

The New Cuban Presence in the Caribbean

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Cuba and Nicaragua: From the Somozas to the Sandinistas

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The Somozas, vehement in their anticommunism, cast Nicaragua in the role of regional gendarme long before the victory of the Cuban revolution. When the United States undertook the subversion of the Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954, Anastasio Somoza García opened training facilities for Castillo Armas's exile army, acted as intermediary for arms transfers from the United States, and provided an air base for the exiles' bombers.¹ Later in the decade, when the United States suspended military aid to Batista, Luis Somoza stepped in to sell him arms for use against Cuba's revolutionaries. Somoza was among the earliest and most vocal opponents of the revolutionary government that came to power in Cuba on January 2, 1959.²

With the victory of the revolution, Cuba became a haven for Latin American political exiles, many of whom proceeded to foment plots against their native governments. Some had the backing of the new Cuban government; some did not. Expeditions were launched against Panama and the Dominican Republic; others were planned against Guatemala and Nicaragua but never came to fruition. Somoza accused Cuba of mounting an abortive exile attack from Costa Rica in June 1959 and the OAS concurred, although the Cubans have consistently denied involvement.³ Faced with an internal uprising in November, Somoza again held Cuba responsible and requested U.S. aid to fend off an anticipated expedition from the island. The Eisenhower administration dispatched a naval task force to patrol Nicaragua's coastal waters to prevent a "communist led" invasion of Central America, but no such invasion ever materialized.⁴ Whatever the extent of Cuba's early support for the opposition to the Somoza dynasty, the animosity between the two regimes was never in doubt.

As the Cuban revolution moved to the left, U.S. hostility toward it grew to be as intense as Somoza's. When the United States endeavored to reenact the "Guatemalan solution" at the Bay of Pigs, Luis Somoza once again volunteered Nicaragua as a forward base of operations. The exile brigade of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) embarked for Cuba from Puerto Cabezas on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, and the brigade's bombers flew sorties from a Nicaraguan airfield.⁵

The Bay of Pigs debacle did not dampen the Somozas' dedication to the Cuban exiles' cause. Both Luis and Anastasio (Tachito) repeatedly offered Nicaragua's cooperation in a new invasion attempt, urging the United States to mount one long after U.S. enthusiasm for such an endeavor had waned. From 1962 to 1975, Cuban exile leader Manuel Artime was allowed to maintain training camps in Nicaragua, and even after the camps were closed, Nicaraguan aid to the exiles continued, albeit more discreetly. Indeed, the Somoza dynasty's ties to the Cuban exiles transcended politics as a number of exile businessmen developed economic ties with the Somozas' business empire.⁶

While Nicaragua trained and armed Cuban exiles, Cuba trained and armed Nicaraguan exiles. The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) was founded in 1962 in Havana by a group of Nicaraguans long active in the revolutionary opposition to the Somoza dynasty. Throughout the 1960s, FSLN members received both arms and training in Cuba. The amount of Cuban aid was circumscribed, however, by the FSLN's small size (it numbered fewer than fifty) and by its inability to establish a guerrilla *foco* against the well-trained and well-equipped National Guard.⁷

During the late 1960s when Cuban foreign policy was in its Tri-continental phase, Cuba provided substantial material support to virtually every guerrilla movement in Latin America, no matter how weak or minuscule that movement happened to be. By 1968, however, the repeated failures of Latin American guerrillas—particularly the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia—prompted a change in Cuban policy. Based upon a new assessment that conditions were not ripe for revolution in Latin America, Cuba reduced its material aid to guerrillas. Instead of attempting to end its hemispheric isolation by promoting revolution, Cuba began to pursue a diplomatic strategy of normalizing relations with those governments willing to ignore the existing Organization of American States (OAS) sanctions. This strategy was such a success that in 1975 the sanctions were relaxed.

