

WASHINGTON POST
8 February 1986

Arms to El Salvador: Look Who's Talking

The argument over whether the Sandinistas are providing arms, training, and command and control to guerrillas in El Salvador has reached absurd proportions.

In recent weeks letters have appeared on this page from David MacMichael, Paul Reichler and Wayne Smith claiming that there is no evidence to support the claims of the administration and the governments of El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras.

The position of Nicaragua's attorney, Paul Reichler, is clear. In a session with journalists at the Nicaraguan Embassy last August, he stated that he had told Daniel Ortega that if the administration was correct in its assertions, he could not take Nicaragua's case to the World Court. Ortega assured him that the charges were untrue, and Reichler accepted Ortega's assurance. Reichler chooses to believe Daniel Ortega and not the president of the United States.

David MacMichael presents a more complicated—and in many ways more pathetic—case. Trading on what has become a near obsession in the United States with giving credibility to the dissident, and secure in the knowledge that as a matter of policy the CIA will not comment on the work of its former employees, he continues to make his case based on four-year-old information—an analysis that was disputed then and now by the vast majority of his colleagues.

Wayne Smith, who appears to be vying for the role of professional dissident guru, disingenuously cites the cables he saw while he headed the U.S. interests section in Cuba, also some four years ago. What the average layman might not know—but which Smith surely does—is that while Smith was privy to some information of the type he describes, he had access to only a limited amount.

Both Smith and MacMichael acknowledge that the Sandinistas were supplying arms to the Salvadoran guerrillas in 1981, thus giving the lie to denials by Father D'Escoto and Comandante Ortega and calling attention to Reichler's credulity.

In fact, the U.S. government has long stated that the weapons flows to El Salvador have shown periodic increases and decreases in response to the guerrillas' needs and the security of the supply net. One of the periods of extraordinary activity was late 1980 and early 1981, when the Sandinistas helped supply the guerrillas for their failed "final offensive" and their initial arms buildup.

In 1981, the U.S. government made the determination to end economic assistance to Nicaragua because of this arms trafficking. In the intervening years, the government's case has been strengthened by testimony of former Sandinista officials and Salvadoran guerrillas, press accounts and an abundance of intelligence information, much of it now declassified. To satisfy the demand for State Department "evidence," the State Department published a booklet called "Revolution Beyond Our Borders," which includes both public and previously classified documentation. It makes a compelling case: Sandinista support for the Salvadoran guerrillas has continued to the present day, as has Sandinista subversion in Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala.

If Reichler, MacMichael, and Smith wish to continue to oppose U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, that is certainly their right. But if they hope to be convincing, they would be well advised to stop denying the obvious.

—Gregory Lagana

The writer is acting director of the Office of Press and Public Affairs for the State Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.

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