

TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

MANILA, MANAGUA

We stood for democracy in the Philippines
We have to stand for democracy in
Nicaragua

—President Reagan

The analogy is preposterous. In Haiti and the Philippines we withdrew our support—at last—from dictatorships we'd embraced for decades. In Nicaragua Reagan wants us to finance a guerrilla war against the government. To subsume these two exercises under the general rubric of "intervention" (or "assist[ing] in the transition to democracy," as this week's NEW REPUBLIC editorial delicately puts it) is to abandon all capacity for making distinctions. Yet this is the lesson that defenders of aid to the *contras*—and of a generally belligerent foreign policy—want us to draw from the events of the past few weeks.

The United States never "intervened" against Ferdinand Marcos when he still had a grip on power. Far from it. Less than a year ago, the administration was asking for a 150 percent increase in military aid to his regime (using arguments similar to the ones now made for aid to the *contras*). It's said now that Marcos was completely out of touch with reality by the end. But who can blame him for thinking that Washington wouldn't begrudge him a little stolen election? Who can suppose that the United States would have given him the push if the Filipinos themselves hadn't forced our hand? As for Nicaragua, if all Reagan proposed was offering Daniel Ortega a free plane ride out and a safe haven for his collection of designer sunglasses, few would object.

Ironically, even as they draw a fatuous parallel between the Philippines and Nicaragua, conservative distinction-makers are working overtime to explain

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why the lessons of the Philippines don't apply to more obvious places like South Korea and South Africa, where we continue to maintain friendly relations with oppressive regimes, hoping that "quiet diplomacy" and "constructive engagement" will do the trick.

It should be obvious—but apparently it isn't—that trying to start a war is a graver step than trying to stop one. The first step isn't always wrong and the second isn't always right. But what's missing from the case for the *contras* is any sense that war is not a chess game. The inevitable ambiguities (Are the Sandinistas committed Leninists? Are the *contras* committed democrats?) and uncertainties (What can this war achieve?) ought to weigh more heavily when you're fomenting violence. According to the *Washington Times*, administration officials have hinted strongly that the Marxist Sandinista government is employing subtle methods to manipulate press reports on Nicaragua. "Subtle methods, the bounders! No one can accuse the administration of subtle methods in its campaign for *contra* aid. The reference to 'subtle methods' concerns a document outlining an alleged Sandinista 'disinformation campaign' against Reagan's proposal. The administration has made a great to-do about this document. Revealing an unexpected flair for drama, CIA director William Casey showed copies in plain brown wrappers to some members of Congress at a White House briefing. But they won't release the document, saying it's classified. Nevertheless, Reagan officials have been sharing the contents with friendly journalists. (This from an administration that wants lie detector tests for thousands of government employees to prevent classified leaks.)

So what does the mystery document say? A "senior administration official" summarizes: "What you have here is a Communist government, allied to the Soviet Union, undertaking a very well-organized effort, with the help of certain Americans, to change a vote in Congress. You mean, like the Marxist government in Angola hiring the lobbying firm of Reagan's buddy Robert Gray, for \$50,000 a month, to campaign against aid to the rebels in Angola? Something like that? Hot stuff. The notion that there's something illicit about a foreign government enlisting sympathetic Americans in an effort, organized or otherwise, to affect legislation will be news to supporters of Israel, among others.

Many aspects of Reagan's own campaign for *contra* aid might be called "disinformation" if the deception weren't so transparent. The administration clings to the fiction that the part of its proposed aid that isn't actually going to buy weapons is in some sense "humanitarian"—a distinction that must create work for dozens of guerrilla accountants. (And one that was invented, for American fund-raising purposes, by the terrorist Irish Republican Army.)

The administration also still claims that its goal is not to bring down the Nicaraguan government. "We continue to believe that a negotiated settlement represents the ultimate hope for peaceful change," Secretary of State Shultz said March 3, though asking Reaganites what the Nicaraguan government could negotiate short of its own demise brings nothing but winks.

My favorite logical contortion is how administration supporters explain away the fact that Nicaragua's neighbors and all the major Latin American nations oppose the *contra* war: they secretly support it, you understand, but they're afraid to say so, for fear of the Sandinistas' wrath. Let's see, now. American right-wingers can divine these leaders' true desire, and report it in the newspapers, but the Sandinistas remain hoodwinked? Or alternatively, the Sandinistas, although bent on regional conquest, will give any country a pass whose leaders demur to say publicly what they are known to think privately? And the Latin leaders are so sure the Sandinistas are obsessed with this rather fine point that they will risk losing American support for the *contra* campaign that they actually—secretly—think it essential to their survival? I might shake my head in disbelief at the workings of the Latin mind, if this whole conceit weren't actually a product of North American thinking.

Support for the *contras* is one of the rare issues in the course of the Reagan administration where the president will have to change the public's mind if he wants to get his way. Reagan's vaunted "leadership" has consisted, by and large, of leading people where they already want to go. But there is no national support for starting a war in Nicaragua. White House supporters portray the opponents of *contra* aid as a timorous liberal elite, paralyzed by Vietnam. In fact, the *contra* campaign itself is almost entirely a creation of elite opinion. A higher quality of disinformation will be required to change that.