For Cuba to continue providing any significant material aid to Latin American revolutionaries would obviously have undermined the new diplomatic strategy. Thus, during the 1970s, guerrillas received only minimal support from Cuba. The FSLN, still with fewer than 100

members in 1977, was no exception to this new policy. Arms aid was apparently halted and the training of FSLN cadres was greatly reduced.⁸ Diminishing material aid did not, however, signify diminishing solidarity. Cuba remained a refuge for Nicaraguan exiles and for Sandinistas freed as a result of various FSLN military actions. In 1970, when four Sandinistas (including FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca Amador) were released from prison in Costa Rica in exchange for a hijacked airliner, they were given refuge in Cuba. Again in 1974, when fourteen Sandinistas were freed in Nicaragua as a result of the FSLN's famous Christmas party raid, they sought asylum in Cuba before making their way back to Nicaragua.⁹ Cuba's sympathy for the Sandinistas and hatred of the Somoza dynasty was never in doubt, but it was not until the insurrection against Somoza was far advanced that Cuba again began providing the FSLN with more than moral support.

The Nicaraguan Insurrection and Cuban Solidarity

Cuba's aid to the anti-Somoza opposition during the last twelve months of the Somoza dynasty was so modest that it would be a serious distortion not to place it within the wider context of international involvement in the Nicaraguan revolution. Cuban aid was real enough, but Cuba was not the principal external actor on either side of the conflict.

As opposition to Somoza intensified in 1977 and 1978, the Cuban policy formulated at the turn of the decade remained unchanged. Except for providing statements of support and a refuge for exiles, Cuban assistance to the FSLN was virtually nil. Even the political strife following the assassination of *La Prensa* editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro did not prompt an increase in Cuban involvement. Judging from Cuban press accounts at the time, until September 1978 Cuban officials did not believe a revolutionary situation existed in Nicaragua. Most of the FSLN's material support during this period came from Costa Rica, which allowed the FSLN to maintain camps and seek sanctuary across the Nicaraguan border. The great bulk of the FSLN's armaments were bought in the international arms market.¹⁰

The September 1978 insurrection in five Nicaraguan cities, which the National Guard suppressed by unleashing its full firepower against its own citizenry, prompted a new flurry of international interest and involvement. The insurrection demonstrated the depth of anti-Somoza sentiment in Nicaragua and the fragility of the dynasty's hold on power. As the dimensions of the political crisis became clear, the cast of external actors grew rapidly. The United States, the most influential

actor in Nicaragua for almost half a century, initiated the ill-fated mediation in search of a moderate political solution.

For Somoza's opponents, both domestic and foreign, the lesson drawn from the September insurrection was that the National Guard could be defeated militarily only if the FSLN were better armed and organized. In the months between September 1978 and July 1979, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama, and Cuba initiated partially coordinated policies of increased material assistance to the FSLN. Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico added their diplomatic support for the insurgents. On the other side of the battlements, Israel, Argentina, Spain, Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador came to Somoza's aid to replenish the depleted military stocks of the National Guard.¹¹

The Cuban role in all this was relatively small, at least until the final month or two of the war. After September 1978, Cuba increased its training of FSLN combatants, provided some arms shipments to the Sandinistas, and helped them establish contact with other international arms sources. The Cubans also encouraged other Central American communist parties to provide whatever assistance they could to the Nicaraguan revolutionaries. Perhaps the most significant Cuban contribution was to help mediate the differences between the FSLN's three factions. As a result of this effort, the FSLN was able to conclude a pact in March 1979 that provided for the reunification of the movement under a new National Directorate and set the stage for the "final offensive" that deposed the dynasty.¹²

Yet, Cuba contributed less than some of the other Latin American nations providing direct assistance to the FSLN. This limited involvement was based on several considerations. First and foremost, Cuba wished to provide no pretext for direct U.S. intervention. On three separate occasions in 1979, FSLN representatives asked the Cubans for greater assistance. Each time Cuba refused, Castro explaining, "The best help we could give you is not to help you at all."¹³ Nor did the Cubans want to rekindle fears of Cuban intervention among other Latin American governments, many of whom supported the anti-Somoza opposition but were nervous about the radicalism of the FSLN. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, for example, traveled to Cuba in June of 1979 seeking assurances that Cuba would not intervene massively in Nicaragua. Ultimately, the Cubans reasoned that as Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica were already providing substantial assistance to the FSLN, there was no need for a large-scale Cuban effort.¹⁴ Thus Cuba maintained a "low key approach."¹⁵

