

**CRISIS AND DISSENT IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY : A CASE
STUDY OF THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S
POLICY TOWARDS NICARAGUA**

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C E R T I F I C A T E

This Dissertation entitled " CRISIS AND DISSENT IN
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF THE REAGAN ADMINISTRAT-
ION'S POLICY TOWARDS NICARAGUA " by Mr. VISIELIE KEZO for
the Degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and
has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of
this or any other University.

We recommend this Dissertation to be placed before
the examiners for evaluation.

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CONTENTS

	Pages
Acknowledgement	iii - vii
PREFACE	iii - vii
CHAPTER I	
I. The Constitution and U.S. Foreign Policy	1 - 13
II. U.S. Policy Towards Latin America: A Brief History.	14 - 21
III. U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua	21 - 26
CHAPTER II	
THE NICARAGUAN CRISIS	27 - 28
I. Reagan and the Central American Challenge	28 - 33
II. Nicaragua: Test Case Reagan Doctrine	33 - 36
III. The Reagan Transition	36 - 38
CHAPTER III	
REAGAN'S WAR AGAINST NICARAGUA: THE FIRST TERM	
I. The Covert War Begins	39 - 40
II. Economic Aggression	40 - 42
III. The Political Offensive	43 - 44
IV. The Military Offensive	44 - 45
V. The Covert War Deepens	45 - 48
VI. The Peace Effort	49 -
VII. The Open Secret	50 - 52
VIII. The Mining Episode	52 - 53
IX. AT the World Court	53 - 54
X. The Second Term: The Set-Back	54 - 56
XI. The Change of mind	57 - 59

	Pages
XII. 1986: A Lame Duck ?	59 - 61
XIII. The Iran-Contra Scandal	61 - 63
XIV . The Surprise	63 - 65
XV. The Last Effort	66 - 69
CHAPTER II	
THE CONGRESSIONAL RESPONSE	70 - 71
I. The Misinformation Campaign	71 - 72
II. An Uneasy Congress	72 - 75
III. Outrage on Capitol Hill	75 - 78
IV. The Vote For Contra Aid	79 - 81
V. The Vietnam Shadow	81 - 83
VI. The House Support	83 - 84
VII. The Contra Revelations	84 - 86
VIII. The Arias Plan	86 - 87
IX. A Mixed Response	87 - 89
X. The Losing Battle	89 - 90
XI. The Noose Tightens	91 - 94
CONCLUSION	
THE DEFECTS	95 - 98
I. Where Do They Point ?	99 - 103
BIBLIOGRAPHY	104 - 112

PREFACE

The Constitution of the United States divides the powers over the conduct of foreign affairs between the presidency and the Congress, but it gives a pre-eminent position to the presidency. The main problem stems from the especial vagueness of the Constitution on many aspects, and the lack of a clear and affirmative grant of powers to either branch, leaving the scope of many powers and functions undefined.

This has led to a confrontation between the two branches of foreign policy-making, where both have tried to blur the lines that divide their estates. Since the Constitution has given no clear and proper definition of the parameters within which the executive and the Congress are supposed to exercise their powers of foreign policy-making, it is considered an invitation to the executive and the Congress to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy.

In the last two decades, the struggle and confrontation between the two have become so acute that it has given rise to a situation of crisis in the formulation of American foreign policy, making the formulation of a coherent policy most difficult. It has been observed in the history of the United States foreign policy that it has undergone a kind of cyclical pattern with periods of unchallenged executive dominance and periods of Congressional do-

minance. In the present century, the presidency dominated from the end of World War II until the Watergate episode, while the Congress dominated in the post-Watergate years.

The post-Watergate years were transitional and very contentious. A massive struggle erupted after the Vietnam war between the presidency and the Congress. There were many battles on foreign policy, the executive losing most of them. A direct and significant result of this was the disintegration of bipartisan consensus which had emerged during the two world wars and at the height of the cold war. Politics no longer stops at the water's edge. Politics has even crossed the waters, affecting all aspects of U.S. foreign policy. The frequent spectacle of an executive and Congress at loggerheads became a common sight during the 80s, sending confusing signals abroad - to friends and foes alike.

Till the decade of the 80s, the United States was still under the shadow of Vietnam, and the fear of getting involved in another. The chaos in American foreign policy-making is, perhaps, best illustrated in its policy towards Nicaragua. The manner in which the executive abused its powers, flouted constitutional norms and lied to the people only made them more wary, and strengthened their opposition to the Administration's policies. It also raised the spectre of an imperial presidency and the fear of ano-

ther Vietnam. Eventually, U.S. policy over Nicaragua only brought harm to the interests of the United States and damaged her standing in the international community.

Throughout Reagan's term, Nicaragua remained a thorn in Congress-executive relations. They were unable to reach a consensus on the broad lines of foreign policy. The struggle over Nicaragua lasted for eight long years and raised a lot of questions, but very few answers. The topic is not a new one. In fact, it is a subject of intense debate with voluminous materials. I have made a modest attempt within a limited time and space to study the various problems that the United States was faced with in formulating a smooth and coherent foreign policy as illustrated by the Reagan Administration's policy towards Nicaragua.

Chapter one Part One deals with U.S. Constitution and the provisions that it contains on foreign affairs. The main focus is the inadequacy of the Constitution which has given rise to problems in the formulation of foreign policy. The provisions contained in the Constitution are very few and general in nature. It has also left a lot of powers undefined and unallotted. Since they have not been granted to either the executive or the Congress, it has led to many conflicts between the two as to who should exercise or have primacy on those matters.

Part two of chapter one studies in brief the history of U.S. relations and its policy towards the Latin American countries since its independence. It also makes a brief review of U.S. policy towards Nicaragua and its involvement which began in 1855 through the present century to the time of the Carter Administration. The active political involvement in the internal affairs of Nicaragua is studied here.

Chapter two studies the events following the Sandinista revolution in 1979. President Reagan was elected to office with a big mandate on his hard-line stand - to check the expansion of Communism in the Western hemisphere and to reclaim U.S. hegemony and influence. These were the main themes that led to U.S. involvement in Central America. Nicaragua was chosen as the testing ground.

Chapter three deals with the implementation of the Administration's policy towards Nicaragua. From the beginning, the Administration was faced with a reluctant and skeptical Congress. The Administration began its policy towards Nicaragua by misinforming Congress. In 1984, it ran into trouble with the Congress when the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors with CIA direction was disclosed. It intensified the war between the executive and the Congress for the control of foreign policy. The Administration suffered a major damage with the revelations of the Iran-contra affair. The

Administration was found guilty of flouting all constitutional norms, of circumventing the Congress and violation of international law. By the end of its term, the Administration had lost all support for its Nicaragua policy.

Chapter four studies the response of the Congress to the Administration's policy. Congress was mainly worried with the morality of the Administration's policy, and the fear of the United States getting involved in another Vietnam. But Congress could not check the President effectively because of the Republican majority in the Senate, which gave the President much freedom in foreign affairs. It was only after they lost majority following the elections in 1986 they were able to put a stop to the President's excessive freedom. The Administration's policy raised fierce debates in Congress about the way in which the Administration was carrying out its foreign policy. The mining of the Nicaraguan harbors and the revelations of the Iran-contra affair marked the high points.

Chapter five reviews the major flaws in the Administration's policy as witnessed in the implementation towards Nicaragua and the various questions that they have raised. It also contains the concluding remarks made from the study.

CHAPTER I

I. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

" America's capacity to act as a twentieth century super-power is hindered by a political structure based on an eighteenth century Constitution - a handicap which will become even more debilitating as the United States is confronted by the problems of the twenty-first century ".¹ This observation seems to appropriately highlight the dilemma that the United States is faced with in the formulation of its foreign policy - especially its inadequacy to deal with the problems of a dynamic twentieth century.

The Constitution has given no clear and proper definition of the parameters within which the executive and the Congress are supposed to exercise their powers of foreign policy-making. This has led to a state of confusion where the policy-makers are increasingly finding it difficult to efficiently implement foreign policy goals. The result is a lack of clarity and consistency of purpose and continuity of design in U.S. foreign policy.

The main issue relating to this problem arises from the separation of powers and the various checks and balances between the Congress and the executive provided for in the Constitution. According to Louis Henkin, "The Constitution says only a little about

1. Nicholas Wheeler and Phil Williams, "U.S. Foreign Policy-Making : Chaos or Design ?", International Relations, Vol.8, No.3, May 1985, p.226.

foreign relations, leaving more unsaid, and when constitutional issues arise, lawyers and courts and students of the Constitution find remarkably little to guide them".² In fact, "the constitutional blueprint for the governance of foreign affairs has proved to be starkly incomplete, indeed skimpy".³

THE CONSTITUTION ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Article I, Section I of the U.S. Constitution states that "All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives". With regard to the conduct of foreign affairs, the legislative powers included the authority to regulate commerce with foreign nations; to define and punish piracies and felonies committed on the high seas, and offences against the law of nations; and to declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules about captures.

Article II, Section I of the U.S. Constitution states "The Executive powers shall be vested in a President of the United States of America". In the conduct of foreign affairs, these executive powers included the authority to make treaties and appoint

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2. Louis Henkin, "Foreign Affairs and the Constitution" in Harmon M. Judd, Ed., Essays on the Constitution of the United States, New York: National University Publications, 1978. p.114.
 3. Louis Henkin, " Foreign Affairs and the Consitution," The American Review, Vol.33, No.1, 1989. p.24.

ambassadors with the advice and consent of the Senate, and to receive ambassadors on behalf of the United States. He is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States.

THE PROBLEM

The Constitution of the United States is based on the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances. It was these principles which provided the guidelines in the framing of the Constitution. However, over the years, the powers intended to be separated in principle have emerged substantially mixed in fact.

Since the time the Constitution came into force to the present, the Presidency and the Congress have undergone great transformations, much beyond what was intended by the framers of the Constitution. The Congress now has more than 500 members. Both houses are directly elected, and their business transacted by a complex of committees and powerful staffers. The Presidency, an office born of doubt and controversy and its power seemingly strictly limited, has now become what is described as the most powerful in the world.

Inspite of these far-reaching changes, the constitutional blueprint adopted two hundred years ago has not been amended sufficiently in details. It continues to define the powers of the President and Congress, and relations between them. Clearly, there

is more to foreign affairs than just laws and expenditures. The relevant prescriptions given in the Constitution are few, and they are becoming increasingly inadequate as new situations develop. It is "Because of the lack of clearly affirmative grants of specific powers, and the especial vagueness of these actions bearing upon foreign affairs, the United States Constitution has been described as an invitation to the Executive and the Congress to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy."⁴

The struggle began over two hundred years ago, and has now become a major crisis, affecting the continuity and effectiveness of American foreign policy. Many have tried to answer the questions which have arisen from this confusion, yet, so far, no one has been able to bring out ready and unanimous answers to all issues.

Originally, the Framers of the Constitution gave first place to the Congress. It was vested with "all legislative powers herein granted"(Article I, Section I of the U.S. Constitution), while the President was to exercise "the executive power"(Article II, Section I of the U.S. Constitution). The Congress was to legislate, and the President was to ensure the faithful execution of those laws. The Constitution did provide a reasonably clear outline

4. John Lehman, "The Executive, Congress and Foreign Policy"
New York, 1976, pp. vii, viii.

of division of powers between the Congress and the Presidency, though both have sometimes tried to move or blur the line that divides their estates.

The Constitution contains no provisions allocating the authority of the United States in foreign affairs to any branch of government. Although some powers were indeed allocated to the Congress and to the President, "there is no general grant to either and no explicit principle of distribution between them; nor is there any such principle obviously reflected or implied".⁵

There are some unlisted powers from which no credible inference can be made from any provision in the text, while there are others which can be derived from powers allocated to one branch as convincingly as from those vested in the other. For example, from the President's power to make treaties - do we accept that it also means he has the power to break them? Or, since breach of a treaty can lead to war, does the authority belong to Congress? The powers to declare war, raise and support armies and to deploy the armed forces belong to Congress. Does it imply its power to deploy troops other than to engage in war, or, do they fall within the president's authority as commander-in-chief?

According to Louis Henkin, " There are no explanations

5. Henkin, n.3, p.116

on why many powers of the federal government are not distributed and allocated; by which agency the federal government is to make foreign policy or conduct foreign relations generally; whether it is the Congress or the president, or the president jointly with one or both the houses of the Congress, that has the authority to determine current and recurrent issues of national policy. Moreover, drawing inferences from particular issues leaves larger issues in the separation of powers unanswered - whether the Constitution provides that all powers are exclusive to one branch or concurrent, and to which branch the final authority is vested with".⁶

The Constitution left most of the fundamental issues to be settled by practice, precedent and judicial review. One major area of conflict in the balance of power has been over efforts to reconcile the war-declaring powers of Congress and the war-making powers of the President. Though the founding fathers gave Congress the power to declare war, they also understood that it would not impede the president from repelling attacks against the country in the absence of a formal declaration of war. But the distinction between the terms "defensive war" and "preventive war" have not

6. Henkin, n.3, p.118.

been defined, and over the decades, presidents have taken increasing advantage of their constitutional authority as commander-in-chief to claim an increasing amount of unchecked authority in the case of such "defensive wars".

A lot of misconceptions and confusion would be settled if we can find out what the Framers of the Constitution originally intended in regard to the division of powers between Congress and the Presidency. But that is impossible, we can only draw conclusions from what the Constitution says and does not say, and from what we have known and observed. But it is clear that they intended a "mixed system" in foreign affairs, where details were to be determined not only by principle but also by compromise. According to Louis Henkin, the Framers had a reasonably clear view about the Congress. "The framers saw Congress as the principal 'policy-making' organ in foreign as in domestic affairs, and in their conception Congress was to dominate the political process. They had a much less clear view about the Presidency. They allocated the President particular functions, but these did not add up to a comprehensive conception of the office".⁷

History has provided us answers to those questions that the constitutional text and 'original intent' have left unanswered.

7. Henkin, n.3, p.25.

From the way the Presidency was conceived, it appears that the Framers intended to leave it undefined in the hands of the man expected to become the first President - George Washington. He has indeed shaped the office, not in accordance with principle or plan, but in response to events, most of them related to matters not defined in the Constitution.

