

A Formula for Failure:
The Reagan Administration's Foreign Policy with El Salvador and Nicaragua

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Emma Joan Bishop has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in History.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan made it clear that he saw President Jimmy Carter's focus on human rights as the source of America's problems in Central America, and that a revival of the tenets and policies of the Cold War was paramount for the maintenance of U.S. credibility and national security. After Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election, El Salvador and Nicaragua saw a surge in violence between opposition groups and their governments, with the civilian population often caught in the middle of the conflict. In early December, 1980, the bodies of three American nuns and a lay worker were pulled out of a shallow grave near San Salvador.¹ Their murders were part of the much larger, but equally violent, state of conflict and revolution that engulfed El Salvador, Nicaragua, and other Central American nations. This violence was in part a response to Reagan's rhetoric on the campaign trail where he expressed a desire to support right-wing dictators, which in Central America often took the form of military regimes, since they opposed communism. His election emboldened the political right in many Central American nations while simultaneously causing the left to panic. The revolutionary groups fighting dictators, especially the guerrilla forces in El Salvador, increased their efforts in the hopes that they could create irreversible change before Reagan moved into the White House. Therefore, even prior to entering the White House, Reagan catalyzed significant social and political changes in Central America.

The violence, conflict, and instability in El Salvador and Nicaragua drew the attention of the incoming administration. By the end of the 1970s, the Farabundo Martí

¹ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1984), 255.

Liberation Front (FMLN) posed a major threat to El Salvador's right-wing military regime. Meanwhile, in 1979, the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, which had been an ally of the United States, collapsed and was succeeded by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). For the Reagan administration, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, as well as the guerrilla forces in El Salvador, stood in ideological opposition to the United States and its interests, and, therefore, were viewed as both part of the monolithic communist enemy and an obstacle to U.S. hegemony in Central America. A combination of the area's perceived vulnerability to communism and its close geographical relation to the United States was what led Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, to declare that "Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today."² Thus, the growth of leftist ideologies in El Salvador and Nicaragua made foreign policy with these nations a top priority for the incoming Reagan administration.

The Reagan administration saw the emergence of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary groups in Central America as a threat to the security of the United States and to American credibility during the Cold War. If the United States could not keep communism out of its own backyard, then how could Washington contain it even farther abroad? Thus, fears about national security and credibility transformed Central America into a Cold War battleground. While acting within the framework of a bipolar world split between democracy and communism, the Reagan administration introduced the distinction between authoritarian dictators and totalitarian dictators into its foreign policy. According to the Reagan administration, "autocratic regimes were seen as

² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, quoted in Peter Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S. – Latin American Relations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182.

traditional and natural dictatorships for their societies,” and provided a stable governing option that would challenge and inhibit the growth of communist ideology.³ Although this distinction existed prior to Reagan’s implementation of it, he made the position public and well known during his first years in office. Therefore, under Reagan, the United States supported right-wing dictators in order to prevent the spread of communism in Central America, to protect economic interests in the region, to ensure national security, and to promote American credibility in the Cold War. Reagan believed that this was the path toward ending America’s “Vietnam syndrome” and reinstalling U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, in response to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the guerrilla movement in El Salvador, the Reagan administration used Cold War ideology to shape its political and military actions in the region, culminating in the Reagan Doctrine.

The fracturing of the Cold War consensus, a product of the Vietnam War, however, caused a shift in how democracy and human rights were viewed in American foreign policy. Reagan’s foreign policy presented a paradox between the moral and democratic values of the United States and the national security interests and preservation of American credibility that led to the support of right-wing dictators. Shifts in public opinion about what types of governments the United States should support catalyzed heated debates over Reagan’s policies in Congress and in the public, and demonstrated that the Vietnam War had a direct effect on American foreign policy. President Reagan wanted to contain communism by sending aid to governments and guerrilla forces that fought communist or other revolutionary governments or guerrilla

³ David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

forces. An adherence to traditional Cold War frameworks and aspiration to reestablish U.S. hegemony in the wake of the Vietnam War thus drove the Reagan administration's foreign policy, and defined American relations with Nicaragua and El Salvador during the 1980s. These goals aligned with Reagan's view of the United States as the city on a hill. These policies were destined to be unsuccessful, however, because the Vietnam War altered the public's perception of the role of U.S. foreign policy and the shape such policies should take, thus creating public opposition to the Reagan administration's policies with El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Historiography

The Reagan administration's foreign policy with Central America has been little discussed in terms of Reagan's revitalization of Cold War ideology in the wake of the Vietnam War. In approaching the topic of Reagan's foreign policy, historians have taken a number of routes. One common trend is the broadly scoped analysis of U.S. policy with Central America over a long period of time, often covering decades but at times covering centuries. These historians typically focus on a specific characteristic of the policy and trace its application over numerous presidencies and even multiple geographic areas. This temporal and geographical breadth allows for an understanding of larger systems and frameworks that have guided U.S. foreign policy, but can sometimes fail to take into account the particular circumstances that directly shape and affect a policy and the changes it produces. In contrast, other scholars have focused on one country and examined how U.S. policies have affected that country. Each of these approaches, however, omits a pivotal aspect of the Reagan administration's foreign

policy with Central America: the ways in which the Vietnam War and the cracking of the Cold War consensus shifted the American public and Congress's support for traditional Cold War ideology. This is troubling because an understanding of the specific application of ideologies, and the effects of past policies, are crucial for the construction and improvement upon American foreign policy today. The covert and overt policies that emerged under the Reagan administration with El Salvador and Nicaragua deserve serious consideration because of what they tell us about Reagan's use of Cold War ideology to shape his foreign policy.

A majority of the academic writings that comment on the Reagan administration's policies with El Salvador and Nicaragua are embodied within a much larger conceptualization of the history of a specific ideology that has characterized U.S. foreign policy for an extended period of time. For instance, Peter H. Smith sought to "concentrate on the structural relationship between the United States and Latin America," which he used to reveal the "structural patterns in U.S. – Latin American relations [and] the transformation of those patterns over time."⁴ To do so, Smith broke U.S. foreign policy into three broad systems: imperialism, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War. In his quest to understand the driving force behind policies during each of these temporal systems, Smith concluded that "national interests are often cloaked in the uplifting idiom of moral purpose, [but] it is the quest for geopolitical and economic advantage – not idealism – that provides the driving force behind foreign policy and international behavior."⁵ Thus, Smith utilized a focus on structural relationships and

⁴ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 3.

⁵ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 4.

national interests to explore U.S. foreign policy, including that of Reagan's with Central America.

Another similar focus to these broader temporal and geographical approaches is demonstrated by the work of Walter LaFeber. He argued that foreign policy with Central America was consistent in regard to its antirevolutionary foundation. To do so he posited that "for more than a century (if not since 1790), North Americans have been staunchly antirevolutionary; and second, U.S. power has been the dominant outside (and often inside) force shaping the societies against which Central Americans have rebelled."⁶ Similar to Smith in breadth, LaFeber traced the themes of U.S. fear of revolution and its ironic systematic creation of revolutions over a large span of time in order to provide a better understanding of how these themes had and continue to have implications on American foreign policy. The fear of revolution that characterized the Reagan years was defined by political ambitions, LaFeber found, instead of an absolute fear of revolution.

Smith and LaFeber, however, both missed the disjuncture to U.S. foreign policy caused by the Vietnam War. Unlike the presidents and administrations prior to and during the Vietnam War, those who served their term in the wake of the war found that they could no longer support a dictator, or other authoritarian or totalitarian government, simply in the name of American interests or national security. Although still operating within temporal and geographical breadth, David F. Schmitz found that the Vietnam War affected the ebb and flow of U.S. support of right-wing dictators. Schmitz pointed out, "issues of democracy, human rights, and the types of government

⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 12.

to which the United States provided aid entered into the public debates over foreign policy” after the fracturing of the Cold War consensus during the Vietnam War.⁷ When running for president, Reagan “promised to end the ‘Vietnam Syndrome,’ restore American power, and protect the friends of the United States.”⁸ As Schmitz pointed out, “Reagan never abandoned the view of the Vietnam War that he set out in 1966,” and his policies were empirically shaped by his determination to never repeat such a war.⁹ The cracking of the Cold War consensus that accompanied the war, however, led to a shift in public opinions about U.S. policies and the support of right-wing dictators as contradictory to American values and the emerging human rights framework. Thus, Reagan’s policies of supporting authoritarian rulers came to face opposition from Congress and the American public.

Other historians decided to approach the subject with the focus on the country impacted by U.S. policies, including El Salvador or Nicaragua.¹⁰ This approach typically entailed the consideration of many writings, speeches, and movements by people within the country as well as those outside of it. Although often functioning more as a source reader than historical argument, these books put different perspectives into a greater dialogue that encourages new perspectives on the foreign policy decisions made in the United States. These books provide a better understanding of the reality of the situation, and the implications that American foreign policy has on the ground, and often out of sight of the American public.

⁷ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 241.

⁸ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 200.

⁹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 200.

¹⁰ For reading on this please see, *The Nicaragua Reader: Documents of a Revolution under Fire*, and *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*.

The cracking of the Cold War consensus within the Vietnam War challenged previously accepted standards for conducting U.S. foreign policy. Reagan, in returning to Cold War ideology as a framework for his policies of anticommunism, sought to reestablish U.S. hegemony throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Reagan administration's foreign policy with El Salvador and Nicaragua did ultimately align with much of Smith and LaFeber's arguments regarding hegemonic values and antirevolutionary sentiments. An understanding of the ways in which the Vietnam War and the fracturing of the Cold War consensus shifted public opinion reveals the paradoxical nature of the Reagan administration's policies, which were now subject to scrutiny from Congress and the American public and destined for failure.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT COLOSSUS OF THE NORTH: U.S. – CENTRAL AMERICAN RELATIONS (1790-1980)

Social and Political Trends Prior to the Cold War

The relationship between the United States and Central America has consistently adhered to one in which U.S. interests have shaped and affected the social, political, and economic nature of Central American nations. After its founding, the United States first sought to assert itself as a global power in a world of growing empires through the expansion of imperialist relations to those nations closest to it. Thus, from the 1790s to the early twentieth century, imperialist interests and policies characterized inter-American relations.¹ The specific desire for hemispheric hegemony dated back to the early 1800s and became a full-fledged policy in 1823 with the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine. It condemned European colonization in the Americas, and fundamentally asserted U.S. hegemony over the region.² By the 1890s, Washington had fully shifted its policy away from aspirations of territorial acquisition and turned its attention toward the creation of a sphere of influence within the Western Hemisphere, which made economic interests increasingly important by the turn of the twentieth century.³

The extension of U.S. hegemony in Central America had less to do with territorial reach, and was more prominently focused on the expansion of commercial advantages. Through the pursuit of a policy of institutionalized hegemony within the

¹ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 5.

² Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 18.

³ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 7.

Caribbean Basin and Central America, the United States sought to secure a sphere unto itself. Because of this, by the 1890s U.S. politicians had concluded that American interests were directly impacted by turmoil in Central America.⁴ The 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War resulted in the removal of Spain from Cuba and the establishment of an American protectorate as well as Washington's direct control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands.⁵ This war was significant because up until this time U.S. hegemony had been backed by the principle of European nonintervention, and the war proved that this claim would henceforth be backed by the use of arms.⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Roosevelt presidency intensified and expanded the U.S. desire to create and maintain a sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. During Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, the United States embraced the position of being a world power. As Roosevelt proclaimed, "We cannot avoid facing the fact that we occupy a new place among the peoples of the world, and have entered upon a new career.... We must dare to be great."⁷ In order to do so, Roosevelt proposed a new approach to foreign policy. On December 6, 1904, President Roosevelt presented to the nation the tenets of what became known as the "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. His creation of a new principle behind foreign policy, which embodied his desire for "big stick" diplomacy, positioned the United States as a sole policeman in the Western Hemisphere and denied European powers the right to

⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 32.

⁵ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 34.

⁶ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 18.

⁷ Serge Ricard, "The Roosevelt Corollary," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2006, 19.

interfere in what he termed the U.S. “zone of influence.”⁸ Roosevelt explained that “the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of... wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international policy power.”⁹ The Roosevelt Corollary was deemed necessary to protect the Caribbean Basin from the influence and control of European powers.

More than thirty U.S. military interventions were launched in Latin America between 1898 and 1934.¹⁰ The military interventions of the early twentieth century typically entailed U.S. forces disposing of the ruler, creating a provisional government, holding elections, and departing. This process ensured that Central American governments would be friendly with the United States. Other interventions resulted in long-term occupations like those in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, which were prominently defined by the purpose of imposing economic and political order.¹¹ The use of military interventions to protect economic interests, assert geopolitical hegemony, and to promote and spread democracy aligned with President Woodrow Wilson’s belief that the United States had a duty to make the world safe for democracy. In order to guide Latin American states toward democracy, however, the United States followed a cautionary itinerary that embraced slow, calculated change through the application of law and order to avoid mass-based social revolutions.

The U.S. occupation of Nicaragua followed the logic of calculated change in order to avoid revolution. Following a few years of varied levels of intervention, in

⁸ Ricard, “The Roosevelt Corollary,” 17.

⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, “Fourth Annual Message,” December 6, 1904, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29545.

¹⁰ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 34.

¹¹ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 65.

1912 U.S. troops launched a full-scale intervention in which marines crushed a Liberal insurrection, established order, and helped run presidential elections (which resulted in the presidency of a conservative who previously had established friendly relations with the United States). Due to continued trends of political instability, specifically political trends that conflicted with U.S. geopolitical interests, occupation by U.S. marines continued for twenty of the next twenty-one years.¹²

The presence of U.S. troops, however, did not provide a long-term solution to instability. Social and political turmoil mounted in Nicaragua during the 1920s and by 1927 liberal politicians were gaining recognition and a following, as well as support from Mexico, which threatened the U.S. support for conservative leaders in the country as well as U.S. hegemony over Central America. One such example of the growth of liberal groups and challenges to the U.S. came from a peasant army, led by the famed Nicaraguan nationalist August Cesar Sandino, that waged a guerrilla war against U.S. marines in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Despite the rebellion's failure, Sandino was remembered as a hero that challenged U.S. domination in Latin America. In response to increased hostilities, the United States created the National Guard, led by Anastasio Somoza, in 1932. Sandino spoke out against the National Guard and called for its dissolution, which led Somoza to order Sandino's execution as part of his ruthless rise to power. In an effort to further protect American interests, especially American coffee planters and economic interests in the country, the U.S. removed American troops since they had become a source of local instability and agitation.¹³

¹² Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 57.

¹³ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 66.

The desire for Central American stability to ensure the prosperity and longevity of a U.S. sphere of influence, however, created a conflict. Inter-American relations were caught in a tension between American ideals of liberal democracy and the nation's economic, cultural, and geopolitical interests in the region. In order to resolve this conflict, American leaders in the 1920s rationalized the institutionalization of a policy of support for right-wing dictators.¹⁴ By developing a relationship with Central and Latin American dictators, the U.S. was able to secure its interests in the region, protect economic policies, and ensure a degree of influence over internal policies and politics. The establishment and institutionalization of such logic was an integral piece of U.S. foreign policy over the rest of the century's course. When military interventions began to prove their inability to provide long-term solutions, Washington turned to the support of right-wing dictators as the means to establish order.

This policy led the United States to support the military dictatorships of Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza Garcia and El Salvador's Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, despite their bloody histories.¹⁵ The Somoza dictatorship came to power in the aftermath of the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua from 1916-1933.¹⁶ In 1934 Somoza seized power of the country and in 1937 he was officially named president.¹⁷ Ruling the country for almost the next fifty years, the Somoza dynasty was supported by the National Guard, the Nicaraguan elite, and the United States. In El Salvador, the United States supported Martinez during the 1930s since he provided economic and political

¹⁴ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 1.

¹⁵ David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're On Our Side: The United States & Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 48.

¹⁶ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 184.

¹⁷ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 295.

stability, and was friendly to U.S. interests. These are only two examples of the many dictators the United States supported in Latin America.¹⁸

During the 1930s and 1940s U.S. interests in Central America also transitioned away from geopolitical concerns and concentrated more on economic considerations. By World War II, the United States was actively engaged in fixing the market with Latin America to favor lower raw material prices and enable U.S. prices to rise.¹⁹ This process greatly disadvantaged Central Americans, whose nations were largely dependent on agro-export systems. American assistance to coffee and banana companies during the turn of the century transformed Central American nations into nations dependent on trade with the United States. “From the 1920s through the 1950s the United States purchased 60 to 90 percent of the region’s exports and provided a similar share of imports.”²⁰ In creating such an extreme level of dependence, the United States paradoxically created a system that guaranteed a sphere of influence, but would also prove to be the cause of instability and revolutions in Central America during both the early and late twentieth century.

Export economies and the expansion and proliferation of authoritarian control in the Caribbean Basin, which was supported by U.S. policies, had vast social and political implications. The ascension of authoritarian rulers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characteristic to most of Central America, and led to the reduction of church power, confiscation of land, creation of private property, and

¹⁸ For a more thorough analysis, and for more examples, on the U.S. support of right-wing dictators, see Schmitz, *Thank God They're On Our Side, The United States & Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965*, and Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*.

¹⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 90.

²⁰ Peter H. Smith, “The Origins of Crisis,” in *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America* ed. Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth Sharpe, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8.

aspiration for progress through the espousal of free-market economics and establishment of “republican dictatorships.”²¹ The flow of capital with increased exportation of agricultural products and importation of manufactured goods benefitted the elite, but also intensified the dismal distribution of wealth in many nations and increased dependency on U.S. economic policies. Furthermore, U.S. support of the authoritarian dictators solidified political relations between national elite and the United States. Thus, to the masses of Central America, the ideals of democracy, like elections and free trade, were viewed as a hoax due to lengthy histories of corruption and repression. Distrust and resentment began to bubble under the surface of these “sleepy banana republics.”

In 1932, a peasant insurrection in El Salvador planted the seed of rebellion for the decades to follow. Communist leader Augustín Farabundo Martí led the peasant revolt against U.S. – supported dictator General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez.²² Amidst the Great Depression, coffee plantations lowered wages in an effort to minimize the effects of the depression. This triggered a revolt from the peasants and poor indigenous workers who already lived in extreme poverty. The uprising was crushed within days, however, and Martinez decided to unleash a massacre on the peasant population in order to further deter future uprisings, which resulted in the slaughter of at least ten thousand.²³ Augustin Farabundo Martí, however, was remembered and hailed as hero for the rural masses, peasants, and indigenous peoples of El Salvador.

²¹ Smith, “The Origins of Crisis,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 6.

²² Martin Diskin and Kenneth E. Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 51.

²³ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 51.

By the early 1930s, after witnessing and participating in the social, economic, and political turmoil that gripped Central America, the United States was beginning to question its interventionist approach. This realization was embraced by the presidential election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. Roosevelt proclaimed that nations had to learn to treat each other as “good neighbors.”²⁴ Roosevelt believed that “single-handed intervention by us in the internal affairs of other nations must end; with the cooperation of others we shall have more order in this hemisphere and less dislike.”²⁵ Furthermore, he asserted that the betterment of relations between nations would significantly increase trade with countries in the region. In 1933, Roosevelt declared that “I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the Good Neighbor... the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.”²⁶ Roosevelt’s declaration led to a policy that directly challenged the trends of intervention, support for right-wing dictators, and the unquestioned involvement and manipulation of other nation’s politics and economic policies. Since the cornerstone of the Good Neighbor Policy was nonintervention, it directly rejected the Roosevelt Corollary and its proclamation of the United States possessing both a right and moral duty to intervene. The Good Neighbor Policy instead upheld the principle of national sovereignty and the “juridical equality of states.”²⁷

During the entire century from the 1830s to the 1930s, no U.S. intervention resulted in the establishment of a democratic government in Latin America.²⁸ The

²⁴ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 68.

²⁵ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 68.

²⁶ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 68.

²⁷ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 69.

²⁸ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 60.

greater emphasis upon geopolitical and economic motivations, under the guise of democracy-promoting rhetoric, established U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere as the ultimate goal for U.S. policies, rather than the installation of democratic states. For the most part, the history of U.S.-Latin American relations was characterized by U.S. justification of military power as a means for the promotion of democracy, regional interests, and security. During the Cold War, military power would similarly be justified as a necessity for the preservation of national security, American credibility, and thus once again U.S. hegemony.

The Cold War and Consensus

Many of the integral beliefs and assumptions the United States held during World War II were transitioned into the Cold War. During the second world war, the belief in American benevolence and moral duty became fundamental to its foreign policy. The war also furthered American exceptionalism and the nationalist assumption that American values were universal values, and, therefore, that it was the duty of the United States to exercise its global power to extend these values to other nations.²⁹ The Cold War, however, was not waged in the name of Western civilization or capitalism, but in the name of America, and American values, which served to both unite the American public within an ideological consensus as well as embrace the christening of “the American Century.”³⁰ The World War II narrative of the United States as a global leader that fought for freedom was reconceptualized to frame American actions in the

²⁹ John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism & the Cultural Roots of the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 7.

³⁰ Fousek, *To Lead the Free World*, 2.

Cold War as a defense of the “free world” against monolithic communism and totalitarianism.³¹ Thus, the ideology created in the 1940s was fundamental to U.S. policies through the 1980s.

In 1946, writing from the U.S. embassy in Moscow, George F. Kennan outlined the preliminary tenets that characterized Cold War policy. In his “Long Telegram,” Kennan detailed the nature of the Soviet Union and its foreign policy. He asserted that Soviets believed that their security, and the creation and preservation of a communist world, required the disruption and destruction of American traditions and society. Thus, all conflicts during the Cold War became issues of national security to the United States. Success against the Soviets, Kennan believed, relied on the use of force. He noted that the Soviets were responsive to force, and “easily withdraw... when strong resistance is encountered at any point.”³² In adherence to this logic, the United States adopted a foreign policy that sought to combat the aggressive and expansive nature of communism.

