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The Reagan Doctrine:
A Narrow Avenue of Diplomacy in Nicaragua.

By

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In 1978 the Somoza family reign came to an end after 42 years of ruling of the Nicaraguan society. A short-lived revolution between the Somoza and Sandinista National Liberation Front, headed by Daniel Ortega brought the Sandinista to power on July 19, 1979. The change of government power worried the U.S. and that is when they decided they needed to actively become involved. In their involvement the U.S. supported the Somoza Government, opposed the Sandinistas, and supported the Contras through military and non militaristic aid.

The US government had supported the Anastasio Somoza Debayle family regime from the 1930's until Carter cut US military aid in late 1979. In support, the people arose and joined the Sandinista to overthrow the Somoza Regime. Somoza was removed from power and the Sandinistas came to rule a poverty-stricken country with high rates of homelessness and illiteracy as well as insufficient health care was empowered on July 19, 1979. They waged a massive education campaign that reduced illiteracy from 50% to 13%, and introduced an immunization program that eliminated polio and reduced infant mortality to a third of the rate it had been before the revolution.

The Sandinistas authoritarian dictatorship socialized the economy, confiscated and nationalized Somoza private property, along with suppressing the freedom of speech and religion. The U.S. was not pleased that the Somoza was overthrown with a successful Sandinista revolution. U.S. and Nicaraguan relations began to deteriorate once the Sandinistas openly admitted its Soviet and Cuban relations.

Soon after the CIA reported the flow of arms from Nicaragua's arms supply (one of the largest armies in the world in proportion to its population) to El Salvador guerrillas in 1980. In response the Carter Administration suspended \$15 million in aid to

Nicaragua, aid which was a strategy to win the Sandinistas to Democracy.

Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States in 1981 and was determined to “do something about what he considered a growing tide of Soviet expansionism”¹ He condemned the Marxist Sandinista occupation of Nicaragua and pledged establish a free and independent government which would submit to the U.S. just as Somoza. Somoza was supported by the U.S. because he assured a cooperative interest seeking partnership with U.S. An unauthorized socialist government in Nicaragua threatened region’s stability, ultimately threatening democracy.

The Reagan administration struggled with the decision of whether to push for a foreign policy of containment or roll to back the Communist empire from third world nations. How to best resolve a destabilizing Central America with Soviet arms and humanitarian aid influencing the region was disputed. In the dispute between republicans and democrats, America’s foreign policy towards Nicaragua was deeply divided among the two.

Three months following Reagan inauguration, aid was suspended to the Sandinistas. Early March, Regan approved \$19.5 million to support the rising anti-Sandinistas (Contras) insurgency who had gathered in Honduras and Costa Rica. The actual organization did not take place until November 17, 1981, but the groups would serve as an indirect way of possibly overthrowing the Sandinistas.

Nicaragua’s ambassador opened negotiations in hopes of using foreign aid to monitor Nicaragua’s foreign policy and reduce its Soviet ties. Prior to the allocation of economic aid the US also asked that the Sandinistas end the training and assistance to the

¹ Noam Chomsky. Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America & the struggle for peace (South End Press, 1986.)

Salvadoran gorillas, and limit its military buildup. The talks failed for two reasons: first, the hard-liners “war party” opposed aid as a compromise “because, that would end any hope of getting Nicaragua back from communism.”² Second, Sandinistas opposed the proposal because the U.S. was only making “promises,” not commitments. Though there was a division among the party members, a general concession was made.

In the second round of policy making in November 1981, the Opinions Paper, which consisted of possible solutions was created. These possible solutions included; direct military action towards Cuba, overthrowing the Sandinistas, or increased aid to political opposition groups. Political leaders collectively supported aid to the Contra because “there was no other way to do it”³ However, to avoid direct American military action, prevent inaction of the situation, Aid to the Contra’s was a substitute for direct Cuban action.

Contra rebel attacks rose during the spring of 1982 with the 3000 indigenous troops in Honduras (FDN, Nicaragua Democratic Force, AKA Contra). These attacks were directed towards the infrastructure and targets of opportunity. The CIA assisted in training, by first giving advice indirectly and than directly. The Sandinistas declared a state of emergency once Contra attacks were fully mobile against them. At the meantime, the U.S. attempted to raise international support, used tactics of verbal abuse towards Nicaragua, reported Nicaragua’s human rights violations, along with the military build up. With one last effort to use military action as a basis for diplomatic incentives, the “NSC staff argued that negotiations with communists were futile and useful only to

² Contra Aid, Congressional digest (March 1998)

³ James M. Scott, “Interbranch Rivalry and the Regan Doctrine in Nicaragua” Political Science Quarterly: summer 97, Vol. 112 Issue 2.

silence critics in congress and the public”⁴.