From the very beginning, the President was the eyes, ears and voice of the United States. Slowly he became also its sturdy arms. The conduct of foreign affairs was a day-to-day process, continuous and informal. Unlike the Congress which was dispersed most of the time and could act only formally, by statute or resolution, the President was always in session, and could act quickly, informally and discreetly or secretly. The practice of the President acting alone was inevitable, and began early. In time, Presidents gained confidence and claimed more authority. Till today, there are several hundred instances of varying scope and significance where Presidents have deployed the armed forces of the United States for foreign-policy purposes determined by the President on his own authority.

According to Kenneth E. Sharpe, a particular pattern of struggle has emerged over the past two centuries: "the executive has enlarged its foreign policy powers at the expense of

Congress; and Congress has reacted to reassert its constitutional prerogatives when the dangers to its institutional authority have become clear. The long term effects of such conflicts, however, has been the gradual enlargement of executive power".⁸

The Congress also contributed a great deal to the steady growth of presidential power. In the Act of 27 July, 1789, Congress recognized and affirmed the President's control of daily foreign intercourse, and the resulting monopoly of information and experience promoted presidential claims of expertise and a Congressional sense of inadequacy. "The Congress increasingly delegated large amounts of its authority to the President, turning to domestic matters and leaving foreign affairs to the President. All these gave the President powers beyond what was intended by the Constitution".⁹ The Congress did retain and exercise most of its traditional roles, but the initiative came mostly from the President.

Gradually, the President became more independent. With the growing practice of informal consultations between the leaders

8. Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Post-Vietnam Formula under Siege: The Imperial Presidency and Latin America," Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 102, No. 4, 1987-88. p. 551.

9. Henkin, n. 3, p. 122.

of Congress and the President, most of the congressional leaders were disarmed. They also helped confirm presidential authority to act without formal congressional participation. The Presidents had their way on most of the issues like trade, intervention, recognition of governments, executive agreements, deployment of troops, overt and covert activities and so on. Congress usually ratified or confirmed presidential actions, such as the Korean war in 1950. Congress also delegated large amounts of its powers on broad terms to the President, making it possible for the President to later claim that he acted under congressional authority as well as his own, as in the case of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964, which in effect legitimated the Vietnam war. Congress generally confirmed, sometimes nibbled at, infrequently frustrated presidential authority in foreign affairs".¹⁰

VIETNAM : THE STRUGGLE BEGINS

It was the Vietnam war which brought to the fore the constitutional issue that has doggedly plagued constitutional experts : whether control of foreign affairs is properly allocated and distributed between the President and the Congress. Till then, Congress had mostly given the President a free hand. It was only after repeated failures, condemnations from world opinion

10. Henkin, n.3,p.123.

and a strongly unfavourable public opinion that Congress began to demand a halt to U.S. involvement. The Vietnam crisis and the Watergate scandal raised questions, especially on the wisdom of putting so much power in the hands of one person without adequate accountability, and a strong demand for clarification and changes in the distribution of authority between Congress and the President.

The Vietnam crisis marked the beginning of real congressional challenge to the President's claims to special authority on foreign relations. This led to the formulation of the wellknown 'post - Vietnam formula'. It has three main components:

- I. more access to information about executive activities;
- II. restoration of congressional legislative authority in foreign policy, and strengthening of constitutional checks on potential executive abuses of authority at home and abroad, and
- III. limiting the possibilities of political repression and violations of civil liberties and civil rights.

Accordingly, Congress passed a series of legislations designed to check presidential abuse of executive authority. By the War Powers Resolution, the President was required to inform Congress within forty-eight hours of deploying troops into areas where hostilities existed or were likely to involve the United

States. The Hughes-Ryan Amendment of 1974 (amended in 1980) required the President to report in a "timely fashion" all covert operations and intelligence gathering activities of the CIA to the appropriate committees. The Case-Zablocki Act of 1972 limited the freedom of the President to make secret executive agreements, and required all such agreements to be reported to Congress. The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act effectively ended Presidential claims of authority to impound or divert funds which Congress had directed the President to spend for given purposes. Congress also reclaimed some powers that it had given away, like grant of emergency power. The Presidential request for weapons, foreign aid and U.S. involvements abroad were also scrutinized, and in some cases, resisted.

Though congressional resurgence was welcomed by many, it has not been able to resolve the uncertainties in the distribution of authority or provide a better alternative. At the same time, while Congress has been able to check executive independence, it may not be always in the interest of the United States to do so. At a time when foreign policy issues need flexibility, prompt response, secrecy and refinement of policy, it may affect

the ability of the United States to act promptly, adequately and effectively in times of crisis, and foster presidential hesitation and indecision. John G. Towers feels that "Congress has inhibited the President's freedom of action and denied him the tools necessary for the formulation and the implementation of American foreign policy".¹¹ All these actions, while checking the misuse of executive authority, do not provide any answers to the problems that exist.

Besides asserting itself, Congress has done little to be independent and effective. It lacks the capacity to initiate, plan and resolve the broad and long outlines of national foreign policy. It also lacks the ability to deal with the day-to-day conduct of foreign affairs. Vietnam and Watergate have only confirmed how important it is for Congress to play a meaningful, intelligent and responsible role.

11. John G. Tower, "Congress versus the President : The Formulation of American Foreign Policy," Foreign Affairs, Winter, 1981/82.p.246.

II. U.S. POLICY TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORY

Till the decade of the 1890s, U.S. interests in Latin America was primarily commercial in nature and very limited in scope. Trade between the newly independent United States and the Spanish crown colonies of Latin America was very little and at best, illegal. The main impediment to the expansion of U.S.-Latin American commercial ties till the War of Independence came from Britain. Britain's free-port system in the Caribbean and Spain's continued dependence on Britain gave her an overwhelming advantage in colonial trade, while her restrictions on neutral commerce in Latin America seriously handicapped U.S. shipping.

This resulted in an Anglo-American rivalry for commercial advantage in Latin America - a rivalry that was to color U.S. - Latin American relations for more than a decade. Behind this rivalry lurked the possibility of the Spanish-Latin American colonies falling into the hands of Great Britain. This would not only threaten American trade but also her very existence. " Thus from the beginning, U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America was faced with a dilemma that was to become a constant refrain in Latin American relations: any change in the status quo might result in the transfer of colonies to a more powerful and dangerous master, while the continuance of the

status quo in this case, the crown monopolies - was intolerable." ¹

When the War of Independence broke out in Latin America, The main concern of the United States was that they might fall into the hands of other European powers. But since she was not in a position to expand her own influence in the hemisphere, she followed the only available alternative -- to actively support the Latin American revolutionaries fighting for independence. But U.S. policy in Latin America suffered a major setback when the Jefferson Administration imposed an embargo on American commerce. It cut off all but illegal communications with the Spanish colonies and intensified opposition against Jefferson's Latin American policy at home.

The Madison Administration went a step further by allowing Spanish American revolutionary agents to reside and buy arms in the United States. But throughout the War of Independence, Britain continued to consolidate her hold over Latin America. By 1815, when peace was finally declared, it had become apparent that the United States had lost the first round in the struggle for influence in Latin America.

When the " Holy Alliance " was formed in Europe soon after with the aim of overthrowing the newly formed governments of the for-

1. William Everett Kane, Civil Strife in Latin America: A Legal History of U.S. Involvement.

fer colonies, the United States saw the danger of European intervention in the Western hemisphere and a challenge to its dominance in the region. Accordingly, the Monroe Doctrine was declared in 1823. Stated on December 2, it declared "...we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety." ² In essence, it sought to exclude the European countries from the Western hemisphere and incorporate Latin America within the U.S. sphere of influence.

At this stage, the United States was faced with pressure exerted by agricultural interests, and by the South's need for more slave territory. It was in pursuit of these interests the doctrine was enunciated--the policy vehicle of the United States towards Latin America for more than a century. The doctrine also became a justification of Washington's imperialistic behaviour towards Latin America. The doctrine was a classic illustration of "the fact that foreign policy objectives are an outgrowth of the capitalist economic system that is the basis of American society as well as a reflection of the distribution of economic power within the society. American national 'interests'--defined by this structure and distribution of power--have remained virtually unchanged for the past two centuries..

2. Quoted in Dexter Perkins, The United States and Latin America, Baton Rouge, 1960. p.48.

These interests are the engine that drives American foreign policy - which, at the broadest level, finds expression in the practice of interventionism." ³

Till the Spanish American War in 1898, U.S. policy in Latin America was characterized by involvement only to protect the life and property of its citizens. It was during the last two years of the nineteenth century that the United States underwent the process of transformation into a major power. By the Treaty of 1898 concluded between Spain and the United States, the United States inherited the colonial empire of Spain in the Western hemisphere and became the paramount power.

From 1901 to 1921, the United States followed an active interventionist policy in Latin America. The Caribbean became the centre of U.S. activity mainly because of the proximity of its markets and raw materials and its strategic position in relation to the Panama canal. During these years, the United States firmly established its control over the Caribbean by a system of de facto protectorates. Theodore Roosevelt's policy of active intervention was replaced by the "dollar diplomacy" of the Howard Taft Administration. It was designed to bail out Latin American governments in financial difficulties by stimulating private capital into the area. The main objective was to maintain political and economic stability and to

thwart the threat of foreign intervention.

Soon after President Woodrow Wilson came into office, he announced on March 12, 1913, that the " United States has nothing to seek in Central America and South America except the lasting interests of the people of the two continents....which shall redound to the profit and advantage of both and interfere with the rights and liberties of neither." ⁴ Although this marked a new approach to Latin American relations, there was no real change in the strategic context. Underneath the cloak of "moral politics " continued other means of the defense strategy of the United States. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took over office in 1933, he made a genuine effort to change the tenor of Latin American relations and put them on a more equitable footing through his " Good Neighbor Policy." The United States withdrew most of its troops and liquidated most of its protectorates in Latin America.

But the strategy of non-intervention proved to be very short-lived. The necessity of defending the hemisphere soon emerged, proving to be the greatest threat to the doctrine of non-intervention. " Therefore, it was inevitable that the " end of isolation " might mean a short life for the principle of non-intervention, if

4. Woodrow Wilson, New York Times, 12 March 1913.

intervention was ever considered necessary for the defense of vital national security interests." ⁵ The outbreak of hostilities in Europe raised the vital question of hemispheric defense against Axis aggression. This was made more urgent by the collapse of France and the imperiled position of the British navy by 1940, including the increased volume of Fascist and Nazi activity in Latin America. This compelled the United States to take the initiative in setting up a collective security framework for the hemisphere. But it was apparent that the inter-American system was but a shelter under which the United States could affect necessary bilateral arrangements with certain Latin American governments. It merely added the cast of respectability to actions that the United States was already taking in its own defense. According to Kane, " It was the story of sovereignty bought by guns and tanks. It could not quite be called intervention but it was an unfortunate second best." ⁶

In order to succeed, the American hemispheric defense effort required the United States to bribe the Latin American military establishments with weapons they would probably never use in the defense of the hemisphere. " The Good Neighbor carried on interven-

5. William Everett Kane, n.1, p.126.

6. Ibid., p.146.

tionism in Central America and tightened the system far beyond anything Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson probably imagined." ⁷

When the Cold War broke out between the superpowers, U.S. Latin American relationships were dominated by the theory of an international communist conspiracy. The threat of international communism became the basis of U.S. policy towards Latin America. The social and political upheavals in Latin America were considered a reflection of a global cold war. When Fidel Castro took over Cuba, the spectre of international communism in Latin America reached alarming proportions in the minds of the American policy-makers. In April 1961, President Kennedy voiced what was to become the new trend in Latin American relations:

Should it ever appear that the inter-American doctrine of non-interference merely conceals or excuses a policy of inaction; if the nations of the hemisphere should fail to meet their commitments against outside Communist penetration, then I want it clearly understood that this government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations, which are the security of our nation.⁸

Kennedy insisted that the United States would adhere to non-intervention only as long as the Latin American states reciprocated by

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7. Walter La Feber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States and Central America*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983. p.81.
 8. John F. Kennedy, *Speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, New York Times, 21 April 1961.

agreeing to follow a U.S. policy, that is, multilateral anti-Communist actions. The main emphasis was a counter-insurgency programme by strengthening the Latin American militaries and the protection of U.S. interests in Latin America. Accordingly, the United States increased the amount of military assistance and tried to promote and strengthen militarism in Latin America. This policy of active involvement was continued by President Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. By 1969, the army held power in every Central American country except Costa Rica.

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When President Jimmy Carter entered the White House, he adopted a strong human rights approach. In what appeared to be a bid to reform several of the worst Latin American regimes, the United States threatened to cut off military aid unless they improved their human rights record. But the whole approach was fraught with contradictions, and did not evoke a favourable response. The United States continued to be actively involved in the internal affairs of most of the Latin American states. The U.S. policy towards Latin America was caught up between the contradictions of human rights and national interest.

III. U.S. POLICY TOWARDS NICARAGUA

Of all the Latin American countries, Nicaragua seems to have suffered greater exploitation from the United States. The first



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involvement of the United States in Nicaragua took place in 1855, when an American named William Walker, supported by American mercenaries, installed a puppet government. The next year he took over the presidency, legalised slavery and declared English the official language. However, in 1857 he was overthrown by an alliance of Nicaraguans, other Central Americans, Cornelius Vanderbilt, an American railroad magnate, and the British. In 1895, the United States successfully cooperated with President Jose Santos Zelaya made commercial overtures to Britain and Japan, and actively promoted Central American re-unification, the United States began to see him as a threat and decided to remove him from power.

In 1909, President William Howard Taft sent U.S. troops to Nicaragua, and till 1933, they remained there, taking sides in civil wars, removing governments the U.S. did not like and installing governments amenable to its wishes. From 1910-1925, the United States controlled Nicaraguan affairs through a series of surrogate presidents. Besides commercial advantages, the United States secured exclusive rights to construct a canal on Nicaraguan territory through the Brian-Chamorro Treaty of 1916, a renewable 99 year lease on the Corn Islands off the Atlantic coast and the rights to build a naval base in the Gulf of Fonseca. By the 1920s, Nicaragua was completely under the control of the United States--economically and politically.

In the words of Walter La Feber:

....dependance had already gone beyond mere trade. The very struture of Nicaragua was shaped by North American bankers and soldiers....power was determined more in Washington than in Managua. That determination mirrored both the....quest for political stabiltiy and the burgeoning U.S. industrial and financial complex's search for profits in an area where its military force now stood supreme.⁹

The United States, however, was unable to suppress the guerilla uprising led by Augusto Cear Sandino. In 1928, the United States supervised elections which brought Jose Maru Moncada of the Liberal Party to power, giving a facade of democracy to the Nicaraguan politics. In 1933, the United States withdrew its forces after installing Anastasio Somoza Garcia, backed by the National Guard. He seized power in a coup in 1936, marking the beginning of a dynasty that ruled Nicaragua until 1979. The Somoza family also served as one of the most dependable U.S. clients in the region - cooperating fully with U.S. economic interests, and backing U.S. militarism.