Although Cuba's contribution to the Nicaraguan revolutionaries was by no means the largest, nevertheless it was Cuba that U.S. Secretary of State Vance singled out for criticism at the June OAS

meeting on Nicaragua.¹⁶ This emphasis on Cuba's involvement was a product of bureaucratic politics in the United States. As Somoza's position deteriorated in early June, the White House's Standing Consultative Committee (the National Security Council's crisis management group) took up the issue of Nicaragua. There was general agreement that the United States ought to actively seek, under OAS auspices, a collective inter-American solution to the Nicaraguan crisis; there was no agreement on how to go about it. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated emphasizing the Cuban involvement, which could then, in turn, be used as justification for an inter-American peacekeeping force. Secretary of State Vance and the State Department's Latin American experts strenuously opposed such a strategy as guaranteed to inflame Latin American sensitivities about gunboat diplomacy, but when the issue was presented to the president, Brzezinski's view prevailed.¹⁷

The proposal for a peacekeeping force proved to be a diplomatic blunder of unprecedented proportions. Not only was it severely criticized and soundly rejected by the OAS, it nearly scuttled U.S. attempts to elicit OAS authorization for further mediation efforts. The charges of major Cuban involvement were not taken seriously by most Latin American governments, who knew full well that Panama, Venezuela, and Costa Rica (at a minimum) were as deeply involved as Cuba. The most serious charge leveled against Cuba at the OAS meeting was that Cuban military advisers were training FSLN guerrillas on the Costa Rican border, but when several days of searching turned up no confirmation of the reports, the White House was forced to admit that it had "no direct evidence" of Cuban advisers.¹⁸

Cuba and the New Nicaragua

On July 17, 1979, the Somoza dynasty came to an end, the victim not of external intervention but of its own greed, corruption, and brutality. The legacy of *somocismo* was a nation bankrupt and an economy in ruins.

Cuba greeted the victory of the FSLN and installation of the Government of National Reconstruction with great fanfare and immediately pledged to help in the massive task of rebuilding Nicaragua's shattered economy. On July 25 a Cuban plane arrived in Managua with 90 tons of food and a Cuban medical team of sixty people.¹⁹ It departed for Cuba with a high-level Nicaraguan delegation, including two members of the ruling junta (Moisés Hassan and Alfonso Robelo) and twenty-six FSLN commanders. The Nicaraguans were the guests of honor at Cuba's national celebration on July 26, at which Castro

called upon all nations to aid Nicaragua in its time of need. Castro even challenged the United States to a peaceful competition to see which nation could give more to Nicaragua; Cuba, he promised, would begin sending food, teachers, and medical personnel immediately.²⁰

The Nicaraguans requested Cuban aid in the fields of health and education because, as Robelo put it, "That is where the Cuban revolution has shown the greatest gains."²¹ More than 100 Cuban doctors and nurses arrived in Nicaragua in the final months of 1979 and were dispatched to outlying towns and villages to establish emergency clinics. Two decades of the Somoza dynasty's anti-Cuban propaganda made real live Cubans something of a public curiosity.²² By 1982, some 500 Cuban medical personnel were in Nicaragua helping to staff the growing health care system.²³

In late August 1979 Cuba and Nicaragua signed an educational exchange agreement in which Cuba pledged to provide 1,000 elementary school teachers and 40 university professors to teach in Nicaragua. The agreement also included 700 scholarships for Nicaraguan students to study in Cuba.²⁴ The Nicaraguan literacy crusade of 1980 was modeled in part on the Cuban literacy campaign of 1961: Cubans helped the Nicaraguans plan the campaign, Cuban volunteers went into the countryside to help carry it out.²⁵ In the wake of the crusade, Cuban educational aid expanded rather than contracted. By 1982, there were 2,200 Cuban teachers serving in Nicaragua.²⁶