The Cold War presented the United States with the global responsibility to contain communism. The U.S. prioritization of national security created a need for influence and control in many areas of the world. Within the bipolar framework of the Cold War, any conflict regardless of size was seen through the prism of the Washington-Moscow conflict. This logic once again justified American intervention and the support of right-wing dictators for the insurance of social and political stability.

³¹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 2.

³² “Attache George F. Kennan Critiques Soviet Foreign Policy in His “Long Telegram,” 1946,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*, seventh edition, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 194.

The first adoption of Kennan's logic and presentation of Cold War policy was the Truman Doctrine. President Harry S. Truman's decision to support the government of Greece in 1947 set the precedent behind American foreign policy during the Cold War as interventionist for the protection of free peoples and democracy. In a momentous speech to Congress, the president presented the underlying tenant of the Truman Doctrine, saying: "I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."³³ Therefore, the commitment of the U.S. to protecting its interests through the protection of "free peoples" justified the use of American assistance for nations struggling against *internal* or external aggressors.

In 1950, the National Security Council Paper No. 68 (NSC – 68) reassessed the Soviet threat to the United States and proposed the policy the United States adopted for the Cold War. The paper described the Soviet Union as an aspiring hegemonic power, "animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, [that] seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world."³⁴ In response, the paper detailed that the United States must use the policy of "containment" to "block further expansion of Soviet power [and] expose the falsities of Soviet pretensions...."³⁵ Military strength was deemed necessary for the ultimate guarantee of our national security," as well as for the policy of containment.³⁶ The paper concluded:

A more rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength and thereby of confidence in the free world than is now contemplated is the only course which is consistent with progress toward achieving our fundamental purpose....

³³ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 120.

³⁴ "The National Security Council Paper No. 68 (NSC-68) Reassesses the Soviet Threat and Recommends a Military Buildup, 1950," in *Major Problems*, 203.

³⁵ "NSC-68," in *Major Problems*, 204.

³⁶ "NSC-68," in *Major Problems*, 204.

It is necessary to have the military power to deter, if possible, Soviet expansion, and to defeat, if necessary, aggressive Soviet or Soviet-directed actions of a limited or total character.³⁷

The fundamental assumption NSC-68 relied on was that communism was monolithic, meaning that the emergence of a communist group or leader anywhere was an extension of Moscow's power abroad, and thus posed a threat to the security and credibility of the United States. This logic further secured the return to policies that were pro-intervention, anti-revolution, and supportive of friendly authoritarian regimes.

The United States intensified its opposition to revolutions based on the logic that revolutions were destabilizing and could lead to the emergence of a communist power. A revolution had the capacity to upset a social order, unleash national sentiments, destroy political institutions, and enable left-wing takeovers.³⁸ The United States instead stressed the importance of guided, evolutionary change that occurred steadily and often with the assistance of U.S. policies. By encouraging gradual and guided change, Washington created a platform from which it could encourage and increase its involvement and support of other nation's affairs to promote stability and oust communist groups.

Right-wing dictators became valuable allies under these pretexts. The support of right-wing dictators was deemed "necessary to maintain order in nations that were too politically immature for self-government, to block the spread of communism, and to preserve American access to the resources of the Third World."³⁹ The Truman administration made a pivotal distinction when revitalizing U.S. support of dictators by

³⁷ "NSC-68," in *Major Problems*, 205.

³⁸ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 147.

³⁹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 4.

distinguishing the totalitarian dictators on the left from the authoritarian on the right.⁴⁰ The autocratic regimes were viewed as natural, while totalitarian rule was viewed as an imposed rule linked to the USSR's monolithic communism. The distinction between the two along the lines of Cold War assumptions resulted in consensus on the support of right-wing dictators and left no room for moral opposition.

The Cold War intensified Washington's concerns about political instability in Central America for security and economic reasons. The intertwined nature of these two issues functioned as the constants of U.S. – Central American relations during the Cold War. Policy decisions throughout the Cold War thus acquired "a particular urgency when social change or political instability threatened to bring 'foreign ideologies' – communism associated with Soviet power – into the hemisphere."⁴¹ The common perception that the United States had both a duty and a need to intervene in the events of Central America to protect national interests was accepted by all presidents during the Cold War. Additionally, this perception reinforced the applicability of U.S. support of right-wing dictators in Central America. Through this logic, military force or repression became equated with political peace.

Increased concerns for national security and credibility culminated into a defense of U.S. hegemony as Central American nations became both a battleground and a prize to be held. Washington's interest in preserving its sphere of influence in the Caribbean Basin, which included all Central American nations and the island nations in the Caribbean Sea, served to benefit specific national interests as well as greater Cold

⁴⁰ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 3.

⁴¹ Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 7.

War objectives. In March 1950, George Kennan visited U.S. ambassadors in South America to discuss American objectives in the Americas.⁴² Following the meetings,

Kennan offered his conception of the goals of U.S. policy in Latin America:

1. The protection of our [sic] raw materials,
2. The prevention of military exploitation of Latin America by the enemy and
3. The prevention of the psychological mobilization of Latin America against us.⁴³

These goals reflected the culmination of the U.S. logic and policies of the past within Cold War ideology. Imperialist tendencies, and the fundamental belief that the United States had the right to demand and control access to materials *in* other nations while rhetorically supporting democratic ideals of freedom and autonomy created a contradictory image. Furthermore, the hegemonic vision of the United States was reinforced by the notion that it was the duty of the United States to protect the hemisphere from communism and totalitarianism. It is in this context that revolutions were perceived as dangerous and threatening to American national security. The logic and rationale behind this manifestation of Cold War ideology was backed by a public consensus.

The optimism and economic confidence that emerged after World War II, and the fear of communism and atmosphere of paranoia created by the Cold War, produced the Cold War consensus. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s, the United States felt as though it had discovered unending economic progress, which created a confidence in the ability of capitalism and economic growth to address and solve social problems. This logic resulted in a shift away from the traditional left, and

⁴² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 107.

⁴³ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 126.

toward liberalism. Meanwhile, the tensions of the Cold War and heightened fears of communism made societal norms become social requirements as an age of conformity was ushered in. The resulting culture of consensus had two faces: it was “confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, [and] anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism...”⁴⁴ The economic prosperity and the social optimism in the wake of World War II, as well as the desire for a culture of conformity, created the liberal consensus that characterized Cold War culture. Thus, until the Vietnam War the policies of the Cold War were backed by a public consensus.

The Cold War Reaches Central America

The emergence of radical movements or revolutionary change in Central America was viewed as both an ideological threat and a security threat to the United States during the Cold War, and reinforced the U.S. policy of support for right-wing dictators. This inherent anti-revolutionary sentiment would lead numerous administrations to produce policy’s that fundamentally opposed their original intent and created counterproductive results. For example, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. policies resulted in the economic dependency of many Central American nations on American trade. In order for these regimes to remain stable and prevent or limit the emergence of left-wing groups, they became dependent on U.S. military aid. This policy, however, was also in the interest of U.S. security, credibility, and containment policy. The policy of support for right-wing dictators aligned with the emergence of more dictators in the region, and “by the end of 1954, military dictators

⁴⁴ Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon – What Happened and Why*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

ruled thirteen of the twenty Latin American nations,” which included “all the Central American nations except... Costa Rica.”⁴⁵ The use of American forces and materials to help uphold right-wing dictators became common during the Cold War, and expanded across more countries. Furthermore, the relationship between the United States and dictators encouraged the expulsion of communists, working-class movements, and other radically left groups to stabilize the region. Thus, as American policies became further militarized, the “Good Neighbor became less a policy of economic growth or reform than of military ties and leverage.”⁴⁶

The policy of nonintervention, however, was challenged following the Cuban revolution by the emergence of a communist state in the Caribbean. The success of the Cuban revolution and failure of the Bay of Pigs haunted the United States. In 1959, the U.S.-supported dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown in an armed revolt and succeeded by Fidel Castro. In campaigning for the presidency, Kennedy focused almost entirely on foreign policy and frequently discussed his determination to rid Cuba of the Castro regime. As David F. Schmitz noted, “it would be difficult to overstate Kennedy’s fixation with Castro and his determination, at almost any cost, to prevent another successful communist revolution in the Western Hemisphere.”⁴⁷ John F. Kennedy’s hopes of reinstalling a friendly noncommunist ruler in Cuba, however, failed with the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. The failure of the Bay of Pigs led to Washington’s worst nightmare; an indigenous, communist regime just 90 miles off the coast of the United States. “In the decades since the Cuban revolution,

⁴⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 110.

⁴⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 110.

⁴⁷ Schmitz, *Thank God They’re On Our Side*, 234.

virtually all of U.S. policy toward Latin America can be traced to Washington's obsession with preventing another Cuba."⁴⁸

The Kennedy administration also implemented a socially and economically focused approach to the application of containment policy in Central America. Within sixty days of entering the White House, President John F. Kennedy proposed a plan he termed the "Alliance for Progress," which sought to use American money to boost development in Central and Latin America. Fear of communism emerging close to America, and the exacerbated anxiety of communism in Cuba, led Kennedy to propose a policy that sought to prevent and contain communism within the hemisphere. The program made a decade-long financial commitment that planned to "create stability and combat communism through an enlightened program of capital investment, economic growth, educational reform, and the promotion of democracy."⁴⁹ Thus, the Alliance functioned as the administration's weapon against revolution and instability in Central America. "Demands for revolution were to be met with evolution."⁵⁰

The application of the program, however, created a different reality. A massive amount of the funds sent to Central America ended up in the hands of oligarchs and U.S.-owned firms. A study conducted in 1963 by the United Nations found that the middle class, which Kennedy had placed his hope in, were growing restless and more radical.⁵¹ In many Central American nations, as the Alliance further condensed the accumulation of land and wealth to a select few, moderate political views disappeared. The Alliance failed to identify or comprehend the roots of discontent and resentment

⁴⁸ Smith, "The Origins of Crisis," in *Confronting Revolution*, 15.

⁴⁹ Schmitz, *Thank God They're On Our Side*, 243.

⁵⁰ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 149.

⁵¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 154.

amongst Central America's rural and poor, and instead further enforced the social, political, and economic dynamics of class and power in many countries.

The combination of economic policies created prior to the Cold War, the Alliance for Progress, and the reliance on military force continued to cause social and economic strife in Central American nations. The explosive growth of commercial agriculture that occurred in the 1950s catalyzed trends of land concentration in many nations through to the 1970s. Small landowners and indigenous peoples were displaced as large-scale production of coffee, sugar, bananas, and cotton grew.⁵² By the late 1970s, nearly 40 percent of the rural population in Central America was landless and unemployment rates were on the rise, of which El Salvador experienced the most severe changes, followed closely by Nicaragua and Guatemala.⁵³ Thus, although the agro-export economies and Alliance for Progress brought new wealth into the nations, very little of it reached the rural and peasant populations. As the poor and rural masses were forced to become wage workers they had to contend with sharp swings in labor demand as well as the effects of fluctuations in international commodity prices.⁵⁴ The masses of Central America were therefore confronted with highly disruptive social changes and challenges.

In order to protect the new social and economic systems, Central American governments often relied on repressive force to safeguard land, repress opposition, and maintain order. As social and political contexts in these nations changed, they revealed the paradoxical nature of the Alliance for Progress. The program was initiated by

⁵² Richard S. Newfarmer, "The Economics of Strife," in *Confronting Revolution*, 209.

⁵³ Richard S. Newfarmer, "The Economics of Strife," in *Confronting Revolution*, 212.

⁵⁴ Dennis Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 90.

Kennedy to promote peaceful change in Latin America, however, these initiatives were paradoxical in nature because they relied on military assistance to ensure stability in the region. The Kennedy, and soon after, Johnson administrations were forced to confront the reality of the policy's failed idealism and turned back to a reliance on military force and the support of right-wing dictatorships to ensure political stability.

In 1964, the CIA called El Salvador "one of the hemisphere's most stable, progressive republics," and it became the pride of the Alliance for Progress.⁵⁵ During the 1960s the nation received a similar amount of foreign aid to that it had received during the entire first half of the century.⁵⁶ This infusion of capital catalyzed staggering economic growth rates, hundreds of new industries, and prompted President Lyndon Johnson to declare it "a model for the other Alliance countries."⁵⁷

The economic transformations of the nation stimulated social change but hid an ugly reality of poverty and unemployment. The post-World War II economic growth did create a loosely identified middle class that included teachers, professionals, and rural workers, however, they were not the majority. During the 1960s, Salvadorans were classified as one of the world's five most malnourished peoples.⁵⁸ As malnourishment rose, so too did unemployment. Peasants and tenant farmers were driven off their land by oligarchs and began to flee to neighboring Honduras in search of work and food. Border tensions between Honduras and El Salvador, however, led to the "soccer war" of 1969, the defeat of Honduras, and the President of Honduras's expulsion of the 300,000 illegal Salvadorans who had been residing in Honduras at the

⁵⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 172.

⁵⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 174.

⁵⁷ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 174.

⁵⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 175.

time.⁵⁹ Thus, those who had fled unbearable living conditions were forced to return to a country with little prospects for change, as conditions continued to worsen into the 1970s.

The increased power of the governing military elite had created greater conflict in El Salvador. In 1950 El Salvador came under the rule of a military-oligarch coalition, although military regimes had controlled the country dating back to from 1932.⁶⁰ Renaming itself the Party of National Reconciliation (PCN) in 1961, the coalition ruled through force and fraudulent elections.⁶¹ The emergence of a strengthened working class, however, did pose a challenge to the military and PCN. During the 1960s, José Napoleón Duarte organized the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), which became a unifying group for other small social, democratic, and communist parties to join in challenging the military-oligarchic alliance. In the 1972 presidential elections, Duarte ran for president on a platform of democracy and land reform, but was labeled a communist by the oligarchy. When election results began to point toward Duarte's victory, the military intervened and declared Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, the PCN candidate, to be president.⁶² The blatant voter fraud of the election marked the end of an optimistic reformist agenda and caused both political and violent opposition to strengthen.

Thus, as El Salvador entered the 1970s opposition to the military government grew. Nonviolent direct action in the form of sit-ins, demonstrations, and strikes was

⁵⁹ "Chronology," in *The Continuing Crisis: U.S. Policy in Central America and the Caribbean: Thirty Essays by Statesmen, Scholars, Religious Leaders, and Journalists*, ed. Mark Falcoff and Robert Royal, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 193.

⁶⁰ "Chronology," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 193.

⁶¹ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 52.

⁶² Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 53.

common among student, peasant, and labor organizations. Some, but not all, were influenced by elements of communist ideology. Religious groups drew upon the “theology of liberation” that had emerged in the Latin American Catholic Church during the 1960s as a means to justify their opposition to authoritarian rule.

Meanwhile, the characteristically more radical groups began to look to militarization.

In Nicaragua, the Somoza dynasty destroyed any hope for peaceful change in Nicaragua. When Anastasio Somoza remarked that “Nicaragua es mi finca,” he was in essence stating a fact, since similar to other Central American nations, large portions of the nation’s land was condensed and owned by Somoza and other elites.⁶³ By the late 1970s, Nicaragua “showed low per-capita income, exceptionally high levels of malnutrition, and the highest rate of infant mortality in Central America.”⁶⁴ Over the course of its rule, the Somoza dynasty would collect and control vast amounts of land and wealth, crush reformist groups, and repress the masses. In addition, the regime used the “Little Machine” to torture those who spoke against them, and protected its rule by creating a nation that lived in fear.⁶⁵

The relationship between the United States and Nicaragua complicated these trends. Dollars from the Alliance for Progress were poured into agricultural projects that primarily benefitted the oligarchy, depleting the capacity of Nicaraguans to feed and care for themselves.⁶⁶ By 1967 the Pentagon supplied thirteen percent of Somoza’s

⁶³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 161.

⁶⁴ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 88.

⁶⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 160.

⁶⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 162-163.

defense budget, and the dynasty had become dependent on U.S. economic and military aid.⁶⁷ The U.S.-Nicaraguan relationship was perhaps the closest in the hemisphere.

The Vietnam War and the Cracking of Consensus

The assumptions of the Cold War foreign policy consensus guided American policy in Vietnam. During the 1950s and 1960s, the war was justified by the policy of containment as well as the belief that communism was inherently aggressive, expansive, and monolithic. The rise of communism in South Vietnam was linked to Moscow and the communist interests of the Soviet Union by Washington's logic. Furthermore, President Eisenhower had introduced and justified further involvement in Vietnam on the bases of his domino theory, which argued that if Vietnam were to fall to communism, then so too would the rest of southeast Asia, and eventually Australia and New Zealand.⁶⁸ The war escalated in July 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to send troops to Vietnam. The decision was supported by a majority of Americans, due to the continued prevalence of the consensus, and was expected to be a quick victory.

The war effort continued to escalate through the rest of the decade, however, and in doing so the public support that once backed the war effort eroded, and the consensus about the Cold War cracked. Some critics saw the war as immoral, others just wanted troops to come home, but collectively Washington faced growing public backlash for its policy decisions. Since the consensus had cracked, the policy decisions and assumptions made by Washington were open to scrutiny from both the American

⁶⁷ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 163.

⁶⁸ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 57-58.

public as well as those who lived under dictators supported by the United States. The transformation of the political climate of the United States during the course of the Vietnam War enabled new questions and debates over U.S. policies to emerge. At the same time, liberal reformers in Central America began questioning U.S. support of dictators. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, liberal reformers had strengthened in numbers during this time and seriously began to challenge and threaten the repressive forces that governed them. Therefore, the cracking of the Cold War consensus had significant implications domestically, which would eventually impact the Reagan administration, as well as abroad.

The tension and opposition toward the Somoza regime was unleashed in the aftermath of the 1972 earthquake, which leveled most of the nation's capital and left tens of thousands of Nicaraguans homeless.⁶⁹ President Richard Nixon responded to the earthquake by sending \$32 million for reconstruction and aid.⁷⁰ As millions of dollars of international aid flooded the country, the Somoza government and military systematically distributed the money to predominantly support enterprises associated with the dictatorship. The actions of the government in the wake of the crisis provoked Nicaraguans of all classes. A moderate opposition composed primarily of the upper-class sought to peacefully remove Somoza from power. A radical opposition movement against Somoza also formed, however, and was most prominently embodied by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The group, named after August Cesar Sandino, turned to armed struggle to oppose the Somoza regime.⁷¹ Dedicated to

⁶⁹ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 90.

⁷⁰ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 227.

⁷¹ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 89.

fundamental change, the Sandinistas were highly nationalistic, anti-Somoza, and champions for the poor. As the group strengthened in the aftermath of the earthquake, it became a target for brutal counterinsurgency attacks by the national guard during 1975 and 1976.⁷²

The Push for a New Policy and the Carter Years

The Vietnam War shattered the Cold War consensus and brought forth criticisms of containment and the support of right-wing dictators. The war and its legacy created the context for the foreign policy with Central America that followed. “In the broadest sense, the struggle over Central America policy stemmed from the lack of a foreign policy consensus in the United States over the purposes of American power in the post-Vietnam world.”⁷³ Prior to the war, the consensus had mandated that the U.S. respond to radicalism in the Third World with military force and intelligence services to deter any social transformations. The cracking of the Cold War consensus, therefore, opened the door to new foreign policy approaches. No alternative principles emerged to consistently guide American policies, however, which led to an inconsistent approach as each presidential administration redefined their distinct foreign policy with Central America.

During Richard Nixon’s presidency, as pressure against the Vietnam War mounted, the U.S. turned to a policy of détente with the Soviet Union in the hopes of easing global tensions. The Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations all tried to keep the arms race of the Cold War controlled through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks

⁷² Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 92.

⁷³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 3.

(SALT). President Jimmy Carter embraced the SALT agreements and tried to ease relations between the two powers, but eventually the ideology of détente would prove to be unsustainable over the course of the Cold War.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the public expressed disapproval of the war's escalation and its failure to embody American values like self-determination and human rights. Moreover, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, popularly known as the Church Committee, uncovered information regarding American covert operations. These included assassination attempts, interventions in foreign governments, the covert overthrow of governments, and the installation of right-wing dictators.⁷⁴ The committee also found that the CIA was in violation of its charter since it conducted illegal surveillance of American citizens.⁷⁵ The Church Committee's cases and hearings for the "investigations of the CIA's covert operations led to a series of revelations that, along with the fallout from the Vietnam War, challenged the classic Cold War paradigm and ensured that a fractured foreign policy consensus would not easily be repaired."⁷⁶

In response, a call for a focus on human rights in foreign policy emerged, since failure in Vietnam demonstrated the dangers of supporting repression to ensure freedom from communism. The revelations from the Church Committee's investigations led to broader discussions of American covert operations and the support of right-wing dictators. Congress passed human rights legislation in an attempt to redress the failure to consider human rights records following World War II.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 7.

⁷⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 14.

⁷⁶ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 113.

⁷⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 11.

Furthermore, the revelations following the Vietnam War led to an increased emphasis on transparency and domestic support for policies. These trends and demands made elected representatives increasingly wary of seeking military solutions. Thus, key tenets of the policy of containment, most prominently the support of right-wing dictators and reliance on military intervention, became contested issues in Congress as well as amongst the American public.

