“Washington Bullets”: United States Involvement in Nicaragua under Reagan

“Central America is closer to Baltimore than is California---in terms of geographic distance, that is. But the intellectual distance between here and Central America is enormous,” declared Fred C. Ilké, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy during the Reagan Administration. In 1979, a group of Nicaraguan rebels called the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacionál (FSLN) revolted against the hated despot Anastacio Somoza and toppled his regime, forming the new Sandinista government. The causes of the revolution had been local, but the small country was quickly swept up in a global battle of ideologies between the United States and the Soviet Union.

President Ronald Reagan was elected shortly after the Sandinistas were established, and engaged in covert military actions against them. Reagan began funding and training a group of counter-insurgents known as the contras who opposed the Sandinista regime. Reagan’s support of the contras was a topic of controversy, nationally and globally, and is still a subject of historical debate. Although the Reagan Administration failed to understand the root causes of the Nicaraguan revolution, to the extent that Reagan sought to advance the national interests of the United States first and foremost, his actions in Nicaragua were justified. Reagan’s aggressive foreign policy aimed to establish a friendly regime in Nicaragua by weakening the Sandinista government through covert actions, along with supporting democracy and economic
development. The internal changes caused by the revolution in Nicaragua posed no threat to the United States, and therefore some have argued that Reagan’s aggressive approach was unnecessary—even detrimental—to United States interests. Regardless, Nicaragua’s geopolitical position was viewed as damaging to the United States’ political standing vis-à-vis the Cold War. The Sandinista regime’s connections with the Soviet Union and Cuba were perceived as a national security threat by the United States. Finally, the Marxist-Leninist ideals espoused by the revolutionaries posed an ideological threat to the United States’ democratic values. A revolution that started as an internal popular insurrection was magnified by the tensions of world politics, and, as a result, became a Cold War battleground.

**Revolutionary Roots: The Case Against Covert Action**

Some have argued that Reagan’s failure to accurately analyze the root causes of the revolution meant that his actions were doomed to failure, and that his aggressive policy was not justified because any further polarization of Nicaragua would have negative repercussions for America. In his essay “North American Interventionism,” historian Francisco Lopez criticizes the United States’ history of intervention and imperialism in Latin America, pointing to its support of Somoza as the root of the Nicaraguan crisis. He argues that the revolution was primarily internal, anti-imperialist, and not overtly Communist. In fact, the revolution’s stated Marxist-Leninist ideals stemmed directly from the unstable socio-economic structure of the country. Therefore, funding the contras was an ineffective foreign policy strategy because the contras lacked popular support.\(^2\) Based on this reasoning, Reagan erred in resorting to covert military
action: recognizing the causes of revolution and acting diplomatically would have been much more effective. Turning Nicaragua into a covert proxy war was a mistake. Latin American scholar Viron Vaky wrote:

> From the outset, the Reagan Administration conceptualized the Central American situation as essentially a Cold War problem—its task to redress the superpower balance and contain, even reverse, Cuban/Soviet ‘expansionism’ in the isthmus.³

Vaky supports Lopez’s argument that the Reagan Administration’s failure to place the Nicaraguan revolution in local context proved to be a critical flaw in the negotiation process and in stabilizing the region.

The Reagan Administration itself admitted that the Nicaraguan revolution was more an internal affair than a Soviet power grab. In a report analyzing the Nicaraguan crisis, the Kissinger Commission wrote, “The crisis in Central America is acute. Its roots are indigenous…Indigenous reform movements, even indigenous revolutions, are not themselves a security concern of the United States.”⁴ Kissinger went on to argue that the Nicaraguan revolution in the context of the Cold War made it a security and ideological concern of the United States.⁵ The Kissinger Report proves that Reagan had intelligence that the Sandinista revolution was internal, while Reagan’s actions indicate that he failed to understand the implications of an internal revolution with respect to funding counter-insurgents. Funding the contras would have only been an effective tactic if the group’s cause had been able to generate popular support. Because he failed to consider this key factor, Reagan’s foreign policy was not the most effective means of achieving his stated objectives. To that extent, his use of covert military tactics was not justified. Despite this, the political climate at the time required Reagan to approach the Nicaraguan crisis within the larger context of the East-West conflict.
Western “Hemis-fears”: Nicaragua’s Geopolitical Position

On the other hand, to the extent that Nicaragua’s strategic geopolitical position was perceived as a threat to the United States’ global political standing, Reagan’s actions were justified. Nicaragua’s location in the Western Hemisphere was one reason that Reagan viewed a hostile regime as an exceptional threat to United States power. A hostile pro-Soviet state in “America’s backyard” was perceived as particularly threatening.6

Vernon V. Asaturian analyzed the Nicaraguan revolution from the Soviet perspective:

It is, of course, somewhat perverse to be examining Soviet-American rivalry in Central America, given the asymmetrical geostrategic context of the confrontation... Under no definition can it be said that the Soviet involvement in Nicaragua is an act of self-defense... A successful stabilization of a Marxist-Leninist regime in Nicaragua, as in Cuba, enhances the power, prestige, and influence of the Soviet Union, and, more important, correspondingly debases those of the United States.7

The Kissinger Commission Report also notes the importance of Nicaragua’s location as part of the larger Soviet threat. Kissinger states that the Soviet Union considered Latin America to be the “strategic rear” of the United States. Allowing an enemy regime anywhere in the Western Hemisphere would damage the United States’ political standing in world politics and “would be read as a sign of U.S. impotence.”8

Overall, Nicaragua’s location made it a country of special interest to the Reagan Administration. Reagan was understandably concerned with the rest of the world’s perception of the United States. Attempting to destabilize Nicaragua to increase the political standing of America worldwide in the context of the Cold War was justifiable insofar as Reagan represented the United States’ political interests and not Nicaragua’s local needs.

“Righting” the Leftists: Nicaragua’s National Security Threat
Nicaragua’s Soviet and Cuban connections caused Reagan to see Nicaragua as a bona fide national security threat to the United States. The security risk posed by the Sandinista regime took two distinct forms. First, the Reagan Administration was concerned with the arms trade between Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and the “domino effect” of leftist guerillas in the region. Second, the Reagan Administration feared the broader security implications of concentrated Soviet power in the Western Hemisphere. Because he recognized the impossibility of throwing the Sandinistas out of power, Reagan instead focused his efforts on preventing the spread of Communism to other Central American countries.

Analysis of the Nicaragua-America correspondence during the negotiation process suggests that the Reagan Administration showed an initial inclination toward diplomacy, although it did make moderate demands of the Sandinistas in an effort to protect United States security interests. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders engaged in extensive correspondence with Nicaraguan revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega Saavedra. In a letter to Ortega on September 16, 1981, Enders laid out clear conditions under which the United States would tolerate a Communist regime in Nicaragua. He condemned “acts of aggression or other acts that threaten the stability of the region or the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of any state in the region” and wrote of his intent to “seek expanded opportunities for cooperation in the interest of promoting peace, security, and the process of economic development both in Nicaragua and the neighboring states of Central America.” These letters demonstrate that Reagan’s primary objective was the containment of Communism. He feared that a
The domino effect among hostile regimes in Central America would pose a threat to the United States.

To prevent such an effect, Reagan actively opposed the arms traffic between Cuba, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Evidence of the flow of arms from Cuba to Nicaragua, a military build-up in Nicaragua, and the training of Salvadoran leftist guerillas on Nicaragua’s territory had been extensively documented from 1979 to 1984. In May of 1979, during the Carter Administration and before the Sandinista revolution, the CIA published a report on Central American guerilla groups listing specific evidence of arms traffic between Cuba and Nicaragua. It also documented the locations of training grounds for Sandinista insurgents, foreshadowing the Cuban- and Soviet-funded Communist revolution.11 The CIA report’s accurate prediction of an impending revolution also gave credence to further evidence of guerilla activities.

In 1982, the bipartisan House of Representatives Committee on Intelligence filed a report finding the CIA intelligence to be credible. The report also cited new intelligence showing that the already-established Sandinista government was carrying out the domino effect by funding Salvadoran Communist guerillas.12 Based on this report, an Intelligence Authorization Act passed in 1984 held the government of Nicaragua responsible for providing military support for other guerilla groups in Central America in violation of the Charter of the Organization of American States.13 Reagan then funded his own counter-insurgents in an effort to “right” this trend. The Reagan Administration’s funding of the contras was a reciprocal response to Nicaragua’s funding of Salvadoran guerillas.

The Cold War context of the diplomatic process between the United States and Nicaragua meant that a concentration of Communist anti-American regimes in Central
America was threatening to the United States. Even though the guerilla activity had remained relatively contained within the region, the arms trade and Nicaragua’s military build-up were material causes for concern.

**Competing Notions of Freedom: Nicaragua’s Ideological Threat**

Because of the Sandinista revolution’s explicitly Marxist-Leninist leanings, the Reagan Administration’s demands of the Sandinistas reflected the legitimate political interests of the United States. More than a military battleground, Nicaragua served as a battleground for the competing ideologies of the Soviet Union and the United States. Although the revolution itself was internal, Nicaragua’s need for a strong ally after the revolution compelled it to form a strategic relationship with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union then directed the Sandinista government towards a Marxist-Leninist economic structure and dictatorial form of government. Conversely, the United States wished to weaken Soviet influence, then re-stabilize countries in Central America by directing their governments toward a system rooted in capitalist economic development and multi-party democracy.