Cuban technical and economic assistance went beyond the fields of health and education. Cuban construction workers helped to complete the first all-weather road between Nicaragua's Pacific and Atlantic coasts in 1981 and worked on a variety of public construction projects throughout the country. Cuban advisers assisted the Sandinistas in the task of building a new administrative bureaucracy to replace the *somocista* apparatus destroyed by the revolution.²⁷ In April 1982 Cuba and Nicaragua signed the most extensive economic cooperative agreement thus far. The Cubans pledged to provide 3,800 technicians, doctors, and teachers as well as \$130 million worth of financial assistance in the form of agricultural and industrial machinery, food, medicine, and construction equipment.²⁸

Cuba and Nicaraguan Domestic Politics

As the multiclass coalition that made the Nicaraguan revolution began to break down in 1980 and 1981, the extent of Cuban influence in Nicaragua came to be a key issue between the FSLN and its domestic opponents. The first open split in the anti-Somoza coalition came in April 1980 when Alfonso Robelo resigned from the junta of gov-

ernment over the composition of the newly created Council of State. Robelo led his Nicaraguan Democratic Movement into opposition. Robelo's complaint, shared by most of the private sector, was that the Sandinistas held an effective monopoly of political power and refused to give it up. The businessmen's deeper fear was that the FSLN would ultimately use its control of the state to do away with the private sector entirely, taking Nicaragua down the road of Cuban-style socialism. The Sandinistas' close friendship with Cuba naturally exacerbated those fears.

Within the nine-member National Directorate of the FSLN, there were, in fact, some *comandantes* who favored the Cuban model of development. During 1980 and 1981, however, they remained a minority, consistently outvoted by a more moderate and pragmatic group that favored maintaining political pluralism, a mixed economy, and a foreign policy of nonalignment.

Ironically, the pragmatists found an ally in Fidel Castro, who advised the Nicaraguans to avoid alienating the private sector or angering the United States if at all possible.²⁹ Castro warned the Nicaraguans that the cost of eliminating the private sector and of severing economic ties with the West would be immense—and that the Soviet Union might not be willing to take up the burden of "another Cuba."

Fidel Castro's efforts to moderate the more radical Sandinista leaders did not mollify the private-sector opposition, which continued to see Nicaragua's close friendship with Cuba as contrary to the principle of nonalignment and Cuban influence as dangerous to its own vision of Nicaragua's future.

The Cuban presence produced problems for the Sandinistas in other sectors as well. When former FSLN commander Edén Pastora went public with his opposition to the direction of the revolution in a press conference in Costa Rica, much of the press conference was devoted to the FSLN's relationship with Cuba. Pastora accused the National Directorate of selling out the nationalist character of the revolution by slavishly imitating everything Cuban. He called upon his former colleagues in the army to rise up against the National Directorate, promising that he himself would return to lead an armed struggle against the FSLN leadership if it did not mend its ways.³⁰

On the Atlantic Coast, the presence of Cuban doctors and teachers exacerbated the tensions between the government in Managua and the people on the coast. In 1980 the first serious antigovernment disturbance in Bluefields was provoked by Cuban advisers' raising a Cuban flag outside their compound. The subsequent rioting lasted several days.³¹

Cuba, Nicaragua, and the United States

By far the most serious consequences of Cuba's relationship with Nicaragua were international rather than domestic. Seeking to avoid a repetition of the U.S. experience with Cuba in the early 1960s, when Washington's hostility drove Cuba into the arms of the Soviet Union, the Carter administration tried to maintain cordial relations with Nicaragua's revolutionary government. Through late 1979 and 1980, the United States provided economic assistance to the Sandinistas and refused to be provoked by some of the FSLN's more virulent anti-imperialist rhetoric.³² In effect, the Carter administration chose a policy close to those of Mexico, Venezuela, and the social democratic parties of Western Europe—to compete with Cuba and the socialist bloc for influence in Nicaragua, hoping that access to Western financial aid would prove more attractive than access to Eastern arms. Although U.S. relations with Cuba deteriorated substantially during this period, the Carter administration did not allow that growing animosity to spill over and poison U.S. relations with Nicaragua, despite the Sandinistas' friendship with Cuba.