Critiques of American foreign policy, made possible by the Vietnam War, paved the way for Carter's attempted balance of human rights concerns with national security interests. Carter sought to create, in essence, a post-Cold War foreign policy that emphasized the principles of human rights and nonintervention. His emphasis on a moral rather than structural change to create pragmatic reform of Cold War policies represented American ideals of progress within Cold War dynamics. The Carter administration's policy was willing to tolerate and at times encourage certain changes, but sought to protect the nation's interest through moderate change in Central American governments and the denial of power to the radical left. The new ideology of the administration was captured by Assistant Secretary of State Viron Vaky's comments in 1979, that the central issue regarding U.S. policy with Central America "is not whether change is to occur but whether that change is to be violent and radical, or peaceful and evolutionary, and preserving [of] individual rights and democratic values."⁷⁸

The new foreign policy for Latin America was influenced by the vision and findings of the Commission on U.S. – Latin American Relations. A bipartisan group

⁷⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 11.

composed of prominent U.S. citizens, and chaired by Ambassador Sol Linowitz, offered an analysis of the past policies and recommendations for new relations that ultimately defined the Carter administration's agenda for Central America. The group produced two reports, *The Americas in a Changing World* (1975) and *The United States and Latin America: Next Steps* (1976), in which they argued that "détente, the decline of U.S. global hegemony in the post-Vietnam period, and the growing assertiveness, economically and diplomatically, of Latin America required fundamental changes in U.S. policy toward the hemisphere."⁷⁹ The commission recommended that military issues no longer dominate foreign policy agendas, that overt and covert action were no longer appropriate, and that promotion of human rights and a returned focus to economic issues were necessary.⁸⁰ In addition to the aforementioned advice, the Linowitz commission proposed three policy recommendations: "negotiation of a Canal treaty with Panama; normalization of relations with Cuba; and active promotion of human rights."⁸¹

The Panama Canal issue was agreed upon as a necessary first step for the administration to improve relations with the entirety of Latin America. Carter appointed Sol Linowitz to negotiate an agreement in which the Canal would be turned over to Panama's left-leaning populist government headed by Omar Torrijos. The administration hoped that the new policy of cooperation would help safeguard American interests, and replace the past policies of hemispheric dominance. The

⁷⁹ William M. LeoGrande, Douglas C. Bennett, Morris J. Blachman, and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 296. Blachman 296

⁸⁰ LeoGrande, et al. "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 296.

⁸¹ LeoGrande, et al. "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 296.

negotiations with Torrijos, however, went much smoother than getting the U.S. Senate to ratify the Canal treaties. Carter continued to face powerful resistance from the Republican right as his administration implemented the new approach to relations with Latin America, especially as the situations in El Salvador and Nicaragua worsened.⁸²

During the 1970s, armed insurgency steadily emerged to challenge the military government. The Popular Liberation Forces, People's Revolutionary Army, and Armed Forces of National Resistance formed during the 1960s and into the 1970s, although they did not formally unify into the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) until May 1980.⁸³ Composed of both political and military wings, the FMLN found considerable support in the countryside and among peasant populations.⁸⁴

The underlying belief of the FMLN was that violence and revolution were the only means by which the military-oligarchical rule could officially end. This was a testament to the depth of the problems that engulfed El Salvador and to the extremity of violence perpetuated by the military and death squads. Death squads were often commanded by middle-level military officers who enlisted men from the National Guard or Treasury Police to conduct political assassinations of individuals or groups.⁸⁵ Priests, trade union leaders, and students were perhaps the most frequently assassinated in the campaign to contain the strength of the left and the growing popular protests.⁸⁶ Mass killings, on the contrary, were highly unorganized and primarily led to the deaths of rural peasants. Although violence was perpetuated by both the FMLN and

⁸² LeoGrande, et al. "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 298.

⁸³ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 54.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 183.

⁸⁵ Shirley Christian, "The Divided Military," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 257.

⁸⁶ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 54.

government forces, it was the military response to popular protests that caused the drastic national increase in violence. Under the military government of General Carlos Humberto Romero, elected in 1977, the number of “disappeared” doubled.⁸⁷ In response to Romero’s violent regime, guerrilla activity escalated, eventually drawing attention and concern from the Carter administration.

By 1978, the Carter administration was worried about the trends of violence and human rights violations under the Romero regime. The administration’s pressure on Romero, however, was often ambiguous. The reduction of military aid and occasional exertion of economic and diplomatic pressure created little quantifiable change.⁸⁸ In 1980, the Catholic Church in El Salvador counted nearly 10,000 political murders within the year, of which an overwhelming majority were committed by right-wing military groups and the government.⁸⁹ This included the murders of the three American nuns and lay worker, whose killings “brought home to the American public the brutality of Salvadoran government troops.”⁹⁰ Eventually called “the nuns’ case,” knowledge of these murders and the increasing violence would complicate U.S. policy with El Salvador over the next several years. Furthermore, as attention to the violence in El Salvador grew, Protestant and Catholic church organizations flooded Congress with letters and telegrams demanding an end to military aid in El Salvador.⁹¹ As one Catholic spokesperson insisted, “any military aid you send to El Salvador... ends up in the hands of the military and paramilitary rightist groups who are themselves at the

⁸⁷ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 54.

⁸⁸ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 55.

⁸⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 256.

⁹⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 50.

⁹¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 42.

root of the problems of the country.”⁹² Thus, the administration’s oscillation between the support of human rights and the continuation of aid to El Salvador’s dictator deepened the U.S. commitment and involvement in the conflict.

Turmoil in Nicaragua also challenged the Carter administration and its application of human rights and national security objectives. During the early 1970s, when the FSLN had first increased its guerrilla activities, the United States had responded by sending Somoza military aid. The Carter administration suspended aid to Somoza in 1977, due to his government’s campaign of repression over the past two years. Pressure from Congressional supporters of Somoza and fear of further destabilizing Managua forced Carter to revert back to providing economic support to Somoza, sending \$12 million of economic aid mid-1978.⁹³ Increased turmoil during 1978 led Washington to launch a final effort to keep the FSLN from governing power; the administration attempted, but ultimately failed, to convince Somoza to peacefully resign his government to a new moderate regime. In 1979, the FSLN launched a successful offensive in which it gained control of every major city outside Managua, eventually earning and claiming the right to the new government that emerged in Somoza’s defeat.

The Sandinista victory caused the Carter administration’s policy toward the FSLN to shift into a cautious cordiality.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the nature of U.S. concerns about Central America shifted in response to the emergence of a second left-wing government so close to home. This culminated in increased pressure on the Carter

⁹² Arson, *Crossroads*, 42.

⁹³ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 93-94.

⁹⁴ LeoGrande, et al. “Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 300.

administration to contain the left-wing governments that existed and prevent the spread of leftist ideologies and power in Central America.⁹⁵

In 1979, President Carter requested \$75 million in economic aid for Nicaragua, of which 60 percent would go directly to the private sector to encourage economic growth.⁹⁶ Over the following eleven months the topic was debated and delayed multiple times by Congress. Disagreements over the purpose of the money and how the aid would affect human rights issues in the nation slowed the bill's progress. In addition, some members of Congress questioned if Nicaragua was already lost to communism, and worried about the presence of a "second Cuba." Other members of Congress stressed the duty and necessity of the United States to do everything in its power to support the Church, press, and other elements of the private sector as a means to combat the leftist government's grip over the country.⁹⁷ By the time the House finally approved sending aid, Nicaraguans were reassessing their relationship with the United States and the prospect of a Reagan presidency on the horizon.

In attempting to balance the promotion of human rights with Cold War-shaped national security concerns, Carter became the subject of scrutiny from both the left and the right. Carter's support of certain U.S. allies, despite their oppressive rule, led the left to criticize his policies for being weak and merely rhetorical.⁹⁸ In contrast, advocates for the unquestioned support of right-wing dictators critiqued Carter for not supporting regimes that shared historically friendly relations with the United States. The administration's human rights campaign, however, did successfully deny

⁹⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 40.

⁹⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 36.

⁹⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 38.

⁹⁸ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 7.

“economic and military assistance to regimes in Guatemala, Chile, and Argentina that were flagrantly abusing their citizens.”⁹⁹ Ultimately, the Carter administration’s objectives “to promote and protect basic human rights, and... to prevent the threat of a Communist takeover in our backyard,” would prove contradictory within the framework of the Cold War.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, Carter remained true to his conviction to not dispatch troops and pushed a human rights agenda into a global arena.

Backlash

Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy positions in the 1980 campaign represented the conservative critique of Carter’s approach and set the stage for the final era of Cold War policy. Reagan viewed the key tenets of Carter’s foreign policy, predominantly the focus on human rights and opposition to military aid, as inherently erroneous. The traditional conservative view of human rights in the Cold War perceived communism, totalitarianism, and the Soviet push for both, as the most egregious violation of human rights, and thus the one that took precedent above all else. The “giveaway” of the Panama Canal, as Reagan referred to the Panama Canal treaties during his presidential campaign, became a symbolic gesture for conservatives of the flawed nature of post-Vietnam foreign policy.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the decision to terminate the U.S. alliance with Somoza, and the succeeding emergence of a left-wing power, angered Reagan and other conservatives. Harking back to earlier policies, they admired the military and diplomatic strength that had once characterized the U.S. relation with Central America.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 161.

¹⁰⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 41.

¹⁰¹ LeoGrande, et al. “Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 298.

The desire to restore American power and prestige characterized Reagan's presidential campaign and two terms as president through a return to the traditional tenets of Cold War foreign policy.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM THE CAMPAIGN TO THE WHITE HOUSE

During his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan promised a return to traditional Cold War ideology, and that he held to the bipolar worldview that saw communism as inherently aggressive and expansive. During the first month of his presidency, relations with the El Salvador were deemed critical, and concerns in Washington about the political future of the nation were high. In an effort to address these concerns, the Reagan administration tried to work with Salvadoran government and support its efforts by sending U.S. aid to the military. In order to better control events in El Salvador, the administration also reached out to the Sandinistas with an ultimatum, aid to Nicaragua would resume once the shipment of arms to guerrilla forces in El Salvador was stopped. The administration, however, had no intent of having the United States follow through with this policy. Rather, it began a rhetorical and a covert war against Nicaragua.

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick's Ideology and Influence

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick was the most prominent critic of Carter's policies, and contributed greatly to the development of the Reagan administration's Central American policy. Originally a professor at Georgetown University, Kirkpatrick served as the ambassador to the United Nations under the Reagan administration. She blamed the Carter administration for the fall of Somoza in Nicaragua and the Shah in Iran, both of whom had been friendly to the United States and amenable to U.S. policies.¹

¹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 197.

Kirkpatrick believed that the support of friendly dictators was beneficial to American interests and necessary during the Cold War, a view that was central to the Reagan administration's policies.

Kirkpatrick attacked Carter and his administration for using human rights as a basis to oppose an authoritarian regime, especially those that had a friendly history with the United States. She argued that the Carter administration used "policies that [violated] the strategic and economic interests of the United States."² Additionally, Kirkpatrick believed that policies in the name of national security or national interests need not be apologized for because they were inherently in defense of the free world. "A posture of continuous self-abasement and apology vis-à-vis the Third World is neither morally necessary nor politically appropriate."³ Furthermore, Kirkpatrick critiqued Carter's argument "that reform and human rights were essential for stability," because in her eyes, his policies had instead aided the emergence of radical thought and created greater instability.⁴

Kirkpatrick argued that dictators served U.S. interests as bulwarks against communism. She believed that "authoritarians sought to preserve 'traditional' societies, [while] totalitarians, however, sought to control every part of society, including the economy."⁵ Kirkpatrick added to this argument that, "traditional autocrats tolerate social inequities, brutality, and poverty while revolutionary autocracies create them."⁶ This distinction was pivotal to American policy because it clarified the difference

² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *World Affairs*, vol. 170, no. 2, (2007), 70.

³ Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," 73.

⁴ LeoGrande, et al. "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 311.

⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 278.

⁶ Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," 72.

between a right-wing dictator and a communist dictator. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick believed that “given time, propitious economic, social, and political circumstances, talented leaders, and a strong indigenous demand for representative government,” nations under right-wing dictators could evolve into democracies.⁷ Her rationale followed a logic that dictators were necessary to provide the stability that democracy could emerge from. Strong rule would, according to Kirkpatrick, prevent the emergence of radical thought and ensure that a nation matured until it was politically and economically able to form a healthy democratic system. Thus, according to her logic, the use of brutal tactics by dictators were necessary to defeat radical ideologies and violent opponents; autocratic regimes could not be judged or valued contingent upon human rights abuses.⁸ Communism was, in her eyes, the ultimate abuse of human rights. By adopting Kirkpatrick’s critiques of Carter, Reagan ultimately realigned American policy with the “support of right-wing dictators throughout the world in the name of anticommunism, stability, and trade.”⁹

Reagan’s Presidential Campaign and a Return to Traditionalism

During his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan brandished a traditional Cold War ideology. He sought to overcome what he saw as the misguided policies of the past presidency and once again position the United States as a global power. His promise to return to the traditionalism of the Cold War and the definitive policies of the 1950s sought to answer the sense of loss many Americans felt upon entering the

⁷ Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” 65.

⁸ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 198.

⁹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 8.

1980s.¹⁰ Reagan embraced the classic Cold War view of a bipolar world in which the United States had both a duty and a necessity to defend itself and its allies, and prevent the spread of communism. To do so, he “drew upon the neoconservative critique of American foreign policy developed during the late 1970s.”¹¹ These tenets defined Reagan’s new ideological approach to foreign policy, which would guide his policies throughout the entirety of his presidency.

Reagan’s critique of Carter during the 1980 presidential campaign revealed his ideological appeals for foreign policy changes, rather than substantive policy suggestions. In Reagan’s view, many of Carter’s decisions humiliated and weakened the United States. He believed that “our nation’s security has greatly deteriorated during these past years....”¹² In order to overcome the flaws of Carter’s policies, Reagan raised a question to the American public: “may I suggest an alternative path this nation can take; a change in foreign policy from the vacillation, appeasement and aimlessness of our present policy?”¹³ His discussion of Carter’s policies during his campaign was, therefore, used rhetorically to demonstrate what a Reagan presidency would not do. Additionally, Reagan condemned Carter’s focus on human rights, in part because it led to the “betrayal” of countries and leaders who had historically maintained friendly relations with the United States, and in part because he saw communism as the ultimate violator of human rights.¹⁴ These trends that Reagan identified as characteristic of Carter’s policies culminated into his critique that Carter

¹⁰ LaFeber stated that “Ronald Reagan offered both congeniality (a welcome contrast to Carter’s up-tight insecurity) and a soothing traditionalism....” LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 271.

¹¹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 194.

¹² Ronald Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, April 5, 1980. 11.

¹³ Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 10.

¹⁴ Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 10.

damaged American credibility. “Who does not feel a growing sense of unease as our allies, facing repeated instances of an amateurish and confused administration, reluctantly conclude that America is unwilling or unable to fulfill its obligations as the leader of the free world?”¹⁵ Reagan’s view of Carter’s foreign policy as weak and harmful to the interests and credibility of the United States further fueled his own convictions for a new policy approach.

Reagan believed that U.S. foreign policy should be based on “the principles and ideals which made this nation what it is today. We must take the lead in pointing out to other nations... the superiority of our system.”¹⁶ His embracement of American exceptionalism enabled him to call upon the patriotism of American citizens and to reignite their perception of the United States as a just, benevolent, and strong global leader. By grounding his foreign policy justifications in the emotions of American citizens, he not only strengthened his bid for presidency, but enabled his foreign policy to become a call to action. “We did not seek leadership of the free world,” Reagan explained, “but there is no one else who can provide it. And without our leadership there will be no peace in the world.”¹⁷

Reagan’s call upon the duty of American power was part of his renewal of rhetorical and ideological binaries that fixed the United States in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. His ideological division of the world into binaries of good and evil, light and dark, right and wrong, left little room for compromise or diplomacy. Reagan was,

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit,” July 17, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25970.

¹⁶ Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 10.

¹⁷ Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 11.

therefore, deeply concerned about the stability of the Western Hemisphere as integral to ensuring the security of the U.S. and its neighbors from the evils of communism. Reagan often emphasized that a “Soviet combat brigade trains in Cuba, just 90 miles from our shores.”¹⁸ Reagan perceived Cuba as a threat to the United States as well as the entire Western Hemisphere. This was not just because of Cuba’s geographical proximity to the United States, but because, as Reagan explained, “Cuban and Soviet-trained terrorists are bringing civil war to Central American countries....”¹⁹ During his campaign, Reagan proposed the initiation of a program that would help strengthen the countries of the Caribbean Basin, some of which “have turned to extremist models – fertile ground for Cuban meddling.”²⁰ He worried that “Grenada, Nicaragua, [and] El Salvador [would] all become additional ‘Cubas,’ new outposts for Soviet combat brigades....”²¹

In order to combat these trends, Reagan proposed an intensified military approach. While on the campaign trail, Reagan argued that the “best foreign policy cannot preserve the peace and protect the realm of freedom unless it is backed up by adequate military power.”²² Reagan’s logic, and renewal of traditional conservative assumptions, led him to assert that “peace is made by the fact of strength – economic, military, and strategic.”²³ In linking peace to military strength, Reagan sought to not

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit,” July 17, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25970>.

¹⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago,” August 18, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85202.

²⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Televised Address by Governor Ronald Reagan ‘A Strategy for Peace in the ‘80s,’” October 19, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=852000.

²¹ Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 11.

²² Reagan, “A Foreign Policy for a Proud America,” in *Human Events*, 10.

²³ Ronald Reagan, “Televised Address by Governor Ronald Reagan ‘A Strategy for Peace in the ‘80s,’” October 19, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=852000.

only reveal the fallacies he identified in Carter's policies, but also recreate the image and role of the United States as a militarily strong, yet just and peaceful power. Additionally, this logic was rational within the context of a policy of counterterrorism and counterrevolution. "We must take a stand against terrorism in the world and combat it with firmness," Reagan declared, because "it is a most cowardly and savage violation of peace."²⁴ His new military approach, which would be predominantly applicable in Third World countries since they often manifested into the battlegrounds of the Cold War, revealed his underlying assumptions that revolutions were inherently dangerous and destabilizing while dictatorships could provide stability and combat communism.

The tenets of foreign policy that Reagan proposed during his campaign revealed a reinforcement of U.S. national security and prestige. He presented both conservative values and specific policy changes, although predominantly through his critiques of Carter. His campaign was not focused on the substance of policies, but rather enabled him to conjure up emotional appeals for ideological policy changes. Reagan pushed for world peace, but in order to achieve it, he believed the United States needed to enhance its credibility, overcome the legacy of Carter's flawed policies, embrace American benevolence, and protect U.S. and hemispheric security through the strengthening of the U.S. military and embracement of military aid.

The Election's Effect on Central America

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago," August 18, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85202.

Reagan's election had a profound effect on the events in both Nicaragua and El Salvador, as governing and opposition groups in both countries prepared for the new administration's policies. Once Reagan was elected president, the architecture of Carter's policy crumbled and nations began to act in anticipation of the incoming administration. The tough rhetoric Reagan espoused during the presidential campaign led political actors in Central America to shift their conduct within the weeks following the election results.²⁵ In Nicaragua, many expected a policy of increased hostility toward the Sandinistas, regardless of their behavior, which diminished the Sandinista's incentive to cooperate with the U.S. or act moderately as they had with the Carter administration. Thus, in November and December 1980, U.S. intelligence noted an increase in the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador.²⁶ The shipment of weapons from Nicaragua to El Salvador completed a revolutionary link that provided the Reagan administration with its justification, although greatly exaggerated, for intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador.²⁷

In El Salvador, the guerrilla groups prepared for the inevitable aid to the Salvadoran military regime that would accompany the Reagan presidency, which caused violence between governing forces and guerrillas to escalate. The FMLN launched a "final offensive" that sought to overcome the military regime prior to Reagan entering the White House. While the violence escalated, progress stalled, and the war entered a stalemate.²⁸ Meanwhile, the right-wing leaders of the country began

²⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 50.

²⁶ LeoGrande, et al. "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 308.

²⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, viii.

²⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 255.

to revise their assessment of “what the United States would tolerate in the name of fighting communism.”²⁹ As a consequence, political assassinations rose during the final weeks of 1980.

Developing a Policy

Reagan promised during his campaign to restore the United States to global preeminence following what he and other conservatives viewed as a retreat from the summit of world power under the Carter administration. The Republican National Convention Platform declared the Republic Party’s opposition to Carter’s aid program and expressed concern for “the Marxist Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.”³⁰ Unlike Carter, Reagan expressed a desire to abandon the use of human rights abuses as a justifiable foundation for American foreign policy. Instead, he projected an argument of morality in which the expansion of communism was perceived to be the greatest threat to human rights, and therefore the United States was morally obligated to combat Soviet gains in the Third World. In March 1981, Reagan explained to Walter Cronkite that human rights were incorporated in his foreign policy since the Soviet Union “is the greatest violator today of human rights in all the world.”³¹ By operating within a traditional Cold War framework, Reagan justified his foreign policy, especially that in Central America, as part of an East-West struggle, symbolized by Cuban aid to the Sandinistas and the FMLN. “The Cubans were the flesh and blood embodiment of the

²⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 50.

³⁰ “Republican Party Platform of 1980,” July 15, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25844.

³¹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 201.

East-West dimension of the conflict in Central America; their presence gave credence to the administration's conception of the crisis."³² To Reagan, stability could not be achieved through moderate change and progress, but demanded an active and offensive military strategy that ensured the preservation of U.S. interests.