This patron-client relationship was further strengthened by the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. By the 1960s, Nicaragua's National Guards became the most heavily U.S. - trained military establishment in Latin America. Between 1946 and

9. La Feber, n.7, p.49.

1967, the Alliance also authorized nineteen loans to Nicaragua worth \$ 50 million from the Inter-American Development Bank. American investment in Nicaragua also increased substantially, and the United States secured fiscal incentives, exemption from trade restrictions and a free hand in trade and enterprise. Slowly, American capital increased its grip over Nicaragua's economy. According to La Feber, " The Alliance accelerated Nicaragua's revolution. The program raised hopes, but it did little or nothing for the peasants and laborers who were displaced by machines, forced to subsist as squatters, or searched for survival in the cities." ¹⁰

In 1969, President Nixon announced the 'Nixon Doctrine'. According to this doctrine, "...in the wake of the Vietnam War, the United States could no longer act as the sheriff in the world, but would work closely with - and arm heavily - selected allies who could act as policemen." ¹¹ This further strengthened Somoza's position. In fact, he became the staunchest ally of U.S. imperialism in Central America and the lynchpin of CONDECA's system of regional repression.

When the Carter Administration took over office, the contradictions in U.S. policy towards Nicaragua became very apparent.

10. La Feber, n.7, p.164.

11. Ibid., p.203.

While emphasizing the importance of human rights, President Carter at the same time indicated his preference for the repressive Somoza regime. In late 1977, when Somoza showed a slight indication of easing repression, President Carter dispatched \$ 2.5 million worth of arms. Similarly, although President Carter pressed Somoza to open up the political process and limit the excessive violence of the National Guard, he made no effort to improve the economic and political condition of the masses, nor comment on the massive corruption of the Somozas. According to Boorstein, " The Somozas were thieves on a scale that makes even the former Cuban dictator, Batista, look smalltime. Batista got out of Cuba with \$ 200 million. From Nicaragua, a much smaller country, Somoza decamped with over half a billion. He wiped out all of Nicaragua's foreign exchange reserves and left it with a debt of \$ 1.6 billion." ¹²

Between September 1978 and July 1979, the Carter Administration tried to find a suitable alternative to Somoza and the FSLN, but failed. In early 1979, President Carter tried to pressurize Somoza by cutting down U.S. aid. But this did not reduce the military effectiveness of the National Guards, who had been well-trained by the United States. Besides, whatever it held back, Israel and Argentina

12. Edward Boorstein, " The Logic of Aggression in Nicaragua." Political Affairs, Vol.64, No.12, December 1984. pp.20,21.

provided to Nicaragua, especially weapons, assistance and advisers. On 17 July, 1979, Somoza fled Nicaragua and the country was taken over by the Sandinistas.

After the revolution, President Carter tried to control the new government through a variety of measures. He proposed \$ 75 million in assistance to the new government, one-third to be used to train the Sandinista soldiers. It was a standard U.S. strategy by which the military establishment was usually influenced into a pro-American position against its own government, so that it would be used to stage a coup when necessary.

The U.S. Congress debated over the aid for eight months before approving it, and adding numerous conditions to it. These conditions included 60 per cent of the assistance to the private sector, no funds for projects using Cuban personnel, and that the Sandinistas hold elections within a reasonable period of time. But President Carter suspended the aid in the last months of his term following the reports of Sandinistas having aided the Salvadoran guerillas.

THE NICARAGUAN CRISIS

On 17 July 1979, the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza was ousted from power in a broadly based revolution led by leftists, called the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). The revolution marked the end of the dynastic rule that began in 1936, when the United States created the Nicaraguan National Guard before leaving the country. The National Guard was later to become the guardian of the Somoza dynasty till its overthrow by the FSLN. Subsequently, the revolutionary junta was proclaimed on 19 July 1979 in Managua.

Following the revolution, the United States shifted its policy of outright hostility to the Sandinistas to one of cautious cordiality. The Carter Administration had failed to influence events in Nicaragua prior to the revolution. After the revolution, it made efforts to maintain good relations with the Sandinistas in order to salvage something from the loss of Nicaragua to the Sandinistas. Nevertheless, relations between the United States and the new Sandinista regime was underlined with tension born of mistrust. The long history of U.S. support for the Somozas and the fear and suspicion of another attempt by Washington to set up a counter-revolutionary scheme to rob them of their victory continued to worry the new regime. Washington, on the other hand, realised that most of the Sandinista leaders were of Marxist origin, and there was always the possibility that the Nicaraguan revo-

lution would head towards the left - down the road of Cuban style Marxism-Leninism.

These problems notwithstanding, it was in the interest of both to maintain cordial relations. Nicaragua desperately needed foreign assistance to rebuilt her war ravaged economy, and besides assistance from the United States, most of the international aid agencies would follow the lead of the United States. For the United States, maintaining cordial relations with the new regime would be a face-saving alternative to its loss. Because of these mutual interests, relations between the United States and the Sandinistas were maintained at a cordial level even though there were evidences of arms flow from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas by early 1980.

REAGAN AND THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CHALLENGE

By the 1970s, the United States was seen as a superpower in decline. Globally, it was faced with increasing economic and political competition by the rise of Western Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union. The United States also significantly lost its influence in international forums following the emergence of newly independent Third World countries and their effective combined opposition to the United States on most of the global issues. The United States was also handicapped by a declining economy and the so-called " Vietnam Syndrome " following the U.S. military defeat in Vietnam. This experience led to a " widespread conviction

that U.S. military intervention in Third World conflicts is undesirable for both pragmatic and moral reasons." ¹ This, combined with the abuse of executive power revealed by the Watergate scandal, activated Congress to erect safeguards to constitutional democracy and make the President more accountable for his actions. Accordingly, the War Powers Act was enacted and congressional oversight committees were established, resulting in a significant restriction of U.S. involvement in global affairs.

However, the loss of U.S. influence was most evident in the Western hemisphere, its traditional sphere of influence. " By the 1950s, the Good Neighbor had lost its power....and Washington's political hegemony was embarrassed by Fidel Castro's survival. " ² When President Reagan came into office in January 1981, revolutionary movements seemed to be mounting in Central America.. In El Salvador, guerilla factions had united to form the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN). In both El Salvador and Guatemala, the revolutionary forces were posing a threat to the status quo. Nicaragua had been lost to the Sandinistas.

Mrs. Jean Kirpatrick, the most well known ideologue of President Reagan's policy, attributed the set-back in Central America to the

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1. Nora Hamilton, et al, Ed., Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s, Boulder: Westview Press, 1988. p.3.
 2. Walter La Feber, " The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America." Political Science Quarterly, Vol.99, No.1, Spring 1984.p.25.

Carter regime. According to her, " United States attempts to 'democratize' friendly autocracies only weakened them and paved the way for unfriendly left-wing dictatorships." ³ The Carter Administration's policy in Latin America, especially during its last year in office, suffered serious setbacks. The year saw the alleged discovery of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba and the fall of Grenada in a coup to a leftwing group. Nicaragua's case was particularly damaging to Carter, especially as he was unable to secure a new government acceptable to the United States, and more so as he had joined a majority of the OAS members in pressurizing Somoza to resign. " The mere existence of governments such as that of Cuba, Grenada and Nicaragua within its traditional sphere of influence bore ample testimony " to the decline of U.S. power and influence in the Western hemisphere. " ⁴

The arrival of President Reagan's Administration marked a drastic change in U.S. policy towards Latin America in general and Nicaragua in particular. President Reagan strongly criticised the Carter Administration's policy, and adopted a hard-line stance designed to regain U.S. hegemony in the Western hemisphere. Significantly, inspite of the erosion of consensus regarding the use of military force, there remained a general acceptance of the necessity of the containment of

3. Jeane Kirpatrick, quoted in Gordon Connell-Smith, " The Crisis in Central America: President Reagan's options." The World Today, Vol.39, No.10, October 1983. pp.385, 386.

4. Ibid., pp.389, 390.

Communism, and a "consensus that further 'communist regimes' in the hemisphere should not be tolerated." ⁵ The Reagan Administration also saw in the Central American crisis an opportunity to counter the perception that the United States was a superpower in decline.

The Reagan Administration perceived Cuba, Grenada and Nicaragua as bases from which the Soviet Union was designing the expansion of its influence and military power in the Western hemisphere. "The President and his men warned of 'Soviet-Cuban aggression' in Central America, the 'Marxist-Leninist' regime in Nicaragua and exhorted the Americans to excise the 'cancer of communism' that was spreading in their backyard." ⁶ President Reagan perceived the situation as a grave threat to the interests of the United States, and he blamed his predecessors for neglecting these interests, including the security of the United States in its own backyard.

In an article published in 1981, Jeane Kirpatrick declared that the deterioration of the U.S. position in the hemisphere "threatens now to confront this country with the unprecedented need to defend itself against the ring of Soviet bases on and around our Southern and Eastern borders." ⁷

5. Nora Hamilton and Manuel Pastor, Jr., *Ibid.*, n.1, p.3.

6. Cheryl A. Rubenberg, "U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua and Iran and the Iran-contra Affair: Reflections on the Continuity of American Foreign Policy." Third World Quarterly, Vol.10, No.4, October 1988.

7. Jeane Kirpatrick, "U.S. Policy and Latin America." Commentary, January 1981. p.29.

The Reagan Administration's approach towards Latin America marked a strong shift to the traditional grounds of U.S. foreign policy, which had been the guiding factor of U.S. policy in Latin America for more than a hundred years. This factor was based on the premise that she possessed weak neighbors, who, by themselves, posed no threat to its security and its inevitable hegemony over them. It was only when 'extra-continental powers' or 'non-American' powers intervened that such a threat could arise. The Monroe Doctrine, promulgated in 1823, is focused on preventing this from happening by professing its opposition to foreign governments which, by propagating alien ideologies, initiate, sponsor and sustain extremist insurgencies in the Western hemisphere.

The centrepiece of President Reagan's foreign policy " was the premise that the Soviet Union cheats and lies, is evil and immoral in its ideology, conducts a predatory foreign policy and cannot be trusted." ⁸ His aim was to "roll-back" communism in the Western hemisphere, and he announced his policy to help those fighting against radical terrorist insurrection and guerilla insurgency in the Western hemisphere. The threat of growing Marxist subversion in Central America formed the main plank of his presidential campaign in 1980. Stating that " W(e) are the last domino " ⁹ President Reagan maintained that a hands off approach

8. Stephen S. Rosenfield, Testing the Hard Line." Foreign Affairs, Vol.61 No.3, 1983. p.503.

9. Ronald Reagan, quoted in Robert A. Friedlander, " Confusing Victims and victimizers: Nicaragua and the Reinterpretation of International Law." Denver Journal of International Law and Policy, Vol.14, No.1, Spring/Summer 1985. p.91.

in Central America would have an adverse domino effect.

The implication was that the United States would extend military aid and assistance to any Latin American country which was faced with a threat to its political independence and territorial integrity by hostile aggressors espousing an expansionist ideology, more particularly, Communist subversionists. President Reagan was also of the view that to contain the Soviet Union's designs, the United States needed firm resolve backed by renewed military power.

NICARAGUA: TEST CASE - REAGAN DOCTRINE

The first and the most immediate challenge that the Administration faced was in Central America. In early 1981, Jeane Kirkpatrick remarked " Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today." ¹⁰ The Administration chose Central America as its first ideological battleground in the world arena. The new Administration proclaimed the Vietnam war as a noble cause, and attributed the Central American crisis to outside interference. This was done with the intent to overcome the problems posed by the 'Vietnam Syndrome'.

Nicaragua became the focus of the Administration's Central American policy. President Reagan identified the Nicaraguan problem as a problem of East-West confrontation, and it was chosen as the testing

10. Jeane Kirkpatrick, quoted in Walter La Feber, " The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America." Political Science Quarterly, Vol.99, No.1, Spring 1984. p.1.

ground of the new 'Reagan Doctrine'. President Reagan considered Nicaragua the key to political instability in the region. Nicaragua thus became a frontal challenge to the Administration. According to William D. Rogers, there are two main reasons: " Nicaragua was one corner in the world where Marxism-Leninism seemed to be on the march, consolidating its influence, threatening by example and growing military power to spill into neighboring countries. The fact that this was occurring so close to home only made the contrast more galling for the U.S. policy-makers." ¹¹ Indeed, the triumph of the Sandinistas was a great encouragement and morale booster to the guerillas who were fighting against repressive regimes, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala. Very soon, the Sandinistas began to actively support such movements.

President Reagan took a confrontational stand on Nicaragua. By late 1981, the United States had begun its support to the contras. The strategy of support to the contras was based on two important assumptions: that the contras could be turned into a credible political and military force ; and that they could dislodge the Sandinistas from power at a tolerable cost with U.S. support.

THE CONTRAS

The term 'contra' refers to the anti-Sandinista guerillas

11. William D. Rogers, " The U.S. and Latin America." Foreign Affairs, 1984 (Student Edition). p.563.

who were actively supported by the United States with economic and military aid. It was then composed of a mixture of diverse groups. Some of them were ex-Somoza National Guardsmen who had fled to Honduras and the borders following the triumph of the Sandinista revolution. There were also Miskito Indians who had been driven away from their settlements by the Nicaraguan Government. The contra force also included a large number of Nicaraguans who opposed the revolution and joined the movement, and some Cuban rebels too.

Initially, the contra force was a ragtag band of 12-20 groups split by internal conflicts, and without proper training, program and plan of action. In late 1981, when the United States decided to initiate the covert war, President Reagan signed a National Security Directive on 23 November. The Directive authorized the use of \$19.95 million in CIA funds which were to be used to support the contras, who then numbered about 500. By 1982 the number had increased to about 4500. What had been a nondescript ragtag collection in the beginning was transformed into a professionally trained force, calling itself the Nicaraguan Democratic force (FDN). Most of them were trained by the United States in training camps based in Florida and California. The contras were now a well organized force with military units having specific assignments. Their operations were mostly supervised by the CIA, and sabotage operations were carried out against specific targets from their base camps

in Honduras.