The Reagan administration began with a somewhat different agenda. The inauguration coincided with the Salvadoran guerrillas' unsuccessful "final offensive" of January 1981. In the aftermath of that offensive, the new administration decided to make El Salvador a "test case" of its resolve to stand firm against Soviet expansion.³³ By "drawing the line" in El Salvador, the administration hoped to test the willingness of Washington's European allies to take a hard line against the Soviet Union, alert the U.S. public to the dangers of communist expansion, and create a confrontation by proxy with the Soviet Union in an arena Washington felt confident was in its favor.

U.S. relations with Nicaragua were immediately and inevitably swept up in this new conceptualization of the Salvadoran insurgency as a battle in the new cold war. In February, the State Department released its White Paper, "Communist Interference in El Salvador," which charged that the war there had been transformed from a domestic conflict into armed external aggression by international communism. At the center of these charges were Cuba and Nicaragua, both accused of serving as arms conduits for the Salvadoran guerrillas.³⁴

Although the White Paper was subjected to withering criticism in the press, there was little doubt that Cuba had in fact been providing arms to the Salvadoran left and that some of these arms had been shipped through Nicaragua.³⁵ Shortly before leaving office, the Carter administration had suspended disbursements of economic aid to Nicaragua, as required by law, because of evidence to that effect. In

public, the Nicaraguans vehemently denied they were allowing their country to be used as an arms conduit, but U.S. intelligence estimates indicated that the flow of arms through Nicaragua dropped off sharply after U.S. protests in February and March.³⁶

Washington, however, did not react to these developments by trying to repair relations with Nicaragua. On the contrary, it refused to resume economic aid, suspended wheat sales, and began threatening to "go to the source" of the Salvadoran war by taking direct military action against Nicaragua and Cuba.³⁷

Rhetorically, the administration's attitude toward Nicaragua was reminiscent of U.S. foreign policy during the 1950s under Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. During those years, any nation adopting a nonaligned foreign policy or establishing normal relations with the Soviet Union was regarded as an enemy of the United States. Although there were some in the Reagan administration who were convinced that Nicaragua had "gone communist" already, the administration did not move to break completely with the Nicaraguans. In part this was due to the influence of U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo, who argued that Nicaragua was not yet "lost." Of equal importance was the administration's strategy for El Salvador. In order to avoid the growth of domestic opposition, the administration sought to minimize its direct involvement in El Salvador, concentrating instead on cutting off the guerrillas' logistical support.³⁸ By breaking totally with Nicaragua, Washington would forfeit whatever leverage it had in Managua, leaving the Sandinistas free to continue their cooperation with the Salvadoran left.

In short, the Reagan administration continued its predecessor's policy of competing with Cuba for influence in Nicaragua. But whereas the Carter administration had fought the competition with the inducement of economic aid, the Reagan administration fought it with threats of hostile actions, both military and economic.

In August 1981 Washington opened a dialogue with Nicaragua aimed at terminating once and for all any Nicaraguan involvement in the Salvadoran insurgency. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders traveled to Managua, offering a resumption of U.S. economic aid, a promise of nonintervention, and a crackdown on *somocista* exiles training in the United States. Discussions continued for a few weeks but broke down in October.³⁹

The failure of the dialogue coincided with growing concern in Washington that the war in El Salvador was being lost. The guerrillas had emerged from several months of retraining with a much more effective military strategy, and U.S. military analysts began saying that

the war was stalemated at best—a poor long-term prognosis for the survival of the government.⁴⁰

Such bleak predictions led the administration to launch a new public campaign of tough rhetoric about Central America. Secretary of State Alexander Haig announced that a variety of options for direct military action in the region were under review.⁴¹ A number of administration spokesmen charged that arms flows to the Salvadoran left from Cuba and Nicaragua were on the rise again, and for the first time, the administration began to criticize Nicaragua's internal military buildup.⁴² "The hour is growing late," warned presidential adviser Edwin Meese in an interview about Nicaragua.⁴³