Reagan blamed all conflicts and instabilities in the Third World on Soviet conspiracies. To Reagan and his administration, "the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on."³³ Thus, many countries became a battleground and arena for the struggle between East and West. Conservatives rejected both détente and human rights as a basis for foreign policy, and instead advocated the reestablishment of a policy supporting authoritarian dictators along the premise that the morality of foreign policy should focus on communism and Soviet expansion as inherently a challenge to human rights and freedom.³⁴ Conservatives believed détente served only to benefit the Soviets, and that it weakened the role of the United States, especially in Central America. This led Reagan, in 1981, to assert that, "so far détente's been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims."³⁵ Human rights, Reagan believed, relied on the defeat of communist expansion and aggression. This logic led him to reestablish traditional Cold War policies in an effort to strengthen the position of the United States in the Cold War.

In part, Reagan's return to the verities of the Cold war was derivative of the different lessons he learned from the Vietnam War. Reagan sought to reestablish the

³² William M. LeoGrande, "Cuba," in *Confronting Revolution*, 229.

³³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 302.

³⁴ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 196.

³⁵ "President Ronald Reagan Denounces the Soviet Union, 1981," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, (Boston:Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 506.

moral American right and duty to military intervention, which had been unquestioned prior to the war. “To Reagan, the Vietnam War represented a proper use of American power to uphold containment; the war had been abandoned due to misguided opposition from the American people and a lack of will among American leaders.”³⁶ Thus, Reagan’s foreign policy included an important domestic political objective – to rebuild a consensus on American foreign policy and the use of military force, similar to the consensus that existed prior to Vietnam.³⁷ In order for the United States to win the Cold War, Reagan believed that an increase of U.S. power relied upon military intervention to stabilize other nations. Reagan explained: “If the Soviet Union can aid and abet subversion in our hemisphere, then the United States has a legal right and a moral duty to help resist it. This is not only in our strategic interest; it is morally right.”³⁸ Thus, the Reagan administration saw the use of military intervention as supportive of just and humane interests abroad.

As an embodiment of the aforementioned tenets, the Reagan Doctrine sought a return to traditional Cold War policies and beliefs, and an emphasis on acting offensively rather than defensively. The support of non-government “freedom fighters” who attacked communist governments in the Third World would enable the United States to position itself on the ideological offensive.³⁹ The premise behind this switch caused the Reagan administration to drift away from a policy of containment toward a

³⁶ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 195.

³⁷ William M. LeoGrande, Douglas C. Bennett, Morris J. Blachman, and Kenneth E. Sharp, “Grappling with Central America from Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, ed. Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande, and Kenneth Sharpe, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986,) 312.

³⁸ Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America, May 9, 1984, *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Reagan, 1984*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 664. (hereafter *PPP: Reagan 1984*).

³⁹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 195.

policy of counterrevolution, which could dismantle perceived Soviet gains and strengthen the U.S. position in the Cold War. The identification of instabilities in Third World countries as products of Soviet geopolitical motives led Reagan to propose militarized responses as the logical means to ensure a country remained politically stable.⁴⁰

By pursuing a policy that would challenge Soviet gains in the Third World, the Reagan administration transitioned containment policy toward a counterrevolution approach. In January 1981, Haig asserted that the Soviets “lay behind the upsurge in ‘rampant international terrorism’ and decried the ‘unprecedented ... risk-taking mode on the part of the Soviet Union.’”⁴¹ In order to combat the Soviet’s increased presence in Third World arenas like Central America, the Reagan administration grew eager to try methods that targeted gains by left-wing political parties and guerrilla groups. A counterrevolution and counterinsurgency approach to communism was the administration’s way of demonstrating that the United States would no longer tolerate communist expansion, or a communist presence in its backyard. Reagan believed this could strengthen and reestablish American credibility, which he perceived was weakened during the Carter administration. A division emerged within the Reagan administration, however, over the practicality and effectiveness of this approach; Reagan’s political appointees supported the use of military power to push communism out of countries like Nicaragua while his foreign policy advisors worried that the policy was too dangerous and reckless. This division culminated into a policy that combined

⁴⁰ LeoGrande, et al. “Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 295.

⁴¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 55.

containment and counterrevolution into a policy of aggression and military hostility, which sought to force the Sandinistas to either turn inward or be destroyed.⁴²

Increased U.S. Interest and Involvement in El Salvador

On February 23, 1981, the administration released a White Paper, “Communist Interference in El Salvador,” which outlined the central tenets of the administration’s assumptions about the war in El Salvador as well as the response the United States should take. The report began by explaining that it “presents definitive evidence of the clandestine military support given by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their Communist allies to Marxist-Leninist guerrillas now fighting to overthrow the established government of El Salvador.”⁴³ Evidence was drawn from “captured guerrilla documents” that supposedly showed the central and direct support of El Salvador’s insurgent forces by Cuba and other communist countries. The report posited that the Soviet Union and other communist states were engaged in a “covert effort to bring about the overthrow of El Salvador’s established government and to impose in its place a Communist regime with no popular support.”⁴⁴ It focused entirely on the military tactics of left-wing groups and completely failed to address the military junta’s role in the perpetuation of violence. The report’s entire focus was centered on the shipment of arms to El Salvador guerrillas from Cuba, Nicaragua, and other nations. In order to

⁴² LeoGrande, et al. “Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 313.

⁴³ “Communist Interference in El Salvador: The U.S. State Department White Paper,” *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 230-231.

⁴⁴ “Communist Interference in El Salvador: The U.S. State Department White Paper,” *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 231.

combat these trends, the White Paper alluded to the importance of continued support for the “moderate” government.

In the months following its release the assumptions and evidence of the White Paper were critiqued by a variety of journalists and newspapers. The White Paper’s failure to address the opposition to El Salvador’s government was one of the most evident holes in the presentation of events that catalyzed a greater investigation and critique of it. One journalist argued that the White Paper failed to identify that the “guerrilla movement is part and parcel of a larger political and social movement that has been and is repressed.”⁴⁵ This perception challenged the Reagan administration’s belief in monolithic communism, and the complimentary assumption that all revolutions are products of Soviet influence.

Other journalists found flaws within the White Paper itself. One journalist for the *New York Times* noticed that the paper quoted guerrilla leaders commenting on the lack of arms or military supplies they had just months after the paper claimed El Salvador’s guerrillas were being swamped with military supplies from numerous nations.⁴⁶ In addition, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article in which it concluded that the White Paper was erroneous and full of presumptuous statements.⁴⁷ The *Washington Post* also contributed to the growing critiques of the White Paper, arguing that after investigating its claims and sources the *Post* found no concrete

⁴⁵ James Petras, “Blots on the White Paper: The Reinvention of the ‘Red Menace’,” *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 244.

⁴⁶ James Petras, “Blots on the White Paper: The Reinvention of the ‘Red Menace’,” *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 250.

⁴⁷ James Petras, “Blots on the White Paper: The Reinvention of the ‘Red Menace’,” *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 255.

evidence for the claim that nearly 200 tons of arms were delivered through Cuba and Nicaragua to El Salvador.⁴⁸

The White Paper was intended to convince the American public and Congress of the need to mobilize and support the administration's new policies in El Salvador as well as the rest of the Third World. The claims and arguments presented in the White Paper demonstrated the administration's desire to make clear a need to further intervene in El Salvador's war, and to prove that communism was monolithic and was responsible for revolution in Third World countries. Regardless of the critiques it received, the administration continued to hold its ground on the policy it had set forth.

Reagan's understanding of the conflict in El Salvador through the framework of traditional Cold War ideology and East-West terms put significant pressure on the use of military aid to support the junta government and deter opposition groups. Determined to achieve a quick military defeat over the FMLN, the Reagan administration saw the failure of the "final offensive" as evidence that use of U.S. military aid would produce a swift defeat of the left. Ignoring records of human rights abuses as well as opportunities for negotiations with opposition and guerrilla groups, the Reagan administration proceeded with a military strategy that sought to aid the Salvadoran armed forces in their war against insurgents. Thus, the policy the Reagan administration would adhere to over the next several years in El Salvador was in theory both simple and consistent. The priority from the outset was to strengthen the Salvadoran military and keep the left from power at any cost.

⁴⁸ James Petras, "Blots on the White Paper: The Reinvention of the 'Red Menace'," *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, 256.

The administration's hope to achieve a swift military victory, however, fell through. With approximately "4,000 rebels facing 17,000 U.S.-trained and supplied army and security forces in a tiny country, Washington's wager on military victory seemed sound."⁴⁹ Yet, the war rapidly fell into a stalemate. In part, this was due to the condition of the Salvadoran army, which a Pentagon study concluded, "resembled a nineteenth-century force incapable of fighting any kind of war, conventional or guerrilla."⁵⁰ Thus, the Reagan administration was forced to consider how their military aid could be supported by political involvement in the nation as well.

The Salvadoran government was stretched thin by the time Reagan became president because it was trying to balance increased violence and tensions from the extreme right and left. The Reagan administration sought to help strengthen the government by encouraging greater incorporation of the far right within the government, while also pushing for land reform to diminish aspects of the far left's purpose. "The administration publicly described El Salvador as run by a moderate reformist government battling extremists from the insurgent left and the death-squad right. Land reform and elections, Washington argued, would undercut the appeal of the left."⁵¹ The reality of the Salvadoran government, however, complicated Washington's plans. The civilian government led by Duarte, who's primary support was American, had little power over Defense Minister Jose Guillermo Garcia's military. The lack of control the civilian government had over the military made land reform exceptionally

⁴⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 284.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, February 21, 1981.

⁵¹ Martin Diskin and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 61.

difficult when enacted because of the violence that plagued rural areas and the military's blatant disregard for the land reform policies.

El Salvador's Reality

Just three weeks after the land-reform program was initiated, the under-secretary of the Minister of Agriculture, Jorge Villacorta, resigned protesting the "sharp increase in official violence against the very peasants who were supposed 'beneficiaries' of the process."⁵² The perpetuation of a repressive regime served the antithesis of U.S. policy objectives, often earning guerrilla groups new recruits. During this time, the FMLN focused their offensive in rural areas, which was safer since cities and areas of more concentrated political forces posed a threat to them.

Politically motivated deaths became an aspect of every day life. "Between January 1 and March 13, 1981, there were 689 political assassinations."⁵³ In the year ending in April 1981, forty political figures of varying levels within the Christian Democratic party were killed.⁵⁴ Furthermore, three hundred to five hundred civilians, on average, were found dead each month. Deputy Secretary of State John Bushnell insisted that the left was primarily responsible for violence in El Salvador. He commented that, "I do not think the majority of those people [in El Salvador] have been killed by the security forces...."⁵⁵ This perspective juxtaposed that of Robert White, once the ambassador to El Salvador, who claimed:

The security forces in El Salvador have been responsible for the deaths of thousands and thousands of young people, and they have executed them on the

⁵² Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 62.

⁵³ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 56.

⁵⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 285.

⁵⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 59.

mere suspicion that they are leftists or sympathize with leftists.... The real issue is how do you supply military assistance to a force that is going to use that military assistance to assassinate, to kill, in a totally uncontrolled way?⁵⁶

The administration, however, chose to ignore this consideration and instead focused on political stability.

The consequences that emerged from the Reagan administration's preliminary policies revealed Washington's misunderstanding of the social and political situation in El Salvador. The history of repressive regimes and electoral fraud fed into the creation of opposition forces and popular organizations, and fueled their desire to participate in national reforms. The revolutionaries were not puppets of Soviet communism, but rather were radicals seeking national reform and progress. Thus, Reagan's adherence to a paramilitary strategy failed to acknowledge the indigenous roots of the conflict, and their resilience.

The immediate commitment to military defeat of the FMLN also caused the Reagan administration to bypass any opportunities for negotiations. Policies locked within a stark East-West framework and reliance on military force blocked the possibility of negotiations that could have enabled a share of power. Furthermore, it weakened the feasibility of legitimate reform and progress. Exclusion of the opposition groups ensured that long-term peace would be unattainable. This ostracized the FMLN and pushed all of their efforts toward disruptive tactics in rural areas; the only way they had agency to influence change and the only place they felt partially safe. In December 1981, the five guerrilla commanders even made an effort to display unity in a letter to President Reagan in which they reiterated their disposition "to undertake [negotiations]

⁵⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 58.

at any time, without preconditions placed on any of the parties in the conflict.”⁵⁷ Yet, the calls for negotiations were ignored as the administration persisted in considering the logistics of military support and integration of the right-wing forces into the government.

The emphasis the administration placed on a military solution also enabled the toleration of continued right-wing repression. “As a result, U.S. policy helped strengthen the right, unify the left, and further marginalize those reformers who had not joined the [FMLN].”⁵⁸ These trends were counterproductive to U.S. policy efforts, like land reform, since it relied on support from the military to enforce it, which Duarte’s civilian government had no control over. Furthermore, the discrepancies between the U.S. perception of El Salvador and its reality did not go unnoticed. In April 1981, Archbishop Rivera y Damas wrote to Vice President George Bush expressing his surprise that the administration defined the government as “centrist.” He explained to Bush that the U.S. failure to understand the junta’s “resistance to change” would be a fatal mistake.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the administration continued to pursue a policy that worked with the government and the military.

Questions of Aid and the Rhetorical War with Nicaragua

To the Reagan administration, Nicaragua gained significance when considered within the prism of the East-West conflict and the civil war in El Salvador. Since policy efforts in early 1981 were most concerned with the crisis in El Salvador, the

⁵⁷ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 61.

⁵⁸ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 61.

⁵⁹ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 61.

Reagan administration's initial actions toward Nicaragua was primarily rhetorical. Initial interests in Nicaragua were predominantly concerned with the way in which it affected El Salvador. The administration saw a need to stop the Sandinista's support for the FMLN. As the situation in El Salvador continued to deteriorate, however, the U.S. began to turn more attention to Nicaragua and adopted a policy of aggression against the Sandinista government.⁶⁰

The Reagan administration's first approach to policy with Nicaragua came just weeks into the presidency, when U.S. officials began to discuss the possibility of aid talks with Nicaragua, contingent upon a stop to all arms shipments to Salvadoran guerrilla forces. In January, U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo convinced both the new administration and Nicaraguan officials to return to the understanding that economic aid depended upon Nicaraguan restraint toward El Salvador. In order for the Reagan administration to consider such a policy, they decided to enact a thirty-day time-frame for Nicaragua to suspend all aid going to El Salvador. Once that occurred, Washington would resume U.S. aid. This led Secretary of State Alexander Haig to announce that "he was stopping \$15 million of economic aid headed for Managua, as well as nearly \$10 million of wheat, for thirty days to test whether the Sandinistas would stop helping the Salvadoran rebels."⁶¹ State Department reports indicated during late February that the flow of munitions from Nicaragua to El Salvador had been drastically reduced and perhaps altogether halted.⁶² Although the Sandinistas had complied with the U.S. requests, hardliners within the administration were still not

⁶⁰ Dennis Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 102.

⁶¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 294.

⁶² Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 100.

keen to resume sending Nicaragua aid. Thus, on April 1, 1981, U.S. economic aid was formally suspended indefinitely.

The administration's decision to cut aid to Nicaragua made evident that Reagan and his advisors had little interest in working with the Sandinistas. They wanted to "win Nicaragua's acquiescence not with the carrot of economic aid but with the stick of threatened military action."⁶³ The State Department's reports regarding the flow of ammunitions detailed positive results that were followed by a non sequitur: because "some arms traffic may [sic] be continuing and other support very probably continues," aid was cut.⁶⁴ Although the State Department's assessment seems illogical in hindsight, it fit neatly into the Reagan administration's foreign policy plans. It was hostile to the Sandinistas and determined to undermine their rule. The Sandinistas responded by igniting a rhetorical war in which Daniel Ortega denounced the "imperialist" nature of the U.S. and the U.S. support of the Somoza dynasty.⁶⁵

During the summer of 1981, efforts to reach any bilateral agreements culminated in sessions of secret talks between U.S. and Nicaraguan officials. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders wanted to ensure that Sandinistas would not affiliate themselves with the Eastern bloc, and also wanted assurance that Nicaragua would not meddle in revolutionary affairs in other Central American nations.⁶⁶ The talks, however, achieved little in the atmosphere of distrust between the two nations. The one achievement was a "mutually accepted cease-fire in the rhetorical war between the two

⁶³ LeoGrande et al. "Grappling with Central America," in *Confronting Revolution*, 314.

⁶⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 294.

⁶⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 77.

⁶⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 79.

governments.”⁶⁷ By October, even this bilateral effort was in shambles after the U.S. and Honduras conducted joint amphibious-assault exercises, which Nicaragua identified as a threat. This led Haig, in November 1981, to withhold any assurances that the United States would not engage in efforts to overthrow the Sandinista government.⁶⁸

The Covert War Begins

By the end of 1981, the nature of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua had become inherently more aggressive with the implementation of the CIA’s covert war against the Sandinistas. The National Security Council met on November 16, 1981 to consider new strategies for Central America. The CIA had already been providing funds to labor unions, the press, private sector organizations, and political opposition parties. Thus, aid was entering Nicaragua, but it was being funneled away from Sandinista control.⁶⁹ The centerpiece of these discussions, however, was paramilitary operations in Nicaragua. The CIA wanted to give financial and logistical support to paramilitary forces operating against the Sandinistas. The \$19 million CIA plan envisioned building a 500-man force that would undercut the Sandinistas through military tactics. The goal was to build popular support for an opposition front, and to support the opposition through training, intelligence collection, and paramilitary operations.⁷⁰ This plan was

⁶⁷ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 101.

⁶⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 79.

⁶⁹ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 105.

⁷⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 80.

put into effect on December 1, 1981, when Reagan signed a finding that covert activity was in national interest.⁷¹

The Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) was the primary beneficiary of the CIA's aid. Originally, support of the FDN was designed with the goal of interdicting arms bound for El Salvador. By the end of 1981, however, the immediate objective of the FDN changed to focus on the economic and social disruption of the Sandinista state. Primarily composed of farmers and workers from northern Nicaragua, as well as some former guardsmen or family members with ties to the national guard, the members of the FDN often objected the Sandinista's rural policies, which required crops to be sold at low prices during the nation's rapid inflation.⁷²

The FDN, although primarily a disruptive force, did engage in brutal acts of terrorism. A report by Americas Watch in 1985 found that the FDN had used "terrorist tactics" throughout the early 1980s to murder unarmed civilians and engage in psychological warfare. FDN personnel were advised to "neutralize" officials or hire criminals to engage in violent confrontations with civilians. Although the report covered all abuses in Nicaragua, it concluded that the FDN had the worst human rights record of all contra groups.⁷³ Therefore, the U.S. alliance with the FDN deepened American involvement in brutal military efforts in Nicaragua.

The pairing of economic restraints with paramilitary efforts did create obstacles and reveal flawed ideology within Reagan's foreign policy with Nicaragua. Since preliminary efforts, both economic and military, rested upon the notion that Nicaragua

⁷¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 80.

⁷² Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 103.

⁷³ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 104.

was still enabling the trafficking of arms to El Salvador, the Reagan administration had to change its policy excuse when it became apparent that this was no longer occurring. For the most part, the policy focused on the prevention of another Cuba in America's backyard and of Nicaragua further meddling in Salvadoran affairs.⁷⁴ Yet, on the ground in Nicaragua, even political leaders from the private sector complained that the Reagan administration's efforts were stifling their efforts for moderate reform; the hostile rhetoric and policies extinguished any space for moderate opposition to Sandinistas. Furthermore, the former Nicaraguan ambassador to the U.S., Arturo J. Cruz, criticized the Reagan administration's counterproductive tactics.

What the United States does not realize is that its continuing mistrust of the revolution might be pushing the Sandinista Government to the left and forcing it, in spite of itself, to use just the kind of measures that the United States finds so troubling Washington's hard line continues to encourage the armed aggression of the counter-revolution.⁷⁵

The economic and military efforts the Reagan administration employed in Nicaragua were ignorant of the greater forces behind the revolutionary ideology that had succeeded in Nicaragua and was still persevering in El Salvador.

Conclusion

The Reagan administration's foreign policy was driven by an adherence to Cold War ideology and desire to reestablish U.S. hegemony and credibility. The effect of Reagan's tough rhetoric during the campaign, and the policies that followed, had a drastic effect on El Salvador's political system and on Nicaragua's economy and political institutions. On the surface, the administration's policies appeared in

⁷⁴ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 104.

⁷⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 79.

accordance with Reagan's aspirations in Central America, yet the policies often created outcomes that served as the antithesis to their original purpose. This was due to the administration's negligence to understand the indigenous roots of revolution in both nations and the region's history of repression. After his first trip to Latin America as President, Reagan commented, "Well, I learned a lot... You'd be surprised. They're all individual countries."⁷⁶ The administration's refusal to familiarize itself with Central America's history would continue to hinder its ability to produce a truly effective policy for the region.

⁷⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 303.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRANSIGENCE AND OPPOSITION

As the Reagan administration left its first year in office behind, it tried to focus its foreign policy in Central America. Military and financial aid for El Salvador continued to increase as the administration became more invested in the emergence of a moderate government that could defeat the guerrilla groups within its borders. Meanwhile, covert operations to destabilize the Sandinistas were intensified through the funding and assistance of *contras*.¹ As the Reagan administration continued to escalate the U.S. commitment in both nations, however, Congress and the public became more concerned about the cost and implications of the policies. While the Reagan administration acted as if the foreign policy consensus prior to the Vietnam War was still intact, it sought to bolster support for its actions through the Kissinger Commission's report. Yet, by 1984 it was evident that Congress and the public viewed the crisis in El Salvador and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua through a drastically different lens than that of the administration.