THE REAGAN TRANSITION

By the time the Reagan Administration took over office in early 1981, there was mounting evidence of arms supply by Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerillas. The Reagan Administration immediately issued a thirty-day deadline to the Nicaraguan government to stop the flow of arms into El Salvador. The Nicaraguan government assured the United States that the arms supply would be discontinued. By mid-March, U.S. intelligence reports indicated that the flow was much reduced, and the deadline was extended.

In August 1981, Thomas Enders, the new Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs made a secret trip to Nicaragua with an offer to improve bilateral relations between the two countries. There were two conditions attached to the offer:

Nicaragua was to stop its support to the Salvadoran guerillas, which was continuing, though at a lower level; and curtail its military buildup. The United States wanted Nicaragua to immediately reduce its army and freeze its acquisition of heavy weapons. In return, the Administration gave its assurance that it would sign a pact of non-aggression with Nicaragua under the terms of the Rio Treaty.¹²

12. The Rio Treaty already obligated the United States to refrain from the threat or use of force against Nicaragua, and the Neutrality Act prohibited training camps of the kind that were operating in Florida and California.

The United States also assured Nicaragua that it would make an effort to close down the military training camps that were operating in the United States and request Congress to restore economic aid to Nicaragua. It was obvious that the offer did not carry any substance. The conditions put forward by the United States demanded too much sacrifice on Nicaragua's part without getting anything in return. To follow the conditions would mean putting herself at the mercy of the United States. Thus it was not surprising that Nicaragua rejected the offer. According to Edward Boorstein, " These requests took gall. They were equivalent to asking the Revolution to commit suicide." ¹³

In October 1981, the United States conducted a three-day amphibious exercise, starting on the seventh, with the Honduran armed forces, known as the 'Halcon Vista' joint maneuvers. The exercises were denounced by President Daniel Ortega at the United Nations. The Reagan Administration took the denouncement as a violation of an earlier agreement between the two countries to suspend the war of words, and broke off the diplomatic dialogue with Nicaragua. The Sandinistas distrust of Washington in a way " allowed the hardliners in the Reagan Administration to defeat those who sought a diplomatic concordat. With the failure of the Enders initiative, Washington turned to the more traditional means

13. Edward Boorstein, " The Logic of Aggression in Nicaragua." Political Affairs, Vol.64, No.12, December 1984. p.22.

of dealing with renegade Latins - brute force." ¹⁴ Soon after the breakdown of relations between the two countries, the United States decided to begin its program of of covert war against the Sandinista government. On 23 November 1981, President Reagan signed a National Security Directive 17, marking the beginning of the covert war. The die was cast. The conflict between the two countries was to last eight long years.

14. William M. Leogrande, " The United States and Nicaragua." in Thomas W. Walker, Ed., Nicaragua: The First Five Years, New York: Praeger, 1985. p.430.

I. REAGAN'S WAR AGAINST NICARAGUA: THE FIRST TERM

In 1981, the Salvadoran guerillas launched two successful major offensives against the government, the first in June and the second in October. The latter offensive set off a panic in the Administration, leading to a full scale review of U.S. policy towards Central America. The Secretary of State Alexander Haig strongly recommended direct military action against Nicaragua and Cuba, charging them as the source of the trouble. But his proposal was strongly opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff because it risked confrontation with the Soviet Union and required diversion of naval forces from more critical theatres elsewhere. They also did not want to risk displeasing the Congress by involving in a politically unpopular ground war.

THE COVERT WAR BEGINS

On 23 November, 1981, President Reagan signed a National Security Decision Directive 17, authorizing \$ 19.95 million in CIA funds to be used to support 500 contras who were to infiltrate Nicaragua and interdict the arms flow to the Salvadoran rebels. President Reagan also approved the initiation of covert paramilitary operations against Nicaragua. The CIA also proposed a variety of covert operations. A very ambitious plan was the CIA's paramilitary role in assembling, training and arming a commando force of 500 soldiers, mostly exiled Cubans, to conduct military operations against Nicaragua from base camps in Honduras. Their

primary objective was to attack Nicaragua's economic infrastructure in the hope that it would lead to economic hardships and create political destabilization.

Another plan called for the United States to provide financial and logistical support for an Argentine effort, which was already underway, to train 1000 Nicaraguan exiles for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguan exiles were also to be given military aid, especially small arms. In early December, 1981, President Reagan broadly authorized the CIA to conduct covert political and paramilitary operations against Nicaragua. The CIA was also authorized to create a 500-man commando force and assist Argentina in creating a larger army of Nicaraguan exiles, establish direct relations with exile groups based in Honduras, and to create a broad political opposition front to the Sandinistas. However, Congress rejected the creation of the commando force and approved the others after providing guidelines and restrictions.

ECONOMIC AGGRESSION

The covert war was not the only strategy of the Administration to destabilize Sandinistas. The Administration also mounted a campaign to cripple the Nicaraguan economy by cutting off external sources of financing. " Reagan's economic strategy was predicated on the thesis that through the destabilization of the Nicaraguan economy, the U.S.A. could foster discontent among the people and turn it against the Sandi-

nistas, eventually leading to a counter-revolucion." ¹

Immediately after taking over office, the Reagan Administration stopped all bilateral aid to Nicaragua because of its support to the Salvadoran guerillas.² This was followed by U.S. efforts to block Nicaragua's access to multilateral channels of aid, mainly from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, where the United States was the largest shareholder. Although the United States was outvoted when most of the loans came up for review, the normal procedure is to defer a loan when serious objections are raised against it. As a result, loans to Nicaragua virtually ceased. In 1983, Nicaragua received only \$ 30 million from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank as against \$ 179 million in 1979.

Another aspect of the economic war was the imposition of a complete trade embargo. In 1981 the United States terminated Export-Import Bank guarantees to finance American exports to Nicaragua. In 1982 the United States prohibited the export of U.S. chemical feedstocks, which was followed by the imposition of a highly unfavourable schedule for the shipping of Nicaraguan sugar to the United States. In June 1983, President Reagan ordered the closure of all Nicaraguan consulates, mak-

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1. Cheryl A. Rubenberg, " U.S. Policy Towards Nicaragua and Iran and the Iran-Contra Affair: Reflections on the Continuity of American Foreign Policy." Third World Quarterly, Vol.10, No.4, October 1988. p.1499.
 2. "Economic Sanctions Against Nicaragua." Department of State Bulletin, Vol.8, No.2100, July 1985. p.74.

ing commercial relations virtually impossible. In May 1983, a direct import quota on Nicaraguan sugar was imposed.

The Reagan Administration also adopted a programme of economic sabotage, beginning in mid-1982. They included raids targeted against economic resources like farms, warehouses, bridges and so on. The major sabotage operations were operated by the CIA. On 11 October 1983, a successful attack was carried out against the oil storage facilities at Corinto, including a series of gunboat attacks on shipping in Nicaraguan harbors. In January 1984, the CIA, in its campaign to further disrupt shipping, mined Nicaraguan harbors. This recieved such a storm of criticism at home and from the international community that it was subsequently halted.

President Reagan's economic war proved extremely harmful to the Nicaraguan economy which was already devastated by the war and bankrupt by Somoza's larceny. It deprived Nicaragua of crucial financial aid badly required to reconstruct the economy. This led to decline of production, soaring inflation; decreased export earnings, increase in foreign borrowings and decreased ability to repay them; stagnation in the development of key economic sectors and transfer of scarce economic resources to military spending.³

3. Rubenberg, n.1, p.1500.

THE POLITICAL OFFENSIVE

The Reagan Administration also carried out a major political offensive against Nicaragua. This included intimidatory threats of military action against the Sandinistas; strong denunciations of the Nicaraguan government designed to generate domestic political support for the Administration's overall Central American policy, and diplomatic efforts to isolate Nicaragua both regionally and internationally.

In November 1981, Secretary of State Haig and Presidential Counsellor Edwin Meese warned that though Reagan had ruled out the use of U.S. troops, other military actions were being considered. The intimidation became so intense that the Mexican President Jose Lopez-Portillo described it as "verbal terrorism"⁴ At the OAS meeting in St. Lucia in December, Haig called upon the members to unitedly block Nicaraguan and Cuban subversion. At home, the Reagan Administration launched a strong campaign and portrayed Nicaragua as a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship that was grossly violating human rights.

Nicaragua was also accused of being a pawn of the Soviet Union and Cuba and of supporting the Salvadoran guerillas.⁵ The CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency also organized a press conference intended to point out that with the assistance of Cuba and the Soviet Union, Nicaragua was undertaking a military buildup beyond its normal defense

4. Washington Post, 25 November 1981.

5. New York Times, 21 February and 5 March 1982.

requirements, and that they could be intended for use against its neighbors. But the efforts fell through because the reports did not carry any substance. Nicaragua also pointed out that with Washington fomenting counter-revolution, it was not unexpected.

Diplomatically, the Administration also tried to isolate Nicaragua from its neighbors and undermine West European support for the Sandinistas. In early 1982, a shipment of military supplies from France intended for Nicaragua was delayed under strong U.S. pressure. Other West European countries were also pressed not to extend military as well as economic support for the Sandinistas.⁶ However, though further supply of military equipment from Western Europe was stopped, economic assistance continued to flow. By March 1983, the United States had become isolated in its efforts, and her policy towards Nicaragua came under strong criticism from her Western allies.⁷ The efforts to organize the Central American Democratic Community to counter Nicaragua jointly also proved unsuccessful.

MILITARY OFFENSIVE

The Administration also took up military measures designed to intimidate the Sandinistas, which included a massive military buildup in Honduras. From \$ 3.9 million in 1980, U.S. military aid to Honduras was

6. Washington Post, 8 January 1982.

7. New York Times, 29 March 1983.

raised to \$ 78.5 million by 1984. The military personnel stationed there rose from 26 to 346, excluding those troops who participated in military exercises. The United States also built military installations costing \$ 87.85 million. But the most dramatic efforts at intimidation were the military exercises mounted in Honduras and off Nicaragua's coasts. Beginning in 1981, they mushroomed into major exercises and by 1984, they had become virtually continuous.

THE CONFLICT DEEPENS

The increased U.S. hostility towards Nicaragua began to worry Mexico. Fearing that the conflict would go out of control, the Mexican President Jose Lopez-Portillo offered Mexico's good offices as an intermediary. In late February 1982, at a speech in Managua, he called for negotiations between the two countries. While Nicaragua, Cuba and the Salvadoran opposition quickly accepted the initiative, the U.S. Administration's response was half-hearted. However, pressure from Congress forced the Administration to be more responsive to the initiative. That the Administration had no interest in negotiations with Nicaragua is clearly pointed out by the text of the National Security Council planning document written at the time which summarized U.S. policy as stepping up pressure on Nicaragua, isolating Mexico and "coopt(ing) the negotiations issue." ⁸

8. New York Times, 7 April 1983.

By August 1982, all efforts for a peaceful settlement came to a dead end. In July and August 1982, when the Nicaraguan exiles launched a series of major attacks against Nicaragua from their base camp in Honduras, rumours of war between Nicaragua and Honduras swept the region. This prompted Presidents Herrera Campins of Venezuela and Lopez-Portillo of Mexico to appeal jointly to Nicaragua, Honduras and the United States to take diplomatic measures to avoid the war. But nothing came out of the effort due to lack of support from the United States.

By 1982, the covert war against Nicaragua underwent a lot of change. Argentina withdrew from the region following the Falklands war, and the army nurtured by it was taken over by the CIA. What had been a nondescript ragtag collection was transformed into a professionally trained force by July 1982, numbering about 4500 and calling itself the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). By summer 1982, the frequency of their forays into Nicaragua increased. The contras claimed that they were trying to intercept the supply of arms, while their attacks were in fact far from the alleged arms-smuggling routes. All these made it difficult for the Administration to keep up the fiction that the covert war was aimed at intercepting the flow of Nicaraguan arms to the Salvadoran guerillas. Accordingly, the Administration had to change the rationale of the covert war to " the stated objective of harassing and punishing Nicaragua in order to convince the Sandinistas to end their support for

the Salvadoran insurgency."⁹ But in practice, the line between the aim of harassing the Nicaraguan government and trying to overthrow it disappeared completely, since both the Contra leaders and the U.S. officials running the operations were determined to depose the Sandinistas.

In March 1982, about 1500 exile troops invaded Nicaragua. Although they were thrown back, it strongly reinforced the claims of U.S. involvement in training, financing, arming and advising the exiles.¹⁰ Besides proving to be ineffective, the covert war also produced negative results: it polarized the internal political situation in Nicaragua, reducing political freedom for the opposition while rallying the support of the population for the Sandinistas; internal economic difficulties were also blamed on the United States and its Somocista allies. Internationally, the covert war earned for the United States the displeasure of its allies in Latin America and Europe. The obvious manner in which the covert war violated the obligations of the OAS Charter, the Rio Treaty and the United Nations Charter also undermined the standing of the United States in the international community.

In November 1982, reports mentioned that the Contras based in Honduras were planning a U.S.-backed invasion of Nicaragua. This prompted Congress to pass the Bolan Amendment in December 1982, sponsored by

9. William M. Leogrande, "The United States and Nicaragua," in Thomas W. Walker, Ed., *Nicaragua: The First Five Years*, New York: Praeger, 1985.

p.440

10. New York Times, 3 April 1983.

Representative Edward P. Boland, Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. The Amendment prohibited the use of funds to support paramilitary groups with the aim of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

By early 1983, the Reagan Administration's Central American policy was in crisis. In El Salvador, the guerillas were gaining ground. In Nicaragua, the contras had made no headway against the Sandinistas. At home Congress was growing restless at the escalating cost of a policy that was showing little signs of success. Within the Administration, a battle was raging between the White House and the State Department for control of foreign policy. The state of affairs made John Walcott coment "It looked as through Reagan's foreign-policy advisers simply did'nt talk to each other".¹¹ This led to a show down between the moderates and the hard-liners over whether to contain Nicaragua or remove the Sandinista regime. The hard-liners won the battle, and the State Department lost control over Central American policy to the National Security Council, the CIA and the Department of Defense, Consequently, the covert war was stepped up. The CIA was authorized to expand the contra forces to 15,000, an army bigger than the National Guard the Sandinista had defeated in 1979. The CIA was also put in

11 John Walcott, "Foreign Policy in Disarray" Newsweek, 3 January, 1988
p.30.

direct control of the sabotage operations against Nicaraguan ports and oil storage facilities.