This high public profile by the administration coincided with a full review of Central American policy. Secretary of State Haig was the principal advocate of direct military action, not in El Salvador proper, but against the alleged Cuban-Nicaraguan arms link. The lesson of Vietnam, according to Haig, was to avoid fighting on the ground and to hit instead at the logistical support of the insurgents. The Department of Defense, however, was adamantly opposed to any direct U.S. military involvement. Both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger were skeptical about the ability of the United States to seal El Salvador's porous borders and were reluctant to divert substantial U.S. forces to the Caribbean basin to enforce a blockade of Cuba or Nicaragua. Finally, the Defense Department feared that the strength of public and congressional opposition to U.S. military involvement in Central America might endanger the Pentagon's first priority—the massive strategic arms buildup planned by the Reagan administration.⁴⁴

The White House also opposed Haig's call for military action on political grounds. The growth of domestic opposition to the administration's policy in Central America made White House aides wary of risking the president's popularity on a military adventure in the region.⁴⁵

At a series of National Security Council meetings held in mid-November 1981, Reagan adopted a series of new policy initiatives aimed at containing the crisis in Central America. The new plan called for an increase in U.S. military assistance to El Salvador, increased economic aid to selected nations in the region (the Caribbean Basin Initiative), and a public relations offensive in the United States to build support for U.S. policy. The bulk of the plan, however, dealt with sanctions against Nicaragua and Cuba designed to raise the cost of their growing friendship and their support of the Salvadoran guerrillas. Efforts to tighten the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba were planned, along with increased diplomatic and economic pressures

against Nicaragua. U.S. military maneuvers in the Caribbean were stepped up in an effort to intimidate the two nations, and contingency plans were developed for a U.S. response to "unacceptable" military action by Cuba—e.g., sending troops to Central America, presumably to Nicaragua. Finally, the president approved a multifaceted covert action program targeted against Nicaragua and to be implemented by the CIA.⁴⁶

In mid-February 1982, the administration launched a major public relations effort to convince its domestic opponents that Nicaragua had become a totalitarian state, that its military buildup was a threat to the entire Central American region, and that it was cooperating with Cuba to destabilize the government of El Salvador. In interviews with the press and in congressional testimony, administration officials accused the Sandinistas of being "more repressive than Somoza" and of committing "genocide" against the Miskito Indian minority on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast.⁴⁷ They alleged that the insurgency in El Salvador was being "run from Managua" and accused the Sandinistas of hosting 1,500 to 2,000 Cuban military advisers.⁴⁸

This flurry of activity reached a crescendo in early March. On the ninth, the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency gave an extraordinary press briefing on Cuban-Nicaraguan military ties. Using aerial photographs in a setting reminiscent of the Cuban missile crisis, the administration demonstrated that Nicaragua's new army was considerably larger than it had been under Somoza and that its new facilities were designed with Cuban assistance. The evidence, however, did not bear out the administration's claim that Cuba and Nicaragua were conspiring to aid the Salvadoran guerrillas.⁴⁹

The Nicaraguans replied to the U.S. charges by pointing out that they had never denied an intention to increase their defense capability—that doing so was only prudent, given the reports that the United States was contemplating military action against them. Nor did the Nicaraguans deny that they were receiving military aid from Cuba, although several high Nicaraguan officials claimed that they had, at most, a dozen Cuban military advisers.⁵⁰

The day after the aerial photography briefing, administration analysts briefed a group of high-ranking national security officials from prior administrations. This group was shown the electronic intelligence concerning Cuban-Nicaraguan aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas. The former officials pronounced the evidence compelling, but the administration continued to insist that this evidence was too sensitive to be made public.⁵¹

On March 13 a second press briefing backfired, bringing the administration's public relations campaign to an abrupt and premature

end. A young Nicaraguan captured in El Salvador was brought before the press in Washington with the expectation that he would admit to having been trained in Cuba and Ethiopia as a guerrilla commander and dispatched to El Salvador by the Nicaraguan army. Instead, to the horror of onlooking State Department officials, he denied it all, claiming he had been tortured into his earlier confessions.⁵²

As the March 28 Constituency Assembly elections in El Salvador approached, the Reagan administration found itself having little success at convincing skeptics that Nicaragua and Cuba were, indeed, at the source of the war in El Salvador. The large turnout recorded in the Salvadoran vote changed the terms of the domestic debate in the United States, giving the administration new ammunition in its battle with congressional critics. As administration officials found they could have more success extolling El Salvador's new-found democracy than they had had waving a red flag over Cuban-Nicaraguan interference, the public attacks on Nicaragua began to recede.

