Nicaragua 1981-1990

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Nicaraguans rose in revolt against the tyrannical and corrupt Somoza dynasty in 1979. Most Americans welcomed the change; however, a new regime took over, a coalition dominated by the Sandinistas. After the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, President Carter authorized the CIA to provide financial and other support to their opponents. At the same time, Washington pressured the Sandinistas to include certain individuals from the democratic opposition in their new government. Although these tactics failed, the Carter administration did not refuse to give aid to Nicaragua. In January 1981, President Ronald Reagan took office under a Republican platform which condemned the Marxist Sandinista’s takeover of Nicaragua. All forms of assistance to the Sandinistas were immediately cut off. Among the many measures undertaken, Nicaragua was excluded from US government programs which promote American investment and trade; sugar imports from Nicaragua were slashed by 90 percent; and, without excessive subtlety but with notable success, Washington pressured the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, and the European Common Market to withhold loans to Nicaragua.

Complaints about covert action fall into two broad categories; while others argue that it is inconsistent with American values, others including former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Stansfield Turner, contend that it usually accomplishes little and often backfires. Harvard lecturer Gregory Treverton states in his book titled Covert Action that some idealists believe the successes of covert action seem ambiguous or transitory in retrospect, and is accomplished at some cost to what we hold dear as a
people and to America's image in the world. The Iran-Contra debacle and the debate over aid to the Nicaraguan rebels sparked calls for stricter congressional oversight of the CIA and even a ban on covert action (Walcott 1988). The CIA was conducting operations in Nicaragua to aid the Contras in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinistas, who were fully backed by the Soviets. There is a lesson one could learn from the CIA’s support to the Contras, which demonstrates why that covert action was bound for doom – the CIA had spent a significant amount of resources in Afghanistan, supporting the Mujahidin fighters prior to their embarkation on the mission in Nicaragua.

One could assess that the CIA, during their decision making process, had somewhat made the comparison of potential outcome in Nicaragua to the achievements or outcome they were experiencing in Afghanistan during that same period. One thing that they may have missed was that even though both operations were targeted at crippling the Soviet influence and eventually eradicating its Presence in both countries, there really was no logic in the assessment of the centers of gravity in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. Mujahidin fighters were fighting to prevent a Soviet take over and were willing to go the course even without the support of the US. Contras were fighting their own countrymen, the Sandinistas; their center of gravity was populace support. In order for the Contras to succeed in Nicaragua, they would have to convince a significant portion of the Nicaraguan population that they were the best fit to lead their country. That was almost impossible considering that the Sandinista government was placed in power by the Nicaraguans and not any external entity. The CIA or the US would have influenced the situation on the ground in Nicaragua better had they taken the population
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into account. Attempting to oust a voted government through the use of rebels was a disaster in the making.

President Reagan put his presidency at risk by circumventing Congress; his aides solicited contributions for the Contras from foreign governments in favor of US endeavors in Nicaragua and South America. Recklessly, the President permitted the secret sales of arms to Iran, with profits diverted to the Contras. The massive scandal forced the flustered Administration to shift its stance on Nicaragua; it then insisted that it truly favored a two-track strategy: diplomacy combined with aid to the Contras.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Wolcott (1988) described the major difference between the Contras and the Mujahidin fighters in his article to be the level of determination to fight. The Afghans would continue to fight even without the US support. The Reagan administration conceded that the Contras, on the other hand, could not survive without American military, economic, and political support. Therefore the lesson was that the US could not create the will to win, but was determined to support such commitment. Wolcott also described the Afghans' fierce independence and even their hostility to the West which were regarded as assets and proof that they were not simply tools of the CIA. The managers of the CIA’s Afghan program had tolerated the feuding and the anti-Western sentiments of the mujahidin groups; but in Central America the CIA had spent two years vainly trying to force the unpredictable former Sandinista leader Eden Pastora to throw in with the US backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force. Nicaragua presented challenges that were far more different to what the CIA had previously dealt with in Afghanistan.
Johnson (2007) identified the effects of the arms transfers to Iran and the activities of the National Security Council (NSC) staff in support of the Contras as the contributing factors to the failure of the covert action and abuse of policy, which ran directly counter to the Administration's own policies on terrorism, the Iran/Iraq war, and Military support to Iran. Those inconsistencies were never resolved and their consequences were not fully realized which eventually resulted in a US policy that worked against itself. Congress was not well informed during the course of the operation; it is still not known to what extent the president was aware of the development of this covert action. The lack of policy oversight encouraged poor accountability and eventually resulted in the failure to achieve the intended goals.

Risen (1998) explains that according to a declassified report, despite requests for information from Congress, the CIA repeatedly ignored or failed to investigate allegations of drug trafficking by the anti-Sandinista rebels of Nicaragua in the 1980's. In a blunt and often critical report, the CIA’s inspector general determined that the agency did not inform Congress of all allegations or information it had received indicating that contra-related organizations or individuals were involved in drug trafficking. It is quite evident that the CIA was also fixated on ousting a Soviet sponsored regime out of the Nicaraguan political sphere at whatever cost; they chose to ignore rather than investigate allegations of drug trafficking by the Contras for as long as the Contras were willing to fight Sandinistas for power.