The Caribbean Basin Initiative

On January 27, 1982, a story broke in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* about a massacre in the villages surrounding El Mozote by the Salvadoran army. The *New York Times* article explained that “the villagers have compiled a list of the names, ages and villages of 733 peasants, mostly children, women and old people, who they say were murdered by the Government soldiers. The

¹ *Contras* were the various right-wing guerrilla groups supported by the United States due to their opposition to the Sandinistas.

Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, which works with the Roman Catholic Church, puts the number at 926.”² Not only did these reports challenge the administration’s claims that El Salvador was run by a moderate government, but the stories also gripped the nation and caused both the public and Congress to turn even more attention to the events in El Salvador.

The first reports of the massacre surfaced in newspapers just the day prior to the administration’s release of the certification of progress in human rights by the Salvadoran government and military. Contrary to the media’s depiction of the events in El Salvador, the administration saw the contemporary Salvadoran government as a better alternative than a communist government, and thus perceived military action to be a necessity to keep leftist groups from power. On January 28, Reagan signed the finding that ruled that “the Government of El Salvador is making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights.”³ The report blamed the guerrillas for the violence in the region and explained that the Salvadoran army had to respond to the guerrilla’s violence. Additionally, on January 30, the U.S. embassy in El Salvador claimed that there was not enough evidence to support the claims being made by the media. The Reagan administration used the embassy’s assertion to substantiate its position that the charges against the Salvadoran regime had no merit.⁴

On February 24, 1982, speaking to the Organization of American States, Reagan presented his plan for the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). His speech

² *New York Times*, January 27, 1982.

³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 86.

⁴ Schmitz, *The United State and Right-Wing Dictators, 1965-1989*, 212.

revealed the administration's translation of Cold War ideology into an economic recovery plan for Caribbean and Central American nations. The initiative's detailed requests for aid and various means of economic control, however, had a long journey through Congress, in which the many facets of the proposal were dissected and often discarded.

Reagan, in introducing his plan for an economic recovery of the Caribbean Basin, reiterated the administration's ideological approach to foreign policy and emphasized the perceived role and duty of the United States in the Cold War. He started the speech by explaining that, "what happens anywhere in the Americas affects us in this country. In that very real sense, we share a common destiny."⁵ Reagan's emphasis on the unity of the hemisphere and the duty Americans have to one another, as well as their shared history and future, was a theme throughout the entire speech. This theme was paired with his revival of traditional Cold War ideology, which cast the events in Central America in a new light.

A new kind of colonialism stalks the world today and threatens our independence. It is brutal and totalitarian. It is not of our hemisphere, but it threatens our hemisphere and has established footholds on American soil for the expansion of its colonialist ambitions.... The dark future is foreshadowed by the poverty and repression of Castro's Cuba, the tightening grip of the totalitarian left in Grenada and Nicaragua, and the expansion of Soviet-backed, Cuban-managed support for violent revolution in Central America.⁶

The expansive and aggressive nature of communism in Central America was used to justify the Reagan administration's proposal for further economic aid. It additionally

⁵ "Caribbean Basin Initiative," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 479.

⁶ "Caribbean Basin Initiative," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 484.

enabled Reagan to proclaim that the Western Hemisphere was destined to collectively be “a beacon of hope for all mankind.”⁷

The proposed economic program was, in essence, a three-prong approach to help Caribbean and Central American countries overcome debts and stimulate economic growth. The first aspect requested \$350 million “to assist those countries which are particularly hard hit economically.”⁸ This aid specifically targeted countries that needed to meet pressing balance of payment needs. Second, the program sought to establish “free trade for Caribbean Basin products exported to the United States.”⁹ Finally, Reagan asked Congress to “provide significant tax incentives for investment in the Caribbean Basin” by U.S. businesses.¹⁰ This program would in no way, however, be enough on its own to create substantial change in the region. For example, it strongly favored some nations over others, like El Salvador which was scheduled to receive 37% of the total aid package. Additionally, application of the free trade program would only affect 5% of the region’s exports to the United States since the nations involved already had many trade incentives.¹¹

The program’s structure and purpose drew criticism from the American public, some of whom perceived it to be disadvantageous to them, while others believed the program had an underlying malicious intent. Organized labor groups, sugar growers, and textile manufacturers opposed the CBI because they believed the new trade incentives would hurt their business. Meanwhile a variety of church and development

⁷ “Caribbean Basin Initiative,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 487.

⁸ “Caribbean Basin Initiative,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 483.

⁹ “Caribbean Basin Initiative,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 482.

¹⁰ “Caribbean Basin Initiative,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 483.

¹¹ Richard E. Feinber, Richard Newfarmer, and Bernadette Orr, “Caribbean Basin Initiative: Pros and Cons,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 117.

organizations opposed the CBI because they interpreted it as a way to enhance American control of local resources and increase dependency on the United States in Central American nations.¹² Additionally, the “evident slant toward Central America prompted human rights groups and congressional critics of U.S. policy to view the CBI as a means of financing misconceived U.S. security objectives, rather than as a true effort to promote development.”¹³

The CBI proposal faced similar levels of scrutiny in Congress. Members were concerned both about the domestic effects of the program as well as its merit. Congress adjusted the bill by reducing the amount of aid for El Salvador and by adding a requirement that 12.5% of the aid be spent solely on basic needs-oriented projects. These changes enabled the aid portion of the bill to pass Congress in September 1982. Momentum for the program died soon after, however, and the rest of the program’s proposals were never passed.¹⁴ The criticisms of the administration’s approach to Central America and its traditional Cold War framework continued to escalate through the rest of 1982, as other events and issues in El Salvador and Nicaragua would occupy newspaper headlines and Congressional debates.

El Salvador’s 1982 Elections

El Salvador’s presidential elections, set for March 1982, became a hallmark of hope for the Reagan administration to guarantee legitimate political reform with the election of a moderate government. While trying to obtain more aid for El Salvador,

¹² Feinber et al. “Caribbean Basin Initiative: Pros and Cons,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 125.

¹³ Feinber et al. “Caribbean Basin Initiative: Pros and Cons,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 116.

¹⁴ Feinber et al. “Caribbean Basin Initiative: Pros and Cons,” in *The Continuing Crisis*, 116.

Reagan began to rely on the elections as a means to prove that the nation was stable, democratic, and friendly to the United States. The administration believed that the election could force the creation of a moderate governing coalition between the right and the Christian Democratic Party. This, in turn, would help convince Congress to approve more aid for the Salvadoran government and military, which the administration believed was necessary to defeat the left forces in El Salvador.

In El Salvador, the election was primarily between two candidates and their parties; d'Aubuisson's Nationalist Republic Alliance and Duarte's Christian Democratic Party. The Reagan administration emphasized that the FMLN's decision to not participate in the election was symbolic of the guerrillas' disinterest in democratic practices and values. The reality of the situation was that many guerrilla leaders were on a "traitors list" and risked assassination if they were to become a public figure. Nonetheless, the administration still faced problems with the political dynamic of the election. The oligarchy and its allies formed the Nationalist Republic Alliance and nominated d'Aubuisson to be their candidate in an effort to get the ultraright control of the nation.¹⁵ D'Aubuisson resented U.S. involvement in El Salvador and threatened U.S. sway over political and economic policies. The elections resulted in the Christian Democrats winning forty percent of the vote, but the formation of a majority coalition between the Nationalist Republic Alliance and another ultraright political group flustered the Reagan administration and left it in a vulnerable position.¹⁶

Publicly, the administration expressed the opinion that the government formed by the elections was an issue for the Salvadoran people, but privately it worked to

¹⁵ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 63.

¹⁶ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 64.

ensure that the Salvadoran government would be palatable for Washington. D'Aubuisson was famous in Congress for being labeled a "psychopathic killer" by former Ambassador Robert White, and for being associated with both the death of the American churchwomen and the assassination of Archbishop Romero.¹⁷ Thus, the administration sent U.S. Ambassador-at-Large Vernon Walters to El Salvador to help mediate the post-election negotiations. Walters and a selection of other administration officials successfully managed to navigate the discussions and political dynamics to keep d'Aubuisson from assuming the presidency. The United States worked with the Salvadoran army, which was heavily dependent on the United States for funds, to get the military's preferred presidential candidate, Álvaro Magaña, the presidency.¹⁸ The forced acceptance of Magaña as president ensured that the governing body of El Salvador would incorporate the Christian Democrats and could thus be labeled as a government of national unity.¹⁹

El Salvador's 1982 presidential election was important because it marked a right-ward shift in the government and legitimized anti-democratic power influenced by U.S. policies. The administration's depiction of the Salvadoran government as a moderate political entity became increasingly flawed in the wake of the elections. The government was no longer battling the extreme right and left, but was composed of the extreme right, which relied on death squads and violence to suppress the population and maintain political control. Thus, as the United States continued to support the Salvadoran army, it sponsored the body responsible for 76% of civilian deaths per

¹⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 95.

¹⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 98.

¹⁹ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 65.

month.²⁰ It was, therefore, no wonder that the human rights policy with El Salvador was further complicated by the elections and relationship between Washington and the Salvadoran government. In October 1982, Ambassador Hinton tried to explain to the American public and its politicians that the severity of human rights violations in El Salvador was extreme, and that the United States needed to reassess its policies toward the nation. “The message is simple,” he explained. “El Salvador must make progress in bringing the murderers... to justice.... If not, the United States, in spite of our interest, in spite of our commitment to the struggle against Communism, could be forced to deny assistance to El Salvador.”²¹

Conflict in Nicaragua

Although the conflict in El Salvador was centerstage for the U.S. focus on Central America, the covert war in Nicaragua continued behind the scenes. Entering 1982, both the United States and anti-Sandinista forces began to escalate their efforts against the Nicaraguan government. The purpose of U.S. activity and support of the contras in Nicaragua began to expand from the interdiction of arms shipments to an attempt to destabilize, even topple, the Sandinista government. The contras destroyed multiple bridges fundamental to transportation and set off an explosion near Managua’s airport that killed four workers.²² In response to increased hostility, the Nicaraguan government declared a “state of emergency,” and suspended many civil liberties for the

²⁰ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 67.

²¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 104.

²² Instituto Historico Centroamericano, “The State of National Emergency: Background, Causes and Implementation,” in *The Nicaraguan Reader: Documents of a Revolution under Fire*, ed. Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 66.

first time since the Sandinista's had come to power.²³ The escalating violence in Nicaragua grabbed the attention of Congress. The rise in violence and the Sandinista's response heightened fears of a Soviet stronghold emerging in Central America, and brought the nature of the Sandinista regime under further scrutiny. Simultaneously, however, the administration had to appear to oppose the overthrow of the foreign government, since this was deemed an unacceptable aim for U.S. foreign policy.

Jeane Kirkpatrick and Ronald Reagan, nonetheless, jumped on the tightening of control by the Sandinista's declaration of a "state of emergency" as a demonstration of the government's totalitarian nature, which demanded a strong American response. Kirkpatrick's speech to the U.N. Security Council in March 1982 emphasized the "new Law of National Emergency" as a policy of repression, and interpreted the Sandinista state of emergency as a planned attack on the Nicaraguan people to create paranoia.²⁴ The administration emphasized that although Somoza had been a dictator, the Sandinistas were far more repressive.

On November 8, 1982, *Newsweek* published the story "A Secret War for Nicaragua," which galvanized opposition to U.S. policies with Nicaragua from the American public and Congress.²⁵ The story detailed how the U.S. policy objective to intercept the arms flow between Nicaragua and the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador was being conducted on the ground by members of counterrevolutionary forces that sought to topple the Sandinistas. In training and working with these groups, the contras, the United States was intimately involved and supporting the efforts of toppling the

²³ Gilbert, "Nicaragua," in *Confronting Revolution*, 102.

²⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Paranoid Style of Politics," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 16.

²⁵ Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, "America's Secret War," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 173.

Sandinista regime. The article presented problems and questions that arose from the attainment of this new information about the covert program, and illustrated how the presence of U.S. military personnel and advisors in Honduras had become intricately linked to contra groups. This was fundamentally problematic because the intentions of the contras in Nicaragua – the overthrow of the Sandinista regime – differed from the Reagan administration’s original assurance that it was not involved with groups that sought to overthrow the government.

In researching the story, the reporters discovered that the secret operations along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border had “escalated far beyond Washington’s original intentions.”²⁶ The article detailed that there were fifty CIA personnel working on the campaign from Honduras, with dozens of military and intelligence officers under them. “The operation posed some very disturbing questions,” according to the reporters. “Did it violate the spirit if not the letter of congressional restrictions on dirty tricks – and would it only make a bad situation in Central America even worse?”²⁷ Furthermore, the story revealed that U.S. officials had turned to “Somocistas” and past military leaders.²⁸ The article quoted one Somocista who believed that “come the counterrevolution, there will be a massacre in Nicaragua.... We have a lot of scores to settle. There will be bodies from the border to Managua.”²⁹ These details and quotes shocked the American public, who were horrified to learn that the United States was in association with groups who’s motives were neither peaceful or democratic.

²⁶ John Brecher, John Walcott, David Martin, and Beth Nissen, “A Secret War for Nicaragua,” in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 209.

²⁷ Brecher et al, “A Secret War for Nicaragua,” in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 209.

²⁸ “Somocistas” was the label given to the elite members of Nicaraguan society who continued to fight for a return to the way of rule that had existed under the Somoza dynasty.

²⁹ Brecher et al, “A Secret War for Nicaragua,” in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 213.

The article did clarify, however, that the Reagan administration had different goals for the covert war.

While U.S. officials maintain that the primary objective of the operation remains cutting off the supply routes, they also hope that a threatened Sandinista government will bring itself down by further repressing its internal opposition, thereby strengthening the determination of moderate forces to resist.³⁰

The increased involvement of the U.S. forces and the contras led many to worry about the operation's intended goals. These revelations rattled Congress and the American public and stimulated greater discussion about the role of the United States in Nicaragua.

Congressional Opposition

In an effort to divert public, congressional, and media attention away for the Salvadoran election, the Reagan administration began to focus on Nicaragua and the 'totalitarian' nature it attributed to Sandinista rule. The administration believed that the Sandinistas and their allies were responsible for turmoil in the region, and wanted to demonstrate to Congress and the public that the Nicaraguan government was far worse than that in El Salvador. During early 1982, the administration continued to pursue a hostile campaign toward the Sandinistas. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick and Secretary of State Haig both intensified their claims against the Sandinistas in early March, as part of the effort to demonstrate that Sandinista behavior, which was predominantly overshadowed by Salvadoran events in the media, constituted worse human rights violations than those in El Salvador.

³⁰ Brecher et al, "A Secret War for Nicaragua," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 213.

The centerpiece of the administration's argument against the Sandinistas was that they created a repressive government in Nicaragua and that their arms shipments to El Salvador further aided guerrilla groups and terrorist violence. These were a continuation of the claims first presented in the 1981 White Paper. In order to substantiate its claims, the administration had Deputy Director of the CIA Bobby Inman and DIA Deputy Director for Intelligence and External Affairs John Hughes hold a public session that showed photos of Nicaraguan military bases. This session initially gained the administration some support from Congress.³¹ In response to the presentation, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee both released statements that supported the administration's findings of Sandinista involvement in the Salvadoran guerrilla movement.³²

On March 25, 1982, Jeane Kirkpatrick delivered a speech to the United Nations Security Council in which she outlined the administration's perception of the Nicaraguan government. She started the speech by declaring that the Nicaraguan government was guilty of "large scale interventions in the internal affairs of its neighbors," as well as the use of violence and aggression in other nations, which disrupted international relations in the region.³³ In addition, she added an assessment of the Sandinistas as totalitarian rulers.

We are confronted in Nicaragua with the familiar patterns of doublespeak with which totalitarian and would-be totalitarian rulers of our times assault reality in the attempt to persuade us, and doubtless themselves as well, that making war is

³¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 106.

³² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 106.

³³ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Paranoid Style of Politics," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 15.

seeking peace, that repression is liberation, that a free press is a very carefully controlled one.³⁴

The totalitarian nature the Reagan administration identified with the Sandinistas was further enhanced by the declaration of a state of national emergency, which occurred the week prior to Kirkpatrick's speech. She asserted that the "new Law of National Emergency" would "eliminate the limited liberty and pluralism that remain in the country."³⁵ Kirkpatrick concluded the address by asserting that the Sandinistas could not be authentically interested in peace and negotiations due to their involvement in El Salvador and internal repression. If they were, Kirkpatrick rhetorically asked,

Would [the Nicaraguan government] have declared a state of siege on its own people, effectively eliminating the opposition? Most importantly, would it continue incessantly to pour arms into El Salvador, even increasing that flow of arms, bullets and propaganda just when the people of El Salvador are given an unprecedented opportunity to express their views?³⁶

These assertions represented the Reagan administration's view of the Nicaraguan government, and its relation with events in El Salvador, claiming that it was a hostile government that repressed its own people, and spread violence and communism to neighboring nations. It was for these reasons that the Reagan administration pursued a hostile policy with Nicaragua, since it saw the nation as a threat to Central American security, and thus to the security and credibility of the United States.

Although Congress agreed with the administration's perception of the Sandinistas as a threat, many struggled to understand how the covert operations and work with contra groups aided the goal of U.S. policies in Nicaragua. The administration had successfully illustrated that the Sandinistas were not the U.S. choice

³⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Paranoid Style of Politics," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 16.

³⁵ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Paranoid Style of Politics," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 16.

³⁶ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Paranoid Style of Politics," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 18.

of rule for Nicaragua but failed to provide a rationale for the covert war. Concerns were accentuated in early March when newspapers began to report information about the covert war. The first articles on the efforts in Nicaragua, however, focused on President Reagan's authorization of "a broad program of U.S. planning and action... in Central America, including the encouragement of political and paramilitary operations."³⁷ The intent and effectiveness of paramilitary operations were, therefore, central to the original concerns of the administration's objectives in Nicaragua.

Members of Congress began to critique the covert war as an impractical approach to the Central American crisis, while others structured their critiques as a dispute of the values of American foreign policy. In March, Senators Christopher Dodd and Paul Tsongas called the policy with Nicaragua "as confused as it is dangerous."³⁸ The policy's lack of clarity also presented concern about the purpose behind the support of anti-Sandinista groups. Skeptics began to voice concerns in March that the goal of the covert operations was not to stop the shipment of arms to El Salvador, but instead to overthrow the Sandinista government. Meanwhile, Congressman Barnes worried that the military approach, similar to that used against Cuba, would only produce similar results and push the Sandinistas closer to the Soviet Union. He tied these military concerns to a critique of the values and principles of American foreign policy. Barnes appealed to the administration to distance itself from a military approach and instead adhere to the principles of "self-determination and non-interference."³⁹ Other congressional liberals explained that the "activities designed to destabilize or

³⁷ *Washington Post*, February 14, 1982.

³⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 107.

³⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 107.

overthrow the government of any nation... are inappropriate, and that outstanding grievances between different nations ... should be resolved through peaceful negotiations.”⁴⁰ These critiques continued to culminate into a clash of values between the Reagan administration’s traditional Cold War ideology, and the liberal focus on ideals of morality, human rights, and self-determination.

In the fall of 1982, however, the reality of the situation became clearer with a selection of press leaks that detailed that the purpose of the U.S.-supported contra forces was the overthrow of the Sandinistas. The article in *Newsweek* was the most prominent, which highlighted the common alignment of the contras with Somocistas and their ambition to overthrow the Sandinista government.

The combined concerns regarding the purpose of the contras and the morality of American foreign policy with Nicaragua led to the creation of the Boland Amendment. The House Intelligence Committee had grown increasingly uneasy with its privileged knowledge of U.S. military and covert policy in Nicaragua during the fall of 1982. Thus, when considering a 1983 intelligence authorization, the Chairman of the Committee, Edward Boland, proposed an amendment that would focus the purpose of U.S. covert policies toward Nicaragua. Boland’s proposal prohibited any U.S. actions with the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. It was accepted by the committee in September.

In December, the House considered the Department of Defense appropriations bill, which stirred controversy among many congressmen because it included funds for U.S. covert operations. One congressman proposed amending the bill to prohibit any

⁴⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 107.

operations in or against Nicaragua, on the grounds that the covert war was immoral and counterproductive.⁴¹ Boland took the floor during this debate to propose his amendment as a compromise. He asserted that the prohibition of the use of U.S. funds toward the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government was agreeable for Congress and the administration. Boland's argument led to its unanimous adoption.

Public Opposition

Public opposition to Reagan's policies in El Salvador and Nicaragua strengthened during 1982 as media coverage and Congressional discussions revealed moral issues within the administration's approach and interpretation of Central American events. A Gallup Organization poll for *Newsweek* magazine revealed that by February 1982 support for Reagan's El Salvador policy had plunged to thirty three percent.⁴² Only eight percent of the four hundred eleven adults who answered the poll believed that American troops should back the Salvadoran junta. Furthermore, protests against U.S. involvement in El Salvador broke out across the nation. In February a protest of 3,000 people marched across Manhattan from the United Nations to the Salvadoran Mission while chanting slogans like "money for jobs, not for war. U.S. out of El Salvador."⁴³ Other participants, some wearing Reagan masks or painted as victims of Salvadoran violence, chanted: "Hey, hey, Uncle Sam. We remember Vietnam."⁴⁴ At an Amnesty International sponsored 'Vigil for the Disappeared' in Seattle, a spokesman accused the government of being responsible for the

⁴¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 111.

⁴² *United Press International*, February 22, 1982.

⁴³ *United Press International*, February 22, 1982.