Once again the opposition passed the Authorization Act in both the senate and house which “prohibiting the use of CIA funds to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.”⁵ This posed as a warning to the administration. Not until late 1982 did the media report that the Reagan's Nicaragua policy was certainly rollback: the overthrow of the Sandinista government

In March of 1983 public opposition rose, criticizing the overthrow of the Sandinistas for a lack of U.S. goals in Nicaragua. Regan than stated, “We do not seek [the government of Nicaragua’s] overthrow. Our interest is to ensure that it does not infect its neighbor’s through the export of subversion and violence. Our purpose... to prevent the flow of arms to El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica”⁶ from Nicaragua.

The situation continued to escalate as the Contras increased to 7,000 troops in April and the CIA estimated to spend \$45 million by the end of the year. The House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere Subcommittee voted to end all American assistance to reshape, re-define the American foreign policy. In the mean time, the administration, fearing forced extraction, complied to create a comprehensive policy for the region and raise support for the Reagan Doctrine. Reagan reiterated its reasoning for continued support to the contras and stated, “Congress or the country is prepared to stand by passively while the people of Central America are delivered to totalitarianism, and we ourselves are left vulnerable to new dangers.”⁷ All of these combined efforts were to

⁴ Ibid, 3

⁵ Ibid,4

⁶ Ibid, 5

⁷ Michael Barnes “Central American Realities: U.S. policy options (a symposium)”, (Center Magazine 7-8-

continue the current military efforts.

With no U.S. aid to the Contras, they resorted to hit and runs, sabotages, attacks on isolated military units, and torturing and killing whomever associated themselves with the Sandinistas. The Contras actions were viewed by the U.S. as a deliberate campaign of terrorism. Diplomatic negotiations were despised and distrusted by Regan because socialism could not be trusted and that it may undermine the U.S. primary interests. George Shultz, Secretary of State quoted, "the hardliners (republicans) wanted no part of a diplomatic effort.... To them, diplomacy was an avenue to accommodation."⁸ Again there is evidence of raising contention among the congressional and senate members about diplomacy.

There was a reverse to reinstated \$24 million dollars to the Contras that they may conduct their own attacks on Nicaragua to stop the flow of arms into Nicaragua. On January 6, 1984, the CIA mined Nicaragua's harbors and instructed the Contras to take the blame. Congress was outraged for the CIA involvement because of the unauthorized the mission. The Reagan denied any involvement.

By mid 1984 the Contra was 10,000-15,000 troops strong but funding was removed. Reagan reiterated the continued support for the Contras in hopes of slowly making its case for the need of full support through aid. Reagan attempted to build the Contra credibility by referring to them as "freedom fighters," but avoided his rollback goal in fear of public opposition.

As a last effort, President Reagan proposed \$14 million dollars in non lethal aid for a cease-fire during negotiations between the Sandinistas and Contras. Interpreted as

84)

⁸ D. Schorr "Undoing the Reagan Doctrine", New leader, 4/17/1989, Vol. 72 Issue 7

daily necessities, non-lethal aid won the approval of the Senate, but failed in the House on April 23, 1985. Other alternatives were also rejected by the house which brought the US and its policy back to square one. No progress had been made yet and the president promised to return to congress for aid to the Contras.

Around the same period the FSLN (Sandinistas) was strengthened by a draft which recruited 40,000 troops. The Contras were driven back into Honduras because of attacks from the light armored and highly maneuverable BLIs (Batallones de Lucha Irregulares) Sandinistas military unit.

At last the president finally committed his administration in a letter to “political, not military solutions in Central America” and further stated “we do not seek the military overthrow of the Sandinista government.”⁹ The president’s address was in response to Nicaraguan’s President Daniel Ortega’s publicized trip to Moscow. The House passed the bill, which excluded the CIA’s and Department of Defense’s involvement, and another division was created to distribute the aid. President Reagan then went to congress to get more non-lethal Contra aid that would be used as leverage during negotiations. The U.S. Allies in Central America were informed of the U.S.’s goal to seek victory and would “not be forced to seek a political accommodation with the Sandinistas,”¹⁰ leading Central America to believe that it had no intentions of negotiating. In January of 1986, the NSC (National Security Council) asked for additional Contra military aid which they believed would give the U.S. an advantage to winning diplomatic negotiations, also giving the Sandinistas an incentive to seriously negotiate. “While Nicaragua was a problem,

⁹ Congressional Record, 11 June 1985, (H40934094)

¹⁰ Eldon Kenworthy. “US policy in central America: a choice denied”, (Current History 84)

Military support for the contras would solve it.”¹¹ This shows the U.S. foreign policy focus on its military strength. U.S. funding went to the contras to counteract the strong Sandinista opposition with weapons and ammo.