THE PEACE EFFORT

The escalation of the covert war intensified the efforts of Latin American countries for a peaceful settlement. In January 1983, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia had formed the Contadaro group at their first meeting in Panama with the objective of finding a diplomatic solution to the Central American crisis. The foreign ministers of the five Central American countries also held several meetings where they tried to remove Central America from the East-West rivalry and demilitarize the area. But the United States did not respond favourably. It continued the military buildup in Honduras and El Salvador, as well as its support to the contras, contrary to the objectives of the Contadora. Defending the Administration's stance over Nicaragua, President Reagan on April 27, 1983, said " Our interest is to ensure it does not infect its neighbors through the export of subversion and violence. Our purpose, in conformity with American and international law, is to prevent the flow of arms to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica !"¹² The United States put forward difficult conditions for any agreement, and also effectively blocked any unfavourable agreement through its influence over Honduras and El Salvador.

12. Ronald Reagan, address to joint session of Congress on April 27, Department of State Bulletin, Vol. 88(No.2075, June 1983,p.3

THE OPEN SECRET

By early 1983, the covert war became quite an open secret, despite the Administration's efforts to keep it hidden. Newspaper reports radio and television news began to bring out what was really going on in Nicaragua. Between February 1 - 6, the United States held joint military manouevers with the Honduras. Called 'Big Pine I!', it involved 1600 U.S. troops. By March, the United States found itself quite isolated in the Security Council in trying to portray the fighting in Nicaragua as an internal affair. Her allies also indirectly repproached her for what they viewed as American-backed efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The Administration also faced strong criticism from Congress. On hearing about the large amount of funds being directed by the CIA to the contras, especially congressionally restricted funds, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, remarked that it was a "crisis of confidence....between the committee and the intelligence community."¹³ Congress also complained that U.S. aid to the contras violated the Boland Amendment. Although the Administration continued to strongly defend its actions as trying to intercept the supply of arms to the Salvadoran guerillas, it was hardly convincing. James Le Moyne commented: "Contra operations have moved far beyond the purported U.S. objective....now the FDN makes no attempt to hide its

13. Patrick Moynihan, Newsweek, 11 April 1983. p.24.

determination to overthrow the Sandinista junta." ¹⁴

In August, 'Big Pine II', the largest and the longest military exercise in Central American history was launched. Involving 19 ships and 16,456 troops, including 4000 ground troops, it was to continue till February 5, 1984. In a move to cut down U.S. involvements, the House passed the " Boland-Zablocki " bill to end support for the covert war in Nicaragua on 28 July 1983. But by October, the covert contra against Nicaragua had intensified, with reports of bombing of international airport, oil facilities and major ports in Nicaragua.

On 10 January 1984, the report of the Bipartisan Commission on Central America was released. But it did not offer anything new, and only ratified the basic assumption of President Reagan's policy: " That by exploiting indigenous unrest, Cuba and the Soviet Union were posing a serious threat to the United States." ¹⁵ Over Nicaragua, it suggested continued support for the contras and was quite vague on how to resolve differences with Nicaragua. " It never addressed the biggest obstacle standing in the way of a Nicaraguan peace deal: the CIA's continued support for the contra rebels fighting the Sandinista regime." ¹⁶

14. James Le Moyne, " The Secret War Boils Over." Newsweek, 11 April, 1983, p.20.

15. Jonathan Alter, et al, on the report of the Kissinger Commission, Newsweek, 23 January 1984. p.20.

16. Ibid., p.22.

In March the Administration renewed its request for \$ 21 million for the contras which was approved by the Senate Appropriations and Intelligence committees. Yet there was a strong move in Congress to end the covert war, and Senate Republicans wanted President Reagan to give an assurance that the Administration was not trying to overthrow the Sandinista government or impose any form of government there.

THE MINING EPISODE

On 6 April 1984, the Wall Street Journal came out with the startling revelation that the CIA had participated in the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors. Earlier in mid-March, some mines had exploded, damaging a few ships at Corinto. The episode opened a troublesome rift on the nation's alliances and put the United States on the defensive on world forums. Clearly, it was an act of war against the Nicaraguan government, threatening not only Nicaraguan commerce but also the shipping of U.S. allies as well.

But the loudest and most serious explosion went off in the Congress, enraged by a feeling of having been misled. Senator Barry Goldwater, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman and a Republican, voiced the anger and dismay of his colleagues. In an astonishingly pungent letter to the CIA Director William Casey, he said " The President has asked us to back his foreign policy....But mine the harbors of Nicaragua ? It is an act of war. For the life of me, I don't see how

we are going to explain it." ¹⁷ Immediately, both the Senate and the House of Representatives approved resolutions opposing the use of federal funds for mining the Nicaraguan harbors. The CIA Director also had to apologize to the Senate Intelligence Committee for failing to inform it of its actions. The episode only strengthened the determination of many Senators and Representatives to cut off U.S. aid to the contras.

AT THE WORLD COURT

On 9 May 1984, the Nicaraguan government filed a suit with the International Court of Justice at the Hague, demanding a halt to all U.S. assistance to the anti-government guerrillas and compensation for the damages caused by them. ¹⁸ A few days earlier, the United States had refused to accept the Court's jurisdiction over the dispute, claiming that it was not the appropriate forum for settling disputes in that area. But the Court held that the United States was a party to the agreement signed in 1946 accepting the jurisdiction of the Court, and that the agreement could be terminated only by a prior notice of six months.

On 10 May 1984, the World Court, for the first time in its history, ordered the United States to respect the sovereignty and political independence of another country. The Court ruling was a great setback for the United States, and critics charged the Administration

17. Barry Goldwater, quoted in George J. Church, "Explosion over Nicaragua." Time, 13 February 1984. p.8.

18. U.S. Foreign Policy: The Reagan Imprint, Washington, D.C.,: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1986. p.71.

for its willingness to even abandon the rule of law, the very essence of Wilsonian idealism in American foreign policy. A new scandal was added to the President's political woes when in September, Congress learnt of a CIA training manual for the contras. Known as 'Psychological Operations in guerrilla Warfare', it advocated selective violence to neutralize the Sandinista officials; the hiring of professional criminals; creation of martyrs through violence, staged demonstrations, and blackmail. On 3 October, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees extended the Boland Amendment for another year. President Reagan could make a new request for funds only after 28 February 1985, for no more than \$14 million.

By the end of the year, a fair definition of the ends had been produced but there was a stalemate over the means and methods."By late 1984, it seemed clear that the second Reagan Administration would have to face the choice of tolerating the Nicaraguan Revolution or intervening directly and massively to exterminate it"¹⁹.

THE SECOND TERM : THE SET-BACK

President Reagan began 1985 with efforts to renew aid to the contras. On 24 January, while addressing legislators from nations in the Western Hemisphere in Washington, D.C., President Reagan warned of a new danger arising from support for the Sandinista government from

19. Leogrande, n.9, pp.444-445.

Libya, the P.L.O. and Iran. This followed the visit of the Iranian Premier Mir Hussain Monssari-kha-menei to Nicaragua on 23 January 1985.

In February, President Reagan asserted that the administration's goal in Nicaragua was to remove the Sandinistas in "its present form". In a televised news conference on 21 February, 1985, President Reagan charged the Sandinista of betraying the revolution, and said the Administration's aim was to make them "cry uncle". Earlier, President Reagan charged that the Sandinistas had "seized power out of the barrel of a gun" and that it had "never been chosen by the people".²⁰ Secretary of State Schultz said those resisting aid were cutting off "these freedom fighters from the rest of the democratic world consigning Nicaragua to the endless darkness of communist tyranny".²¹

On 26 February, President Daniel Ortega announced a moratorium on acquisition of arms and expressed his hope that the bilateral talks suspended in January would be resumed. He also announced the reduction of Cuban military advisers in Nicaragua. President Reagan denounced it as a measure designed to influence Congress to vote against contra aid. President Reagan also came up with a suggestion a few months later. He suggested a ceasefire in the fighting between the contras and the government forces, to be followed by peace talks with the Church acting as a

20. Ronald Reagan in New York Times, 11 February, 1984

21. Facts on File, vol. 45, No. 2310, March, 1985, p.130.

mediator. If the Sandinistas agreed, the \$ 14 million would be used for humanitarian purposes. If, after a period of 60 days, no agreement was reached, it would be used to buy arms. In the meantime, he continued his efforts to renew contra aid. But President Reagan's plan did not receive support in Congress. Sensing imminent defeat, President Reagan agreed to postpone military aid.

In March, the United States decided to withdraw from the proceedings of the World Court. According to a White House statement, " The proceedings in the International Court of Justice are a misuse of the Court for political purposes and....the Court lacks jurisdiction and competence over such a case." ²² On 23-24 April, the House gave a serious blow to the Administration by rejecting the resumption of aid to the contras. On 23 April, the Senate had narrowly approved \$ 14 million in aid to the contras after President Reagan gave his word not to use the money for military purposes. But the same request was overwhelmingly rejected by the House an hour later. Following the vote, President Reagan declared national emergency. On 1 May he signed an executive order imposing a total embargo on trade with Nicaragua in view of what the Administration considered an " emergency situation created by the Nicaraguan Government's aggressive activities in Central

22. White House statement, Department of State Bulletin, Vol.85, No.2096, March 1985. p.6.

America, Nicaragua's continuing efforts to subvert its neighbors, its rapid and destabilizing military buildup, its close military and security ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union, and its imposition of communist totalitarian internal rule." ²³ The treaty of friendship and commerce between the two countries was also terminated.

THE CHANGE OF MIND

June saw the shift in Congressional opinion towards the Administration's request for funds. A major reason seemed to be President Daniel Ortega's trip to Moscow soon after the vote in Congress which resulted in the signing of an economic aid agreement between the Soviet Union and Nicaragua. Prior to the voting, President Reagan also toned down his request along lines suggested by some senior congressional leaders, and agreed to use the aid for humanitarian assistance only. In a radio message on 8 June, President Reagan said " A House vote for humanitarian aid to the freedom fighters will send a strong bipartisan message that we will not tolerate the evolution of Nicaragua into another Cuba nor will we remain with our heads in the sand while Nicaragua becomes a Soviet client state." ²⁴ On 12 June 1985, the House approved

23. Langhorne A. Motley, " Economic Sanctions Against Nicaragua." Department of State Bulletin, Vol.8, No. 2100, July 1985. p.74.

24. Ronald Reagan, Radio Address on June 8, Department of State Bulletin, Vol.85, No. 2101, August 1985. p.88.

\$ 27 million for food, clothing and other humanitarian purposes to be sent to the contras. It was to be released in three instalments over a nine-month period. The CIA and the Defense Department were barred from dispensing the aid.

In September, the Contadora group presented the second Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America, but it was rejected by Nicaragua on grounds of concession to the United States. On 15 October, Nicaragua re-instated a state of emergency, and censorship was imposed on the press and the media. In a speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 22, 1985, Vernon A. Walters, the Permanent Representative of the United States to the U.N. accused Nicaragua of being "The root cause of conflict in Central America" caused by Nicaraguas "political repression, " which seeks to contaminate its neighbors." ²⁵

In October, President Reagan charged that the World Court was being " misused by Nicaragua and the communist bloc for political and propaganda purposes " ²⁶ and announced that the United States was terminating its acceptance of the compulsory jurisdiction of the World Court. Speaking in a radio message broadcast to the nation on 14 December 1985, President Reagan said " If Nicaragua can get material support from comm-

25. Vernon A. Walters, Department of State Bulletin, Vol.86, No. 2108, March 1986. p.54.

26. Ronald Reagan, Department of State Bulletin, Vol.86, No.2106, January 1986. p.67.

unist states and terrorist regimes and prop up a hated communist dictatorship, should not the forces fighting for liberation....be entitled to more effective help in their struggle for freedom ?" ²⁷

1986: A LAME-DUCK ?

The Administration began the year with a campaign for assistance to the contras for an amount of \$ 100 million. In a message to Congress on February 25, President Reagan said: " If the enemies of democracy thousands of miles away can understand the strategic importance of Nicaragua....then we Americans must understand that Nicaragua is a foreign policy question of supreme importance which goes to the heart of our country's freedom and future." ²⁸ The Administration defended aid to the contras as essential for U.S. policy in Central America, an important stimulus to a diplomatic solution and a necessary element in U.S. defense against Soviet and Cuban intervention in the hemisphere.

However, President Reagan's request faced strong opposition from the Democrats, and the request was rejected. President Reagan's speech before Congress was largely responsible for the defeat. The speech was full of contradictions and rhetoric, most of which were inaccurate. Claims of the President like Brazilian radicals were being trained in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas being involved in international

27. Ibid., n.26, p.23.

28. Ronald Reagan, Department of State Bulletin, Vol.86, No.2110, May 1986. p.83.

drug trafficking, etc., could not be substantiated by his own Administration. A prominent Jewish rabbi also refuted his charge that the entire Jewish community had been forced to flee Nicaragua.

The next vote was scheduled for June. By this time, there was a widespread belief that the President would submit to lame-duckery. But President Reagan launched a new offensive against the wavering congressmen. Defying all such expectations, the Administration was able to build up a decisive victory. On 25 June the House of Representatives approved \$ 100 million in aid to the contras. The aid provided \$ 30 million in humanitarian assistance, and \$ 70 million for purchase of arms. It was the first time the House had provided military aid to the Administration. President Reagan acclaimed the vote as "a step forward in bipartisan consensus in American foreign policy."²⁹

The vote had a lot of significant implications. It meant more fighting and a long-term wholly public U.S. commitment to oust the Sandinistas. Restrictions on the CIA were also lifted, bringing back its involvement which had been banned in 1984. The vote was a major victory for the Administration and an endorsement of its policy in Nicaragua. Newsweek correspondents remarked: "The most profound effects of the vote will be political, not military. A lot of people have been sitting

29. Newsweek, 7 July 1986. p.34.

on the fence waiting to see which way the wind is blowing. Now they know, they'll jump." ³⁰

President Ortega quickly reacted to the vote. Within hours of the congressional decision, the respected newspaper La Prensa was shut down indefinitely. The moderate opposition and the Catholic Church were warned to toe the line. In a new height of rhetorical defiance, he called President Reagan a 'new Hitler'. President Ortega's charges got more leverage following the World Court's decision on 27 June 1986, indicting the United States for violating international law and Nicaragua's sovereignty. But the United States, having earlier rejected the Court's jurisdiction, merely shrugged off the decision.

