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# No Lesson in Covert Aid

A dangerous mythology is developing in the United States to the effect that the right combination of covert military assistance ensures success for diplomatic initiatives. The proof is Afghanistan, purveyors of the concept say, rushing to apply the same formula to an analysis of events in Angola and Nicaragua.

The trouble with this is that Afghanistan is unique, bearing little resemblance to the situations in Angola and Nicaragua. In Afghanistan a neighboring superpower, the Soviet Union, unleashed a military invasion. The brazen breach of international law invited a firm response from the world at large, including the almost unanimous condemnation by the membership of the United Nations. The military conquest was resisted from the start by a substantial popular base within Afghanistan, supported with increasing flows of arms from outside. The internal resistance, helped by foreign arms, made the cost of the conquest far greater than Moscow could have imagined. But what probably was decisive in Moscow's decision to withdraw was the realization that the negative consequences were undermining other Soviet efforts to create a new relationship with the Western democracies. In other words, diplomacy appears to have been more important than weapons, even in Afghanistan.

In both Angola and Nicaragua, Marxist-oriented governments have enjoyed substantial support from the Soviet Union and its allies, and have been challenged in open warfare by opposing elements receiving military and economic assistance from the United States. Much has been made of the presence of Cuban troops in Angola, but it would be a mistake to confuse their role with that of the Soviet army of occupation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Angolan and Nicaraguan governments enjoy the support of most of their neighbors

and are recognized by the United Nations, while the U.S.-supported guerrillas in those countries are largely isolated, enjoying only limited approval from a few other nations.

The contrast with Afghanistan is most evident in Nicaragua, where the Contras, supported by Washington, appear to be opposed by virtually every other nation in the region. Indeed, the peace plan contrived by the Central American presidents themselves called for an end to this sort of guerrilla warfare while at the same time asking all nations, the Soviet Union included, to terminate arms supplies to the area.

U.S. military support for UNITA in Angola and for the Contras in Nicaragua has, in sum, done more harm than good. Indeed, the United States must share responsibility for the terrible toll of civilians as well as the destruction of property that has characterized the warfare in both Angola and Nicaragua. The military commitment to these guerrilla movements has been out of all proportion to any risk to international security posed by the nascent Marxism of the governments in the two impoverished, puny nations.

The development of peaceful settlements in both regions of the world can best be facilitated by an end to insurgency and a commitment to international negotiations. The new interest in *détente* in Moscow reinforces this opportunity.

This is not to argue that the United States can forgo clandestine armed intervention in all cases. But it is to argue that history already judges these adventures badly. Rarely do they work. That is a lesson of particular importance for Vice President George Bush, whose involvement in covert activities while director of the Central Intelligence Agency may weaken the resistance that every President should have to these dangerous, and too often counterproductive, operations.

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