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The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC 02972-84
18 May 1984

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director for Intelligence
Director, Office of African and Latin American Analysis

SUBJECT: Ways to Examine Alternative Strategies in
Central America

REFERENCE: My memorandum of 28 March 1984, Questions
About Current Strategy in Central America

1. While I thought I had said the last on this, the footnote on Page 3 of the memorandum referred to above hangs in my mind, and I should like to be rid of it. You need not refer back to that paper. The point concerns future moves on the part of the United States, or by the Sandinistas, the Cubans, or the FDR/FMLN, and the need for us to do the best possible analysis of the results of moves open to us or to anticipate and consider replies to moves made by our opponents.

2. Insufficient discussion in government circles of the options available to the United States means that we have a weak appreciation of opportunities open to us or perils in our path. On the other hand, we are paying insufficient attention to moves the others can come up with that might influence the outcome in Central America.

- We may be paralyzed by our own assumptions--an historian spoke to us recently of false options and false alternatives.
- Conventional wisdom holds that a US invasion of Nicaragua would be costly to the United States in terms of lives and of Latin American public opinion and would result in a long drawn-out struggle against Sandinista guerrillas in the hills. Should we accept this?
- Negotiations with the Sandinistas, held by dominant opinion in the Administration to be equivalent to surrender in Central America, is a forbidden topic. Should it continue not to be discussed?

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3. These are the two most stark examples of choices available to the United States. Neither one is discussed openly--openly in discreet government meetings, that is--the first for fear of a leak suggesting invasion is being considered, on the one hand, and the other from fear of retribution by those who would forbid thoughts about negotiations.

4. The serious enterprise on which we are embarked in Central America deserves a full exploration of the alternatives open to us without the ideological bars to rational discussion that seem so far to have prevented examination of the full range of options. Such considerations go beyond the proper sphere of the Intelligence Community but that does not mean that the Intelligence Community cannot participate in the process.

- Two different games on Central America were run in the past year at Harry Rowen's and Fred Ikle's initiative. Both intelligence and policy people participated, and the latter in particular benefitted from the experience, suggesting a follow-up. It would be helpful if the policymakers were to frame the scenario for a third game on invasion or on negotiations.
- Analysts can contribute importantly to the question of options open to our opponents in Central America through intelligence assessments of Cuban or FDR/FMLN intentions and capabilities.

The threat of losing the useful pressure on the Sandinistas that the insurgency in Nicaragua has provided--and this would be an important loss that would need to be put into any calculations of the future--makes it all the more urgent that we widen our vision. It would be more than sad should we look back to see that we lost the initiative in Central America because of needless restraints we had imposed on ourselves.

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SUBJECT: Ways to Examine Alternative Strategies in Central America

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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

National Intelligence Officers

NIC 01986-84
28 March 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: John Horton
National Intelligence Officer for Latin America

SUBJECT: Questions about Current United States Strategy in
Central America

1. The current aims of the United States in Central America are to encourage the government of El Salvador to survive, preventing the FDR/FMLN from taking power, and to furnish sufficient services to its people to draw their loyalty and support. With Nicaragua, we want the Sandinista regime to stop supporting the guerrillas in El Salvador, to sever or modify its ties to the Soviet Union and Cuba, to cut back on the level of its arms and armed forces so as lessen the threat to its neighbors, and to maintain pluralism--as is sometimes stated--or to provide a free rein for the opposition--somewhat different--to compete in a democratic framework. We hope thus to control insurgency in the region and to prevent its spread. An unexpressed objective is to force the Sandinistas to dissolve their government, to step down. Being unexpressed, it is little discussed and therefore not critically examined in our government.

2. Current strategy is to persuade the Salvadorans to form a government respectable enough to allow the United States--the Congress--to support it, one effective enough to prosecute the counterinsurgency by political and by military means, satisfying the people in the meantime by providing them a sufficient livelihood and the promise of security. In Nicaragua, we are using military and economic pressure, principally, to persuade the Sandinistas to move toward meeting our aims. (The one step they have taken so far--that of elections--may have been taken more at the behest of the Europeans than as a direct result of our pressure and this step, once taken, may prove to benefit the Sandinistas' image, in the short run. If the society stays as open as it is now, we shall have lost little ground.)

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3. El Salvador is more important to the United States than is Nicaragua. That is, keeping the FDR/FMLN from taking power in El Salvador is more important to the United States than is forcing the Sandinistas to change their ways. The two situations are closely connected, of course, especially by the safehaven for the FDR/FMLN in Nicaragua and the support that flows from there to the guerrillas in El Salvador. That support is crucial¹ to the survival of the guerrillas and thus crucial to the success of the counterinsurgency in El Salvador. And the crucial question is: When will this privilege be denied the guerrillas? The question of time is important because an indefinitely extended struggle in El Salvador would probably exhaust the patience of the United States which seems to be incapable of giving consistent support to military endeavors of any duration. A wave of political righteousness demands that our clients be deserving of our help; cultural differences lead us to challenge their values. Overselling of the cause breeds skepticism and any suggestion of protracted struggle causes dismay. Just as delicate a weight in the balance is the morale of the government and armed forces and people of El Salvador. Continued hardship with no hint of an eventual settlement may erode their will. They--and the Hondurans, too--may increasingly desire an accommodation with Nicaragua. Resentment may follow if they suspect that the United States is playing its own ideological contest over their heads while using Central Americans as pawns.²