THE IRAN-CONTRA SCANDAL

On October 9, 1986, a C-123 cargo plane loaded with weapons was downed by the Sandinistas, and the lone survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, was captured. Although the United States denied any involvement, the confessions of the prisoner disclosed a multi-million dollar aid network set up in 1984 to send military supplies to the contras secretly after Congress outlawed U.S. involvement. On 25 November, U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese reported that the profits of arms sales to Iran had been secretly diverted to the contras. As a result, National Security Advisor Vice Admiral John Pointdexter resigned, and President Reagan's National

30. Tom Morgenthau, et al, " Rekindling the Magic: Reagan Wins Congress Victory Aid to the Contras." Newsweek, 7 July 1986. p.33.

Security Aide Lt.Col. Oliver L. North was removed from the National security Council staff.

President Reagan also appointed the Tower Commission to investigate into the matter. In December, Federal District Court Judge Lawrence E. Walsh was named special prosecutor in the Iran-contra affair. The House and the Senate also set up their respective committees. By early January 1987, investigations on the scandal were well underway. Congressional investigators found evidence of shipment of arms to the Nicaraguan rebels through Portugal, and a crude arms-for-hostages swap with Iran. Senate reports and documents also revealed the pivotal roles played by NSC advisor John Pointdexter and Lt.Col. Oliver L. North. The Congress strongly criticized President Reagan for making unlawful efforts to privatize foreign policy. The Administration's policy of supporting the contras " allowed ambitious politicians in both the Congress and the executive branch to advance their own careers." ³¹

By far the most damaging report came from the Tower Commission. The report portrayed President Reagan as a confused and a remote figure who failed to understand and control the secret arms deals with Iran. On the whole, the report exposed " the weak grip of the White House on both the substance and the process of American foreign policy," ³² and portrayed the Administration officials as regularly deceiving each other,

31. Linda B. Miller, " Innocence Abroad ? Congress, the President and Foreign Policy." World Today, Vol.43, No.4, April 1987. p.63.

32. Ibid., p.62.

as well as Congress, about major elements of opinion.

On 12 March the House voted to withhold the final \$40 million instalment of the \$ 100 million approved in June 1986 until President Reagan provided accounts of the money so far recieved. The Senate narrowly defeated an attempt to cut off the final instalment to the contras on 19 March 1987. Faced with the unsavoury prospect of Congress abandoning support to the contras, President Reagan along with House Speaker Jim Wright proposed a peace plan. The plan called for a truce between the contras and the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas would restore civil liberties and prepare for internationally supervised elections, and the Reagan Administration would suspend all military aid to the contras. Privately, the Administration officials hoped and expected President Ortega to reject the proposal, exposing the rigidity of the Sandinistas and thereby increasing the prospects of renewed contra aid.

THE SURPRISE

" The Reagan initiative was designed to capture the headlines and demonstrate that, however politically damaged by the Iran-contra hearings, the President still was capable of setting the national agenda." ³³ But the Administration was in for a big surprise. On 6 August, at a quiet meeting in Guatemala city, President Ortega and four other

³³: Newsweek, 17 August 1987. p.22.

Central American presidents came up with a regional peace plan. Called the Arias Plan after Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez, it was a dramatic contrast to President Reagan's plan. The plan demanded an unconditional halt to all contra funding. It also called upon Honduras to stop permitting the use of its territory as a staging ground for the contras, and each of the five governments, including Nicaragua, were to be allowed to complete their constitutional terms.

The plan was enthusiastically received by Congress, and House Speaker Jim Wright immediately endorsed the plan, severely undercutting the White House approach. He also warned the President that it would be counter-productive to seek further contra aid. The Arias plan stole the limelight intended for the White House. It "left the Administration floundering for a response."³⁴ Although the Administration tried to dismiss the plan as fatally flawed, it only lent further damage to its credibility, especially after Nobel Prize was awarded to its author, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez. "The accord provided powerful arguments for opponents of contra aid, made it virtually impossible to gain a consensus of the Central American Presidents for any effort to oust the Sandinistas, and weakened the credibility of the Administration efforts to portray Nicaragua as an intransigent regional menace."³⁵

34. Ibid., p.22.

35. Richard L. Millet, "The United States and Central America: A Policy Adrift." Current History, Vol.87, No. 533, December 1988. p.402.

By this time, chances of Congress providing further aid for the contras were very dim. The current aid to the contras was to lapse after the deadline of 30 September 1987. However, Congress approved the continuation of non-lethal aid - \$ 3.5 million in October, and \$ 3.2 million in November. On 20 December 1987, both Houses sanctioned \$ 8.1 million to the contras. Of this, \$ 3.6 million was for humanitarian assistance and \$ 4.5 million for transportation costs, through February 1988.

Congress prohibited delivery of any type of equipment to the contras between 13-20 January when the Central American presidents would meet and determine whether a ceasefire had been implemented in Nicaragua. Also, before making any request for further aid, the White House had to certify that the ceasefire had not been affected, that the contras acted in good faith, and that the Nicaraguan government was at fault.

Throughout 1987, the Administration was handicapped by the lingering effects of the Iran-contra scandals. In the aftermath of the revelations, most of the ardent contra supporters had left the Administration. Their successors did not possess the conviction and enthusiasm of their predecessors. Polls also showed that a majority of the Americans were against providing lethal assistance to the contras. In the Congress, the Administration had totally lost its influence and the support of the Senators.

THE LAST EFFORT

By late 1987 and early 1988, the Administration's policy towards Nicaragua was faced with mounting problems. A strong group in Congress, determined to end the contra program altogether, was emerging. In early January 1988, the Central American presidents met in Alajuela, Costa Rica, to discuss the implementation of the Arias Plan. Nicaragua had not complied yet, and to avoid the collapse of the accord, which would help the Reagan Administration in securing contra aid, offered three major concessions:

1. Suspension of emergency and restoration of civil liberties, including freedom of press and right of assembly;
2. to open direct talks with the contras in San Jose, Costa Rica, aimed at a ceasefire agreement, and
3. amnesty to all political prisoners jailed since 1981.

But President Reagan was not interested in any agreements. He was determined that the Sandinistas should be out of power by the time his term finished. On 19 January 1988, he wrote to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and to the President of the Senate, saying that the Nicaraguan government had not carried out the ceasefire yet. He also said " It has become increasingly clear that without the pressure created by a strong Nicaraguan democratic resistance, the Sandinistas will not change their conduct to comply with the promises they have repeated-

ly made and broken since 1979." ³⁶

In an effort to stop U.S. aid to the contras, President Ortega offered the contras irrevocable guarantees of their political rights, and called for immediate talks with the contra leaders. Immediately, the Administration launched a strong press campaign, presenting the guerillas as an effective political tool. On 22 January President Reagan sent a request of \$ 36.25 million to Congress, stating that " such assistance is essential to enhance the national security of the United States by advancing the prospects for democracy in Nicaragua and security for all of Central America." ³⁷ Ten percent of the aid was for lethal assistance, to be released only if the contras and the Sandinistas failed to negotiate a ceasefire agreement by 31 March 1988.

But Congress did not react favourably to the request. In an attempt to rally public support, the President made a personal appeal on 2 February the night before the House vote. However, the three main commercial television networks refused to carry the message, saying that it contained the same old rhetoric. In February, President Reagan's request was rejected in the House of Representatives. With the current package of economic aid about to expire, the contras were faced with

36. Congressional Digest, Vol.67, No.3, March 1988, p.73.

37. Ibid.

the prospect of being left without any economic support. This fear was confirmed when on 3 March 1988, the House rejected a \$ 30.8 million 'humanitarian' aid package proposed by House Speaker Jim Wright.

On 17 March, 3150 U.S. troops began arriving in Honduras in response to President Azcona's call for assistance to maintain the country's integrity and sovereignty. But it was apparent that the move was more of an attempt to display U.S. commitment to the beleaguered contras who were being pursued close to, and sometimes, across the border.

The Administration suffered the biggest setback over Nicaragua when on 24 March, the contras and the Sandinistas signed a ceasefire agreement, bringing the seven years war to an end. The White House was taken completely by surprise. It was only after the deal that the Administration came to know the contras planned to quit. It gave a big blow to President Reagan's dream of ousting the Sandinistas by the end of his term. Many Administration officials began to feel that the best alternative was to extricate themselves from Nicaragua. A senior Reagan official complained " The problem in Central America is that there was never a clear policy goal." 38

Following the ceasefire, Congress approved \$ 17.7 million in aid for food and medicine to the contras. But it made sure that the Administration did not use the funds for military aid by attaching

38. Quoted in Newsweek, 4 April 1988. p.32.

numerous conditions to the bill. At this point, the debate over U.S. support to the contras seemed to be coming to an end. There was infighting among the contra leaders. Panama became the major focus of the Administration's policy in Latin America, and both the running candidates George Bush and Michael Dukakis did not seem inclined to make Nicaragua a major issue.

The issue was revived in July when the Nicaraguan government arrested several opposition leaders, closed down the newspaper La Prensa and the Catholic radio station, and expelled the U.S. ambassador and several members of his staff. The Administration retaliated by expelling the Nicaraguan ambassador. In August, the Senate passed a package providing \$ 27 million in humanitarian aid. But the Administration was not happy because the bill contained too many conditions opposed by it. In October 1988, the \$ 27 million package was approved as a part of a foreign aid bill, extended for a six-month period.

As the debate went on in Washington, the strength of the contras dwindled rapidly. The Administration was also finding it increasingly difficult to raise support from its allies in Latin America, who were increasingly becoming critical of some aspects of U.S. policy in Central America. By the end of the year, the United States frankly conceded that the contras no longer had a realistic chance of ousting the Sandinistas, and that the eight-year guerilla war had been lost.

THE CONGRESSIONAL RESPONSE

Throughout President Carter's tenure, Congress remained a reluctant partner over U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. Congress was strongly opposed to supporting corrupt and oppressive regimes. Instead, it preferred "to condition foreign military and economic aid on a regime's human rights performance."¹ The success of the Sandinista revolution forced a reappraisal of policy in Washington, with the Administration and Congress locked in a fierce debate over a proposed \$ 75 million aid package. The debate also focused on the possibilities of Nicaragua following the path of Cuba, and ways and means of preventing such a development. After a long debate that lasted eight months, Congress finally passed the aid with several conditions attached to it. But the Administration suspended the aid during the last few months of its tenure following reports of Nicaraguan aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

By mid-1981, the new Reagan Administration's hard-line approach towards Nicaragua was well established. The signing of the National Security Directive 17 by President Reagan on 23 November 1981 marked the beginning of the covert war against Nicaragua. It autho-

1. Kenneth E. Sharpe, "U.S. Policy Toward Central America: The Post Vietnam Formula Under Siege," in Nora Hamilton, et al, Ed., Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s. Boulder: Westview Press, 1988. p.20.

rizes a \$ 19 million CIA -directed plan to aid paramilitary operations against Nicaragua. The House and Senate Intelligence Committees were informed of the decision, carefully following the letter of the law.

THE MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

The Administration gave the rationale that the amount would be used to fund 500 contras who were to infiltrate Nicaragua and intercept the flow of arms to the Salvadoran rebels. But the real objective of the major actors in the operation - the CIA, the exiles and the hard-liners in the Administration were different: " to create an anti-Sandinista army capable of destabilizing and perhaps eventually overthrowing the revolutionary regime." ²

Till 1985, the Administration maintained the public position that it was not doing anything to overthrow the Sandinistas, and the broad purposes of the Nicaragua policy were not presented to the congressional committees for scrutiny and debate. Thus from the very beginning, the policy of misinforming the Congress was an important element in Administration policy. On 7 May 1981, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to lift the aid restrictions imposed on Nicaragua on the conditions that the Administration gave a certifi-

2. Alan Riding, " The Central American Quagmire." Foreign Affairs, Vol.61, No.3, 1983. p.648.

cation stating that it was not aiding leftist insurgents in neighboring countries, that it is observing human rights standards and maintaining political pluralism.

By early 1982, the U.S. policy of hostility towards Nicaragua had increased in intensity. U.S. aid to Honduras, the key actor in the U.S. crusade against Nicaragua, received \$ 33 million in military aid. U.S. presence and activities in the country increased, including the number of incursions by the contras into Nicaragua. There were also numerous reports in the newspapers, newsmagazines and television documenting the role of the United States in backing the contras, their abusive tactics and their goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas. By fall 1982, the Administration presented a new rationale for the covert war - to harass and punish the Sandinistas in order to convince the Sandinistas to stop supporting the Salvadoran insurgency.

AN UNEASY CONGRESS

As the covert war expanded, both the House and Senate Intelligence Committees began to worry that the operation was going out of control. In November 1982, following reports that the contras based in Honduras were planning a U.S. backed invasion, Congress passed the Boland Amendment. Sponsored by Representative Edward P. Boland, chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, it

prohibited U.S. aid to paramilitary groups " for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua." ³ But the Amendment did not end the covert war. It merely registered the unease of the Intelligence Committee, at the same time permitting the covert war to continue. The Administration responded by expanding contra operations, including sabotage raids on targets like oil supplies and port facilities.

In March 1983, when about 1500 exile troops invaded Nicaragua, many members of Congress became convinced that the Administration's real intent was to overthrow the Sandinistas. Newsweek reporter James Le Moyne remarked " Now the FDN makes no attempt to hide its determination to overthrow the Sandinistas." ⁴ The Democrats attacked the Administration for violating the Boland Amendment. Accordingly, Senator Patrick Leahy went to Central America on behalf of the Senate Intelligence Committee to investigate, and on his return expressed the opinion that the Administration was violating the intent of Congress.

A similar tour was conducted by Representative Wyche Fowler, a Democrat from Georgia with the same conclusions. Senator Patrick

3. " United States Legislation Relating to Nicaragua." International Legal Materials, Vol.26, No.2, March 1987.

4. Newsweek, 11 April 1983. p.24.

Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee described as a " crisis of confidence....between the Committee and the intelligence community " ⁵ the questionable manner in which the congressionally restricted money was being spent. On 28 July 1983, the House passed the 'Boland-Zablocki' bills to end support for the covert war in Nicaragua.

The Democratic leadership in the House was angered by the stand of the Administration that it was keeping within the law because aid was given to the contras to interdict arms, not to overthrow the Sandinistas, although it acknowledged that the aim of the contras might be to overthrow the government. On 28 July, in a speech to the House, Boland expressed his fears over the outcome of the war, stating that although the Boland Amendment forbade any effort to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, "...that is where we are headed." ⁶ Since the Democrats lacked enough votes in the Senate to end the covert war, a compromise was reached. A cap of \$ 24 million was put on contra aid for fiscal year 1984, and the CIA was prohibited from using any contingency funds to augment the amount.