⁴⁴ *United Press International*, February 22, 1982.

disappearance of thousands in El Salvador.⁴⁵ Other cities, including Chicago, Boulder, and Hartford also had large protests in which Americans connected domestic unrest to foreign policy. A group of protesters from Chicago released a statement explaining that, “while Salvadoran peasants are being massacred with U.S.-made weapons, here in South Chicago plants are closing, thousands are laid off and welfare benefits have been reduced below survival level....”⁴⁶ The American public not only wanted out of Central American affairs, but wanted to direct attention back to domestic issues.

In March, thousands of protesters congregated in Washington to advocate for an end to the interference in El Salvador. Police estimated that 23,000 people took part in the march in Washington, D.C., while similar demonstrations were also held in Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. The spokesman for the Washington demonstration, Robert Costa, claimed that the protest was sponsored by more than 40 labor, civil rights and religious groups, who all shared a desire to end “all U.S. aid in El Salvador.”⁴⁷ Again in June, a protest against nuclear weapons also had many participants carrying signs that requested the U.S. to remove itself from El Salvador.⁴⁸

1983: An Altered Approach

In early 1983, the administration was faced with opposition to its policies in both Congress and the public, as well as with worsening situations in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In grappling with these circumstances, the administration was also faced

⁴⁵ *United Press International*, February 22, 1982.

⁴⁶ *United Press International*, February 22, 1982.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, March 28, 1982.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, June 13, 1982.

with the deadline for the release of the third presidential certification of human rights in El Salvador, which was necessary for the administration to continue to send fiscal and military aid to the Salvadoran government and military. Released in January, the certification was uncharacteristically blunt in regards to the human rights situation in El Salvador, and noted that “human rights abuses continue and ... the further development of democracy and the protection of human rights are not to be taken for granted.”⁴⁹ It noted that systemic ineffectiveness of the judicial system and a lack of military discipline were the primary causes of the blatant human rights abuses. A *New York Times* piece explained that President Reagan assured Congress “that despite ‘great obstacles,’ El Salvador was not only making progress on human rights but was also laying the foundation for democratic government.”⁵⁰ The administration maintained that despite El Salvador’s shortcomings, improvements had been made and that the progress warranted the continuation of U.S. aid.

In further advancing the cause of aid to El Salvador, Reagan transformed much of the debate about Central America into a domestic issue. The speeches about national security and anticommunism once again began to manifest into a patriotic rallying point for Reagan’s supporters. The rhetoric of the administration augmented an image of urgent crisis in Central America that demanded American help, which the U.S. citizenry was pressured to provide as part of their duty to the free world. Reagan’s renewed discourse of the Marxist threat in the Western Hemisphere was coupled with attacks on one’s patriotism if they disagreed with the administration’s interpretation of the Cold War and its manifestation in Central America. Congress began to find itself

⁴⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 119.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, January 22, 1983.

on the defensive, compelled to demonstrate a resolute repugnance toward communism, while trying to critique the morality and effectiveness of the administration's foreign policy. Reagan and his supporters believed that a lack of vigor was hindering American policies, and that it was the duty of the United States to act powerfully in exterminating a communist threat from the West. This ideology was what made the critique of aid to El Salvador difficult to pursue, and what made military commitments appear as a commitment of strength to some and as a counterproductive mistake to others.

Between February 3 and 12, 1983, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick traveled to Central America to acquire an enhanced understanding of the situation in many of the countries threatened by social, political, and economic instability.⁵¹ Following her trip, Kirkpatrick's assessment of the Salvadoran situation reflected the administration's ideological approach to Central America. She claimed that the situation was dire. Kirkpatrick believed that the influence of the Soviet Union had grown, and that the prospects for successful U.S. policies were depleting, especially if fiscal aid to the region did not increase. Kirkpatrick's analysis that "the military situation was deteriorating and that the Salvadorans needed more arms" caught President Reagan and other White House officials "by surprise at the depth of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's concerns about possible guerrilla advances in Central America."⁵² Her assessment of the situation and declaration that more aid was necessary shaped the administration's interpretation of the situation going forward as it relied on the frameworks provided by Kirkpatrick.

⁵¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 117.

⁵² *New York Times*, March 4, 1983.

The president expressed similar interpretations of the events in Central America. In a speech to the National Association of Manufacturers on March 10, 1983, Reagan discussed “the problem” in Central America, as one caused by “an aggressive minority [that] has thrown in its lot with the Communists, looking to the Soviets and their own Cuban henchmen to help them pursue political change through violence.”⁵³ In order to combat these violent and undemocratic forces, Reagan proposed an emergency package of \$298 million for the region, of which \$110 million of military aid would go to El Salvador.⁵⁴ Reagan believed that his critics and Congress should be blamed for the continuation of human rights abuses in El Salvador because they would not provide him with the proper aid to help correct the situation.

Meanwhile, opposition to the administration’s policy in Nicaragua continued. During the spring of 1983, opponents of the policy with Nicaragua sought to eliminate all of its funds.⁵⁵ There continued to be concern that the purpose of the contras differed from what the administration claimed. The contras appeared to many members of Congress as a free entity receiving funds from the United States rather than as an extension of U.S. policy. On April 27, 1983, just hours before President Reagan was due to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress, Boland introduced H.R. 2760, a bill “to prohibit United States support for military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua.”⁵⁶ Many members of Congress, when expressing their support for the bill, noted that they agreed with the objectives of President Reagan and his administration, because they too disliked communism and did not want a base for Soviet operations in

⁵³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 122.

⁵⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 122.

⁵⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 123.

⁵⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 128.

Central America. Still they worried that the methods and policies employed by the administration had led to the support of Boland's bill.

Within hours of the bill's introduction, Reagan spoke to the joint session of Congress in an attempt to save the administration's Central American policies. He asserted two points: that Congress was liable for the policy failure, and that the Sandinista's rule in Nicaragua was hostile and destabilizing for the region. Although stressing ideas of peace and reform, Reagan continued to push issues of nationalism and national security. He claimed:

The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy.... Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?⁵⁷

The administration's attack on Congress continued a few days later when Kirkpatrick stated that there "are some members of Congress who want to see Marxist victories in Central America."⁵⁸ What Kirkpatrick failed to note, however, was the Congressional shift toward the president's stance. The final question of Reagan's statement to Congress captured a pivotal issue at hand: no Congressman wanted to be held accountable for failures in U.S. foreign policy and credibility. Furthermore, members of Congress who previously had opposed the entirety of the president's foreign policy began to warm to his goals and ideology. This left many members of Congress in a difficult position. Although they supported Reagan's staunchly anticommunist rhetoric and desire to improve American credibility, they struggled to support the methods and

⁵⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Let Me Set the Record Straight on Nicaragua," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 19.

⁵⁸ LeoGrande et al, "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *Confronting Revolution*, 318.

application of these objectives as proposed by the administration. Nonetheless, Reagan's call on Congress led many to question their stance on foreign policy with Central America.

In his speech, Reagan also clarified the purpose of the United States in Nicaragua, and why it had an obligation to act against the Sandinistas. He discussed the imposition of a new dictatorship in Nicaragua, and condemned the censorship and human rights abuses identified by the administration. Furthermore, Reagan emphasized that the policy did not seek to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Rather, "our interest is to insure that it does not infect its neighbors through the export of subversion and violence."⁵⁹ The administration again proclaimed that it sought "to prevent the flow of arms to El Salvador" and the nation's persistent efforts in spreading violence in the region.⁶⁰ Reagan and the administration intended to continue to preserve their original course in Nicaragua, regardless of opposition.

A mid-year policy review, from the National Security Decision Directive 82, "U.S. Policy Initiatives to Improve Prospects for Victory in El Salvador," (NSDD 82) presented a less promising assessment of the administration's policies' effectiveness in Central America, and served as a critical point of change in the administration's approach to El Salvador. The document explained that the U.S. faced "substantial opposition, at home and abroad..."⁶¹ Furthermore, it acknowledged that the administration wanted to continue to provide aid to El Salvador, however, the means of achieving this aid needed to change since the current policy failed to present a detailed

⁵⁹ Ronald Reagan, "Let Me Set the Record Straight on Nicaragua," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 19.

⁶⁰ Ronald Reagan, "Let Me Set the Record Straight on Nicaragua," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, 20.

⁶¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 136.

assessment of how U.S. aid would enhance the chance for success in San Salvador. The NSDD warned that periodic efforts that sought modest supplements of aid “may be perceived as incremental escalation to stave off defeat for the time being, without any clear strategy for success – an awkward parallel with Vietnam.”⁶² In order to catalyze a changed approach, and thus a changed perspective on the purpose and effect of the aid, NSDD 82 recommended a substantial increase in the amount of military aid sent in 1984. The document argued that this increase could be achieved if the administration were to develop a “long-term strategy with improved chances of bipartisan support.”⁶³ This report led to a moderation of tone by the administration and the creation of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, the Kissinger Commission.

The administration’s altered approach to the situation in El Salvador was reflected in Vice President George H.W. Bush’s visit to President Magaña. Bush offered a blunt toast at dinner with the Salvadoran president, which emphasized the administration’s increased concern about death squads.

Your cause is being undermined by the murderous violence of reactionary minorities.... These cowardly death squad terrorists are just as repugnant to me, to President Reagan, to the U.S. Congress, and to the American people as the terrorists of the left.... If these death squad murders continue, you will lose the support of the American people.⁶⁴

Although his commentary failed to note that Reagan’s policy had already lost the support of the American people, it served as a threat to improve the human rights record in the country. Furthermore, Bush’s engagement with these issues represented the administration’s new tactic in Salvadoran policy, to try and mollify Congress and

⁶² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 137.

⁶³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 137.

⁶⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 143.

public opinion. In Nicaragua, however, the administration continued to display a defiance of Congressional disapproval and pursued policy goals as if it had domestic consensus. Nonetheless, 1983 cemented the Congressional and public concerns regarding interventionist activities in both El Salvador and Nicaragua. The perpetuation of violence, and improved awareness of it among the American public, created a greater obstacle for the administration's regional goals. Despite Congressional and public concerns about policies with both El Salvador and Nicaragua, the administration appeared open to only altering its approach to San Salvador.

The Kissinger Commission's Report

On July 19, 1983, President Reagan signed Executive Order 12433, which established the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America. Chaired by Henry Kissinger, the function of the commission was to "study the nature of United States interests in the Central American region and the threats now posed to those interests."⁶⁵ Based on the findings, the commission was also asked to provide the president with advice for future policies with Central America. In part, the creation of the commission was to address the continuing congressional opposition that the Reagan administration faced in 1983. The intention behind the commission being bipartisan was that it was expected to provide a consensus on Central American policy. Reagan hoped that the commission's creation of a consensus for foreign policy with Central America would ease divides between the executive and legislative branches. The commission was,

⁶⁵ Henry Kissinger et. al., "Executive Order 12344 of July 19, 1983: National Bipartisan Commission on Central America," in *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984).

nonetheless, mainly composed of members who already supported the ideological purpose behind Reagan's policies, which guaranteed the administration a favorable report.

Predictably, the commission endorsed the administration's interpretation of Central American events and supported a continuation of the administration's policies. Furthermore, from the outset it proclaimed that there was "no room for partisanship."⁶⁶ In an effort to create a policy consensus, and to diverge from "the often polarized and emotional nature of the debate that has surrounded Central America," the commission emphasized a cause-and-effect reasoning for a bipartisan policy. Since "the people of Central America are neither Republicans nor Democrats," the logic of the commission followed that "the crisis is nonpartisan, and it calls for a nonpartisan response. As a practical political matter, the best way to a nonpartisan policy is by a bipartisan route."⁶⁷

The report included an analysis of the turmoil in Central America, an assessment of U.S. interests in the region, and proposed a program to build national consensus for actions that would protect national interests. The seven U.S. interests in the crisis identified by the commission embody the priorities and concerns of the Reagan administration.

(1) To preserve the moral authority of the United States.... (2) To improve the living conditions of the people of Central America.... (3) To advance the cause of democracy.... (4) To strengthen the hemispheric system.... (5) To promote peaceful change in Central America while resisting the violation of democracy by force and terrorism. (6) To prevent hostile forces from seizing and expanding control.... (7) To bar the Soviet Union from consolidating ... a

⁶⁶ *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, 6.

⁶⁷ *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, 6.

hostile foothold on the American continents in order to advance its strategic purposes.⁶⁸

The first interest reflected the U.S. view of its power as benign, as well as an issue of American credibility. The second was unique, and perhaps unexpected, because it acknowledged the poor living conditions of the people of Central America. The report did, however, fail to acknowledge that the poor living conditions in Central America were due to the history of oppression, economic dependency, and violence the region has been subjected to for centuries. The third, fourth, and fifth points all asserted the U.S. role in the Cold War through its duty to protect the free world and its interests in the preservation of democracy and freedom, all of which relied upon a strengthening of the hemisphere against communism. Similarly, the last two points portrayed the traditional Cold War ideology embraced by the Reagan administration, blaming hostility, violence, and repression on the aggression and expansion of monolithic communism, an argument previously made by George Kennan in his Long Telegram.

The specific policy recommendations made by the commission further reflected an adherence to the administration's trends. The report proposed a massive increase in economic assistance to the region, urging the United States to consider increasing the appropriated funds for FY 1984, which was set at \$477 million, an additional \$400 million. "Such an increase, if complemented by continued improvements in the economic policy programs of these countries and if quickly made available," the commission suggested, "would help stabilize current economic conditions."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, 45.

⁶⁹ *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, 57.

The report's focus on El Salvador revealed a slight change in policy, which can be traced back to the implications of the dismal NSDD 82 report in 1983. The commission argued that

With respect to El Salvador, military aid should... be made contingent upon demonstrated progress toward free elections; freedom of association; the establishment of the rule of law and an effective judicial system; and the termination of the activities of the so-called death squads, as well as vigorous action against those guilty of crimes and the prosecution to the extent possible of past offenders.⁷⁰

These "minimum standards" for the provision of military aid to El Salvador demonstrated the ideological shift that occurred during 1983, as human rights became a more integral component of U.S. policy with the nation. Aid was no longer contingent upon vague notions of improvement but was supposed to be held accountable by many legislative and quantifiable steps by the Salvadoran government. Additionally, these standards also highlighted the underlying importance the United States placed on the upcoming Salvadoran presidential elections and the importance of democratic systems and structures. Furthermore, the report's suggestion for policy with El Salvador did provide a middle ground, in which conservatives were pleased with the demand for an increase in aid, while some liberals were content with the increased and clarified conditions on which aid was contingent.

The report's adherence to the administration's interpretation of the events in Central America and its policy proposals resulted in a failure to provide alternative policy options or build a consensus. The background information provided in the report did not demonstrate an understanding of the link between nationalism and the crisis many nations in Central America faced. Furthermore, it presented the death squads and

⁷⁰ *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, 124.

insurgent groups as extreme elements, although in reality, they were at the heart of the conflict. Overall, these failures revealed an inability to understand the nature of the conflicts, which accounted for the inability of the commission to produce alternative policies that would better address the issues outside of discussions and policies confined to a Cold War prism.

The 1984 Presidential Elections in El Salvador

In February 1984, the Reagan administration presented an \$8 billion aid package for Central America, which included a prominent increase in military aid for El Salvador. The administration found, however, that the Kissinger Commission, instead of providing groundwork for a leap of faith in Congress, intensified debates about the internal conditions in El Salvador. Senator Bennett Johnston expressed concerns about human rights, saying “it seems to me the situation is deteriorating, ... that we are losing the war ... because we are losing the war for the hearts and minds of the people.”⁷¹ Johnston believed this loss was due to the prevalence of the death squads on the American public’s conscience and the failure of the administration to address them. While critics of the Reagan administration’s policies agreed on what was flawed, they failed to unify around a way to produce an alternative approach. Many were unwilling to face the political heat of proposing another policy. “The administration deftly manipulated the charge that congressional proposals for a negotiated settlement were little more than calls for the integration of communist insurgents in a new

⁷¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 153.

government.”⁷² Many members of Congress, therefore, were paralyzed by a fear of appearing “soft” on communism or unpatriotic.

In March, the administration submitted an “emergency” request for \$93 million in aid, and argued that the Salvadoran army urgently needed assistance to ensure the protection of the March elections.⁷³ The administration sought to create a sense of urgency and crisis in an effort to increase the likelihood of the request passing through Congress. A Defense Department “fact sheet” from March 13, 1984 declared that without the \$93 million, “the ESAF (El Salvador Armed Forces) will either go back to the barracks or collapse.”⁷⁴ The rhetorical urgency created by the administration caused the Salvadoran election to become a dominate consideration in congressional discussions of the aid request. Many amendments were added to the request, but a compromised figure of \$61.75 million in military aid for El Salvador was passed.⁷⁵

On March 25, 1984, Salvadorans went to the polls and voted in the election of a new president. The results of the election, however, was inconclusive. No candidate received a clear majority, which paved the way for a runoff between the top two contenders: Roberto d’Aubuisson of the Nationalist Republican Alliance and José Napoleón Duarte of the Christian Democratic Party.⁷⁶ Members of Congress were nonetheless impressed by the elections. House Majority Leader Jim Wright exclaimed, “I’m going to do whatever is necessary to provide the means for the people of El Salvador to preserve a democratic society.”⁷⁷

⁷² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 154.

⁷³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 155.

⁷⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 155.

⁷⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 156.

⁷⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 156.

⁷⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 156.

Members of the administration, however, knew that Duarte's success in the runoff was necessary for the preservation of Reagan's policy with El Salvador. One State Department official explained that "everyone in the [U.S.] Embassy knew that if Duarte didn't win that was the end of Reagan's policy in El Salvador... but everyone also knew we couldn't say that to the Salvadorans."⁷⁸ Duarte's election would symbolize the victory of a moderate position, a beneficial attribute of the election for U.S. interests. Furthermore, with an increasingly hesitant Congress, the administration knew that Duarte's presidency was essential for the continuation of military aid to support the administration's goal of militarily defeating the left in El Salvador.

Although Congress had approved emergency aid for El Salvador, Reagan was still frustrated with Capital Hill and the lack of consensus or support for his policies. In a speech to Georgetown University's Center for strategic and International Studies on April 6, 1984, Reagan intensified his claims that Congress was responsible for the failures in the administration's Central American policies. Reagan argued that for the United States to help make the world more safe and humane, the U.S. must "revive the spirit that was once the hallmark of our postwar foreign policy: bipartisan cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of our government."⁷⁹ This, according to Reagan, had not been achieved under his presidency due to failures on the behalf of Congress. "Where we have foundered in regional stabilization, it has been because the Congress has failed to provide such support."⁸⁰ Reagan wanted to restore the bipartisan consensus for foreign policy that existed during the 1950s. Due to the many

⁷⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 158.

⁷⁹ Remarks at the National Leadership Forum of the Center for International and Strategic Studies of Georgetown University, April 6, 1984, *PPP: Reagan, 1984*, 479.

⁸⁰ "Remarks at the National Leadership Forum," *The Public Papers of the President*, 5.

congressional initiatives in the 1970s that limited executive power, Reagan asserted that it was up to “congressional leadership as well as of executive leadership” to build a bipartisan consensus.⁸¹ Reagan argued that many members of Congress were hindered by the ‘Vietnam syndrome’ and failed to understand the need for a military element to foreign policy. The speech ended by challenging Congress to rise to and meet the “great challenges of the eighties” through the “positive, practical, and effective action” of a bipartisan consensus.⁸²

During this time, the CIA began the expansion of a covert program of assistance to Duarte. To support Duarte’s campaign, the CIA made large donations to the Christian Democratic Party. In addition, the administration spent \$10 million to cover the air fares of international observers as well as finance electoral technology.⁸³ By early May rumors began to emerge about the U.S. involvement in Duarte’s election campaign. The *New York Times* reported that the CIA funneled \$2.1 million into the Salvadoran election in order to prevent the election of d’Aubuisson. This conflicted with the Reagan administration’s public denial of “taking sides in the election or giving aid directly to political parties or candidates.”⁸⁴ In a floor speech on May 8, Senator Jesse Helms claimed that the State Department and the CIA “bought Mr. Duarte lock, stock, and barrel.”⁸⁵

The triumph of Duarte and the Christian Democrats in the Salvadoran election may have been influenced by the U.S. aid, or may have resulted regardless, but the end

⁸¹ “Remarks at the National Leadership Forum,” *The Public Papers of the President*, 5.

⁸² “Remarks at the National Leadership Forum,” *The Public Papers of the President*, 7.

⁸³ Diskin and Sharpe, “El Salvador,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 70.

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, May 12, 1984.

⁸⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 158.

of uncertainty for El Salvador's future was met with relief by the administration and Congress. For the administration, Duarte's election made a democratic reformist government a reality, and reunited the administration and Congress in their aspirations for U.S. policy toward the nation. Congress was more willing to provide funds and less inclined to continue the fight over policy with El Salvador in light of the election's results. Congressional resignation from involvement in Salvadoran issues additionally enabled the administration freer management of the counterinsurgency war it was waging against the left.

Duarte's election, however, hid underlying problems. A stalemate ensued following the election because Duarte continued to rely upon the Reagan administration, as well as the military and oligarchy, for political support. "He could not act independent of any of these groups, all of whom still sought a military solution to the crisis in El Salvador."⁸⁶ Duarte's reliance on death squads, repression, and social and political control led America's Watch to conclude in 1985 that the election had not resulted in a movement toward democratization of El Salvador. "Unless and until the political space widens so as also to permit peaceful opposition by newspapers, labor unions and political parties to the left of the Christian Democrats, it will not be possible to say that democratization is underway."⁸⁷ Thus, what was originally identified as a success for democracy and freedom in Central America was instead the continuation of the same patterns of control, abuse, and repression, which existed prior. The administration's years of intervention in El Salvador and covert support for the

⁸⁶ Schmitz, *The United State and Right-Wing Dictators, 1965-1989*, 216.

