.

■ Finally, the refrigerated truck episode again refers to an event of very early 1981. The period after that, as Rogers himself stated, is the one in question.

Contrary to his belief, the World Court did review precisely these examples and a great deal more besides. It did not find them convincing.

Nor have others. Prof. Richard Gardner, in a New York Times op-ed column of July 2, even while defending the Reagan policy, declared the U.S. claim that it couldn't show its proof of Nicaragua arms trafficking for fear of exposing intelligence sources and methods "simply not credible." CIA public affairs director George V. Lauder, in a letter to The Post Jan. 11, could say only that agency evidence "indicated a Nicaraguan government role," a statement as remarkable for its ambiguity as for its weakness. Soldier of Fortune magazine technical editor Peters Kokalis, writing in August 1986 on FMLN weaponry, concluded that "no concrete proof exists of arms shipments from Nicaragua. . . ." He goes on predictably to say, though, that there is "overwhelming . . . circumstantial evidence. . . ." (This reminds me of a CIA colleague who, in 1982, waved aside as unimportant the scantiness and unreliability of intelligence information on the arms shipments and told me, "Of course we don't have the kind of evidence that would satisfy the ACLU, but everybody knows the Sandinistas are sending weapons.")

What "everybody knows" is neither valid intelligence nor legal proof. Simple-minded repetition of unsupported charges by The Post or, as in publication of Rogers' letter, confusing the issue by presenting irrelevant examples, not one of which demonstrates Nicaraguan government involvement in arms shipments (the point at issue, after all), is hardly responsible journalism.

—David MacMichael

The writer, a former CIA estimates officer, testified in behalf of Nicaragua in its case against the United States in the World Court.

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