The main reason for congressional opposition to the Admin-

5. Ibid.

6. Congressional Record, 28 July 1983. p.H5848.

istration's policy was expressed by Senator Christopher J. Dodd, a Democrat and a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: " Many of us in Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, disagree with the President because we believe the means he has chosen will not fulfill them....Instead of trying to do anything about the factors which breed revolution, this Administration has turned to massive military buildups..."⁷ Many in Congress felt that the Administration's policy in Nicaragua was taking a dangerous turn in " pushing toward a military solution....at the risk of involving the U.S. in what could be a widening war."⁸

OUTRAGE ON CAPITOL HILL

In March 1984, the Administration approached Congress for \$ 21 million in aid to the contras. The request was approved by the Senate Appropriations and Intelligence Committees. However, the Republicans in the Senate pressed President Reagan to issue a statement declaring that the United States did not intend to destabilize or overthrow the government of Nicaragua, or impose any particular form of government there. But on 6 April 1984, the Wall Street Journal reported that the CIA had directed and supervised the mining of

7. Congressional Digest, Vol. 62, No.10, October 1983. pp.237-239.

8. Norman Mineta, quoted in Time, 8 August, 1983. p.6.

Nicaraguan harbors. The report brought such a storm of criticism at home and abroad that it was subsequently stopped.

But the loudest and most serious explosion by far, came from Congress. It was enraged by a feeling of having been misled by the Administration. Both the House and the Senate immediately passed resolutions opposing the use of U.S. funds to mine Nicaraguan waters. There was also a bitter confrontation between the CIA Director William J. Casey and the Senators over the failure of the agency to inform the Senate committees of the action. In an astonishingly pungent letter to the CIA Director which voiced the anger and dismay of his colleagues, Senator Barry Goldwater said: " I am pissed off....The President has asked us to back his foreign policybut mine the harbors of Nicaragua ? This is an act violating international law. It is an act of war. For the life of me, I don't see how we are going to explain it." ⁹ The episode strengthened the determination of many Senators and Representatives to cut off all U.S. aid to the contras.

The Administration's action brought a lot of embarrassment to the legislators who had extended support to the Administration and had publicly defended their position. On 25 June, President

9. Time, 23 April, 1984. p.8.

Reagan's request for \$ 21 million in supplemental aid to the contras was defeated in a joint House-Senate conference. The shifting votes in the Republican dominated Senate was a strong indication of how the Administration's policies had brought distrust among its supporters. On 3 October 1984, the House and Senate Intelligence committees extended the Boland Amendment for another year, cutting off congressional support for the contras. The President was allowed to make a new request only after 28 February 1985 for an amount not exceeding \$ 14 million.

On the congressional rejection of the Administration's Nicaragua policy, Leogrande says: " The issue that ultimately led the House of Representatives to repudiate the war was one of institutional prerogatives. The quality of the Administration's reporting to the Intelligence Committees was so poor that the members simply stopped believing what they were told. Their efforts to restrain the operations were ignored or circumvented by convoluted interpretations of the law, until they felt there was no alternative but to bring the whole operation to a halt." ¹⁰

In January 1985, following the visit of the Iranian Prem-

10. William M. Leogrande, " The United States and Nicaragua," in Thomas W. Walker, Ed., Nicaragua : The First Five Years, New York: Praeger, 1985. p.442.

ier to Nicaragua on the 23, President Reagan warned of a new danger in Central America arising from support to the Sandinistas from Iran, Libya and the PLO. But Congress merely saw the President's warning as an attempt to persuade Congress over aid. Congress also felt that the Administration had to find out other ways besides covert aid. Many in Congress complained of the Administration's failure to come out with a new approach. House Speaker Thomas O'Neill, a Democrat said that the U.S. had "played 'uncle' in Latin America for far too long....It is time to play brother." ¹¹

As the time approached for vote in Congress, the chances of renewed contra aid looked bleak. Sensing imminent defeat, President Reagan decided to postpone the request for military aid till September. On 23-24 April, President Reagan suffered one of the biggest defeats of his presidency when the House rejected the resumption of U.S. aid to the guerillas. The Senate had narrowly approved a \$ million aid package to the contras after assurance from the President that it would not be used for military aid, and that talks would be resumed with the Nicaraguan government. But the same request was rejected by the House an hour later, which was ratified on 24 April.

11. Facts on File, Vol.45, No.2310, March 1985. p.130.

THE VOTE FOR CONTRA AID

In June, there was a shift in congressional position over aid to the contras. There were several reasons which led to this change in Congress. A few days after the vote on 26 April, President Daniel Ortega left on a trip to the Soviet Union and Europe. This reinforced the Administration's claim that the Sandinistas were availing of Soviet aid and friendship by choice, not necessity, and congressional efforts to stop the war would not induce Nicaragua to restrain itself in international politics. " We should not be tying our own hands while Daniel Ortega is shaking hands with those in the Kremlin," ¹² remarked Representative Dave McCurdy, a Democrat from Oklahoma.

Among those who changed their votes, especially Democrats from the South, was the feeling that by voting against aid to the contras, they would be labelled as being soft on Communism. There were others who felt uncomfortable in turning down the President's request without providing an alternative, especially for those who were doing the fighting. Many Democrats who shifted their votes did so because they genuinely believed that the contras would provide leverage in negotiating a political settlement.

12. Quoted in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Reagan Imprint, Congressional Quarterly Inc., Washington, D.C., 1986. p.73.

The change in congressional stand also strongly illustrated how far the Administration's rhetorical statements could influence congressional opinion. President Reagan made promises to pursue political solutions, to explore the possibility of bilateral talks with Nicaragua. He also promised improved human rights practices by the contras, who had been charged of violating them. The Administration also "launched a concerted campaign to paint the issue as a stark choice between communism and freedom." ¹³

On 12 June 1985, in a stunning turnaround, the House approved \$ 27 million in non-military aid to the contras. The amount was to be spent on food, clothing and other humanitarian purposes only. The CIA and the Defense Department were also barred from disbursing the aid. According to Cynthia Arnson, "overcoming opposition to the covert war in the House resulted not only from the specific factors.. ..but also from a shift in Congress towards acceptance of the means, if still not the goals, of the Reagan policy." ¹⁴

THE VIETNAM SHADOW

In March 1986, the crucial bill for \$ 100 million in military and humanitarian assistance to the contras came up in the House

13. Cynthia Arnson, n.1, p.50.

14. Ibid.

of Representatives. President Reagan had become emboldened by the previous year's vote in June to come to Congress with a larger request. The vote was billed as a vital test of the Administration's interventionist policy. But the House rejected the request by a vote of 222 to 210.

Many blamed the House rejection on the President's speech to Congress before the vote. The speech was full of contradictions and inaccurate rhetoric:

The State Department contradicted Reagan's claims that Brazilian radicals were being trained in Nicaragua. His own drug agency could not substantiate his charge that the Sandinistas were involved in international drugs trafficking. A prominent American Jewish rabbi rebutted his charge that the entire Jewish community had been forced to flee Nicaragua. Residents of Harlingen, Texas, were amused to hear the President say that the Nicaraguan terrorists were just two days driving time from their town, which is more than 2500 miles from Managua. ¹⁵

The close vote and the outcome reflected the confusion of the public and their wariness over the Administration's Central American policy. Evan Thomas remarked " Many congressmen are searching for a middle ground. Unwilling to cut off the contras altogether, yet eager to explore diplomatic avenues as well, they want to approach the Sandinistas with a mixture of carrot and stick." ¹⁶

15. Newsweek, 31 March 1986. p.20.

16. Evan Thomas, " The Tug of War" Time, 31 March 1986. p.4.

Congress at the time was filled with a deep sense of uncertainty, and there was no alternative available that could be generally accepted. The manner in which the debate was waged, using emotional rhetoric, did not help at all. Prior to the vote, Administration spokesmen warned that anyone opposing aid to the contras would be labelled as being "soft on communism."¹⁷ Congressman Henry Hyde of Illinois charged the Democrats, saying "history is going to assign to you folks the pall bearers to democracy in Central America."¹⁸ The members did not take kindly to such attacks, for they felt that it was an insult to their patriotism.

The Democrats accused the Administration's supporters of 'red baiting' and warned of Nicaragua becoming another Vietnam. In a passionate speech that revived old nightmares, House Speaker O'Neill declared "I see us becoming engaged, step by step, in a military situation that brings our boys directly into the fighting."¹⁹ Congress also charged the President for not fulfilling his promise to seek a peaceful settlement in return for the \$ 27 million aid approved by Congress in June 1985. The confusion was aptly described by

17. Ibid., p.5.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

Strobe Talbott: " The White House and Capitol Hill have both reverberated with one-sided and unrealistic assessments of the challenge in Nicaragua, with deceptive and diversionary claims about what the U.S. should be trying to accomplish there and with unconvincing recipes for what to do." ²⁰

THE HOUSE SUPPORT

By this time, there was a widespread belief that President Reagan would sooner or later succumb to lame-duckery. Defying all such beliefs, President Reagan started a lobbying blitz after the vote. The targets were the wavering congressmen, and the President worked his legendary political abilities to build a decisive victory on the most controversial foreign policy issue of his Administration. For the first time on 25 June 1986, the House of Representatives approved military aid to the contras. The Edwards-Skelton Bill of \$ 100 million was passed by a vote of 221 to 209.

Out of the \$ 100 million, \$ 30 million was for humanitarian assistance, including tents, clothing and medical supplies for the contra camps in Honduras. The remaining \$ 70 was for the purchase of arms and improved air transport to contra supply points. The vote carried significant implications. It meant more fighting and a

20. Time, 24 March 1986. p.44.

" long-term, wholly public U.S. commitment to oust the Marxist government in Nicaragua." ²¹ The vote also unleashed the CIA by removing removing restrictions on CIA and Pentagon training which had been imposed in 1984. The vote also put a strong pressure on the Administration and the contras to come up with some measure of success against the Sandinistas, a success that had so far been elusive.

THE CONTRA REVELATIONS

On 9 October 1986, The Nicaraguan forces shot down a plane carrying military supplies to the contras. The lone survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, was captured. It was an event that was to lead to the unravelling of the CIA's activities. Despite the Administration's denials, the confessions of the prisoner revealed that the Administration was involved in a multi-million dollar aid network set up in 1984 to send military supplies to the contras secretly in violation of the congressional ban imposed in 1984. Reports indicated that profits from the sales of arms to Iran were diverted to the contras. Following thereport, the National Security Advisor Vice Admiral John Poindexter resigned, and the President's National Security Aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North was removed from the National Security Council staff. In January 1987, the House and the Senate set up their own special

21. Newsweek, 7 July 1986. p.33.

investigating committees.

The investigations revealed how the Administration had been involved in a crude 'arms-for hostages' swap. It also revealed how the White House had flouted the Constitution by deliberately evading congressional oversight of foreign policy. More importantly, it opened the long struggle between the Congress and the executive, and gave Congress an opportunity to try and seize a bigger role in foreign policy. As the hearings progressed, the Administration was faced with the increasing prospect of Congress abandoning its support for the contras.

By January 1987, Congressional investigators found evidence that Lt. Col. Oliver L. North had coordinated several arms shipments to the contras. A Senate report on 12 January revealed the crucial role played by National Security Advisor John Pointdexter. Congress accused the White House of breaching its relations with Congress, and of trying to privatize foreign policy. The Senate Intelligence Committee report also portrayed the Administration officials as regularly deceiving one another, as well as Congress over major elements of opinion.²²

On 19 February 1987, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to halt all funds to the contras. By this time, prospects of

22. New York Times, 30 January, 1987.

renewed aid to the contras had become so bleak that the Administration decided to postpone its formal request of \$ 105 million. On 12 March, the House of Representatives voted to hold up the first \$ 40 million instalment of the \$ 100 million approved in June 1986 until President Reagan furnished an account of the money so far received from Congress and other sources. On 19 March, the Senate defeated by a narrow margin an effort to cut off the instalment of military aid for the year to the contras.

THE ARIAS PLAN

As the investigations proceeded, the revelations proved very damaging to the Administration. Unless it brought out a new alternative acceptable to Congress, chances of getting further aid to the contras were very bleak. To avoid the eventuality of Congress abandoning its support for the contras, the Administration proposed a peace plan. The plan provided for a truce between the contras and the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas would restore civil liberties and prepare for internationally supervised elections. In return, the Reagan Administration was to suspend all military aid to the contras. If President Daniel Ortega rejected the offer, as the Administration hoped, it would increase the prospects of continued contra aid by exposing the Nicaraguan government as rigid and uncooperative.

But the Administration was rudely shocked when on 6 August,

at a quiet meeting in Guatemala city, the five Central American presidents came up with what the Administration had considered impossible - a peace plan. Called the 'Arias Plan' after its author Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez, the plan called for an unconditional halt to all contra funding. Honduras was to stop permitting the use of its territory as a staging ground for the contras, and the five governments, including Nicaragua, were to be permitted to complete their constitutional terms. It was a strong contrast to the Administration's plan.

House Speaker Jim Wright immediately endorsed the plan, severely undercutting the Administration's approach. He also warned President Reagan that it would be counter-productive to seek further contra aid. The 'Arias Plan' stole the limelight intended for the Administration. It was intended to demonstrate that however politically damaged it was by the Iran-contra hearings, the President was still capable of setting the national agenda. Instead, the Administration was left floundering for a response.

A MIXED RESPONSE

Conservatives denounced the peace talks as a betrayal of the contras, while Liberals enthusiastically welcomed it, saying that the diplomatic process had taken a life of its own. On 7 August 1987, the Senate agreed to establish a bipartisan group of Senators which was

to be known as the Senate Central American Negotiations Observer Group.²³ President Reagan agreed to pursue negotiations before making any request for further aid. However, he made it clear that he still supported the contras, and would push for more aid if the Sandinistas made no changes by 30 September 1987, the day contra aid was to expire.

Later, he endorsed the peace plan in order to appease the Democrats, whose votes would be crucial in pushing the aid through. His immediate fear was that the Sandinistas would make enough reforms to discourage Congress from passing further contra aid. However, President Reagan's endorsement of the Plan was strongly denounced by the Republicans as a 'sell-out'. On 10 September 1987, Congress approved \$ 3.5 million in humanitarian assistance to the contras, and permitted \$ 100 million in obligated funds to be expended. On 14 December, Senate approved a 'catch-all' appropriations bill which included \$ 16 million in non-military aid to the contras. But the House version contained no further aid for the contras.

