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... Why Not Try Diplomacy Instead?

By Wayne S. Smith

WASHINGTON — The United States' choices in Nicaragua are not, as the Administration asserts, between aiding the "contras" and seeing the whole region engulfed by Communism. There are alternatives, if we would but grasp them. Among the most promising are the efforts of most Latin American countries to produce a diplomatic solution.

Meeting in Caraballeda, Venezuela, on Jan. 11 and 12, eight major countries — Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay — agreed on steps to revitalize the Contadora process. Two days later, five Central American states pledged their full support.

Believing that the United States' aid to the contras and its refusal to re-

Revive the Contadora process

sume bilateral negotiations with the Sancinistas were two of the principal obstacles to a settlement, on Feb. 10, the foreign ministers of eight Latin American countries converged on Washington to urge Secretary of State George P. Shultz to halt aid and return to the negotiating table.

Mr. Shultz refused, and the President showed his outright disdain for the Latin American effort by going ahead with his request for \$100 million in contra aid — aid that the Contadora countries regard as totally incompatible with their own peace effort. Colombia's foreign minister labeled President Reagan's action "intransigent and extreme." The presidents of several other countries said the aid request was a mistake that would produce tragic results.

The United States is now virtually isolated on this issue. With the possible exceptions of El Salvador, Paraguay and Chile, no Latin American country supports our contra policy. Even Honduras is threatening not to allow any more aid to be shipped across its territory. In the face of this united opposition, the best the Administration can do is to claim that the

Wayne S. Smith is adjunct professor of Latin American studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

Latin Americans say one thing in public, quite another in private.

Even if that were true, it would leave Washington in the dubious position of basing policy on something whispered furtively and off the record. Few, however, believe it is true. As Representative Michael D. Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, put it last week: "Every Latin American government official I have talked to has said the same thing in private that they say in public: that is, they disagree with our policy."

Only the Administration's intransigence is blocking a Contadora agreement, which would address all our security concerns. Managua has emphasized that it is ready to resume talks at any time within the Contadora context. It was prepared to sign a Contadora agreement in September 1984 and would be prepared to do so now provided Washington were still willing to sign a protocol committing itself to respect that agreement.

Obviously, Nicaragua cannot agree to reduce its armed forces and send home Soviet and Cuban military personnel unless the United States agrees to matching steps in the area. But the Administration refuses to take any action unless the Sandinistas first sit down with the contras and negotiate the holding of new elections. To insist on this as a condition is to block any progress, for the Sandinistas regard the contras as isolated mercenaries organized by the Central Intelligence Agency, led by far too many National Guards from the Somoza regime and representing no one inside Nicaragua. Many observers in the United States agree with that assessment. That's one reason Congress does not want to give the contras more aid.

The Administration is right about one thing: national reconciliation is needed in Nicaragua. The Contadora countries recognize this and are trying to bring about an internal dialogue. They do not, however, insist that the contras be included; rather, it would be between the Sandinistas and the opposition parties in Nicaragua.

Would that the Latin Americans could impel the Administration to a solution in Central America as the Filipinos did in the Philippines. Unfortunately, the Administration has a far greater capacity to gum up the works in Central America. So long as it is aiding the contras and refusing to associate itself with a Contadora agreement, there can be no hope of a settlement. Tragically, by so arrogantly blocking the diplomatic initiatives of the very countries it claims to be defending, the Administration dooms them to continued turmoil and bloodshed. □