This change in tone was also due to the Reagan administration's decision to cooperate, superficially, with Mexico's efforts to find peaceful solutions to the Central American crisis.

In late February Mexican President José López Portillo launched a major initiative aimed at bringing about negotiated solutions for three "knots" of tension in Central America. He offered Mexico's good offices as a mediator to begin talks between the Salvadoran government and the guerrillas, between the United States and Cuba, and between the United States and Nicaragua. At first, the United States ignored the Mexican initiative, but López Portillo's proposal elicited considerable support both in Europe and among the administration's congressional critics. Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Salvadoran left accepted the proposal almost immediately, and the Reagan administration was put in the unenviable position of appearing to prefer war to a negotiated peace. Nearly a month later, when the administration's public relations campaign had come to its untimely end, the United States cautiously accepted Mexico's offer to help initiate talks with Cuba and Nicaragua.⁵³

The administration did not, however, expect that much would come of the talks. It maintained its policy with regard to both Nicaragua and Cuba, insisting that any improvement in their relations with the United States would have to be preceded by an end to their arms shipments to El Salvador. As both Cuba and Nicaragua denied that they were making such shipments, there seemed to be little to discuss.

Several contacts between U.S. and Cuban officials produced no progress whatsoever, and the administration insisted on keeping talks with Nicaragua at the level of ambassadorial exchanges that did little

more than restate the respective positions of the two nations. Once the results of the Salvadoran elections had reduced the domestic pressure on the administration's Central American policy, Washington evinced little interest in pursuing serious discussions on any front.⁵⁴

By mid-1982, Central America had disappeared from public attention in the United States, supplanted in the headlines by other world crises. Within the region itself, however, the conflicts were no less acute. Border tensions between Nicaragua and Honduras escalated in tandem with a rising tide of exile forays into Nicaragua from Honduran sanctuaries. At the same time, Honduran troops intervened in the Salvadoran civil war more directly and openly than ever before. These developments, along with a gradually deepening war in Guatemala, threatened to engulf the entire region in armed conflict—potentially a conflict in which neither right nor left paid much heed to international boundaries.

The danger of a regionalized war also carried with it the seeds of potential confrontation between the superpowers. Nicaragua's close and growing friendship with Cuba, particularly their military cooperation, raised the possibility that Cuba might come directly to Nicaragua's aid in the event of a war between Nicaragua and Honduras. Throughout early 1982 the Reagan administration warned that Nicaragua was intent upon acquiring MiG fighter aircraft, probably from Cuba. Some officials advocated, within administration councils, that such a development should be met by the United States with air strikes against Nicaraguan airfields.⁵⁵ Washington also seemed prepared to take military action to prevent the deployment of Cuban troops to Nicaragua. As this would require some sort of blockade of Cuba, it would violate the U.S.-Soviet agreement that ended the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and would thereby provoke a confrontation between the United States and the USSR.

Conclusion

For the Reagan administration, the Nicaraguan revolution and the Sandinistas' subsequent friendship with Cuba raised anew the specter of Soviet subversion in the Western Hemisphere. With almost all Third World conflicts viewed through the prism of East-West rivalry, Washington became convinced that Soviet proxies in Havana, acting through Cuban puppets in Managua, were intent upon spreading revolution throughout Central America. Nicaragua's friendship with Cuba was thus seen as *prima facie* evidence that the Nicaraguans endangered vital U.S. interests.

This apocalyptic vision was reinforced by the fact that both Cuba and Nicaragua did, indeed, support the Salvadoran guerrillas politically and to some extent materially. It was strengthened by the fact of Nicaragua's military buildup, undertaken with Cuban assistance and Soviet-bloc arms. The possibility that the Nicaraguans were arming themselves out of fear that the United States would attack them was not seen as credible in Washington. Nor were Nicaragua's denials that it was involved in arming the Salvadoran left.