The year was a disaster for the Administration. The findings of the Iran-contra scandal hit the headlines everywhere, and all other issues took a back seat. " As the administration's problems mounted, its ability to influence Congress declined. Criticisms increased, some from the right, which charged that policies in

support of the contras were not aggressive enough, but more from a Democratic majority that was divided between moderates willing to compromise on issues like contra aid and liberals determined to end the program altogether." ²³

In spite of all these problems, President Reagan continued his efforts to secure economic and political support for the contras. That these efforts did not break down was mainly due to the Sandinistas, whose actions kept the issue alive. These actions included:

bellicose statement of Sandinista officials, a major incursion into Honduras, revelations of Sandinista military plans by high-level defectors and periodic Nicaraguan government crackdowns on opposition media and politicians....the administration used such actions to revive contra aid.²⁴

THE LOSING BATTLE

In January 1988, President Daniel Ortega offered some major concessions. They included restoration of civil rights, opening of direct talks with the contras for a ceasefire and amnesty for all political prisoners jailed since 1981. He also offered irrevocable guarantees of political rights to the contras. The offer was mainly aimed at keeping the contra supporters at bay. But President Reagan was not satisfied with the concessions. By this time, he had made it

23. Richard L. Millet, "The United States and Central America: A policy Adrift." Current History, Vol.87, No. 533, December 1988. p.402.

well known that he wanted the Sandinistas out of power by the time his term finished. In January 1988, he approached Congress for \$ 36.25 million in contra aid, arguing that the contras were an important and effective political tool in bargaining with the Sandinistas.

But his arguments did not cut much ice with Congress. In a last-minute attempt to rally public support, President Reagan made a personal appeal for renewed contra aid the night before the House vote. But the three major commercial television networks - ABC, CBS and NBC refused to broadcast his speech, saying that there was no news in his speech, and that it was full of familiar hyperbolic rhetoric. Many congressmen even refused to meet the President before the voting took place.²⁴ It was a dramatic contrast to those days when President Reagan could influence most of the senior leaders of Congress. On 3 February 1988, the President's request was defeated in the House by 219 votes to 211.

Debating on the issue, some Senators felt that aid should be continued to prevent communism from gaining a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. Senator Howard T. Heflin, a Democrat from Alabama said " The United States should send a strong message to the Soviets, and to the world, that revolutionary tactics which attempt

24. Ibid., p.403.

to undermine the security and peace of free nations in the Western Hemisphere will not be tolerated, and will be challenged." ²⁵ But Senator Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa, accused the Administration of misleading Congress with false claims, and of blocking the peace process in Central America. He said " the President in his determination to make the Sandinistas cry uncle, has methodically sabotaged the Latin American search for a political solution....we cannot embrace the peace process with our hand while voting for the Administration's contra policy with the other....if our goals are the promotion of peace and democracy in Central America, as the President so often proclaims, then the Arias Plan has already proven it can work."²⁶ Senator Phil Bradely, a Democrat who once supported contra aid, said " There is a difference between speeches that rail at communists, and a policy that effectively counters them. Speeches are easy. Policy takes effort and care." ²⁷

THE NOOSE TIGHTENS

In early March, Congress dealt the contras another blow when the House rejected a \$ 30.8 million humanitarian request sponsored by House Speaker Jim Wright. On 23 March 1988, the contras and

25. Address on the floor of the U.S. Senate on 4 February 1988.
Congressional Digest, Vol.67, No.3, March 1988. p.79.

26. Ibid.

27. Time, 15 February 1988. p.14.

the Sandinistas signed an accord, bringing the seven years war to an end. The Administration was completely taken by surprise, since it had no inkling of the decision of the contras. President Reagan blamed the Congress for abandoning the contras and driving them into a corner. But the moderate Democrats were exultant. " I think you can see the light at the end of the tunnel," ²⁸ said House Majority leader Jim Wright. Wayne Smith, a former U.S. diplomat in Latin America and a Reagan Administration critic remarked: " You could have had this outcome without ever organizing the contras. We've had seven years of bloodshed for nothing." ²⁹

On 1 April 1988, both Houses in a surprising show of unity, agreed to provide assistance and support for peace, democracy and reconciliation in Central America. The contras were granted \$ 48 million in humanitarian aid; \$ 16 million for food, clothing and medical supplies for the next six months, and an equal amount for the treatment of Nicaraguan children injured in the seven-year war; \$ 10 million for the expenses of the verification of the Sapoa Accord (23 March) and \$ 2.5 million to a U.S. firm towards the cost of administering the aid.

28. Newsweek, 4 April 1988. p.31.

29. Ibid., p.30.

In mid-July, the Sandinista government withdrew the freedoms it had recently granted. Several opposition leaders were arrested, La Prensa and the Catholic radio station were closed and the U.S. ambassador and several members of his staff were expelled. An outraged Congress denounced the actions as a blatant disregard for human rights and for the year-old regional peace plan, and threatened to resume aid to the rebels. The developments came at a bad time for the Democrats because of their opposition to contra aid, and in view of the coming elections.

To avoid an embarrassing situation, the Democratic leadership in the Congress quickly passed a package providing \$ 27 million in humanitarian aid, including a provision for a later vote on releasing \$ 16.5 million in military aid. But the bill did not make the Republicans and the contras happy. They saw it as an effort to block lethal aid to the contras and to avoid embarrassment.

In October 1988, the \$ 27 million humanitarian aid package was approved. But the late passage of the bill effectively killed the provision for releasing military aid. While the debate was raging on in Washington, the strength of the contras was dwindling rapidly. The Administration was finding it increasingly difficult to rally support even from its allies in Latin America. By the end of the year, the Administration had come to a dead end over Nicaragua,

and the contras were weakened by the lack of funds. As the year ended, the Administration admitted that the contra war was lost.

CONCLUSION: THE DEFECTS

Without a doubt, Nicaragua was the most controversial agenda of the Reagan Administration. Throughout its term, the Administration was so pre-occupied with Nicaragua that it has been criticized for being obsessed with it. Nicaragua was the centre of the Administration's focus in its objective to 'roll back' Communism; the staging ground of the Reagan Doctrine, and the first step in recasting U.S. hegemony in the Western hemisphere. But success proved very elusive, and from an ulcer, it became a festering sore that plagued the Administration till the end of its term.

There was never a dull moment. Throughout President Reagan's term, Nicaragua generated controversies, heated debates and sharp quarrels, especially between the Administration and the Congress. From the very beginning, Congress was critical of the Administration's approach towards Nicaragua. It was one thing to support a government against leftist insurgents in pursuance of its postwar policy of containment, as in the case of El Salvador. But Congress was critical of the Administration's attempts to unseat a left-wing government in power by supporting insurgents. Congress was also critical of supporting the contras, most of whom were composed of the hated National Guards of the Somoza regime. " The conflict over Nicaragua was

necessarily more intense and bitter, because the legislative branch came to question not only the wisdom of U.S. means but also the very objectives they were designed to achieve." ¹

The most serious problems came from the Administration. From the beginning of its term, it was affected by the debacle of infighting that took place between the Department of State and the Department of Defense and their respective allies. " The noise caused by this battle drowned out most of the policies the fight was allegedly about - and increasingly drew attention to the inadequacy of a President failing to exercise clear control and serving instead as an umpire between the combatants..." ² The efforts of the Secretary of State Alexander Haig to claim a privileged position on foreign policy, calling himself the 'vicar', the chief deputy of the President in foreign policy-making was perceived by the President's men at the White House as an attempt to upstage the President and usurp his policy-making prerogatives. This led to an intense clash that ended with Alexander Haig's resignation in June 1982. The clash led to a lot of confusion at home as well as abroad. " Until the President's

1. Cynthia Arnson, " The Reagan Administration, Congress and Central America: The search for consensus," in Nora Hamilton, et al, Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s, Boulder: Westview Press, U.S.A., 1988. p.44.

2. Andrew Knight, " Ronald Reagan's Watershed Year ? Foreign Affairs, Vol.61, No.3, 1983. p.513.

switch of Secretaries, the river of American foreign policy had seemed, often, to be divided into rivulets - and flowing uphill at that." ³

The Administration followed a very inconsistent policy over Nicaragua. By early 1982, it had expressed its willingness to negotiate with the Sandinistas. But at the same time, it was expanding its so-called efforts to interdict the supply of Nicaraguan arms to the Salvadoran guerillas, and initiated secret operations to harass, isolate and destabilize the Sandinista regime. The Administration's rationale for the covert contra war also kept changing. Wayne S. Smith remarks that the " Administration's efforts to explain its goals in Nicaragua have been....consistently inconsistent..." ⁴

The Administration also lacked a clear goal and a well-defined objective in its policy towards Nicaragua. It was not sure of what it really wanted - to remove the Sandinistas; to settle for a negotiated political settlement, or, to be satisfied with concessions from the Sandinistas. There was never a clear and accepted objective towards which its efforts were directed. By 1988, Congress was thoroughly exasperated with the Nicaraguan issue. By the end of its

3. Ibid., p. 511.

4. Wayne S. Smith, " Lies About Nicaragua." Foreign Policy, No.67, Summer 1987. p.88.

term, the Administration was still faced with a situation similar to 1981, with hardly any substantial achievement to its credit. Senator Bill Bradley, a Democrat from New Jersey who had once supported contra aid, remarked: " Ronald Reagan has failed to articulate a coherent policy toward the Sandinistas, while his governments's actions have covered the range from amateurism to outright duplicity." ⁵

The most serious problem of the Administration was revealed by the findings of the Irangate investigations. It exposed President Reagan as a confused and remote figure who could not understand the arms deals that were being carried out secretly with Iran, and his inability to control the illegal behaviour of the over zealous National Security Council staff. Above all, it exposed the weak grip of the Administration over the substance and process of foreign policy

The Administration's policy towards Nicaragua was also based on unrealistic and outmoded beliefs and assumptions. The Soviet Union was evil and immoral. It was the cause of all problems in the Third World, especially in Central America. The Administration also wrongly equated democracy and freedom by portraying the contras as fighters for democracy. It failed to understand the real cause of revolutions in the Third World, and approached the Nicaraguan problem in a

5. Bill Bradley, Time, February 5, 1988. p.14.

manner that only aggravated the situation. According to Louis Rene Beres, the Administration " has confused violence with power. It has substituted rhetoric for thought. And above all else, it has subordinated every principle and goal to the sterile dualism of U.S. - Soviet rivalry." ⁶

WHERE DO THEY POINT ?

President Reagan came to office with a massive mandate which he considered a strong support to his hard-line stand. The new Administration set out to reclaim its lost control over the Western hemisphere, beginning with Nicaragua. From the very beginning, the Administration began its campaign of misinformation to the Congress. Later, it began to circumvent Congress, and flouted all constitutional norms and propriety. The covert war and the activities of the CIA showed its scant regard for the political sovereignty of another country. The mining of the Nicaraguan harbors showed its lack of respect for the norms of international law.

The Administration's policy took a course that was out of touch with reality and lacking in popular support. It was built on the weak foundation of lies and deceit, which easily crumbled when the facts were disclosed. But not all the blame lies with the Administration. It was able to get away with all these during its first term because of an indulgent and lackadaisical Congress, especially

the Senate, which had a Republican majority. The Congress was also lacking in willpower to check the President. This senatorial deference gave a lot of freedom to the Administration in making foreign policy that led to disasters, like the Iran-contra scandal. It was only after the Republican loss of majority in the Senate following the mid-term elections in 1986 that senatorial deference came to an end.

Congress also failed to provide a coherent alternative to the Administration's policies while tying its hands down on many occasions. Its response to the Administration's policy over Nicaragua was also erratic, leading to more confusion. The debates over Nicaragua also showed how easily Congress was swayed by rhetoric and speeches. It is also significant to note that the debates over Nicaragua, especially on the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors and the Iran-contra scandal were focused only on whether the Administration had broken the law in implementing its policy, and not on policy objectives.

Looking at all these, one cannot help but notice the striking departure of the substance and process of U.S. policy from reality. Throughout Reagan's two terms, the theme was always the threat of Communism. U.S. policy failed to come to grips with reality and adapt to the changing conditions. The Administration failed to respond

to the changing moods at home and abroad. As a result of its stubbornness and rigidity, the Administration lost popular support at home as well as the support of its allies in Latin America, which greatly affected the success of its policy. Accordingly, the Administration's policy only brought controversies and quarrels, and produced no positive results. When Congress finally decided to stop funding the contras, the Administration was caught in the middle of nowhere, with hardly anything to show for the efforts of the seven years.

The study also provides a good insight into the manner in which the American people conceive and expect of the presidency - a dynamic office. What they want from the office is dynamism and initiative. This is shown in the Presidential election of 1980. The Carter Administration's lacklustre tenure had been quite a disappointment to the people. President Reagan was elected to office by a strong support to his hard-line stand. He promised a strong and firm leadership. The invasion of Grenada is a strong indication of the pressure to meet these expectations. They mattered more than the long-term interests of the United States, for they would guarantee President Reagan a second term. It did not matter what was reality and what was myth, as long as they invoked support from the people.

Thus in its aim to gain the support of the people, the Reagan Administration was certainly successful. President Reagan

left office as one of the most popular and charismatic Presidents in a few decades. This, inspite of the fact that he had lied to the people, flouted constitutional norms , showed scant regard for the law of nations and brought controversies and scandals. We also notice that the Reagan Administration did not make a realistic and qualitative assessment of the goals and objectives of American foreign policy. Throughout the two terms of the Reagan Administration, the foreign policy-vehicle was run on the fuel of rhetoric - a trademark of the Reagan Administration.

Ultimately, the debate boils down to a change of relations between the Congress and the President. While it is true that the U.S. Constitution is severely inadequate and outdated, as many critics feel, it cannot be denied that Congress does have enough powers to check the President. In this context, it can be pointed out that during President Reagan's term, Congress hardly made use of its most effective tool in keeping the executive in check - its control over the purse. It also hardly studied and scrutinized the Administration's policy.

The study very strongly points to the need of a firm Congress with willpower and determination to keep the President in check. It also needs to participate more effectivley in the process of foreign policy formulation and to contribute its share in

giving substance and quality to the broad lines of the country's foreign policy. In the end, the issue lies in the office of the presidency and the manner in which it exercises its powers. Arthur Schlesinger has correctly summed up the debate when he says: " The answer to the runaway Presidency is not the messenger-boy Presidency. The American democracy must discover a middle ground between making the President a czar and making him a puppet." ⁶

6. Newsweek, 17 August 1987. p.22.

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1943