3. There are reasons to question, then, whether United States support and instruction of the armed forces in El Salvador can be continued and whether it will lead to victory over the guerrillas and whether it can be useful enough soon enough to prevent a critical sagging of morale in El Salvador.³

1. The assumption that this support is crucial either to the guerrillas or to the ability of the government of El Salvador to put down the insurgency needs to be examined. For instance, some may say that the insurgency can be defeated without stopping this support from Nicaragua. Others may say that the government of El Salvador will not be able to defeat the guerrillas even if this haven is denied the FMLN. Time is a consideration here, as discussed above.
2. Peace--whatever that means--is attractive. Those who suspect the Christian Democrats of being "soft" on the FMLN are aware that there is a desire among them to reach an understanding at least with the more flexible elements of the guerrilla factions, probably representing a widespread yearning for an end to the fighting.
3. A current assessment of the Salvadoran armed forces suggests the need to question their ability to improve in time--faster than the opposition--to defeat the FMLN.

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4. Support flows to the guerrillas from Nicaragua and from behind the Sandinistas, Cuba.⁴ "Going to the source" whether it be Cuba or Nicaragua once was an attractive thought that proved to be beyond our political reach. The inability to bring the full military or materiel power of the United States to bear on the problem is intensely frustrating and tempts us constantly to consider how force can be used decisively.⁵

5. Short of cutting the Gordian Knot the United States is left with considering how to bring the power it does have to bear on the situation. If it is correct to say that saving El Salvador is our first concern, and that the support to the FMLN from Nicaragua is crucial, it follows that we should concentrate on stopping that support and closing that haven, forcing the guerrillas to exist on their own in El Salvador. If supplies continue to be sent from outside, at least they would be kept from the present comparatively easy routes.

6. Our pressure on Nicaragua, particularly from the insurgency and from the spectacular attacks on economic targets, has been effective to a degree but not to the point of forcing the Sandinistas to agree to stop supporting the guerrillas--despite some moves in this direction for propaganda purposes--let alone gaining our other aims with Nicaragua. The Nicaraguans have endured years of hardship since the earthquake, followed by the war against the Somoza government: mismanagement and the insurgency have made living even harder. The government and the people are probably capable of living this way indefinitely, getting just enough support from others to survive at a low level. Both in our expressions of policy and in our private estimates of Nicaraguan vulnerability we have said and found that the results of our pressures are limited in what they can accomplish. We must ask also how long the pressures can be kept up, what we shall have to bargain with when their effects fade, what we shall have to show for the effort if no verifiable and tangible concessions are exacted from the Sandinistas.

7. The Grenada syndrome--let's call it, although it started in July before the October invasion and continues still--has caused the Sandinistas to fear invasion by the United States even if some, such as Tomas Borge, might welcome it as the final searing experience needed to set Nicaragua on a pure revolutionary path. Here again we need to ask how long the fear can last and how long the United States can wait to take advantage of it. My answer is that we can reach a time when fear is slight and pressures have relaxed, and we shall be in a poor position to bargain.

4. The Soviet position in Central America is an enviable one. The Soviets are doing nothing in or for Nicaragua that they cannot readily abandon at low cost to the Soviet Union. Their stepping back from Central America would not change the problem for the United States. The United States, on the other hand, is in no position to abandon El Salvador or to turn its back on Central America.
5. To the extent that the commitment of the United States armed forces to either El Salvador or Nicaragua is an appealing course, a study of the gains and consequences should precede serious consideration, both through gaming and through intelligence assessments. If these processes do not give clear answers, they do throw light on opportunities as well as difficulties.

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8. At this time, both pressures and the Grenada syndrome provide opportunities to the United States to exact concessions from Nicaragua, if not from the FDR/FMLN (the latter might be susceptible to defections in a different climate). The concessions that can be expected are as limited as the pressures that can force these concessions. The Sandinistas will not step down--they do not hold their own positions to be negotiable--nor will they metamorphose into a friendly bunch.

9. Having spoken before of ways to approach agreements with the Sandinistas, I shall not go over that ground again, but rather simply say that our present course seems to me to lead to loss or an insupportable long stalemate--perhaps that is the same thing--in El Salvador with the Sandinistas getting off scot free--a failure of policy, in short. The alternative is a chance to win in El Salvador, buying the time needed by pursuing a course which would quiet influential critics in the United States and our current political stalemate. Negotiating a cutting of support to the guerrillas would cause distrust between the FDR/FMLN and the Sandinistas, the former fearing the latter will desert them in their own interest. Negotiations themselves would heighten the differences within the Sandinista Directorate if some in the Nicaraguan government see opportunities for another future than their current isolation and subservience to the Cubans. We might get the Sandinistas and the Cubans arguing about Central America if the FDR/FMLN is abandoned by the Sandinistas.

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SUBJECT: QUESTIONS ABOUT CURRENT UNITED STATES STRATEGY
IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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