⁸⁷ Diskin and Sharpe, "El Salvador," in *Confronting Revolution*, 74.

elections failed to change the reality for Salvadoran people. It did, however, provide Congress and the administration with an ideologically agreeable symbol of success.

Reagan Stays the Course in Nicaragua

In early 1984, explosions from mines placed in Nicaraguan harbors damaged ships, caused massive losses of oil, and threw both Nicaragua and the United States into momentary panic. In the fall of 1983, the Reagan administration launched a new facet to its policy with Nicaragua, a covert effort of sabotaging ports and oil storage facilities. The purpose of the campaign, according to a memorandum from National Security Council aid Oliver North, was “to severely disrupt the flow of shipping essential to Nicaraguan trade during the peak export period,” to undermine Nicaragua’s economy. This was consistent with the administration’s policy goals of pressuring the Sandinistas and disrupting Nicaraguan society.⁸⁸ Many of the raids were conducted by CIA personnel or their contact agents, although they were credited to contra groups.⁸⁹ One contra leader described in a testimony to the World Court in 1985 that he remembered receiving a press release from his CIA contact, which informed him that his contra organization would be taking responsibility for the mining of several Nicaraguan harbors.⁹⁰ While the mines sunk several small Nicaraguan boats and damaged five international ships, they produced the most damage on Capitol Hill.⁹¹

Congress was furious about the mining, both due to disagreements with the nature of the policy, but to a greater extent because it was never informed. Barry

⁸⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 164.

⁸⁹ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 120.

⁹⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 164.

⁹¹ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 120.

Goldwater summed up the sentiments of many members of Congress in a letter to CIA director William Casey in which he exclaimed: “I am pissed off!”⁹² By May, both houses of Congress had passed resolutions that condemned the CIA organized mining of Nicaraguan ports.⁹³ In June, the Senate Intelligence Committee attempted to prevent a similar instance from occurring in what came to be known as the “Casey accords.” The legislation demanded that the committee be informed of “any other planned covert action activities for which higher authority or Presidential approval has been provided, including... ongoing covert action.”⁹⁴ The requirements also included that the committee be informed of activities they might have a desire to know; in essence the agreement was a catch-all of covert activity and encouraged the transmission of knowledge between the intelligence community and Congress.

The mining of Nicaraguan harbors thus deepened the divide between Congress and the administration, which produced the groundwork for the emergence of the second Boland amendment. The amendment clearly spelled the end of U.S. assistance to the contras.

No funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose of which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operation in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement, or individual.⁹⁵

Congress wanted to ensure that it left no loopholes for the administration. The administration’s involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors further exacerbated

⁹² *Washington Post*, September 11, 1984.

⁹³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 173.

⁹⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 172.

⁹⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 179.

the issues taken up by many members of Congress with the morality of American policy as well as the inherently counterproductive nature of the policies.

The administration, however, seemed unconcerned with Congressional disapproval of its policies, and continued to focus on the Sandinista threat. Between 1982 and the end of 1984 the Nicaraguan military substantially expanded its military capabilities, which the Reagan administration publicly interpreted as a direct threat to U.S. security as well as regional peace.⁹⁶ Secretary Shultz explained to a congressional committee that the people of Nicaragua were “behind an Iron Curtain,” and the United States had an obligation to help them escape.⁹⁷ In July the administration renewed its propaganda war against the Sandinistas, claiming once again that they were shipping arms to Salvadoran guerrillas and that the Sandinistas were a totalitarian regime. On July 18, 1984, the administration released the report titled, “Nicaragua’s Military Build-up and Support for Central American Subversion.”⁹⁸ The paper claimed a “steady” flow of arms was underway, and used the paper to spread propaganda about the Sandinistas in an effort to help its policy initiatives gain popularity with the public and with Congress. Privately, however, a CIA intelligence report described the Nicaraguan buildup as “primarily defense-oriented” and aimed at “improving counterinsurgency capabilities.”⁹⁹ Thus, the objective of the administration to dismantle the Sandinista’s was still founded in the pretext of traditional Cold War ideology rather than a reflection of the situation’s reality.

⁹⁶ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 115.

⁹⁷ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 122.

⁹⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 177.

⁹⁹ Gilbert, “Nicaragua,” in *Confronting Revolution*, 115.

Conclusion

The Reagan administration's strict adherence to traditional Cold War ideology proved to be unsuccessful. Not only did the American public and Congress disagree with many of the fundamental tenets of the policy, but in its application the policy often produced a counterproductive result. The Caribbean Basin Initiative and the report from the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America both sought to create a domestic consensus on foreign policy, similar to the 1950s, yet failed to address the ways in which the Vietnam War and human rights arguments had altered the framework for foreign policy. This was the ultimate flaw in the Reagan administration's foreign policy. In adhering to traditional Cold War ideology, the administration failed to adjust to the new circumstances that shaped the impact and response to policies in the post-Vietnam era.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAILURE OF THE REAGAN DOCTRINE

During his second term as president, Ronald Reagan continued to strictly adhere to a traditional Cold War ideology, which ignored public concerns and Congressional restrictions on foreign policy. In its ardent pursuit of removing communist powers from the Western Hemisphere, the administration's disregard for the effects of the Vietnam War and the changed political climate at home ultimately culminated in the failure of the administration's policies. During 1985, in the wake of the presidential election in El Salvador and the victory of José Napoleón Duarte, the Reagan administration intensified its efforts in Nicaragua to remove the Sandinistas. No longer satisfied with the containment of communism, Reagan wanted to expel the Sandinistas from power and pushed for military aid to the contras as a means to this end. The emergence of the Iran-Contra scandal, mounting public pressure, and Congressional concerns, however, ultimately blocked the president's policies. Reagan was forced to abandon his support for right-wing dictators and "freedom fighters" in Central America, as Congress adopted policies that upheld human rights and democracy in practice. Reagan's refusal to listen to his critics and to the American public proved Senator Dodd's claims, back in 1983, to be true. Dodd had explained that the administration's policy of "ever-increasing military assistance, endless military training, and further military involvement... [was] a formula for failure. And it is a proven prescription for picking a loser. The American people know that we have been down this road before – and that it only leads to a dark tunnel of endless intervention."¹

¹ *New York Times*, April 28, 1983.

The Reagan Doctrine and Nicaragua

On February 6, 1985, Ronald Reagan delivered the State of the Union Address before a joint session of Congress. Speaking about foreign policy, the president emphasized the importance of American credibility, national security, and the promotion of democracy. Reagan argued that “spending for defense is investing in things that are priceless – peace and freedom.”² His speech, and more broadly the Reagan Doctrine, also pushed the importance of democratic ideals as the essence and product of U.S. foreign policy. “We must stand by our democratic allies,” Reagan proclaimed, “and we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.”³ Reagan’s approach to supporting the contras remained in the into a bipolar framework that distinguished democracy from communism, freedom fighters from terrorists or insurgents, and good from evil. “Support for the freedom fighters is self-defense,” Reagan explained to his audience. He finished the speech by urging Congress to “support the democratic forces whose struggle is tied to our own security.”⁴

In positioning his stance on aiding the contras in such black and white terms, the speech left little room for negotiations or discussions about the best ways to support the contra forces or address the Sandinista government. Instead, it posited support for

² Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 6, 1985, *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Reagan, 1985*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 132. (hereafter *PPP: Reagan 1985*).

³ Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 6, 1985, *PPP: Reagan 1985*, 135.

⁴ Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 6, 1985, *PPP: Reagan 1985*, 135.

the contras as the democratic and correct path, and those who questioned administration's support of the contras immediately fell into the trap of being framed as pro-communist, or anti-democratic. Additionally, the speech suggested the totalitarian nature of the Sandinistas, and the need to replace their rule with the democratic contra forces. The speech thus moved away from notions of containment toward an offensive strategy that sought to eliminate leftist power from Nicaragua.

In turning much of its focus to the situation in Nicaragua in 1985, the administration began to pursue a stronger policy of support and aid to the contras, or "freedom fighters." According to National Security Advisor Robert MacFarlane, in January 1985 President Reagan instructed him "to do everything possible to reverse the course of the Congress" and to get funding for the contras.⁵ In an effort to change the public and Congressional approach to contra aid, the administration started a rhetorical campaign to change the image and perception of the contras. The purpose of this campaign was to portray the contras in a way that connected with the American public's moral values. During the first few months of 1985, Reagan referred to the contras as "our brothers," "freedom fighters," and as comparable to revolutionaries like Lafayette and Simón Bolívar.⁶ At one point the contras were even described as "the moral equal of our founding fathers."⁷ The administration's emphasis on the moral quality of the contras was linked to their rhetorical push and claims that in helping the contras the United States would be reestablishing democracy in Nicaragua.

⁵ James M. Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 2 1997, 249.

⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 189.

⁷ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 249.

The Reagan administration also justified the effort to overthrow the Sandinistas as paramount for regional security and necessary to counter the totalitarian nature of the Sandinista government. The administration argued that the Sandinistas were a threat to the region because they were “exporting revolution” to neighboring nations, including El Salvador, and were building up their military strength.⁸ In response to these accusations, the Nicaraguan government insisted on its right to defend itself, which the Reagan administration ignored by arguing that the Sandinistas were a totalitarian power and that they were conducting a “campaign of disinformation” about the situation in Nicaragua in order to undermine the Reagan administration’s policies. Reagan continued to insist that it was duty of the United States to “support with moral and material assistance [the contra’s] right not just to fight and die for freedom, but to fight and win freedom...”⁹ Thus, the president hailed them as democratic reformers and heroes in the fight against communism and totalitarianism. Ultimately, however, Reagan’s support of the contras was predominantly part of the effort to displace the Sandinistas from power.

The ideology of the Reagan administration, manifested in the Reagan Doctrine, became more intricately and prominently linked to the president’s desire to overthrow the Sandinistas. According to Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Reagan Doctrine focused on U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, but relied on “freedom as a starting point for economics, government and foreign policy.”¹⁰ The self-assigned duty to protect and

⁸ Roger Peace, “Winning Hearts and Minds: The Debate Over U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua in the 1980s,” *Peace & Change*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, 8.

⁹ Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua,” 237.

¹⁰ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “The Reagan Doctrine I,” in *Legitimacy and Force: Political and Moral Dimensions*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 422.

support democratic systems and groups against the perceived danger of communism led Washington to use its role as a global leader as an excuse to pursue democratic goals at any cost, including outside the jurisdiction of the law. Kirkpatrick also argued that the Reagan Doctrine affirmed “the moral and legal right of the United States to assist” those who “defend themselves against incorporation in an empire based on force.”¹¹ This moral and legal right was applied as the duty of the United States. As a regional hegemon, the Reagan administration sought to uphold American credibility by keeping leftist threats out of the U.S. backyard.

The Sandinista presence in the U.S. backyard caused the administration to simultaneously focus on the threat to national security this posed as well as the duty and obligation the United States had, for reasons of both credibility and security, to help anti-Sandinista forces. These themes were captured by Kirkpatrick’s analysis that the United States had to confront a decision:

Will we help the Nicaraguans fighting against the consolidation of another Marxist dictatorship in this hemisphere? Or will we leave them stranded ... consigning Nicaragua to totalitarian tyranny, Central America to subversion, intimidation and instability, and ourselves to unfamiliar and unwelcome dangers and defense burdens on our coasts and on our borders?¹²

The administration’s rhetoric was revealing of the continued adherence to traditional Cold War ideology, and revived the domino theory by arguing that regimes like the Sandinistas posed a direct threat to their neighbors, and thus the region, because they were a platform for communist subversion. None of these policies were new to the Reagan administration, but the degree to which these ideas were espoused rose during the administration’s second term. Kirkpatrick believed, as many other administration

¹¹ Kirkpatrick, “The Reagan Doctrine I,” in *Legitimacy and Force*, 429.

¹² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Kennedy-Khrushchev Pact and the Sandinistas,” in *Legitimacy and Force: National and International Dimensions*, vol. 2, (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), 186.

officials had come to believe, that the best course of action was military support of the contra forces. She proclaimed that the “Reagan administration’s program of support of the Nicaraguan Democratic resistance fighters, the Contras,... is the most dramatic single example of the implementation” of the traditional American support for “freedom, self-determination, [and] national independence everywhere.”¹³

The Desire to “Win”

During the Reagan administration’s second term the desire to oust the Sandinistas from power became a more integral, and eventually defining, factor of foreign policy. In 1985 President Reagan had dispatched a letter to support the aid vote in June, in which he explicitly promised to “pursue political, not military solutions in Central America...”¹⁴ He elaborated in the letter that the military overthrow of the Sandinistas was not the goal of the administration. Rather, Reagan claimed to want “to secure democracy and lasting peace through national dialogue and regional negotiations.”¹⁵ These rhetorical promises, however, were merely part of the greater ambiguities and lack of transparency within the administration’s foreign policy objectives.

In reality, the administration did want to fund the contras for the purpose of aiding the overthrow of the Sandinistas. Yet, it relied on a narrative with Congress and the public in which it claimed that it was only seeking to pressure the Sandinistas to adopt democratic elections in Nicaragua. In private, the administration began to

¹³ Kirkpatrick, “The Reagan Doctrine I,” in *Legitimacy and Force*, 428.

¹⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 203.

¹⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 203.

consider the benefits of a policy of victory, which would culminate in the overthrow of the Sandinistas, and prove that the United States would not accommodate to the interests of what it labeled a totalitarian state. Following an analysis of the situation in Nicaragua by the CIA in 1984, CIA Director William Casey suggested that the contras would not be successful against the Sandinistas if policies stayed as they were. Casey argued that what was necessary to produce the conditions for the Sandinistas to fall from power was military aid and pressure, in addition to the economic pressure and support of opposition groups.¹⁶

Given that in public the administration could not violate past restrictions on U.S. policy with Nicaragua, it covertly sought to pursue its path. A memo from Oliver North, a deputy-director of the National Security Council, to National Security Advisor John Poindexter illustrated this problem. North reported that he had assured allies in Central America that the United States did not want to “be forced to seek a political accommodation with the Sandinistas,” but rather “intend[ed] to pursue a victory....”¹⁷ The administration’s changed objective became vaguely public in 1985 when President Reagan called for increased support of the contras in their efforts to defeat the Sandinistas, and to *win* freedom.

In accordance with the administration’s policy objectives, it created an offensive strategy to combat communism in the Third World. The administration no longer sought containment policies or political and economic pressure, but instead sought to further establish American credibility and hegemony through a military approach that was tailored to oust communist governments or insurgents from an area.

¹⁶ Peace, “Winning Hearts and Minds,” 7.

¹⁷ Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua,” 251.

The Sandinista government became a primary target for the Reagan administration. The offensive strategy did not entail the deployment of U.S. forces, but as was true with the case of Nicaragua, the policy was facilitated through the training and support of proxy armies, like the contra forces.

The Reagan administration also enhanced its foreign policy in 1985 by heightening tensions around the necessity for contra aid by arguing that regimes or insurgencies that subscribed to Marxist-Leninist ideology posed a radical terrorist threat to U.S. security. Terrorism became a means by which the administration could justify more aggressive policies and tactics against groups it deemed as threatening to American hegemony, credibility, or security. On July 8, 1985, when speaking before the American Bar Association, President Reagan labeled Nicaragua, Cuba, Libya, Iran, and North Korea the predominant forces/instigators of terrorism in the world.¹⁸

Although the rhetoric and policy of counterterrorism was not new under Reagan's administration, or even new to the administration's policies, it acquired a new significance as the administration's justification for advocating and supporting war against a sovereign nation, Nicaragua.¹⁹ The creation and adoption of an offensive policy served as the means by which the Reagan administration could address its ambitions outlined by the Reagan Doctrine.

Signed by Reagan in early 1986, NSDD 207: "The National Program for Combatting Terrorism" formally suggested a policy framework that relied on support for insurgents (meaning freedom fighters or other guerrilla groups that were engaged in

¹⁸ Philip Travis, "We're Going to Nicaragua: The United States, Nicaragua and Counterterrorism in Central America during the 1980s," *Journal of Terrorism Research*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2016, 3.

¹⁹ Travis, "We're Going to Nicaragua," 2.

a fight against a communist regime), threatening military and naval maneuvers, and military strikes.²⁰ On March 6, 1986, Vice President Bush acknowledged that Nicaragua was a primary target of the administration's counterterrorism approach.²¹ Since the labeling of Nicaragua as a terrorist state made the government illegitimate in the eyes of the United States, the administration had sufficient reasoning to avoid negotiations and pursue a military solution. Furthermore, in a meeting with other departments involved in the creation of U.S. anti-terrorism policy, Bush noted that legislation packaged "under anti-terrorism... will stand a good chance of passage."²² Thus, the Reagan administration used counterterrorism as a rhetorical cloak for its continued adherence to traditional Cold War objectives and policies.

El Salvador and Vietnam Comparison

As El Salvador became a prominent target of American foreign policy at the start of Reagan's presidency, it was frequently compared to Vietnam by both the administration and the public. The Reagan administration entered El Salvador hopeful for a quick victory as a means to overcome their diagnosis of the Vietnam syndrome. As the administration became increasingly involved in the war in El Salvador, however, it soon had to defend its actions in Central America and attempt to distance itself from and discredit any Vietnam analogies. In 1981, President Reagan began to make the assertion that he would make throughout the rest of his presidency, that there was "no comparison with Vietnam and there's not going to be anything of that kind [in

²⁰ Travis, "We're Going to Nicaragua," 5.

²¹ Travis, "We're Going to Nicaragua," 5.

²² Travis, "We're Going to Nicaragua," 3.

El Salvador].”²³ One Congressman, however, noted that Vietnam had a “ghostly presence; it’s there in every committee room, and at every meeting.”²⁴ Whether one saw the similarities or denied their existence, the memory of Vietnam played a key factor in Central American policy under the Reagan administration.

There were certainly similarities between the situations in Vietnam and El Salvador. As two small tropical nations, they were both labeled as Third World countries by the United States. In the context of the Cold War, the internal events of these nations were played out on a global arena. Each saw the rise of an insurgent force that sought to overthrow a government that maintained friendly relations with the United States. The governments were characteristically right-wing military regimes while the insurgents adhered to leftist ideologies; and in both cases Washington claimed the revolutionaries were an extension of the Soviet’s reach. The insurgents relied on guerrilla tactics and their superior knowledge of the terrain while the government forces of Vietnam and El Salvador relied on foreign aid, predominantly from the United States.

There were also very significant differences. Vietnam’s geographic importance was due to its proximity to China, and the effect a leftist turn in Vietnam would potentially have on the entirety of Southeast Asia. El Salvador’s significance, on the other hand, derived from its proximity to the United States. The domino theory was also applied to El Salvador, however, as the Reagan administration grew concerned about another Central American nation turning to the left. Other differences included

²³ George C. Herring, “Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Uses of History,” in *The Central American Crisis: Sources of Conflict and the Failure of U.S. Policy*, ed. Kenneth M. Coleman and George C. Herring, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1985), 98.

²⁴ Herring, “Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Uses of History,” 100.

the type of insurgent bodies, the means by which the government and guerrillas received funding, and the types of military tactics used.

The similarity, therefore, was not explicitly between the wars themselves, but in how the United States responded to the insurgent-led civil wars in Vietnam and El Salvador. Although both were indigenous struggles, the United States identified and defined them within the context of the Cold War, which meant Washington identified the Soviet Union as the source of communist aggression. The domino theory and moral duty of the United States were used as reasons to intervene in the wars, but credibility became the driving force behind continued and escalated assistance and aid. The White Papers from February 1965 and February 1981 contained similar messages about the duty and responsibility of the United States to support the governments of the respective nation and contain communism in order to preserve and protect American security and credibility. The similarity in the response from the U.S. government was also evident in the public's response. The eventual domestic debates about both Vietnam and El Salvador cautioned and questioned the administration's bold rhetoric, the motives of communist aggression, and the demands for military action. Polls taken in the summer of 1983 revealed that seventy five percent of Americans feared that El Salvador would evolve into another Vietnam, and just over half opposed sending American troops to El Salvador regardless of the war's outcome.²⁵

To Reagan and his administration, the war in Vietnam represented a proper use of American power, but was abandoned due to a lack of will among American leaders. According to Kirkpatrick, "the post-Vietnam fear of involvement in any way, in any

²⁵ Herring, "Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Uses of History," 101.

military conflict of any kind, anywhere, collides with the American commitment to universal values of freedom and self-determination....”²⁶ What Kirkpatrick’s assessment revealed was the way that the Reagan administration sought to reverse the effects of Vietnam syndrome: through an argument that American intervention served to protect democratic values and the U.S. commitment to humanitarian goals.

Most notably, however, the Vietnam War took place prior to the crisis in El Salvador, and thus the historical memory and changed national climate affected later foreign policy. Although the events in both nations were similarly interpreted by the U.S. government, the trauma and memory of Vietnam so effected the American populace that troops were never committed to an active role in Central America under Reagan. Additionally, the Vietnam War confronted the public with the issue of human rights within American foreign policy, or perhaps more accurately, its absence. Administrations that followed the Vietnam War could not support right-wing dictators or pursue aggressive Cold War policies with the same freedom as those prior to the war. The political climate had changed, and with it, U.S. foreign policy. The Congressional debates in 1985 over Nicaraguan aid demonstrated the ways in which the different lessons from the Vietnam War created the disjuncture between the administration’s policy objectives and Congress’s concerns.