Mitgang (1991) described that almost throughout the Iran-Contra affairs President Reagan made policy without Congress or the National Security Council. In the wake of the Iran-Contra quagmire, President Reagan had signed the Boland Amendment to the
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Defense Appropriations Act for 1983, which prohibited the CIA and Defense Department from using any funds for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua or provoking a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras. This report of events also highlights the implementation of a policy that worked against itself; some political analysts raised the issue of impeachment, expressing the view that Iran-Contra was a greater offense to the Republic during the Reagan Presidency than Watergate was during the Nixon Presidency.

Rosenthal (1987) highlighted the Iran-contra hearings which raised fundamental questions about the formulation and conduct of foreign policy by a democracy. Those questions included whether it is possible to justify lying to and misleading Congress, circumventing the foreign policy process, and keeping the Cabinet members and even the President in the dark about major decisions to preserve secrecy. Other questions that were generated were what the Iran-contra affair meant to the future of the relations between the legislative and executive branches of government and what the proper role of covert action is. It is imperative that the president and the rest of the policy makers attempt to interpret the long-term effects of any given covert operation even though projecting the effects of an operation 20 to 30 years away can be a challenge.

Walcott (1986) described that war in Nicaragua would be a test of the US intelligence community's ability to predict how the Soviets and their allies would respond to American challenges in the Third World. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) prepared by the CIA showed that if the Sandinistas were to be in serious trouble, neither the Soviet Union nor Cuba would risk a confrontation with the US to bail them out. That analysis was almost universally shared within the intelligence community.
III. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

Covert action seeks to influence political events directly and has the characteristic of anonymity, namely that the role of the government is not readily or overtly acknowledged. Deniability is the single distinguishing feature of covert action if there is to be useful discussion of the action or events leading to such action. There are only two legitimate reasons for carrying out an operation covertly rather than overtly. One is when open knowledge of US responsibility would make an operation infeasible; the other valid reason for carrying out an operation covertly is to avoid retaliation or to control the potential for escalation.

Defense Department estimated Soviet military aid to Nicaragua through the first nine months of the Sandinistas regime at $440 million, and an additional $330 million in economic assistance. The Soviet military aid arrived in 62 naval shipments of more than 23,000 tons. US intelligence analysts expected the Soviets and their allies to send the Sandinistas more guns, helicopters, and perhaps more advisers to help turn back the Contras. The Soviets and Cubans had built an intelligence gathering facility near Ocotal, in northern Nicaragua, to intercept rebel radio messages, and US officials claimed Soviet pilots were helping to prepare new MI-8 helicopters for battle.

With regard to the Iran-Contra scandal as revealed by the findings of the inquiry initiated by President Reagan and the National Security Council (NSC); according to the findings - Report of the President's Special Review Board (Tower Commission, 1987), the Iran initiative ran directly counter to the administration's own policies on terrorism which prohibited the US from making compromises and or concessions with terrorist organizations, the Iran/Iraq war, and military support to Iran. The result taken as a whole
Henry Hama was a US policy that worked against itself (Johnson 2007). Congress was not well informed during the course of the operation; it is still not known to what extent the president was aware of the development of this covert action. The ultimate power to formulate domestic policy resides in the Congress, the primary responsibility for the formulation and implementation of national security policy falls on the President (Johnson 2007). The lack of policy oversight encouraged poor accountability and eventually resulted in the failure to achieve the intended goals which was to free US hostages from Iran. The administration had also banned any operations to support political activity in Nicaragua; therefore if the sole intent was to free hostages, an arms-for-hostages deal would have fixed the problem in the short term.

There were major differences between the Contras and the Mujahidin fighters, notably in the Mujahidin case, where the Afghans were fighting to drive the Soviets out of their land. In Nicaragua the Contras were fighting to oust a revolutionary government that, although it had broken many of its promises, was swept into power with broad popular and regional support; it was easier to argue that the Soviets should be driven from Kabul than the Sandinistas from Managua (Walcott 1988). President Carter was very much fixated on the movements and expansion of the Soviets that he felt obligated to carry out covert action to eliminate the presence of the Soviets and Soviet influence from South America; it is fair to assess that any American president during that era would have more than likely authorized and carried out that decision. Contras can be compared to the CIA force of Cuban exiles during the Bay of Pigs operation; they did not have as much support in Nicaragua as the Sandinista government they felt objected to oust with the support of the CIA or US.
It is very important to note that US objectives are what most people distinguished the successful Afghan operation from the unsuccessful Nicaraguan one. Despite years of rhetoric about interdicting Nicaraguan arms shipments to El Salvador and promoting a negotiated settlement, the aim of the secret war in Nicaragua had always been to oust the Sandinistas (Walcott 1988). In Afghanistan, the US objective initially was simply to make the Soviets pay for invading Afghanistan; and thereafter the goal transformed to forcing the Soviets out, and to create a pro-Western Afghanistan. According to Walcott, one of the essential requirements for a successful covert operation is knowing when to cash it in for a reasonable payoff. In Nicaragua, the Reagan administration ignored every opportunity to trade its support for the Contras for assurances that the Sandinistas would stop exporting their revolution.