Communism was a direct ideological threat to traditional American notions of freedom and independence. As Lopez described, the causes of the revolution were grounded in unequal wealth distribution and other structural economic factors. In fact, the Sandinista revolution was initially anti-dictatorial in character. But, the local factors that prompted the revolution were not of concern to the Reagan Administration. Instead, the global implications of having a socialist-leaning regime in the Western Hemisphere posed a serious ideological threat to the standing of American democracy worldwide.
The Soviet Union quickly latched on to Nicaragua and steered the revolutionary leaders towards explicitly Marxist-Leninist and anti-American rhetoric. In August of 1981, Nicaraguan Defense Minister and revolutionary leader Humberto Ortega gave a speech to a closed session of army specialists condemning the United States and supporting Marxist-Leninist ideals. He said:

“Our revolution has a profoundly anti-imperialist, profoundly revolutionary, profoundly class character. We are anti-Yankee, we are against the bourgeoisie... Marxism-Leninism is the scientific doctrine that guides our revolution.”

This passage illustrates the Communist fervor that quickly became the guiding force behind the Nicaraguan revolution and the Sandinista regime’s actions. It also shows the ideologically driven hostility of Nicaragua’s leadership---clearly a threat to United States interests. This sentiment was echoed in the alliance formed between the Soviet Union and Nicaragua in the years following the revolution. In March of 1980, the Soviet Union and Nicaragua issued a Joint Nicaraguan-Soviet Communiqué establishing friendly relations between the two countries and a common opposition to the United States. It said in part:

“The USSR and Nicaragua resolutely condemn the imperialistic policy of interference in the internal affairs of the Latin American peoples. Both sides oppose the preservation of colonial ownership in the Western Hemisphere.”

This direct attack on the United States’ foreign policy was also echoed in a speech of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, which declared the Soviet Union’s support of Nicaragua in opposing United States “colonialism.” An analysis of Soviet-Nicaragua correspondence reveals that the nation was ideologically hostile to the United States, and, again through an ideological domino effect, sought to spread anti-democratic, anti-capitalist ideals to the rest of Central America.

As a response to this Communist rhetoric, the Reagan Administration made it clear that its intention was to stabilize Nicaragua, making it safe for democracy and
capitalism. Ilkê said in a speech about Central America that the United States’ primary objective was to establish democracy and “prevent the expansion of totalitarian regimes.” The Kissinger Commission Report also described the objectives of the United States as establishing capitalism, political pluralism, more equitable distribution of wealth, economic development, increased involvement of the American private sector, and, above all, democracy.

So why, if the United States’ primary goal was to stabilize the region, did Reagan fund counter-insurgents?

The ideological battle between capitalism and Communism in world politics was paralleled by the political battles between conservatism and liberalism at home. Reagan was determined to depart from former President Jimmy Carter’s human rights campaign. Reagan believed that President Carter’s cut-off of economic aid to the pro-American Somoza contributed to his downfall, destabilizing Nicaragua in the first place and allowing the Sandinistas to come to power. This interpretation of events was echoed by Joe Strummer of The Clash, who sang:

When they had a revolution in Nicaragua
There was no interference from America
Human rights in America
Well the people fought the leader
And up he flew
With no Washington bullets what else could he do?

Rather than risk appearing "soft on Communism," Reagan employed an aggressive foreign policy to assert United States power in the region. However, Reagan had to use covert military action because he faced opposition in Congress and would not have been able to justify a declaration of war. Furthermore, Reagan faced public opposition and fear of another Vietnam. Under these political circumstances, covert military action was
Reagan’s best option. Ilké justified Reagan’s policy when he said in a 1983 speech to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs:

> We extend economic support and promote democratic development. But given forces of violence that will not accept the democratic will of the people, we also have to provide military assistance—enough to succeed.\(^{21}\)

Reagan was careful not to make the mistake of supporting a policy without the Washington bullets to back it up.

**Conclusion**

Reagan was elected by the American people as a Cold Warrior---a president who would aggressively represent the interests of the United States first and foremost. His marriage of American ideology with military might increased United States influence around the world, furthering the interests of the American electorate. However, his Cold War vision blinded him to the real needs of the Nicaraguan people and the potential gains brought by the revolution. To the extent that Reagan represented the global interests of America, his actions in Nicaragua were both legitimate and reasonably effective. But one important question remains: What, if any, obligation does the United States have to take into consideration the welfare of another country’s citizens who are affected by United States foreign policy but lack representation in its government? The answer to this question is not one that can be proven with CIA intelligence and government commission reports, but rather an ethical one that each American citizen should ask him- or herself when he or she steps into the voting booth.
Notes


5. Ibid., 557.

6. Vaky.


9. Ibid., 557.


12. House Committee on Intelligence, Subcommittee on Oversight and Devaluation, U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central America, 98th Cong., 1st sess.,
12


14. Lopez, 60.


21. Ilké.
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Helen,

Ignore all that follows.

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5 Ibid., 559.
6 Vaky.
8 U.S. Kissinger Commission, 61.
9 Ibid.

11 CIA Intelligence Report.


14 Lopez, 60.


18 Ilké, 25.


20 Strummer