From Humanitarian to Military Aid

As the administration increased its demands, a slight shift occurred in the Congressional reception regarding sending aid to the contras. “The end of all aid for

²⁶ Kirkpatrick, “The Reagan Doctrine II,” 434.

the contras,” as Senator Sam Nunn explained it, meant “a victory for the Sandinistas.”²⁷ Many in Congress believed that humanitarian aid, including medical equipment, food, and clothing, accompanied by economic and political pressure, was adequate to push the Sandinistas toward negotiations or an internal collapse. Reagan was warned by allies in Congress, however, that requests for military aid would be met by a strong opposition.

Nonetheless, in April 1985 Reagan unveiled a \$14 million request for military aid attached to a “proposal for peace,” which stipulated that the Catholic Church had sixty days to orchestrate a contra-Sandinista dialogue before the administration sent military aid. The request was significant in its acknowledgement of Congress’s desire for negotiations, but failed to realize Congressional opposition to military aid on an ideological as well as practical level. The request was, therefore, doomed for two reasons: the contras did not need military aid and Congress had already expressed adamant opposition to military aid. Unsurprisingly, the request failed to pass in the House.²⁸

In June, however, the House approved \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the contra forces. Some Congressmen, either annoyed with the failure of the request in April or with the failure to provide the administration with an alternative request, believed that there were benefits to working with the administration and providing the contra forces with aid. Democrats saw the opportunity for supporting a new version of aid as a step toward reform and negotiations, and also as a means to appease the administration without the use of military tactics. Many in Congress understood that

²⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 193.

²⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 194.

they had to work with the administration in order to create a successful foreign policy, thus acknowledging that requests should seek to satisfy both the executive and legislative branches of the government. Additionally, as news of human rights violations in Central America continued to be reported, members of the House worried that without aid more people would die. The June vote was significant, moreover, because it legitimized the contra force and its link to U.S. foreign policy with Central America, and provided the Reagan administration with a position from which it could campaign for more funding in order to preserve American credibility to its allies.²⁹

Determined to pressure Congress to approve military aid, Reagan requested \$100 million in both military and non-lethal aid on February 25, 1986. “Under the request... \$70 million would go for weapons and \$30 million for what the administration [called] humanitarian aid, such as food and medical supplies.”³⁰ The reasoning for the continued pressure was expressed by many members of the administration, often with an air of frustration. “We’re giving them food and boots and bandages,” explained one senior White House official, “and you cannot fight Soviet helicopter gunships flown by Cubans with food and boots and bandages.”³¹ Reagan claimed that the increased aid, with its military provisions, would help further pressure the Sandinistas into negotiations with the United States as well as with the Contadora Group. The aid itself, however, would be going to the contras whose purpose was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government.³² Thus, contradictions as to what the aid would really go toward foreshadowed the scandal regarding the private operatives

²⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 204.

³⁰ *New York Times*, February 26, 1986.

³¹ *New York Times*, February 26, 1986.

³² *New York Times*, February 26, 1986.

under the National Security Council's (NSC) supervision that were directing military aid to the contra forces at the same time that Congress was debating the aid requests of 1985 and 1986.³³

On March 16, 1986 President Reagan gave a televised appeal for bipartisan support on his request for \$100 million in aid to the contras. The purpose of the speech was to pressure Congress to pass his request through an appeal for consensus on the preservation of national security. Reagan argued that Nicaragua "threatens the security of the United States. This danger will not go away; it will grow worse, much worse, if we fail to take action now."³⁴ He then turned the pressure onto Congress.

The question the Congress of the United States will now answer is a simple one: Will we give the Nicaraguans' democratic resistance the means to recapture their betrayed revolution, or will we turn our backs and ignore the malignancy in Managua until it spreads and becomes a mortal threat to the entire New World? Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right on the doorstep of the United States?³⁵ Thus, Reagan framed the issue of aid to the contras as an issue of national security and credibility. He also claimed it was an "issue on which we must act not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans."³⁶

This approach was characteristic of the administration's campaign of pressuring members of the House to vote in favor of the administration's request by creating a platform to question a member's morality, or to frame them as pro-communist; to pressure members of the House to vote by employing pro-American and moral rhetoric that was difficult to argue against. Tensions in the House continued to heighten as the administration waged a rhetorical war against Congress to get the vote for military aid.

³³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 205.

³⁴ Ronald Reagan, "The Threat in Central America," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 11.

³⁵ Ronald Reagan, "The Threat in Central America," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 12.

³⁶ Ronald Reagan, "The Threat in Central America," in *The Continuing Crisis*, 17.

The administration filled news outlets with the discourse of terrorists and subversives that threatened regional security, just a two-day drive from Texas.³⁷

The administration's rhetorical campaign against Congress, however, alienated supporters of the aid and frustrated those who opposed it, ultimately backfiring on the administration when Congress voted 222-210 against the aid request on March 20, 1986.³⁸ Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, made the administration's tactics and treatment of Congress part of a floor speech before his vote, saying: "There is a difference between debating the effects of policy and questioning the motives of those who advocate those policies.... My conscience dictates that I vote 'nay,' not only for the Administration policy but to its tactics as well."³⁹ The reason for the request's failure was slightly more complex. In January 1986, the Contadora Group had reached out to Congress and asked for the "termination of external support to the irregular forces operating in Central America."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the "Appropriations, Foreign Affairs, and Intelligence Committees all concurred that, while Nicaragua was a problem, military support for the contras would not solve it."⁴¹ In response to the vote "not to assist the Nicaraguan patriots," Kirkpatrick posited that Congress's decision was "neither consistent with the president's policy nor with American traditions or interests. It was consistent only with the tradition of abandonment."⁴² Nonetheless, members of the House voted against the request because a majority of them questioned the practicality and morality of a military approach.

³⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 207.

³⁸ *New York Times*, March 21, 1986.

³⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 208.

⁴⁰ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 208.

⁴¹ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 252.

⁴² Kirkpatrick, "National and International Dimensions," 192.

Two developments over the following months altered this perception; publicity of Sandinista aggression and personal appeal's for the vote from Reagan. In an effort to make the House reconsider its decision, the administration focused its efforts on extensive publicity of the Sandinista's military aggression. On March 22, 1986, just two days after the vote, the Sandinista Army attacked contra camps in Honduras. The incursion was played up by the administration, which responded by airlifting U.S. troops to the border zone and blamed Congress for not taking action to prevent such an attack.⁴³ The administration also pushed Congress to reflect on one of the assertions Reagan made during his televised address to the nation in March. "There seems to be no crime to which the Sandinistas will not stoop – this is an outlaw regime," Reagan declared. "Could there be any greater tragedy than for us to sit back and permit this cancer to spread, leaving my successor to face far more agonizing decisions in the years ahead?"⁴⁴ Part of the reason for the administration's heightened emphasis on the perceived offensive and aggressive nature of the Sandinistas was due to a conclusion Oliver North came to regarding the acceptance of a military conflict between the U.S. and Nicaragua. North noted in private that the "public acceptance of a U.S. invasion in Nicaragua could change drastically should the Sandinista military invade either Honduras or Costa Rica."⁴⁵ Thus, in neglecting to note the defensive nature of the attack on contra camps, the administration publicized an image of the Sandinistas that garnered further interest in a military response.

⁴³ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 209.

⁴⁴ Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 9.

⁴⁵ Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 14.

As Congressional division over the issue of military aid slowly began to swing toward a majority in favor of the aid, Reagan's personal appeal became a key influence in collecting votes. In April 1986, a proposal from moderate Democrats that included military aid was presented, but failed by an even smaller number of votes.⁴⁶ In response to the narrowing margin of defeat in Congress, Ronald Reagan took the initiative and invited representatives that might switch their vote to the White House. The combination of his personal appeal, overall approval ratings, and outreach gesture was warmly received. One Democrat reflected, "I was leaning toward changing my position prior to meeting with the President, but I must admit his taking about 15 minutes of his time... was persuasive upon me to help him out..."⁴⁷ Another Democrat noted that "nationally, there is basic opposition to this policy. The thing that overrides [it] is Reagan's deep personal appeal."⁴⁸

On June 25, 1986, the House voted to approve the plan for \$100 million in humanitarian and military aid for the contras, which the Senate then approved in August.⁴⁹ President Reagan responded to the vote with optimism for the future. He asserted that the vote signaled "a new era of bipartisan consensus in American foreign policy.... We can be proud that we as a people have embraced the struggle of the freedom fighters of Nicaragua."⁵⁰ This optimism, however, was short-lived.

⁴⁶ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 252.

⁴⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 214.

⁴⁸ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 184.

⁴⁹ *Washington Post*, February 3, 1988.

⁵⁰ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 253.

The Iran-Contra Scandal

Starting in 1984, parts of the administration began a secret effort to secure aid, especially military aid, for the contras to get around Congressional restrictions. Oliver North, the deputy director for political-military affairs in the NSC was put in charge of the operation. In early 1985 funding from other countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, began to increase.⁵¹ Thus, while Congress was debating aid packages for the contras, the U.S. government was involved in a covert operation that secretly worked with other countries to provide fiscal and military aid to the contras. The operation unraveled in October 1986, after “Sandinista troops shot down an airplane loaded with 10,000 pounds of ammunition and gear for contra forces in northern Nicaragua.”⁵² One of the soldiers on board the plane survived and was captured by Nicaraguan troops. Eugene Hasenfus, the captured American and CIA agent, revealed under interrogation that Washington officials were diverting funds from the covert sale of arms to Iran as a means to support the contras.⁵³

In May 1987, a joint House-Senate panel began the investigation into the diversion of profits from the covert sale of arms to Iran to fund the contra forces. Perhaps influenced by the Watergate affair, the investigation was primarily focused on uncovering if President Reagan had any knowledge of the diversion of funds. This inquiry was brought to an end, however, with National Security Adviser John Poindexter’s testimony that “on this whole issue, you know, the buck stops with me.”⁵⁴ In addition to the investigation’s specific interest in finding a “smoking gun,”

⁵¹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 192.

⁵² Arnson, *Crossroads*, 215.

⁵³ Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, 187.

⁵⁴ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 219.

Democrats and Republicans reacted to the investigation in different ways. Democrats did not want to be accused of attacking a popular president, and tried to focus the investigation on government procedures and what led to the affair. In contrast, Republicans used the investigation to their advantage by encouraging those testifying to link their actions to a patriotic duty.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, in the wake of the scandal the president's popularity took a twenty-one percent drop as he worried about the extent to which Reagan knew about the Iran-Contra affair.⁵⁶

The final report from the investigation included a strong critique of the administration and was a testament to the flaws that led to the greater failure of the Reagan administration's foreign policy. The report found that "secrecy, deception, and disdain for the law" were all common trends within the administration's policies.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the report's conclusions fed Congressional and public distrust for the administration, and verified concerns about the morality and legality of U.S. policies with Nicaragua.

Public Opinion and the Anti-Contra campaign

By the Reagan administration's second term, the American public was incredibly skeptical of White House claims for military support of the contras and the Cold War logic used to justify it. Many Americans saw issues, especially in Central America, as rooted in poverty and government brutality rather than communist expansion and the terrorist nature of leftist guerrillas. Additionally, the cracking of the

⁵⁵ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 219.

⁵⁶ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 220.

⁵⁷ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 253.

Cold War consensus during the Vietnam War provoked issues of democracy, human rights, and the efforts of U.S. humanitarian and military aid to become topics for public debate. According to Assistant Secretary of State Langhorne Motley, the American public was committed to avoiding another Cuba or Vietnam.⁵⁸ During the Reagan administration, public opinion polls consistently revealed that many Americans did not want greater involvement in Central America.⁵⁹ The public had learned from Vietnam and did not want to repeat similar mistakes.

Congress and the American public struggled to quantify how the support of right-wing dictators was in the interest of the United States. In the wake of the Vietnam War, and influenced by the Carter administration, the public understood American credibility and duty to be tightly associated with human rights. Critics of the administration's policies identified "revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala [as] rooted in poverty and political oppression...."⁶⁰ Thus, they noted the counterintuitive nature of the rhetoric for democracy and freedom being juxtaposed by the support of repressive regimes. Furthermore, the public challenged the notions of monolithic communism and instead connected poverty and oppression to the rebellions and conflicts in the Third World. Similar to Congress, members of the public advocated for negotiated settlements and supported the Contadora Group's work.⁶¹ Activists that opposed the administration's policies pushed for diplomatic policies and educated their communities about the events in Central America.⁶²

⁵⁸ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 249.

⁵⁹ Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 208.

⁶⁰ Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 25.

⁶¹ Piero Gleijeses, "The Reagan Doctrine and Central America," *Current History*, vol. 85, no. 515, 1986, 437.

⁶² Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 16.

Critics and public opposition to the administration's Central American policies played a significant role in the trajectory of policies during the second term. The anti-contra campaign was supported by many different types of groups including Nicaraguan solidarity groups like the Nicaragua Network, religious groups like Witness for Peace, and multi-issue peace groups like SANE.⁶³ The campaign was notable for its contribution to Congressional debates and increased public awareness, and it bolstered Congressional opposition to military aid while advocating for Central American diplomatic efforts. Additionally, many groups in the United States "raised humanitarian aid on behalf of the Nicaraguan people, participated in peace witness delegations or work brigades, and formed more than eighty U.S.-Nicaragua sister cities."⁶⁴ Opposition groups were concerned with human rights and the treatment of civilians. The emergence of a public discourse that not only challenged the assumptions of the Reagan administration, but also helped bolster concrete policy change, was pivotal to Congressional debates and the focus on diplomacy over war.

Diplomacy over War

During August 1987, two events caused a shift toward Congressional primacy over foreign policy. On August 5, President Reagan and House Speaker James Wright announced a peace proposal that called for a cease-fire in Nicaragua and suspension of U.S. military aid for the contras, which was contingent on the end of Soviet military aid for the Sandinista government.⁶⁵ The caveat of the proposal was that if the

⁶³ Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 11.

⁶⁴ Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds," 11.

⁶⁵ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 255.

Sandinistas did not cooperate with it then Wright promised to support a request for new military aid from the Reagan administration.

Just two days later, five Central American presidents signed the Esquipulas accord, which mandated “region-wide cease-fires, amnesty, negotiations, and preparations for elections.”⁶⁶ More commonly known as the Arias plan, due to Costa Rica’s President Arias’ leadership in creating a peace plan for the region, it received endorsement from Wright and much of Congress. The administration, however, did not embrace the plan because it did not confront the issue of Soviet aid to the Sandinistas.⁶⁷ President Reagan critiqued the plan as “fatally flawed” and expressed disapproval of it.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the Arias Peace Plan provided Congress with a policy that supported diplomatic solutions rather than military ones in Central America, and thus provided an alternative to the Reagan Doctrine.

The turn toward diplomacy over war was influenced by House Speaker James Wright’s increased influence on foreign policy. Wright ardently pursued the cause of Central American peace, and took it upon himself to meet and discuss such prospects with influential actors in the region, including President Arias, contra leaders, and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. The administration was furious about the latter, whom the State Department had refused to see upon his visit to Washington. The administration’s inability to alter the trajectory U.S. foreign policy with Nicaragua, however, was emblematic of the effects of the Iran-Contra affair, Arias plan, and Wright’s activism, all of which redirected the course of American policy.

⁶⁶ Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua,” 255.

⁶⁷ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 221.

⁶⁸ Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua,” 255.

In early 1988, the relationship between the United States and the Sandinista government drastically changed. In a final effort to rally support for contra aid, the administration advanced an argument that the Sandinistas were becoming more aggressive. The claim was ironic, or perhaps just blatantly wrong, since by the end of January the Sandinistas had lifted the state of emergency and approved other concessions in the hopes of ending contra funding. Nonetheless, the administration requested \$36 million in aid for the contras, of which only \$3.6 million was for military purposes.⁶⁹ The request, however, was submitted in the midst of peace talks in Nicaragua, which led Congress to critique the administration for ignoring the importance of the talks. Congress's refusal to send aid had immediate implications in Nicaragua. On March 23, 1988, the contras and Sandinistas signed a cease-fire agreement.⁷⁰ Congressional commitment to diplomacy and negotiations instead of hostile pressure and military force ultimately produced the peace talks desired.

The Reagan administration's foreign policy saw very limited success at high costs. The Iran-Contra scandal depleted public trust in the administration and brought the credibility of its actions and policies under harsh scrutiny. Meanwhile, Congress grew hopeful for the situation in Nicaragua, and pushed for diplomatic initiatives instead of military aid and hostile policies. In tandem, this produced the result Congress and a majority of Central American leaders desired. Freedom, self-determination, and democracy prevailed.

⁶⁹ Arnson, *Crossroads*, 223.

⁷⁰ Scott, "Interbranch Rivalry and the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua," 256.

Paradox of Support

The flaws of the administration's assumptions and policies culminated in the inability to understand the internal problems and causes that created the conditions for revolution. Since Cold War ideology stipulated that the events in El Salvador and Nicaragua were both tied to the inherently aggressive and expansive nature of monolithic communism, the administration did not seek to thoroughly understand the causes of revolution. Furthermore, in failing to understand the intricacies of El Salvador's war and the nature of the Sandinista government, the Reagan administration pursued policies that were counter-productive in their applicability.

The paradox of the Reagan Doctrine was that it supported right-wing dictators and right-wing insurgent groups, and opposed leftist governments and left-wing insurgents, despite pushing a policy framed by morality, democracy, and freedom. Kirkpatrick argued that the United States "need not stand in fear and trembling of helping others fight for their freedom."⁷¹ To her, and to the majority of the administration, traditional American values invoke the moral duty of the United States to support groups fighting for democracy and freedom. The real character of the groups supported by U.S. aid, however, often diverged from these notions and relied more heavily on their benefit to U.S. national security, hegemony, and alliances.

Foreign policy with both El Salvador and Nicaragua was framed within the context of national security. The Reagan administration accused the Sandinista government of exporting revolution and engaging in military buildups, which threatened the security and stability of the region. Both Congress and the American

⁷¹ Kirkpatrick, "The Reagan Doctrine I," 431.

public rejected the notion that U.S. support of right-wing governments, militaries, or insurgencies, was in national interest and saw the United States as the outside force fanning the flames of war.⁷² Additionally, the public began to question the administration's assumptions, and asked why the administration was so eager to support "freedom fighters" but refused to assist revolutionaries that opposed a dictator or military regime. Kirkpatrick addressed this point to the National Press Club in 1985.

Some assert that it is inconsistent for the U.S. to support an insurgency against a government in Nicaragua and a government against an insurgency in El Salvador. The answer is that in both cases we are supporting legitimate democracy against those who would base their powers on force. Legitimacy cannot be made to depend on an international consensus, or the consent of those who seek to rule by force.⁷³

Her argument not only shows that by 1985, in comparison to 1981, the administration had already changed its rhetorical presentation of support of right-wing forces to a democratic framework rather than one based on stability and security, but that the administration also failed to realize that the public and eventually Congress saw military support as the problem.

Therefore, there was a discrepancy between U.S. rhetorical support for democracy and freedom and the fiscal and military aid that perpetuated bloody stalemates and avoided peaceful, diplomatic efforts. The U.S. trend of supporting repressive governments was also responsible for the right's exploitation of this friendly relationship, and the left's call for revolution. The policy of support for right-wing governments or insurgents was thus paradoxical in the sense that it conflicted with the rhetorical, and traditionally American, values of morality and freedom, and

⁷² Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 242.

⁷³ Kirkpatrick, "The Reagan Doctrine II," 437.

counterproductive in the sense that it often added fuel to the fire it was trying to put out.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Reagan administration's embrace of traditional Cold War ideology and assumptions doomed its policies to failure. The administration's reliance on U.S. military power and claims of national security to initiate and maintain policies lost influence as the public and Congress questioned the effectiveness of this approach. In addition, the failure to comprehend the internal issues that produced revolution in both Nicaragua and El Salvador led the administration to continue to support right-wing groups at the expense of human rights. The disconnect between the lessons the administration took from the Vietnam War and those of Congress and the American public further exacerbated conflicts over foreign policy. The culmination of these trends with the Iran-Contra affair and the growing Congressional and public desire for a diplomatic rather than military approach led to the failure of the Reagan Doctrine.

American hegemony in Central America was perceived by Reagan to be a duty and a necessity. Military efforts thus became a means of securing hegemony while maintaining American credibility through the application of brute force. It led the administration to focus its policy on national security and defense, which led to misguided assumptions and understandings of the crisis in El Salvador and the Sandinista government. The inflated rhetoric and exaggerated accounts of the situation, however, put the Reagan administration in a position that lacked the support of the American people.

In El Salvador, the Reagan administration was successful in holding elections, preventing economic collapse, and creating a government it deemed friendly. These efforts, however, could not create the strong, moderate government the administration wanted because of U.S. and Salvadoran reliance on repression and the military. Thus, the bloody war continued after Reagan left office.

In Nicaragua, the refusal to negotiate with the Sandinistas and desire to “win” the war against them led the administration in pursuit of a military victory rather than diplomacy. When asked about the administration’s policies, one army colonel replied that, “the problems down there [in Central America] are not military, they are political and economic. You shouldn’t send soldiers to solve political and economic problems.”⁷⁴ The additional refusal of the administration to enter peace negotiations demonstrated to Congress and to the public that the improvement of foreign policy relied on efforts from forces outside of the administration.

The Reagan administration’s policies toward El Salvador and Nicaragua failed because they were based on flawed assumptions, failed to account for the changed political climate of the United States, and did not represent and uphold the values that Congress and the public championed during the 1980s. The administration’s failure to alter its foreign policy in the face of broad-based opposition at home, and its disregard for Congressional and public concerns, led to the crisis of the Iran-Contra scandal and the final defeat of Reagan’s policies.

⁷⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 306.

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