In 1986 President Reagan declared, “America will support with moral and material assistance your right not to just fight and die for freedom, but to fight and win freedom...”¹² It is not known whether this statement was made before or after the House reversed its decision on Contra Aid on March 22, 1986 due for blame of encouraging invasion and attacks on Honduras camps, and to pursue a more diplomatic approach. Again the House passed \$100 million in military and non lethal aid on June 25th. Also, in August the Reagan Doctrine Aid was passed which added to the aid in weapons, ammo, training and guidance provided by the CIA and department of defense. The United States inability to uphold a stable and decisive role in foreign policy is the more evident as possible solutions are toiled with.

Early 1987 congress attempted to end U.S. support for the contras by cutting off the funds remaining from the 1986 authorization. To promote peace in Central America, five Central America presidents agreed to meet on August 6, 1987. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua signed the Guatemala Peace Accord which was presented by Costa Rica’s Government that agreed to commit to fight for peace and eliminate war as well as bring peace, social justice and resolution to years of frustration. The ten parts to this agreement asks for governments to do whatever is necessary for an effective cease of fire, a democratization process with civil rights, justice, and a strong non-corrupt central government. This also includes free elections, a

¹¹ Ibid, 12

¹² Ibid Congress Record, 2

stop to the dispersal of aid of any type to gorilla militants, and that these groups refrain from using these five nations territory for aggression. It involves the peaceful negotiations of disarmament and removal of the forces along with the assisting the regions displaced persons. And as a final note, it encourages each nation to cooperate and comply within 90 days of signing the document. A follow up would than be conducted to strengthen any loop holes within the document or those nations that are complying.

Nicaragua announced that talks with the rebels would begin no later than March 1, 1988. This decision came from a two month long dialogue, during January in February brought the Yatama/ Nicaragua Accord. During the two month dialogue, congress passed 8.1 million dollars in humanitarian and demobilization aid for the Contras through February of 1988. January 19, 1988 president Reagan informed the five Central American nations that the efforts of reaching a ceasefire consensus failed, but in fact negotiations of a cease of fire were not expected to take place until March. The first evidence of progress was in mid January when the Sandinistas agreed to negotiate with the Contras and lift restriction on its civil liberties. The U.S. had attempted to bargain with the Nicaraguan government to fix its human rights violations. On April 1, 1990, Contra forces demobilized and ex-Contra fighters returned to their former homes after fears of the Sandinista had settled.

I believe that the U.S. public did not extensively comprehend the truth of the matter; that Central America was misinformed by the US on its foreign policy focus and goals in Nicaragua, and the Regan administration refused to undertake a diplomatic approach to the regional Soviet threat. The Soviets spent 1.086 billion dollars in various

forms of aid to the Sandinistas the U.S. must have spent billions worth in direct and indirect aid to assist the contras or Nicaragua.

America's foreign policy towards Latin America, in particular Nicaragua, was centered on U.S. self centered short term interest and endeavors which have been spotlighted through out the history of U.S. and Nicaraguan foreign relations. The U.S. would have benefited politically and spend less of its tax payer dollars from a diplomatic approach in Central American. The U.S. may have looked at the option but the Reagan administration was set in removing any source of communism which included the Sandinistas. Reagan's failure to achieve its goal is reflected back a weak Reagan Doctrine when it was applied to Nicaragua. Unable to overthrow the Sandinista regime it is a standing monument of failure. These events have negatively shaped Nicaragua's perception of the U.S. imperialism including Latin America.

It was Costa Rican's President, Arias who was most influential in bringing an end to the regional conflict. He kept his nation neutral and restrained from its nations re- armament. His belief and ambition to peruse diplomacy proved successful. His ambition towards achieving peace through no engaging means, and was a candidate of the 1987 Peace Prize.

In conclusion, the U.S. supported the Somoza Government, opposed the Sandinistas, and supported the Contras through military and non militaristic aid to overthrow the Sandinistas. Although there is much criticism of the loss of lives on both fronts, President Reagan stated that the means (although controversial) are justified by the end result. President Reagan backed its hard-lined rhetoric with whatever the means necessary to win. Force was used in attempt to contain communism, protect U.S.

economic and political interests with little room for unthreatening diplomatic negotiations.

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