Ironically, Washington's deep fear of "another Cuba" in Latin America made normal relations between the United States and Nicaragua virtually impossible once the Sandinistas began to develop a close relationship with Cuba. As hostility between Nicaragua and the United States escalated, the Sandinistas were pushed even further into the arms of Cuba and the Soviet Union for lack of any alternative. Although the Cubans warned the Sandinistas of the costs and dangers of following the Cuban path of development, the hostility of Washington seemed destined to make Nicaragua another Cuba after all.

Notes

1. Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977), p. 213.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 225; U.S. Congress, House, *Foreign Assistance and Related Agencies Appropriations for 1978: Hearings, Part 3* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 581.
3. Millett, *Dynasty*, p. 225; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 1303.
4. Millett, *Dynasty*, p. 225.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226; Thomas, *Cuba*, pp. 1355ff.; "Central American Fixer," *NACLA's Latin American and Empire Report*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (February 1976):13-16.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Millett, *Dynasty*, p. 258.
8. *Hearings, Part 3*, p. 582.
9. Millett, *Dynasty*, pp. 233, 242-243.
10. *Newsweek*, July 9, 1979.
11. *New York Times*, November 12, 1978; *Washington Post*, May 24, June 8, and July 24, 1979.
12. This was the gist of the widely disseminated CIA report of May 2, 1979, on Cuban aid to Central American guerrillas.
13. Edén Pastora ("Comandante Cero"), as quoted in *Newsweek*, July 9, 1979; *Washington Post*, July 24, 1979.
14. *Washington Post*, June 26, 1979.
15. This phrase is from the CIA report cited in note 12 above.
16. *Washington Post*, June 23, 1979.

17. *New York Times*, June 22, 1979; *International Bulletin*, July 2, 1979.
18. *New York Times*, June 23, 1979.
19. *Washington Post*, July 27, 1979.
20. *Granma Resumen Semanal* (Havana, Cuba), August 5, 1979.
21. *New York Times*, July 29, 1979.
22. *Washington Post*, August 11, 1979; Richard C. Leonard, "Para Nicaragua todo nuestro apoyo," *Bohemia* (Havana, Cuba), August 10, 1979, pp. 56-59.
23. *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.
24. *Washington Post*, September 1, 1979.
25. The best description of the literacy crusade is Valerie Miller's "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), pp. 259-272.
26. *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Washington Post*, April 7, 1982.
29. *Ibid.*, November 9, 1980.
30. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1982.
31. Margaret D. Wilde, "The Sandinistas and the Costeños," *Caribbean Review*, Vol. 10, no. 4 (Fall 1981):8-11.
32. William M. LeoGrande, "The United States and the Nicaraguan Revolution," in Walker, *Nicaragua*, pp. 63-78.
33. The policy of making El Salvador a "test case" was announced initially in not-for-attribution press briefings. See *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, February 14, 1981.
34. U.S. Department of State, *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, Special Report Number 80, February 23, 1981.
35. In April 1982 a senior Cuban official met with a group of U.S. foreign policy specialists in Cuba and admitted that Cuba had provided "material assistance" to the Salvadoran guerrillas prior to January 1981. Seweryn Bialer and Alfred Stepan, "Cuba, the U.S., and the Central American Mess," *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 1982, pp. 17-21.
36. *Washington Post*, February 24, 1982.
37. The phrase "going to the source" was first used by Haig in late February. See *Washington Post*, February 29, 1982.
38. U.S. strategy is described in length in the *Washington Post*, March 4, 1982.
39. The course of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations in 1981 is outlined in the *New York Times*, December 3, 1981.
40. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1981.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Newsweek*, March 22, 1982.
43. *New York Times*, November 23, 1981.
44. *Washington Post*, March 4, 1982.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*

47. See the remarks by U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, CIA Director William Casey, and former Secretary of State Haig as reported in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, February 21 and March 1, 2, and 5, 1982.

48. *Washington Post*, March 1, 1982.

49. The text of the aerial photography briefing is in the *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.

50. *Boston Globe*, March 11, 1982.

51. *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.

52. *Washington Post*, March 13, 1982.

53. *Ibid.*, February 22, 1982.

54. *Ibid.*, April 4 and May 1, 1982.

55. *Ibid.*, March 4, 1982.