The President’s Special Review Board (Tower Commission, Washington, DC, February 26, 1987) believed that failure to deal adequately with those contradictions resulted in large part from the flaws in the manner in which decisions were made; the established procedures for making national security decisions were ignored. Reviews of the initiative by all the NSC principals were too infrequent. The initiatives were not adequately assessed below the cabinet level; intelligence resources were underutilized. Applicable legal constraints were not adequately addressed; the entire operation was handled too informally, without adequate written records of what had been considered, discussed, and decided. That pattern persisted in the implementation of the Iran initiative. The NSC staff assumed direct operational control; the initiative fell within the traditional jurisdictions of the Departments of State, Defense, and the CIA. But for the most part, all those agencies were largely ignored. Great reliance was placed on a network of private
operators and intermediaries. According to Johnson, how the initiative was to be carried out never received adequate attention from the NSC principals or a tough working-level review. No periodic evaluation of the progress of the initiative was conducted; all those shortcomings resulted in an unprofessional and unsatisfactory operation.

The CIA was well aware that Congress had passed the law that prohibited conducting any military operations in Nicaragua, the Boland Amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act for 1983, and that Congress was not going to fund any operations carried out to oust the Sandinista government. President Reagan at the time wanted any Soviet influence in South America thwarted; therefore, there is a lot of implication from research that he had visibility on the CIA’s activities in Nicaragua. The CIA found a way to fund the Contras by taking profits from the Arms sales to Iran and redirecting the money to fund the Contras. Another challenge presented by the lack of accountability was the failure by the CIA to carefully monitor the Contras’ drug trafficking activities to and from El Salvador. There is also speculation that a lot of the money that was being used by the CIA to fund the Contras was in turn being used by the Contras for other activities unrelated to the covert action. Again, it is also fair to assess that the CIA was very concerned with placing the Contras in power that they purposely ignored the allegations of drug trafficking activities by the Contras. In an effort to oust a communist influenced government, the US created and empowered a drug cartel which ran operations not only in Nicaragua, but Honduras and El Salvador as well.

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secret sales of arms to Iran, with profits diverted to the Contras. The massive scandal forced the flustered Administration to shift its stance on Nicaragua; it then insisted that it truly favored a two-track strategy: diplomacy combined with aid to the Contras. President Arias shrewdly took advantage of the opening in 1987 to propose a regional peace plan. When the Tela accord was approved by the region's presidents, including Daniel Ortega, the White House went along with the agreement which had provisions to disband the Contras. The Nicaragua compromise was achieved by Central Americans; the Contra war ended and the global Soviet threat ended and Sandinistas lost much of their arrogance.

Even after spending more than $4 billion and 11 years trying to build democracy in Nicaragua, an estimated 400,000 citizens still did not have the identification cards required to cast a vote in national elections. Most of these disenfranchised Nicaraguans resided in the country's poor central, rural highlands and Atlantic lowlands, the safe haven of the famous Contra movement, named for its resistance to the Marxist Sandinistas who controlled the country in the 1980s.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

After the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, President Carter authorized the CIA to provide financial and other support to their opponents, the Contra rebels. At the same time, Washington pressured the Sandinistas to include certain individuals from the democratic opposition in their new government. One could assess that the CIA had somewhat made the comparison of the potential outcome in Nicaragua to the achievements or outcome they were experiencing in Afghanistan during that same period. One thing that they may have missed was that even though both operations were targeted
at crippling the Soviet influence and eventually eradicating its Presence in both countries, there really was no logic in the assessment of the centers of gravity in Nicaragua and Afghanistan. Mujahidin fighters were fighting to prevent a Soviet take over and were willing to go the course even without the support of the US. Contras were fighting their own countrymen, the Sandinistas; their center of gravity was populace support. In order for the Contras to succeed in Nicaragua, they would have to convince a significant portion of the Nicaraguan population that they were the best fit to lead their country. That was almost impossible considering that the Sandinista government was placed in power by the Nicaraguans and not any external entity. The CIA or the US would have influenced the situation on the ground in Nicaragua better had they taken the population into account. Attempting to oust a voted government through the use of rebels was a disaster in the making; they empowered a drug cartel that operated not only in Nicaragua, but Honduras, El Salvador, and other South American locations.

Covert action failure and or compromise could result in significant damage to the US policy and prestige and can also result in the accusation of activities that are immoral, illegal, and counterproductive to the long-term interests of the American people. Under current statute, the President is required to keep the congressional intelligence committees fully and currently informed of all covert actions and that any covert action finding shall be reported to the committees as soon as possible after such approval and before the initiation of the covert action authorized by the finding (Cumming 2010). Even with all the oversight and safeguards, there remains the possibility of operational failure due to the potential of espionage; because of these various measures of accountability,
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compartmentalization is a challenge and will continue to be so regardless of additional security measures.

V. REFERENCE LIST:


