OUTLAW STATES: THE UNITED STATES, NICARAGUA, AND THE COLD WAR
ROOTS OF THE WAR ON TERROR

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of PHILIP TRAVIS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

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In the 1980s, a terrorism crisis transformed U.S. foreign policy. The Reagan administration altered the old model of Cold War containment and constructed a new offensive policy to combat state sponsored terrorism. While the war on terrorism in the post September 11, 2001 world reflects an important moment in history, the roots lie in U.S. policy with Nicaragua following the overthrow of the Somoza regime in 1979.

The Reagan administration’s response to a global terrorism crisis involved the adoption of aggressive unilateral measures against states that were allegedly sponsors of terrorism. The Reagan administration argued that terrorism was a new tactic in an expanded Cold War that involved an alliance of radical Middle Eastern powers, communist nations, and Marxist revolutionaries. In order to respond effectively to this threat the Reagan administration adopted a new framework of intervention that involved hardline measures that challenged the norms of international behavior and marginalized the sovereign rights of nations allegedly involved in sponsoring terrorism.

In conjunction with its efforts to construct a hardline strategy with Nicaragua, the administration turned to a propaganda campaign in an effort to convince a skeptical Congress,
public and international community of the need to adopt an offensive policy against the Sandinistas. In this process, they used terrorism as a linguistic weapon that criminalized Nicaragua. The administration labeled Nicaragua a state sponsor of world terror and insisted on the right to take measures that included an array of military force options.

The case of Nicaragua is significant for three reasons: first, since the conflict with Nicaragua began as a defensive conflict to contain communism the transformation to an offensive war on terrorism in the mid-1980s is clear. Second, this case foreshadows how the United States deals with terror states today, with aggressive applications of hard power justified with a powerful rhetoric. Finally, Nicaragua is important because this case helps demonstrate the danger of military oriented wars on terrorism, which to date have created more problems than solutions.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Elizabeth, and my late father, Gary

Their support and encouragement as role models made this possible

In memory: Charles Gary Atkins Travis
Introduction

In 1989, ten years after the Nicaraguan Revolution, Orion Pictures produced a film titled Speedzone. This motion picture was the third of a trilogy of comedies made about the illegal cross-country motor race, “The Cannon Ball Run.” The movie featured a collection of well-known American personalities including John Candy, Brooke Shields, Carl Lewis, and the Smothers Brothers. One of the later scenes is rife with historical significance. In this portion of the movie, the Smothers Brothers, playing themselves, bought plane tickets in an attempt to cheat in the race by flying, rather than driving, from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. The flight attendant on the plane was the darling of the 1980s, Brooke Shields. As Shields made jokes and small talk about the lowly quality of the airline, a dark skinned man jumped up, drew two guns and shouted, “This is a hijack, we’re going to Nicaragua!” At this point, Shields and the pilots struggled with the Nicaraguan terrorist and Shields knocked the villain out with a food service tray. The interesting element in this scene is that no Nicaraguan had conducted a major airline hijack during the 1980s. Nor were there any other types of international terrorist acts that the Sandinistas directly perpetrated. Why did this popular image of a Nicaraguan terrorist exist in the mind of Americans in the late 1980s? The answer to this question rests at the heart of this project.¹

¹ Michael Short, Speed Zone, DVD, directed by Jim Drake (1989: Orion).
This is the story of the Cold War roots of the war on terror. Between 1983 and 1985, the Reagan administration confronted a terrorism crisis. Over these three years, the world witnessed a succession of terrorist acts: airline hijackings, bombings, shootings, kidnappings, and assassinations targeted U.S. citizens and their allies primarily in Latin America and the Middle East. This crisis caused a change in U.S. Cold War policy. It began in 1983 with the infamous bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, and the escalation of urban terrorism in El Salvador, but June 1985 was the peak moment for this deadly escalation in global violence. That month gunmen shot and killed six U.S. citizens in a café in San Salvador, El Salvador; terrorists hijacked TWA flight 847 in the most visible hijacking of the era; and a bomb exploded in the Frankfurt airport. These events provided a catalyst for the Reagan administration and a call to action. The manner in which the United States reacted to these events carried significant implications. The administration created a task force headed by Vice President George H. W. Bush to evaluate the United States’ response to this terrorism crisis. The acts, the task force agreed, presented a unique and dangerous threat to the United States. This group led the development of a policy approach first called for by Secretary of State George Shultz in 1984. The task force designed a new framework for intervention in order to respond to the problem of state sponsorship of terrorism.

This project is about the Cold War roots of the war on terrorism. One of the most significant scholars of this subject is Mahmood Mamdani, author of *Good Muslin, Bad Muslim* and *Saviors and Survivors*. Mamdani argues that the post-Vietnam era resulted in a change for U.S. foreign policy. He insists that the United States increasingly relied on proxy wars and offensive measures in their pursuit of hegemony in the world. Mamdani showed that Cold War
competition over areas in Africa, and the Middle East sowed the seeds of the modern crisis of terrorism by importing arms and exacerbating societal tensions. In his analysis, he applied an approach similar to Chalmers Johnson’s perspective on ‘blowback.’ Mamdani demonstrated that Cold War competition led to the expansion of the terrorism problem, an unintended consequence of U.S. policy. In *The Global Cold War* Odd Arne Westad made a similar argument. Westad insisted that fanatical Islam emerged in the 1980s as a significant byproduct of the Cold War. These scholars have successfully demonstrated that the war on terrorism today has roots in the Cold War.

I build on the argument for the Cold War roots of the war on terror by showing that Nicaragua was the site for the development of a new framework of intervention for dealing with unfriendly states in the developing world. In this project, I examine how the United States reacted to the terrorism crisis and the new threat posed by state sponsors of international terrorism as well as the causes and consequences of this change for U.S. domestic and international relations. The Reagan administration’s involvement with Nicaragua provides an early example of how the United States engages with states alleged to sponsor terrorism. The administration developed an aggressive war on terrorism that created a model for future dealings with alleged ‘rogue states’ that was three fold. This involved military, economic, and diplomatic pressure against state sponsors. Diplomatically the Reagan administration used threat, ultimatum, and a domestic and international language, the accusation of terrorism. This language

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criminalized Nicaragua. Economically, the Reagan administration applied strangling sanctions. Militarily, the United States resorted to a wide spectrum of force measures to undermine the regime. U.S. involvement with Nicaragua provides a look at the origins of a more aggressive United States in the post-Cold War world.

The subject of terrorism received limited attention from historians until September 2001. Since then scholars have considered terrorism in a number of different ways. Some have discussed the issue over the scope of the United States’ entire history. Topics like the Barbary Coast War and labor violence are areas that some scholars have analyzed. A few others have emphasized the modern controversy surrounding the war on terrorism. Some scholars have demonstrated the usage of terrorism by the United States as a way of aggressively eliminating opponents and obstacles to hegemony in the world. Most notably Greg Grandin, Mahmood Mamdani, Noam Chomsky, and John Collins took this position. On Central America and the Caribbean, Grandin argued that the Reagan administration used the region as a laboratory to test out a purposeful terror war as a method of expanding the power and hegemony of the United States. This project is not about whether or not the United States used terrorism as a weapon in its Central American policy. While there is no question that U.S. surrogates committed acts of violence against civilians, there is little evidence to suggest that the Reagan administration consciously sought a policy that utilized terrorist methods. In this project, I am concerned with the development of the Reagan administration’s war on terrorism against Nicaragua, which involved an invasive propaganda, and a new offensive framework for dealing with alleged state sponsors of terrorism.

In *The First War on Terrorism* political scientist David C. Wills details the development of the Reagan administration’s counterterrorism strategy. Like this project, Wills insists that the origins of the U.S. war on terrorism today are in the 1980s. Wills argues that the Reagan administration’s counterterrorism approach was contradictory and inconsistent. He demonstrates that President Reagan’s management style was largely to blame for such inconsistency. Reagan organized his staff loosely and rather than closely monitoring his administration, he allowed his underlings to act on individual motivations. This meant that whoever was in charge of responding to a particular incident carried a significant amount influence over how the administration handled the particular case. Wills indicts Reagan for not running a tighter operation and assuring that his officials carried out the policy doctrine in a coherent manner. *The First War on Terrorism* is a broad project that deals with several major terrorist incidents in the Middle East and examines the nature of the Reagan administration’s response to each event, which he argues varied and depended on the individuals in charge at the time. According to Wills the administration, from the beginning, claimed that their terrorism strategy involved two pillars: first, never negotiating with terrorists, and second responding to terrorist acts forcefully. Wills insists that the Reagan administration was never consistent in the pursuit of these two pillars, but was rather inconsistent due to the discontinuity and differences of opinion within the Reagan cabinet.

This project compliments Wills’ approach by providing a case study not covered in his book, the case of Nicaragua. However, in other ways this dissertation does something that Wills does not. Wills is particularly concerned with the manner in which the Reagan administration...
responded to individual terrorist attacks. Wills confidently states that the United States only responded militarily twice despite the roughly 600 terrorist acts committed during Reagan’s presidency. However, such an assertion is to miss the bigger point that the terrorism crisis of the 1980s as a whole encouraged the creation of a more aggressive framework of intervention that the United States put into action against Nicaragua. This project documents how the 1980s terrorism crisis drove the expansion of hardline and often military oriented tactics against Nicaragua. Wills tends to deal with the Reagan administration’s terrorism policy as though the basic framework remained unchanged throughout Reagan’s presidency. He applies the two pillars as static, which he then applies to several Middle Eastern and Mediterranean examples of terrorist acts. While these two pillars, responding forcefully and never negotiating, did remain foundational philosophical positions of the administration’s counterterrorism approach, its counterterrorism strategy developed over time. This dissertation emphasizes change over time. It demonstrates the manner in which the terrorism crisis of the 1980s changed the United States’ conflict with Nicaragua and altered how the United States used the language of terrorism to defend the deployment of a new more aggressive framework of intervention. Whereas Wills is correct to state that only 2% of terrorist attacks resulted in a U.S. military response, the terrorism

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7 Some scholars are reluctant to call the U.S.-Nicaragua story a war or a case in which the United States applied the military option. The Reagan administration, however, did use the military option in Nicaragua. The absence of American combat forces does not mean that the United States did not pursue a military-pressure-first strategy. The administration chose to fight a war through surrogates precisely because of the resistance of the American Congress and public. However, despite the absence of American combat forces, this was a war and the Reagan administration did consciously use the tool of military pressure in an effort to achieve their goals in the region. Regardless of nationality, when the United States uses soldiers to apply lethal force to an enemy over a consistent period of time it is a war.
This dissertation fits into an ongoing debate over the roots of the war on terrorism, and most specifically, the historical position of the George W. Bush administration’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Following those attacks, the United States targeted two alleged state sponsors of terrorism, Afghanistan and Iraq, and launched aggressive and large-scale military assaults on them. Since the outset of these conflicts, historians and political scientists have debated whether these developments represented a new precedent in U.S. international relations or a variation of older practices. Was the Bush Doctrine an unprecedented development or a variation of long established patterns in U.S. international relations? This dissertation contributes to this debate.

In 2006, Lloyd Ambrosius wrote a compelling article for *Diplomatic History* that summed up the debate over the historical position of the Bush Doctrine. Ambrosius addressed the arguments of several significant scholars like Melvin Leffler and John Lewis Gaddis, who insisted that President Bush’s invasion of Iraq was not new, that his pre-emptive operation was a variation of an older principle used in other ways by prior administrations. Ambrosius, however, claimed that these scholars discounted the nature of the means that the United States applied against Iraq. He insisted that the war in Iraq represented an unprecedented development because

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8 Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 10.

9 Even though the specific reason for the Iraq invasion of 2003 was to address the country’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program, a primary concern with this program was that Saddam Hussein’s regime might possibly give such weapons to terrorists that sought to attack the United States. This consideration factored into the alleged threat that the Bush administration constructed.
the United States utilized a full-scale conventional force against a sovereign nation that allegedly possessed a potential security threat.  

This dissertation accepts Ambrosius’ position that the means, an overt and large-scale conventional offensive, were an unprecedented form of pre-emption. There is no other case of the United States, during peacetime, organizing a pre-emptive war on this scale. However, I argue that the principle behind the invasion of Iraq and likewise that of Afghanistan was rooted in the 1980s as part of the Reagan administration’s own war on terrorism. The terrorism task force, led by Vice President George H. W. Bush, developed a new framework for intervention in 1985. The approach challenged the norms of international behavior and violated the sovereignty of independent states. However, the administration argued that such an approach was necessary because alleged state sponsors of international terrorism, or those with the capacity for this conduct, were criminal threats and only offensive measures designed to deter these actions were effective. The administration’s new approach relied on hardline policies and the application of an invasive propaganda campaign that used the language of terrorism as a way of encouraging greater acceptance from Congress, the public and the international community for the application of American power abroad.

In this dissertation, I argue that the United States’ action against Nicaragua during the 1980s represented the first application of a war on terrorism that challenged the norms of international behavior by conducting unilateral offensive military actions that marginalized the rights of sovereign nations and sought to manipulate the perception of the American people.

Ambrosius is correct to assert that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a means not yet taken by the United States. However, the principle behind the invasion, that the United States should assume offensive hardline measures against sovereign states alleged to sponsor terrorism, the Reagan administration developed amid its struggle with Nicaragua. In this respect, George W. Bush’s war on terrorism was an expansion of the precedent of earlier actions.

Scholars often treat the war on terror as an Islamic and Middle Eastern phenomenon. While it is true that the Middle East does represent a sort of epicenter of this new danger, an exclusive focus on the Middle East and Islam obscures the scope of this transformation in U.S. policy. In this project, I demonstrate how the United States constructed and reconstructed the threat posed by Nicaragua as the emergence of a terrorism crisis in the middle of the 1980s transformed policy makers’ understanding of threat in the developing world. This case reveals that the war on terror carried implications for the United States and the world that were not limited to fanatical Islam or the Middle East. The change was relevant to many areas of the developing world.

This project also expands on the recent contributions of John Collins. In his essay, “Terrorism,” in the book Collateral Language, Collins defined terrorism as a linguistic weapon that the United States uses to vilify its enemies. Collins is a scholar primarily concerned with Palestine and the post-September 2001 war on terrorism, but his approach influences this project. I expand on Collins’ thesis by outlining the manner in which the language of terrorism was, over


time, applied to the conflict with Nicaragua. The linguistic weapon of terrorism the Reagan administration used to change the dialogue over Nicaragua and over time and with the assistance of international events played an important part in the development of a U.S. offensive against Nicaragua. This project demonstrates the significance of the language of terrorism as a propaganda tool that facilitated the creation of an offensive policy founded on hardline measures that violated the international rights of sovereign states like Nicaragua.13

Several scholars have written excellent works documenting U.S.-Nicaragua relations during the Reagan administration. However, no scholar has done so since the 1990s and the recent release of formerly classified documents allows for a reappraisal that demonstrates the importance of terrorism to the development of the Reagan offensive in Nicaragua. Since the 1980s, a number of excellent scholars have dealt with this period. Some of these writers explain this history from economic, ideological, and political perspectives. William LeoGrande, Cynthia Arnson, Greg Grandin, Robert Kagan and Walter LaFeber are some of the most significant scholars of this period. Kagan’s book is the most in-depth interpretation of the conflict. His monograph, A Twilight Struggle, is a roughly 900 page meta-narrative that misses no detail about the conflict. However, Kagan’s work is written from the point of view of an individual from the inside of the Reagan administration and this results in a narrative that is defensive. Kagan, by in large, feels that the United States reacted to a legitimate threat in Nicaragua and that the Sandinistas’ own policy decisions were more to blame for the tension and war. Others like LeoGrande and Arnson describe this history from the view of American politics and are highly critical of the Reagan administration’s efforts to gain support from Congress for the Contras. By

contrast, Greg Grandin emphasizes the importance of neo-conservative ideology. Grandin insists that the goal of neoconservatives to remake the world in the capitalist-democratic model drove the Reagan offensive in Central America. Finally, Walter LaFeber argues from the standpoint of United States imperialism. LaFeber, the ground-breaking revisionist scholar, argued that the revolutions in Central America were the result of a long history of U.S.-led imperialism. This project adds to this already rich historiography by explaining this story in terms of national security. I argue that a perception of threat from a global enemy operating from within Central America, first communism and then later world terrorism, motivated the United States’ offensive hardline strategy against Nicaragua. The administration first fought to contain this and then to combat this threat with an offensive hardline policy abroad and an involved propaganda effort at home.14

Many scholars have documented the ‘Reagan offensive,’ in Central America.15 This project attempts to reorient this narrative. It is not that the Reagan administration was not aggressive in the prosecution of this conflict, but an anti-communist offensive was only one part of this development. In the middle of the 1980s, the United States did begin a more aggressive approach, which derived from not only a war on communism but also the development of a war on terrorism that carried consequences not only for Central America, but also for the domestic realm. The emergence of the new strategic threat of international terrorism represented an


15 Grandin, Empires Workshop; LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard; Arnson, Crossroads; Westad, The Global Cold War; Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim.
important change in the middle of the 1980s. This lent itself to a more offensive framework of intervention justified by a powerful language that over time has made U.S. foreign policy difficult to oppose. The mid-1980s is significant not only for a re-escalation of the Cold War, but also for the transformation caused by a terrorism crisis and the Reagan administration’s reaction to it.

George C. Herring’s America’s Longest War, despite being about the Vietnam War, provides an important model of analysis for this particular project. Scholars refer to Herring’s argument as the flawed containment thesis. He argued that the United States’ preoccupation with communism as a global monolith caused policy makers to exaggerate the nature of the conflict in Vietnam and to involve the country militarily in Southeast Asia without fully comprehending the local and imperial causes of the events there. This project suggests that the Reagan administration made a similar error in Central America. The top officials in the Reagan administration were cold warriors. They served during the Vietnam era, and many of them had worked in the Nixon administration. Despite widespread criticism from the public and Congress that the United States’ Cold War perspective had caused the Vietnam tragedy, the top officials and architects of U.S. policy under Reagan dismissed these criticism and maintained the correctness of the United States national security outlook during Vietnam and the Cold War more generally. The acceptance of the Cold War national security mantra, which generally reduced world affairs to considerations of a zero-sum game between the forces of capitalism and communism, caused the Reagan administration to construct a policy with Nicaragua that ignored the imperial and socioeconomic roots of the conflict in favor of grand visions of global bi-polarity that encouraged military options over diplomatic ones. The administration’s failure to
accept criticisms of U.S. Cold War policy in Southeast Asia doomed it to make the same mistake in Central America during the 1980s.16

Because of its adherence to this global national security paradigm, the Reagan administration understood the terrorism crisis as part of the Cold War rather than resultant of local or regional problems. In 1981, leaders in Washington were convinced that Nicaragua represented another Cuba, and was part of a global communist strategy that made diplomacy impossible. When the terrorism crisis developed, the Reagan administration remained consistent and interpreted it as an escalation of the Cold War and the emergence of an offensive against the Western world led by an expanded communist-terrorist enemy that leaders like Secretary of State George Shultz referred to as the Radical-Left. At a time in which the United States and the Soviet Union’s struggle remained significant, policy makers defined the terrorism problem not as separate, but as a part of the Cold War. The terrorism crisis occurred within the Cold War. As a result, it changed how the Reagan administration understood and responded to a new Cold War.

The United States’ conflict with Nicaragua and the emergence of a terrorism crisis were together the most visible and controversial elements of U.S. international relations during the 1980s. Nicaragua was the most widely covered of all American conflicts during the decade, and incidents of terrorism, like the hijacking of TWA flight 847, received significant publicity and shocked the public. That hijacking was one of over 600 acts of terrorism to occur during the 1980s. There was truly a terrorism crisis during Reagan’s presidency. American society was deeply aware and concerned about both the Nicaraguan conflict and the terrorism crisis. Hollywood films like *Red Dawn*, *Speedzone*, and *The Naked Gun* demonstrate this awareness, as

does the activity of pop-culture figures like Salman Rushdie, Jackson Browne, Genesis, and even
the Clash whose album “Sandinista” was a major release for the British punk band. The conflict
with Nicaragua and the terrorism crisis factored significantly into the American experience
during the 1980s. Over the past decade, declassified government documents have provided
information that demands a new monograph that provides a reappraisal of this important moment
in history.\footnote{Michael Short, \textit{Speed Zone}, DVD, directed by Jim Drake (1989: Orion); Kevin Reynolds, \textit{Red Dawn}, DVD,
directed by John Milius (1984: MGM); Jerry Zucker and Jim Abrahams, \textit{The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police
Atlantic Records, June 1, 1986.}

This project is unique because it offers a two-fold analysis of the role of terrorism in
transforming the United States’ conflict with Nicaragua during the 1980s. These two strands of
analysis deal with the use of public diplomacy by the Reagan administration to attempt to control
the dialogue over the conflict and the development of a new framework of intervention in
response to the terrorism crisis of 1983 and 1985.\footnote{Public diplomacy in this project refers to an elaborate propaganda operation on the part of the Reagan
administration to sell their case on both Nicaragua and terrorism to the American people. While this term does not
always refer to propaganda, the Reagan administration used this term to identify an operation designed to build
support for its foreign policy among the public, Congress and the international community. The administration’s
public diplomacy campaign involved speeches, articles, overtures to news media outlets, personal phone calls to
members of Congress, and diplomatic missions to Central America and Europe. Public diplomacy was the term that
the administration used to refer to its propaganda program, and it is for this reason that I have decided to use this
term throughout this dissertation.} The overarching historical significance of
this dissertation is to demonstrate that the United States’ conflict with Nicaragua represented a
military oriented war on terrorism that carried significant consequences. Reagan’s war on
terrorism entwined two important elements: First, language as propaganda played an important
role in manipulating the public dialogue over the conflict, and second the reaction of the Reagan
administration to the terrorism crisis resulted in the development of a framework of intervention
for dealing with states alleged to sponsor terrorism. While many scholars have documented the U.S.-Nicaraguan conflict, the role that terrorism played in transforming this conflict remains hidden. The administration used the terrorism crisis to create the framework for the Reagan offensive against Nicaragua. This framework of intervention involved an aggressive hardline strategy that challenged the norms of international behavior in conjunction with an advanced propaganda campaign designed to criminalize Nicaragua and justify U.S. action.

The purpose of this project is to explain what the emergence of terrorism and the reaction of the Reagan administration meant to the Central American crisis and for U.S. international and domestic relations. The United States’ response to terrorism involved physical and verbal weapons. The language of terrorism criminalized Nicaragua and justified a hardline strategy. The conflict in Central America was part of a broad re-evaluation that introduced offensive measures against alleged state sponsors of terrorism that challenged the norms of international behavior and violated Nicaragua’s sovereign rights. These two powerful aspects make up critical components of the war on terrorism today, the linguistic power of the terrorism label, and the application of an offensive hardline policy directed at unfriendly states in the developing world. The roots of this framework for intervention are located in the 1980s.

There are two key reasons why this project is important. First, this story provides a warning of the dangers involved in the application of aggressive hardline counterterrorism strategies. Since the 1980s, U.S. leaders, in particular the Bush administration, have often adopted a hardline strategy in response to allegations of state sponsorship that amounts to an accusation, an ultimatum, sanctions, and an array of military oriented strategies in dealing with alleged state sponsors of terrorism. As Nicaragua’s case shows, such policies inherently violate
the sovereignty of another nation or nations and create an immediate escalation of hostilities, which damage the chances at diplomatic options. The hardline strategy creates conflict and rarely brings about peaceful solutions. In Nicaragua, peace developed in spite of the Reagan administration, not because of its strategy. The administration’s approach to Nicaragua worsened the situation and extended the time it would take to create peace. This dissertation suggests that U.S. military interventions are dangerous and often flawed, and that the application of American military power should always come as a last resort. Second, this project sends a cautionary message to the American public. The Reagan administration was the first in U.S. history to invoke terrorism as a central motivation for an escalation of American power in the developing world. The language of terrorism is a powerful propaganda primarily because it demonizes ‘the other’ to such a degree that questioning U.S. policy is perceived as sympathizing with the most heinous criminals. The rhetoric of terrorism, when coupled with the occurrence of events, can undermine the public voice, encourage a deterioration of civil liberties and public activism, and promote a quiet acceptance of a more provocative application of American power abroad. When the language of terrorism is the justification of a conflict, citizens should respond with a critical eye, and be mindful of the consequences of the use of American power.

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters not including the introduction. The first chapter deals with the political landscape within which the Reagan administration made policy during the first term. Here I look at opposition from Congress, the media, and the public and argue that the domestic environment shaped U.S. policy with Nicaragua. This chapter is particularly concerned with the public dialogue over the Reagan administration’s Central American policy. During Reagan’s first term domestic politics molded the administration’s
policy largely because it involved the popular remembering of the Vietnam War. The Reagan administration did not simply exert its will on Nicaragua. Instead, Congress, the public, and the media negotiated with the executive branch over the correct direction for the United States. The public dialogue over this policy was of fundamental importance for the United States’ conduct in Central America, and the Reagan administration throughout sought to control this discussion.

The second and third chapters explain how acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens and U.S. allies increased in 1983 and provided the administration with the opportunity to use terrorism as a linguistic weapon that eventually changed the dialogue about the conflict with Nicaragua and facilitated an escalated hardline strategy. Over the course of 1984, the Reagan administration developed a new reasoning for war with Nicaragua that breathed new life into its attempt to gain authorization for the conflict against Sandinista led Nicaragua. The Reagan administration, in the wake of an escalating Central American crisis and the emergence of a terrorism crisis, reconstructed the Cold War and called on support for its pursuit of active measures against an allegedly more heinous global communist-terrorist threat. The prevailing rhetoric, during the administration’s first term, that insisted that Nicaragua represented the threat of global communism that the United States had to fight to contain had failed to win strong support in Congress. This failure, I argue, was due in large part to the controversial legacy of the Vietnam War. However, with the emergence of a terrorism crisis as well as an escalation of hostilities in El Salvador, the Reagan administration changed the dialogue from an assertion of the correctness of a Vietnam-like war to contain Nicaragua to one that required offensive measures to address the threat of international terrorism. This change in the administration’s argument led directly to the adoption of unilateral economic sanctions and, eventually, resulted
in the acquisition of lethal aid to the Contras from Congress, which was evidence of the power of
the language of terrorism as new tool of propaganda.

In chapter four and five, I argue that an escalation of terrorist events in June of 1985
acted as a catalyst to the development of a United States war on terrorism. The mid-1980s
terrorism crisis changed U.S. Cold War policy. In Central America, the Reagan administration
redefined guerrilla movements and revolutionary governments as ‘communist-terrorist.’ In terms
of conduct and how the United States understood threat in the world, the ‘Reagan offensive’
established an important precedent in U.S. international relations history. This demonstrated how
the United States dealt with nations alleged to abet and aid international terrorists. Nicaragua was
a sovereign state, not at war with the United States, but primarily because of the allegation of
state sponsorship, the Reagan administration justified the application of aggressive measures that
challenged the norms of international behavior. The Reagan administration created a policy
framework for future dealings with alleged state sponsors of international terrorism.

The fourth chapter begins with the terrorist attacks of June 1985. This chapter discusses
the development of Vice President George H. W. Bush’s Task Force to Combat Terrorism as the
vehicle for the first steps in the formation of a new U.S. policy to combat alleged state sponsors
of terrorism, and an escalation of an intensive public diplomacy campaign that continued the
deployment of the language of terrorism as a continued effort to shift the dialogue over
Nicaragua. The fifth chapter begins in December 1985, with the finalization of the report of the
task force. I demonstrate that the final report placed emphasis on military solutions to state
sponsorship of international terrorism. The military approach, however, was controversial and
two top officials in the Office of Counterterrorism protested the shortcomings of this approach.
Robert Oakley and Parker Borg represented two officials that provided alternatives to the dangerous offensive military oriented strategy suggested by the task force. The Reagan administration ignored Borg and Oakley, however, and implemented the policy that involved a renewed fight over lethal aid to the Contras, and provocative military and naval maneuvers against alleged Radical-Left states Nicaragua and Libya. The Reagan administration escalated the usage of guerrilla surrogates in fighting Nicaragua and launched airstrikes on Libya. The attack on Libya showed that the United States would take pre-emptive action on a state sponsor, and the Contra army, which more than doubled in size in 1986 and 1987, showed that the Reagan administration was willing to wage prolonged proxy wars in order to counter alleged state sponsors of international terrorism.

The sixth chapter deals with the consequences of the escalation carried out to overthrow the Sandinista regime. In this section, I look at the efforts of the Reagan administration to use the guise of diplomacy to achieve an end goal of using military pressure to force a change in the Nicaraguan government. Philip Habib’s diplomatic missions were designed to create unity among the Central American democracies—Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Guatemala—for support of the United States’ policy of using the Contras to bring military pressure on Nicaragua that would either result in the Sandinistas’ collapse or their agreement to a peace that included the Contras and would likewise facilitate their political marginalization. The U.S. diplomatic missions did not listen to the Central American leaders or pursue legitimate options for peace. Rather their purpose was to achieve a pre-determined U.S. goal by bullying Central American leaders like Oscar Arias into joining the United States in its efforts to isolate Nicaragua and bring military force to bear against the Sandinista leadership. The military
oriented war on terrorism that the Reagan administration unleashed on Nicaragua, however, resulted in significant consequences. The intentional escalation of hostilities by the United States violated the sovereignty of Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa, and left the Central American democracies deeply concerned for provocations of an increasingly armed Nicaragua. As a result, the Central American democracies reluctantly aligned with the Reagan administration in the summer of 1986.

The policy of the United States created tension and instability in Central America. The aggressive approach of the Reagan administration further created international and domestic controversy. Beginning in 1986 the emergence of the Iran-Contra affair shocked the American public. The determination to deal with the alleged “outlaw state” through military pressure resulted in one of the most significant controversies in United States history. The controversy destroyed the fragile coalition that the Reagan administration forged among the Central American governments and members of Congress. The emergence of the scandal forced the United States to sit on the sidelines, isolated, while Costa Rica led the way in forming a peace proposal that provided a solution to the conflict. Central Americans developed the solution to a problem caused by a U.S. policy that placed primacy on military measures. The primary aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the war on terrorism, which relied primarily on hard power, for dealing with alleged state sponsors of terrorism carried negative consequences including endangerment of Americans, loss of credibility internationally and domestically, and violations of state sovereignty. Through this chapter, I hope to show that the use of hard power should be a last resort and that diplomacy, which involves regional state actors, is the best method of dealing with the threat posed by state sponsors of terrorism.
This dissertation makes use of three archives: The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library located in Simi Valley, California, the George Bush Presidential Library located in College Station, Texas and the National Security Archive located at the Gelman Library at the George Washington University. This last collection is partially digitized, offered through Proquest and is available through subscribing libraries. The non-digitized National Security Archive material used in this dissertation includes the John Boykin collection. This collection provides material related to the Reagan administration’s diplomatic missions, led by Philip Habib in 1986 and 1987. Some of the materials used in this dissertation are from the digital version of this archive. The digital archive includes seven collections: these include two collections on Nicaragua, “Nicaragua: The Making of US Policy 1978-1990” and “The Iran Contra-Affair,” two collections on El Salvador that pertains with the period from 1977-1990 and a collection “Terrorism and US policy” that also contains pertinent information. In addition to these, the archive provides two collections that contain presidential directives.

Both the Reagan and Bush libraries provide a significant amount of material regarding the United States, Nicaragua, and terrorism. The Bush library’s collection on the Vice President’s terrorism task force contains a significant amount of useful material. The Reagan library also contains archival subject areas on Nicaragua, international terrorism, and terrorist incidents that were very helpful in constructing this narrative. These archives contain White House office files, memorandums, policy documents (public and internal), speeches and their drafts, meeting minutes, and information books. In addition to documenting the United States’ policy with Nicaragua, these archives provide valuable materials that cover the policy
transformation that occurred during the 1980s terrorism crisis. This project also utilizes the Congressional Record, The New York Times and other periodicals.

In addition to written sources, this dissertation utilizes pop-culture materials as historical sources. In particular, I use several motion pictures that convey the resonance of the administration dialogue over Nicaragua and terrorism. In a democratic society, films often reflect prevailing public attitudes. The films Red Dawn (1986), The Naked Gun (1988) and SpeedZone (1989) contain scenes that convey the cultural resonance of the Reagan administration’s war on terrorism against Nicaragua. These Hollywood films present examples of pop-culture renditions of the Sandinistas amid the development of the United States’ escalation of hostilities and of an intensive public diplomacy campaign. In addition to these, this project uses the documentary El Salvador: Another Vietnam (1980) as a source in chapter one. This is a rare film and is only available on 16mm, but it aired to wide audiences on PBS at the time of Reagan’s first inauguration. This film helps display the role that the Vietnam War played in shaping the public dialogue over Nicaragua and El Salvador during Ronald Reagan’s first term. Together these films provide another way of understanding the changing course of United States involvement with Nicaragua. These films demonstrate the resonance of the public dialogue over the Reagan offensive in Central America.

There are a variety of other published materials relating to the conflict in Nicaragua. Due largely to the Iran Contra Affair there exist a number of important and easily accessible primary sources on this subject. The Tower Commission Report, published in a four-volume set, including the entire transcripts of the hearings, provides a great deal of firsthand testimony about the scandal. Likewise, the National Security Directives of the Reagan and Bush Administrations, by
Christopher Simpson and *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History*, by Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne provide selective collections of National Security Council documents, administration memorandums, and directives that are useful to the researcher. These are, of course, also available in original form at George Washington University’s National Security Archive project that Peter Kornbluh chairs.\(^\text{19}\) In addition, *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan* is a useful resource as well as the many memoirs, biographies, collected speeches and personal publications of Reagan and members of his National Security Council (NSC) like George H.W. Bush, George Shultz and Jeane Kirkpatrick.\(^\text{20}\)


Chapter One

Vietnam Revisited

In December 1974, a group of armed men raided a residence in Managua, Nicaragua. The men took several hostages including prominent businessmen, American citizens and high ranking Nicaraguan officials. The militants were members of the FSLN, the Sandinista revolutionary movement.¹ For decades U.S. corporations had exploited Nicaragua and its Central American neighbors, and a dictatorship had facilitated this process while simultaneously lining its own pockets. Following a devastating earthquake in 1972 that left the capital city of Managua destroyed, many of the Nicaraguan people turned to the FSLN, a revolutionary group first organized in the mid-1960s.² The desperate situation of the people of Nicaragua encouraged support for the FSLN. The Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza dismissed the violence and the suffering of his people. These were the first salvos in a conflict that did not end until the dusk of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

In 1978 and 1980 two acts of terror helped fuel the long and controversial conflict in Nicaragua. The first was the murder of journalist Pedro Joaquin Chamorro in 1978, and the second was the assassination of President Somoza himself after his flight from power in 1979. The first act was a catalyst to the successful culmination of the Nicaraguan Revolution that the


FSLN led. The second triggered the beginning of the Nicaraguan Civil War, which the Reagan administration concluded was an integral part of a communist offensive in the developing world.

Chamorro was the editor of *La Prensa*, a local newspaper that was highly critical of the Somoza regime. For the people in Nicaragua, both moderates as well as leftists, Chamorro's killing was confirmation of the presence of a pro-government terrorist group that sought out and murdered dissenters. The event crystalized opposition to the Somoza regime. Chamorro’s death prompted the consolidation of moderate elements against the Somoza regime. Early in 1978, the people demanded the resignation of Somoza, and organized a nation-wide work strike aimed at forcing him from power. Meanwhile, the Sandinistas gained momentum and clashes with Somoza’s National Guard increased. The Nicaraguan revolution was underway.

In late summer of 1979, the Sandinistas successfully overthrew Somoza. The deposed dictator of Nicaragua fled the country. At first, he went to Miami, Florida, and then to the Bahamas before the President of Paraguay, Alfred Stroessner, offered the 54-year-old asylum. Somoza took up residence in Asuncion, the capital of Paraguayan. On September 17, 1980, while traveling through the city in his yellow Mercedes, a blue Chevy pickup stopped the former leader. Immediately, four gunmen opened fire with automatic weapons from the truck. Moments after the shooting began a bazooka fired from a nearby apartment building. The bazooka blast struck the yellow Mercedes and it burst into flames. When the shooting was over, Somoza lay dead and bloodied by upwards of 25 bullet wounds and burns from the fire and explosion.

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former leader was unidentifiable. At the morgue, Dinorah Sampson, a friend, provided recognition by identifying the expensive watch that adorned Somoza’s wrist. The Associated Press reported that the government and many of the Nicaraguan people rejoiced at the news, the national radio celebrated the killing and Managua bars filled with individuals as though the small nation were competing in the World Cup. The dastardly dictator, who was little more than a vassal of the United States, received a justice that many Nicaraguans felt him due.⁵

The United States deserved significant blame for the development of the Nicaraguan Revolution and likewise for the civil war that racked the country throughout the 1980s. For decades, successive administrations in the United States supported the repressive Somoza-family dictatorship, and facilitated United Fruit’s imperial exploitation of the Nicaraguan people. Historian Walter LaFeber has documented this as a brutal reality that left Nicaragua a top exporter of food, but simultaneously a suffering and in some cases starving nation. LaFeber was correct in his assessment that the United States’ neo-imperial relationships fostered “inevitable revolutions” in places like Nicaragua.⁶ Following Somoza’s demise, the Reagan administration’s Cold War policy made matters worse.

The Nicaraguan revolution was one of a series of revolutions and conflicts throughout the developing world between 1978 and 1980. In Central America and the Caribbean there were Marxist rebels in multiple countries, Nicaragua and Grenada both experienced revolutions, and guerrillas threatened the government in El Salvador. After these events, both the Carter and the Reagan administration defined the new Nicaragua as a danger to the region and part of a

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⁶ LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions.
revolutionary campaign driven mostly by Cuba. The Reagan administration, though, was different because it believed that the best way to address this problem was through force. Over subsequent years, the administration placed military measures via the CIA and transnational guerrillas, made up largely of Somoza’s deposed National Guard, as the primary element of a policy to contain Nicaragua. The United States under Reagan applied a policy with Nicaragua that involved the application of military pressure as the primary tool in the pursuit of a solution dictated by the United States. Over the course of both of Reagan’s terms, the administration applied economic and diplomatic measures, but these were consistently secondary to the use of military pressure. The administration’s insistence on addressing the situation in this manner was the result of an adherence to a bi-polar national security framework, a Cold War outlook that defined threat most principally in terms of global communist revolution. This view encouraged an exaggeration of the threat from Nicaragua and an oversimplification of the causes of the Nicaraguan Revolution. The result was a continual deterioration of relations between the United States and the Nicaraguan government. When peace was possible, the hostility of the Reagan administration, which interpreted the conflict in the guise of super-power competition, assured the continual escalation of a crisis that threatened other Central American states.

This chapter builds on George C. Herring’s analysis of the Vietnam War. Herring regarded the Cold War national security paradigm as prone to oversimplification of cause and

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7 In this case, military force refers to any policy that places military pressure as a means to an end. Proxies, governments supported by the United States, the United States’ armed forces or covert operations are all aspects of a military oriented policy in which the use of such force is integral to the achievement of policy goals. Military force, though carried out by proxies, foreign governments and covert operations, was integral to the Reagan administration’s policy against Nicaragua and in El Salvador. I am careful to avoid a narrow definition of war as only when U.S. armed forces are directly involved. A narrow definition absolves the role of the United States in conflict abroad. In the case of Nicaragua and Central America, the Reagan administration actively waged war, the actions should be consider as a war, as the use of military force as the primary route to achieving the interests of the United States.
exaggeration of threat of local and regional conflicts. He argued that the central problem with the Vietnam War was that the United States exaggerated the nature of the Vietnamese revolution. Policy makers’ adherence to a grand strategy containment policy caused them to overlook issues of imperial roots and local political flaws in favor of concern for super power competition. During the 1980s, the Reagan administration made a similar mistake with Nicaragua.  

In this chapter, I examine the first three years of the Reagan administration’s involvement in the Central American crisis. The White House affirmed a need to prevent Nicaragua from facilitating the collapse of El Salvador, and expanding the reach of communist power. Because of the urgency that their outlook demanded, the Reagan administration did not attempt to pursue a diplomatic approach. Instead, the United States turned first to military pressure in the form of support for transnational counterrevolutionary forces, the Contras, which opposed the Sandinista leadership. The groups operated in the border regions of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras and violated the national sovereignty of all three of these states. Challenged at home by Congress and the public’s opposition to using force in the region, the administration turned to this shadow army, the support of which challenged the norms of international behavior, in the hope of preventing Nicaragua from assisting other revolutionaries throughout the region. The program was secret, but inevitably uncovered by journalists. Once exposed, U.S. policy with Nicaragua was center-stage in a controversial political debate as to whether or not to apply military pressure against the Sandinistas by funding the guerrillas.  

The public debate during Reagan’s first term between the Executive Branch, Congress, the media, and the public over the Central American policy is the primary focus of this chapter.

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8 Herring, *America’s Longest War*. 
The ability to control the dialogue over Central America was essential to the conduct of the administration’s policy with Nicaragua. This public debate centered on the past as much as it did the present, and in many respects amounted to a struggle for control of the meaning of the Vietnam War. Controlling the remembering of this conflict would either validate or invalidate the Reagan administration’s policy to stabilize El Salvador and contain Nicaragua. From the beginning of Ronald Reagan’s first term, the administration struggled to control the national dialogue over Nicaragua and Central America. The debate over the lessons of the Vietnam War during Reagan’s first term demonstrates that the successful implementation of policy in Central American hinged on controlling the dialogue over the conflict. This debate over Nicaragua involved considerations of the use of American power in the defense of national security.

The legacy of Vietnam established important trends that confronted the United States in the 1980s. That troublesome conflict left no consensus on clear-cut lessons. Vietnam divided the United States, and this division remained significant during Reagan’s first term. As opponents and proponents argued for or against the Reagan administration’s actions in Central America, they engaged in a debate about the meaning of the Vietnam War and the relevance of macro national-security models. Understanding how the legacy of the Vietnam War factored into the public and congressional debate on Central America not only allows historians to explain changes in the conduct of U.S. foreign relations, it also allows us to understand the manner in which historical perspectives shape the present.

The societal wide debate over Vietnam encumbered the Reagan administration’s intervention in Central America. Americans were apprehensive about conflicts in the developing world to contain communism. However, over time, the situation in the world changed and this
change led the administration to create a new framework of intervention and allowed them to alter the discussion about Nicaragua in such a way as to make their military oriented approach more viable. The change began in 1983 and was a response to an escalation of terrorist activity throughout the world. The emergence of a terrorism crisis facilitated a shift in the dialogue over Nicaragua and the stated purpose of the Reagan administration’s policy. This chapter establishes the first phase of the debate over Nicaragua and emphasizes the extent to which this dialogue and the U.S. policy approach changed following the development of a terrorism crisis in the mid-1980s.

After Somoza's death, many in Washington assumed that the Sandinistas were behind the assassination. Under the parameters of new legislation that was part of the Export Administration Act of 1979, this case went up for review as an act of terrorism. If evidence showed the involvement of the Nicaraguan government in Somoza’s death, the Carter administration possessed the power to punish Nicaragua by cancelling the distribution of foreign aid and potentially authorizing economic/trade sanctions. The Export Administration Act granted this power to the executive, and was evidence that the United States recognized terrorism as a problem in the 1970s. The Carter administration’s investigation of Sandinista involvement marked the first time that the new Nicaraguan government was allegedly involved in an act of international terrorism. Under the brand new anti-terrorism legislation, the Carter administration reviewed the assassination. The United States was scheduled to provide $75 million in aid to the new Nicaraguan government, but only if the investigation cleared the government of involvement in Somoza’s death.
After some debate and investigation, Carter confirmed the aid, but the administration was not convinced of innocence: it only considered the evidence inconclusive. There was indication that several in the National Security Council (NSC) were nearly certain of the Sandinistas’ complicity in the slaying of the United States’ former ally. The White House, however, did not have enough evidence to prove decisively the role of the Nicaraguan government in the killing. The aid went through as planned. This was the first time that the Sandinistas faced allegations of ties to terrorism, but it would not be the last.9

After Somoza’s defeat, loyalist elements later referred to as the Contras established themselves in Honduran and Costa Rican territories, and by 1980 began conducting sabotage and hit and run attacks on the new Nicaraguan state.10 Simultaneous to this development, the government of El Salvador, Nicaragua’s bantam sized Pacific coast neighbor experienced a revolution that carried the same hallmarks as the revolution in Nicaragua and that of the tiny island nation of Grenada, which had fallen to Marxist revolutionaries in the same year as Nicaragua. On the eve of Ronald Reagan’s inauguration as President of the United States, Central America, so long considered a haven of U.S. imperial control was turning into a chaotic morass of anti-Americanism. To those close to Reagan the situation represented a dangerous trend and sign that communism was undermining an area of traditional U.S. strength.

After the Sandinistas came to power in the summer of 1979, the Carter administration was concerned over the security threat that Nicaragua and Cuba posed to the region and the


United States. In the wake of the Sandinista victory, Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) outlined the Carter administration’s objectives in the region. The SCC insisted, “We are at a watershed in our relations with Central America and possibly the hemisphere as a whole.” The principle objective was the “containment of Cuba: to prevent the consolidation of extreme left regimes in Nicaragua, or in other Central American countries.”

On January 2, 1981, the Carter administration gave the newly elected president, Ronald Reagan, a final brief on the situation in Central America. The outlook was not good, and the Carter administration confirmed fears of Nicaragua’s export of terrorism and subversion. The brief addressed the imminent concern in the Americas at this time, the escalating revolution in El Salvador and the role of Nicaragua and Cuba in facilitating the overthrow of the United States-supported government. According to the document, “An imminent leftist offensive supported by…large numbers of international volunteers from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Panama will participate in a major offensive [in El Salvador] this month.” The document remarked that Nicaragua had escalated its military activity. The Carter administration claimed that the goal of these international insurgents that Nicaragua harbored was “to sustain a high level of assassinations and other spectacular terrorist attacks.” The Carter administration set the stage.

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Ronald Reagan would assume office amid deep fears about regional security and the export of violence by Nicaragua.

Shortly after Reagan’s inauguration in January 1981, the National Security Council (NSC) began to form a Central American policy. In that first year, El Salvador was the most pressing concern. The small nation had fallen into civil war in 1979, and revolutionary forces of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) battled the United States-supported dictatorship of Jose Napoleon Duarte. In the first month of Reagan’s presidency the Department of State, headed by Alexander Haig, prepared a report on the situation and explained the direction of policy. Accordingly, the United States intended to expand both military and economic aid to El Salvador. Responding to questions from reporters in February 1981, Haig explained that the situation represented a “grave concern to the United States.” Further, in defending the report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, State Department staff member Robert McFarlane engaged what would become the center of the initial round of debate on U.S. policy toward El Salvador and Nicaragua. Responding to public fears, McFarlane denied the Vietnam analogy to Central America. McFarlane reassured the committee that “this administration does not intend to make a Vietnam-like commitment of major forces.”

In January 1981, PBS aired a documentary film, titled, “El Salvador: Another Vietnam.” This represented one of the earliest public comparisons of Central America to Vietnam. Directed by Glenn Silber and Tete Vasconcellos, the 53-minute film examined the recent history of El Salvador in the twentieth century and the role that the United States came to play in the early 1980s. The brutality of the United States-supported dictatorship came to life, as did the presence

of American advisors or ‘so-called’ “technicians.” Silder and Vasconcellos made it clear; they understood the role of the United States as “analogous to the circumstances under which the United States was drawn into Vietnam.” From the outset of the conflict with El Salvador and Nicaragua, Americans questioned it in terms of Vietnam.\footnote{Glenn Silber, Tete Vasconcellos, \textit{El Salvador: Another Vietnam}. 16mm. 1981: Icarus Films.}

During Reagan’s first term there were no less than 75 newspaper articles in prominent publications like the \textit{New York Times}, the \textit{Boston Globe}, and the \textit{Washington Post} that discussed policy in Central America in terms of the Vietnam War. For a low-level conflict, one that did not command the front page very often, this represented an impressive statistic. Congress also repeatedly engaged in drawn out battles over the administration’s policy that involved questioning the meaning of America’s conflict in Southeast Asia. As they fought over what Vietnam meant and how its legacy should or should not apply to Central America, high-level figures like Reagan, United Nations (UN) Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Secretary of State Alexander Haig and his successor George Shultz tried to influence Congress, the public and the media by inserting their understanding of the Vietnam analogy in Central America. The legacy of the Vietnam War channeled the debate on policy. Virtually every critical statement one way or the other formed around the Vietnam comparison.

rebels killed two U.S. workers involved in farm assistance. Exactly one week later the revolutionaries went on the offensive and seized parts of the capital city, San Salvador. Some 9,000 died in El Salvador in 1980, and at outset of 1981, the situation deteriorated.\footnote{Foreign Affairs Chronology 1978-1989 (New York: Free Press, 1990), 121.}


Secretary of State Haig led the Reagan administration in articulating the new Cold War conflict in Central America. In March 1981, Haig went before the Senate Foreign Relations
Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee to answer questions about the administration’s aid requests for Central America. Haig was one of the hawks in the Department of State and his statements focused on relations with Cuba. He argued that Fidel Castro’s communist regime represented the primary facilitator of revolution and weapons trafficking in Central America. Furthering fears, the Department of State did not mention any details other than the fact that the president did “not exclude anything” when it came to options for dealing with the Castro regime. This caused concern for many in Congress that the military oriented perspective of the Reagan administration threatened an expanded conflict.21

In these meetings, Undersecretary of State Walter J. Stoessel acknowledged that the United States did not exclude the military option when it came to addressing the situation in Central America either. Instead, all possibilities remained on the table. His testimony resulted in widespread concern on Capitol Hill. Republican Senator Charles Percy of Illinois asked the undersecretary, “If Central America could turn into another ‘quagmire’ like Vietnam.” To this Stoessel replied that the administration stood “determined that this situation will not develop into another Vietnam…the situation is containable.” Shortly after, Haig explained his version of a ‘four phased’ communist plan to take over Central America, Representative Robert (Bob) Dorman, Republican from California, questioned Haig as to whether this represented a “Caribbean domino theory,” to which Haig, obviously aware that accepting this analogy directly might cause political backlash, responded that he felt the communist plan looked more like a “hit-list.” Haig used the phrase to distance the administration from directly citing the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, the Reagan administration defined the crisis in Central America in a logic

embedded in and drawn from the Vietnam War. A Central American domino theory was the way in which the White House defended policy, and U.S. politicians, and journalist made the comparison to Southeast Asia from the outset. Central America, for the Reagan administration, was about Cold War grand strategy and the prevention of world communism undermining the United States in an area of long-time U.S. influence.²²

As the Reagan administration proposed an escalation in early 1981, Congress discussed El Salvador in terms reminiscent of Vietnam. Republican Jim Leach from Iowa expressed the concern that the administration’s expansion in the use of advisors and military aid threatened to draw the United States into a civil war, and a bloody quagmire. Before Congress on February 25, 1981 Leach claimed, “If we send advisers, and one or more is killed, we may well cause a nasty civil war to become a Vietnam in our backyard.”²³ Leach went on to remind Congress: “It was just 20 years ago that John F. Kennedy made the fateful choice of expanding military involvement in Vietnam. Now is the time to embrace rather than ignore the lessons of history.”²⁴ In this debate history mattered, but the problem was that Americans disagreed on the meaning of the Vietnam War.

On March 17, Democratic Senator Thomas F. Eagleton echoed Leach’s concern. Eagleton asserted that the Reagan administration had not presented the situation clearly. He claimed that the president had not made the true number and activities of advisers clear. Likening the situation to Vietnam, he argued that “there are advisers being dispatched that are skilled in


the same counter-insurgency techniques employed by the Green Berets in Vietnam.”25 Eagleton continued, “Where the Vietnam analogy holds is in the manner in which our government seems to be making a potentially fateful commitment to be involved militarily with a fragile foreign government.”26 Critics established the fundamental concern that American involvement in El Salvador could deteriorate into deeper involvement in a polarizing civil war. A significant number of Americans criticized the relevance of Cold War containment in Central America. Equating revolutionary movements as part of a global monolithic movement many citizens perceived as a dangerous flaw of U.S. Cold War policy.

Other concerns expressed by members of Congress related to issues of popular support and problems with the weak and repressive government in El Salvador. Concerned politicians feared a repeat of Vietnam in which the government escalated a war without public support and with an authoritarian ally that violated human rights and could not win its people over. A 1981 Gallup Poll confirmed such fears; the survey posed the question, “How likely do you think it is that the U.S. involvement in El Salvador could turn into a situation like Vietnam?”27 Of those polled, 38% felt it “fairly likely” that U.S. involvement in El Salvador would deteriorate into a Vietnam like conflict.28 This number represented an American public concerned and aware of Reagan’s policy. Many Americans feared that the Cold War national security perspective might cause policy makers to overlook warning signs and embark on a fool’s errand as they had in

27 The Gallup Poll (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1982), 63.
28 The Gallup Poll (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1982), 63.
Vietnam.

In general, Democrats criticized the administration’s actions most widely, but Republicans voiced disagreement with Reagan’s Central American policy as well. Senator Claiborne Pell (R) from Rhode Island expressed that “Every time that government forces are involved in acts of violence against Salvadoran civilians. It is the communists who benefit. As we learned too painfully in Vietnam, no amount of American arms or military advisers will have any lasting effect if the government we are supporting is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of its own people.” Senator Mark Hatfield (R) followed Pell, he claimed, “I do not think that strong public support will ever be forthcoming because the nation’s heart is not in this war.” These statements came in the shadow of continuing reports from El Salvador that the United States supported-regime involved itself in civilian killings and widespread human rights abuses. The Reagan administration denied the claims.

Many in Congress, though, supported the administration’s plan for Central America and El Salvador. Before Congress in March 1981, Senator Strom Thurmond (R) backed “the Reagan Administration for its strong policy firmly rejecting communist expansionism in Latin America.” For the record, Thurmond submitted an article by James Cary titled “El Salvador Revolt is Cuba-based.” This piece, like the administration’s position, argued that the conflict in El Salvador represented a move by the Soviets and Cubans to conquer an entire region. Proponents of the escalation of action in Central America justified their position with the logic of the Cold War and

of Vietnam just as opponents feared a repeat of the United States’ worst foreign policy blunder.\footnote{97 Cong. Rec. S3382 (March 1981) (Statement of Senator Thurmond).}

In a news conference on March 6, Reagan summed up the motivation behind U.S. policy. He claimed that the administration intended “To halt the infiltration into the Americas by terrorists, by outside interference and those who aren’t just aiming at El Salvador, but…at the whole of Central America and possibly later South America-and, I’m sure, eventually North America.”\footnote{Reagan news conference transcript, March 6, 1981, in \textit{Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, January 20 to December 31, 1981} (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 207.} This rhetoric, a remnant of Vietnam, permeated the administration’s cause and observers like journalist Phillip Taubman, and Senator Charles Percy made the connection and were concerned that this Cold War perspective on national security might cause the United States to repeat the mistakes of the past.

One aspect of the pro-administration position on Central America was that there existed no direct battlefield correlation to Vietnam. In 1981 congressional representative John Murtha (D) traveled to El Salvador to assess the situation. Murtha reported, “El Salvador was not another Vietnam.” Likewise former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a principle architect behind the Vietnam War, claimed that the “only objective link…is the politics of thing.” Murtha and Rusk considered the comparison with Vietnam irrelevant because of differences in the battlefield situation, i.e. how strong were the guerrillas, how well were they supplied and so on. Murtha and Rusk did not believe that the nature of the conflict in El Salvador possessed the scale of Vietnam and was unlikely to deteriorate into a large-scale Americanized conflict.\footnote{Philip Taubman, “El Salvador as Domino,” \textit{New York Times}, February 20, 1982, http://ntserver1.wsulibs.wsu.edu:2184/docview/424290143?accountid=14902.}
In promoting their intentions in Central America, the White House appealed to the justice of supporting the El Salvadoran government in their fight against Marxist revolutionaries. This, the administration insisted, was a mission to oppose communism in the developing world, and an attempt to bring pressure on Nicaragua, who supported guerrillas fighting against the government of El Salvador. In press conferences and congressional hearings, the Reagan administration, and its supporters, referred to the domino principle and historical accounts, all of which emphasized the importance and justice of American action in Vietnam and by comparison El Salvador and Nicaragua. Thomas Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, used the domino theory in Central America to appeal for support in the Senate claiming that El Salvador represented “a decisive battle for Central America.” William Westmoreland, former commander of American forces in Vietnam, when asked by journalists, claimed, “The domino theory has validity in Central America. If El Salvador falls, after Nicaragua, then Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica could go.” Many Americans must have felt deja-vu after hearing these statements, but this perspective fit perfectly with Reagan’s defense of their Central American policy.35

By comparison, opponents called on an entirely different meaning of Vietnam. Opponents of the Reagan administration feared that unchecked executive action and the folly of understanding the world only through the lens of communist containment and super-power bipolarity held all too familiar memories of the catastrophe in Southeast Asia. Democrats played an important role in opposing Reagan’s policy in El Salvador. In April 1981, Senator Ted Kennedy and Walter Mondale spoke to Minnesota Democrats. The two hoped to rally their party

in unity and opposition to Reagan’s policies. Their criticism ranged from economic issues, budget cuts, anti-unionism and social welfare concerns, but Kennedy also used the opportunity to draw an analogy to Vietnam in an attack on Reagan’s actions in Central America. Kennedy accused the administration of basing policy on ideas that were “so outworn that we have nearly forgotten them.” He continued that the Republican administration brought back memories of “the most dangerous days of the Cold War and their endless enthusiasms for Vietnam.”

Several months later former Democrat presidential nominee George McGovern, likewise referred to what he perceived as a legitimate comparison to Vietnam claiming, “Once again, the United States assumes that insurgents are actually fighting a proxy war for the Soviets. We’re repeating the mistake of supporting an unpopular government.”

The political battle lines over Central America were drawn, and the fight involved a struggle for the legacy of the American experience in Vietnam.

The year 1982 began in a similar fashion to that of 1981, with a significant offensive in El Salvador by insurgents fighting to overthrow the U. S. supported government. However, during 1982 the focus of concern in the United States shifted away from El Salvador to Nicaragua. While the fighting was in El Salvador, the White House implicated Nicaragua in the conflict. National Security Decision Directive number 17 (NSDD-17), signed by Reagan in early 1982, represented an escalation of intervention by the United States. Implicating Nicaragua and


Cuba in the conflict in El Salvador, the NSC proposed a variety of operations including expanded assistance to El Salvador.\textsuperscript{38} Further, this document authorized the support for a legally dubious paramilitary operation against Nicaragua. The NSC allocated “secret funds” through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of $19.5 million primarily for the creation, equipping, and training of a Nicaraguan ‘rebel group’ of “commandos,” known as the Contras or counterrevolutionaries, to interdict weapons flowing to El Salvador. There were several different groups and several different leaders, but the administration used the singular term Contras for simplicity. These rebels, some of whom were former members of Somoza’s National Guard, harassed the Nicaraguan government with sabotage attacks against bridges, harbors, oil storage, communication, and power plant facilities. The stated goal of the administration was to contain Nicaragua from spreading their revolution to neighboring countries.\textsuperscript{39}

In 1982, the United States began sending military personnel and CIA operatives to Honduras to train, equip, and organize the Contras. Reports in July described the Honduran border with Nicaragua as an “armed camp waiting for a war.”\textsuperscript{40} Through the CIA, the United States organized a transnational paramilitary force that launched military incursions into Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{41} Honduras acted as an important staging area. More advisers went there than to El Salvador.\textsuperscript{42} Guerrilla units also used Costa Rica as a southern front. In order to stabilize the


government in El Salvador the administration applied a two pronged strategy that sought to bolster the government’s struggle against the FMLN while simultaneously denying the Nicaraguan government the ability to support the Marxist guerrillas. NSDD-17 authorized a policy to pursue the containment of Nicaragua, but to do this meant violating the sovereignty of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica as well as supporting a group of guerrillas that pursued their own objectives.

In early March 1982, only a few months after the president signed NSDD-17, the Washington Post reported that the United States utilized a covert paramilitary operation against the Nicaraguan government.43 The New York Times reported incursions into Nicaragua and the shocking revelation that the CIA trained Contra troops in South Florida.44 Throughout the year, the media exposed the U.S.-backed war against Nicaragua. Dozens of articles in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Boston Globe covered the crisis. Many, including members of Congress, accused the administration of conducting a policy that violated international law and represented an attempt to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. These accusations resulted in a congressional measure to prohibit the usage of aid “for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua.”45

With the revelations of a U.S.-led military escalation directed against Nicaragua in 1982,

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Congress acted to restrict funding to U.S. supported covert paramilitary operations against Nicaragua. The Boland Amendment, first approved in the House of Representatives in December 1982, represented the beginning of a battle in Congress for Reagan’s policy to use military pressure as a tool of coercion against Nicaragua. The Reagan administration’s attempt to direct a war against the Sandinistas was the new center of debate.

The Reagan administration insisted that the goal of its policy was to use the Contras to harass the Nicaraguan government in such a way as to eliminate their effectiveness in funneling arms to El Salvador. According to the Reagan administration, the policy was containment carried through by surrogate guerrillas. Opponents of the administration, however, insisted that the Reagan administration sought the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. The Boland amendment originally passed as a rider in an allocation for defense expenditures for 1983. The budget signed by Reagan in January 1983, allowed limited funds to the Contras in order to minimize arms smuggling to El Salvador, but denied the Reagan administration the right to use the aid to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Formally classified policy documents and statements asserted a policy of containment and weapons interdiction but Democrats were, nonetheless, suspicious that this was the central motivation.

Early in 1983, some members of Congress contended that the administration continued to act illegally and were attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Walter Mondale, a hopeful for the Democratic nomination for the following year’s presidential election, spoke on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” Mondale implied that Reagan did not intend to comply with the restrictions posed by Congress. He cited rising numbers of advisers in Honduras as an example. Emphasizing the danger of possible Vietnam-like scenario, the presidential hopeful claimed that
he observed the first steps to the usage of U.S. troops in Nicaragua.46

Scholars like Robert Kagan have noted the apparent contradiction in the U.S.-Nicaragua policy debate at this time. The Reagan administration was emphatic that it did not desire an overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, and that the United States merely sought to use the Contras to stop Sandinista weapons shipments to El Salvador through harassing border assaults and weapons interdiction. Congress recognized this goal as acceptable. However, the contradiction was in the motivations of the Contra guerrillas themselves. Could the Contras actually be fighting and putting their lives on the line to contain Nicaragua? The answer was, of course, no. The Contras were transnationals: they were soldiers without a homeland that operated illegally in neighboring countries. Their goal was not simply to help the United States prevent the collapse of El Salvador. The Contras wanted to reassert their place in Nicaragua. However, it is a mistake to equate the motives of the Contras with the goals of U.S. policy. The Contras were not, in terms of power and numbers, capable of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government and the kind of support that they received from the United States dictated the scope of their activities.47

In contending with accusations of regime change and most importantly the actions of Congress, the administration accepted responsibility for the continued covert operations. However, officials denied that the Reagan administration sought to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The administration justified the action as defensive and aimed at preventing the


‘Marxist-Leninist’ leadership in Managua, Nicaragua, from undermining the United States supported regime in El Salvador and facilitating a broad victory for communism.\textsuperscript{48} Reagan asked for support not only to stop communism and to interdict weapons, but also to back the Contras that waged war on the government of Nicaragua, and harassed the Sandinista making them incapable of expanding their revolution.\textsuperscript{49} Administration documents, like NSDD-17, confirm that the administration’s objective at this time was a defensive policy of containment. If the Contras did bring about the collapse of the Sandinista government the administration, undoubtedly, would have celebrated the occasion, but during the first several years of Reagan’s presidency the objective from Washington remained centered on the primary aim of containing Nicaragua.

To complicate matters, the situation in El Salvador continued to deteriorate adding fuel to the debate, already accelerated by the Nicaraguan revelations. In early 1983, five hundred Salvadoran rebels seized Berlin, El Salvador. In the fight to extradite them from the city journalists confirmed the first U.S. advisor wounded in action. Sargent J. Thomas Stanley received a bullet wound to the leg.\textsuperscript{50} Widespread media reports, from notable media personalities like Mike Wallace, further complicated the Reagan administration’s aims by exposing human rights abuses carried out by the Salvadoran government.\textsuperscript{51}


In response to the changing situation in El Salvador, the Reagan administration proposed an increase in the number of advisors in country beyond the limit of 55.\textsuperscript{52} In appealing for support, Reagan insisted, “If El Salvador fell to the rebels, other countries in Central America would fall too.”\textsuperscript{53} Many in the media identified this rhetoric’s similarity with Vietnam. Major television news personalities like Dan Rather and Lesley Stahl understood the language in these terms. On the CBS evening news, Rather remarked, “The President’s language recalled Southeast Asia.” Likewise, Stahl acknowledged that Reagan “echoed…Vietnam era rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{54}

Vietnam continued to swirl around the dialogue over the United States’ efforts in Central America.

The Reagan administration knew all too well that 1983 represented a critical and decisive time for its initiatives in Central America. Since the controversial revelations of covert operations and infringements upon Nicaraguan sovereignty, the Congress and public had grown not just skeptical but alarmed.

Knowing the importance of public and Congressional support, the administration created National Security Decision Directive number 77 (NSDD-77), entitled “Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security.” The document, signed on January 14, 1983, outlined the creation of a “special planning group…responsible for the overall planning, direction, and


coordination and monitoring of implementation of public diplomacy activities.” This was the beginning of an intensive propaganda program to win support for the Reagan administration’s policy. This group developed speeches, prepared statements, and lobbied the news media in an attempt to address public and congressional opposition. Activities included not just promoting speeches that emphasized the wide regional threat that communism represented in Central America, but also pressuring U.S. media corporations like CBS and the New York Times to report the conflict in a light more favorable to the administration. This program was thorough and integral to the pursuit of congressional support for lethal aid to the Contras. In 1983, the administration created the public diplomacy effort to control the dialogue over the Central American crisis. If the administration could control how Americans thought and talked about the conflict, it would be less encumbered in the pursuit of its policy.

Justin Hart has traced the origins of public diplomacy back to the late 1930s. The purpose of public diplomacy, he suggests, “encompasses an incredibly broad set of initiatives designed to shape the image of the United States in the world.” The difficulty of the Reagan administration in the conflict in Central America caused the Executive Branch to reinvigorate this practice in the hope that it could better control the dialogue and likewise the prosecution of the conflict. The Reagan administration’s public diplomacy campaign was a lasting consequence of the influence of the Vietnam War on the United States during the 1980s. The divisive and widely opposed conflict in Southeast Asia resulted in a heightened concern for the role of the United States in the


56 Shultz to Reagan, April 15, 1984, in Kornbluh and Byrne, The Iran-Contra Scandal, 35.

world. Concerned about the unjust application of American power, Congress and the American public were not enthusiastic about the use of force abroad and particularly critical of such applications of power in minor areas of the developing world for the expressed purposes of fighting the grand threat of communism. Many Americans were critical of the application of American power abroad. For this reason, it was integral for the Reagan administration to communicate its side of the story to the American people.

Public diplomacy was propaganda, and it was an integral part of the Reagan administration’s Central American policy. The primary goal was to create public support by providing the kind of information that could help the Reagan administration’s position, and to avoid providing information that might undermine the initiatives in the region. Public diplomacy was a way of telling the story the White House’s way and encouraging increased support for the policy primarily by demonizing their enemy, the Sandinistas. This was an integral aspect of the U.S.-Nicaraguan conflict throughout Reagan’s presidency.

In 1983, Congress and the administration continued to argue over policy, and the public diplomacy operation’s success hinged on controlling this dialogue. In 1983, the Reagan administration was losing in this important area. Americans continued to draw a negative association with the United States activities with the Vietnam War. In 1983, media coverage drew widely on the Vietnam analogy. In an April op-ed piece for the New York Times Lewis Flora claimed, “It is accurate to compare El Salvador to Vietnam, Central America to Indochina, in the sense that Washington’s policy has no positive goal.” Flora repeated the fears of many that an inability to form a clear objective would lead the United States wandering into another

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Vietnam War.

When asked publicly to discuss comparisons with Vietnam, administration officials often denied any connection. Instead, officials appealed to the importance and justice that embodied the Vietnam War and the early Cold War. The White House sought an alternative way of remembering Vietnam, and one that lifted the conflict up as just and heroic but undermined by the meddling of bureaucracy. In March of 1983, United Nations ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick denied that U.S. policy toward Central America carried any connection to Vietnam. She insisted instead that it resembled the Marshall Plan because it “constituted a response to a regional problem that was simultaneously economic and social and military.”

Likewise, on April 27, 1983 President Reagan addressed a joint-session of the United States Congress. Reagan did not refer to Vietnam directly, but he evoked the rhetoric of the Vietnam War, a language that suggested that the importance of U.S. policy reflected a region-wide security concern that threatened to cripple the country. He stated, “Central America’s problems do directly affect the security and the well-being of our own people.” He continued, “El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts. Nicaragua is just as close to Miami, San Antonio, San Diego, and Tucson as those cities are gathered tonight” and “Cuba is the host to a Soviet combat brigade, a submarine base capable of servicing Soviet Submarines, and military bases visited regularly by Soviet military aircraft.”

At a news conference later that summer, Reagan


60 98 Cong. Rec 9854 (April 27, 1983) (address by President Reagan).
steadfastly attested that “There is no comparison with Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{61} The Reagan administration sought to deny the relevance of the comparison with Vietnam, but as it sought to justify policy and build support, officials defended it by harkening back to the morality and justice of the cause in Vietnam and likewise Central America. The administration’s defense reflected the same drives that motivated U.S. leaders during the outset of the Vietnam War. Officials justified the action in terms of national security by uplifting the fight against communism that posed a subversive threat to entire regions. Throughout Reagan’s presidency, the administration consistently argued that the Sandinistas represented a broad regional threat. However, if it were to gain the adherence of moderates in Congress they needed the public diplomacy operation to shift the dialogue away from the troubled memory of the Vietnam War.

In the spring of 1983, the administration faced further resistance from Congress. Lawmakers feared the development of a Vietnam-like action and were distrustful of the intentions of the administration. The House Intelligence Committee, headed by Boland, took the first step to eliminate any kind of assistance to the Contras for the next fiscal year, 1984. The committee decided, in a partisan vote, to support an amendment that rejected all appeals by the Department of State and the CIA to fund the Contras in the coming fiscal year.\textsuperscript{62} This decision created a tense environment in the House of Representatives and the summer months ahead promised a fight over policy. Minority leader Robert Michel (R) lamented the decision recalling the injustice of Vietnam. He drew a connection with the crisis in Cambodia and Vietnam, and claimed that this “Would leave Nicaragua as a sanctuary for guerrillas in El Salvador and a


festering sore for American interests in the region.” Strom Thurmond (R), a supporter of Reagan’s policy, proclaimed a position that conjured up the familiarity of rhetoric from the Vietnam era. He insisted that if “We turn our backs on the people of El Salvador and other Central American countries, we do great harm to the future of democracy itself, and we send a dangerous messaged to friends and foes alike.” Thurmond submitted for the record an article from *Time* titled, “El Salvador: It is not Vietnam.” The title exposed the clear objective of the author, and Thurmond submitted it as an attempt to deny a material connection with Vietnam. Interestingly, this article reflected the position taken by proponents, a position that did not refute the Vietnam analogy, but rather appealed to a different interpretation of the past.

While politicians on Capitol Hill argued about Central America and the lessons of Vietnam, something happened that represented the beginning of a change that over the next several years significantly altered the course of the debate and of policy regarding Nicaragua and the developing world generally. That spring a suicide bomber attacked the United States embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. The death toll was over 60. Then a month later at around 6:30pm on May 25, 1983, urban terrorists gunned down Lt. Commander Albert Schaufelberger as he waited for a friend in a parking lot outside of Central American University in San Salvador. Schaufelberger, a resident of San Diego, California, was a member of the small contingent of American advisors helping the government of El Salvador fight the Nicaraguan backed insurgency in the country.


Schaufelberger was sitting in his green Chevy Malibu, from which he had removed the bullet resistant glass that all such vehicles were out-fitted. The sealed bulletproof windows made the sweltering heat of San Salvador unbearable. As he waited, a vehicle pulled in from behind, gunmen jumped from the small van and gunned down the deputy commander of the United States military advisory group while he sat in his car.\textsuperscript{66} These attacks played an important role in changing how members of the Reagan administration understood threat in the world, and eventually how it defined and conducted their policy with Nicaragua. Over the next several years the administration observed a global escalation of terrorism.\textsuperscript{67} The threat was serious and real, and over the next three years, it allowed the administration’s public diplomacy operation to shift the debate over Central America and to develop a new more aggressive policy with Nicaragua, and the world.

During 1983, administration officials observed an escalation of terrorist violence in Latin America and throughout the world. Of the 170 attacks against U.S. citizens and property that year, Latin America led all regions with nearly 80 incidents. Likewise, by 1985 Latin America made up 15.2 percent of international terrorism in the globe, this was the third highest percentage following the Middle East and Western Europe. More importantly, just short of 50 percent of all


international terrorist attacks on U.S. citizens and property occurred in Latin America. That year marked the emergence of a terrorism crisis.\footnote{U.S. Department of State “Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1985,” in Friedlander, \textit{Terrorism}, 80-81.}

It would take time for the Reagan administration’s public diplomacy campaign to change the conversation to a focus on terrorism and the summer debates over funding for the Contras remained centered on the meaning of Vietnam and the relevance of the Cold War notion of national security to Central America. On June 1, 1983, Congressman David Bonior (D) reacted to Schaufelberger’s death along with Howard Wolfe (D) by demanding de-escalation. Likening the course of action to Vietnam, Bonior declared, “We cannot help but ask where this policy is leading? The parallels between our policy in Indochina and the folly of our current involvement in Central America have been carefully documented by my colleague from Michigan, Howard Wolfe.”\footnote{98 Cong. Rec. H14242 (June 1, 1983) (statement by Congressman Bonior).} Bonior submitted a speech made by Wolfe, and in it he argued that “An all too familiar pattern is emerging, and I fear we are about to make the same mistakes we made in Vietnam.” He concluded that the United States stood at a “crossroads…not dissimilar to that which the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations faced in 1963 and 1964.”\footnote{98 Cong. Rec. H14242-14243 (June 1, 1983).} For Wolfe and critics in general, the fundamental error of the United States in Vietnam and in Central America came in misunderstanding “the causes of revolution [and] emphasize[ing] external factors.”\footnote{98 Cong. Rec. H14242-14243 (June 1, 1983).} These critics provided answers to difficult questions about the role of the United States in the world and the best ways to define the violent changes in government.
The resonance of the Vietnam comparison grew louder in July of 1983 as members of Congress engaged in a bitter fight that was as much about Vietnam as Central America. As politicians fought over various attempts at amending the restrictions introduced by Boland, they argued over the remembering, the lessons, and meaning, of Vietnam. It was an argument about the proper role of the United States in the world, the consequence of American empire and of the use of force. The debate divided the country. None disavowed the honor of veterans of Vietnam, though, the Reagan administration and its supporters often attempted to monopolize their nostalgic remembering. Instead, Americans debated the accuracy of the grand strategy national security perspectives that led to Vietnam and was drawing the country deeper into conflict in Central America. Congress and the country were divided, and if support for the Reagan administration’s policy hinged on agreement on this topic the White House would have to wait a long time.

On July 28, 1983, Phil Gramm (D), in strong support of action against Nicaragua, sounded a tone reminiscent of U.S. demands placed against North Vietnam during the 1960s and 70s. He said, “If the Nicaraguans want peace, if they are willing to stop their aggression against their neighbor, then we will stop our support for the fighters with their borders. If they do not, we will not.” Gramm went on to evoke Vietnam arguing that congressional restrictions represented, “A proposal from this committee that says let us not repeat the errors of Vietnam, but let us repeat the methods of Vietnam.” Gramm opposed the Boland Amendment, but he also worried that U.S. policy to deny to Nicaragua the ability to funnel arms to El Salvador had not learned the impossibility of this kind of task. He lamented, “With tens of billions of dollars, with 600,000

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combat troops, with absolute mastery of the air and the sea and the land, we never shut down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and we never stopped the shipment of arms and the movement of men and materials to South Vietnam. How can we believe that we can be successful in that activity in Central America when it did not work in Vietnam? Samuel S. Stratton (D) spoke shortly after and he embraced the same analogy interpreting the funding issues as similar to the bombing halts conducted by Johnson during Vietnam. July 28 proved a hard fought day on Capitol Hill.

In response to both Stratton and Gramm’s comments, Robert Mrazek (D) offered strong words. He emphasized another analogy. Mrazek called on a most painful memory of Vietnam, at least for Congress, when he compared the demands of the administration to that of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964. He remarked that “I can remember an August day in 1964 when we Americans watched on television as the President of the United States described an unprovoked attack against our destroyers…It was not until years later we found out there was no such unprovoked attack.” To this John McCain (R) entered the debate backing Stratton and Gramm claiming, “Our involvement in Vietnam was exactly only more particularly described as the gentleman from Texas did and there is an exact parallel between what is happening now and what happened there.” To this Mrazek responded, “I would simply like to say that we are in a very similar position to the one we were in back in those early 1960s. The chairman of the intelligence committee has pointed out very, very effectively that we are heading down a similar

road.” He continued, “all it is going to take...are a few of our troops or advisers to be taken out some night in the jungle...when that happens the rage of the American people is going to be uncontrollable.”77 This back and forth continued as the debate focused more and more on Vietnam and less on Central America itself.

Proponents of the administration’s policy in Central America drew on Vietnam as much as did opponents. Tobias Roth (R) claimed that opposing the Boland Amendment could prevent another Vietnam War. This perspective stood in contrast to supporters of the proposal who asserted that the acceptance of the legislation intended to prevent this type of conflict. Roth claimed that the “adoption of this amendment...would lead to another Vietnam.”78 He went on to ask Congress, “Do we want to go the route of another Vietnam? I do not think so. That is why I think the President is right in this particular program...if we side with continued covert aid, i.e. the alternative that we have today I think we can eliminate that possibility.”79 Roth implied that an indirect application of force was necessary to avoid a direct application of American personnel that might become necessary if the United States did nothing. Congressman Henry Hyde (R) followed up on Roth’s comments with a moral justification of both Vietnam and the conflict in Central America. He claimed, “I have my own view of the American character. That view encompasses the notion that we fight for freedom, we fight for the underdog, we help people defend themselves when they are attacked by a vicious aggressor...we did it in Vietnam.” He went on to claim that, “the lesson of Vietnam is that...you have to have the will, the will to

assert your national interest.”

Proponents, like Roth, harkened back to John F. Kennedy’s inauguration speech while opponents like Norman Mineta (D) claimed that Reagan’s escalation represented a “repetition of the incremental escalation of military involvement that characterized our involvement in Vietnam,” He argued, “If Congress again fails to stop the president, we will share responsibility for this new, open-ended, and unnecessary war.” American politicians fought to define the history of this conflict, a political battle that carried significant consequences for the nation’s course of action and for the accepted understanding of the proper place of American power in the world. When these debates concluded, the U.S. Congress succeeded in blocking all aid to the Contras. The Reagan supporters failed to win the battle over the memory of Vietnam.

During the summer of 1983, the media covered the political conflict and the American people reacted. In some cases, Americans took to the streets to express their opposition and concern. In June 1983, several hundred people formed on the campus of the University of Massachusetts. The protestors expressed their concern with El Salvador and Nicaragua, and they did so in terms of Vietnam. A former Marine present at the rally explained, “The parallels with Vietnam are incredible.” Further, the Gallup Poll suggested that public opinion had shifted drastically against the administration’s policy. Public concern that the situation in El Salvador could escalate and draw the United States in more deeply represented, “71% of persons familiar


with the El Salvadoran situation, 82% of the total.”\(^{83}\) This translated into a finding the following year that showed that, “72% of aware Americans think it is either very or fairly likely that our involvement in Central America could escalate into a Vietnam.”\(^{84}\)

In addition to the public’s awareness, several retired U.S. generals again threw their expertise into the national discussion over policy. Among them, William Westmoreland proved the most vocal. Together the generals all expressed a need to prevent any further communist gains, and recommended an expansion of advisors sent to Honduras.\(^{85}\) In an op-ed piece written in the fall, Westmoreland reiterated the feelings he first expressed in 1981 that “The much disparaged ‘domino theory’ could well apply in Central America if we turn our backs on El Salvador.”\(^{86}\) A debate over the nation’s troubling experience in Southeast Asia captivated the nation.

To add further to this highly tense atmosphere in the summer of 1983, *The Week in Review* conducted interviews with key policy makers who had advised Kennedy on Vietnam. Interestingly, Victor Krulak insisted that the comparisons to Vietnam receive “sober attention.” He went on to assert that in some respects “the analogy with Central America is perfect.” In general, the panel asserted that there existed “one overriding lesson of Vietnam, it is that an Administration must level with Congress and the American people, accepting the burdens of a great debate in which objectives and strategy are clarified, with their costs and implications, and

\(^{83}\) *The Gallup Poll* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1984), 135.

\(^{84}\) *The Gallup Poll* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1985), 107-108.


submitted for a clear vote of approval or rejection.” The administration did not do this. Instead, the Reagan administration relied on secrecy and the fear invoking rhetoric of the domino theory and grand strategy description of the crisis in Central America. This led many to distrust the White House and form debates over the possibility of another Vietnam. Members of Congress did not want inaction to allow the conflict, dictated entirely on the president’s terms, to result in a Vietnam-like quagmire, and the secrecy and legally dubious actions of the administration further concerned many members of Congress. 87

While Americans struggled over the legacy of Vietnam, the world was changing. The world was not the same in 1983 as it was in 1965. Since then technology and expanded global weapons sales in the developing world contributed to the emergence of a new and more unpredictable security threat. As the Schaufelberger killing in San Salvador earlier that May showed, urban terrorism had increased in an escalating conflict in El Salvador. Likewise, the Beirut attack also demonstrated that the United States faced a new security threat. The issue of terrorism was not a mere anomaly. The terrorism problem in Central America was not only leftist terrorism, but also rightist ‘death squads’ that hunted down anti-government affiliates in El Salvador. The widespread presence of terrorism as an issue within El Salvador forced the Reagan administration to develop a position against this issue in the years ahead.

The escalation of terrorism in Central America, from both the right and the left, forced the White House to consider the emergent danger more closely. In November 1983, Ambassador to El Salvador, Thomas Pickering spoke for the administration in denouncing terror from the right. Pickering said that the leadership in Washington believed that “extremist terror [was]

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another case of fascists serving the communist cause." In December 1983, the activity of rightist death squads in El Salvador also led Vice President George H. W. Bush to speak for the administration. On December 11, 1983, Bush visited El Salvador and at a dinner with President Alvaro Magana proposed a toast in which he insisted, “These cowardly death squad terrorists are just as repugnant to me, to President Reagan, to the United States Congress, and to the American people as the terrorist on the left.” An escalation in terrorism in Central America and in other parts of the world led the Reagan administration to recognize this threat in a more serious manner. One thing that would make the Cold War in the 1980s different was how the United States defined and reacted to the emergent threat of terrorism.

While Congress, the executive, the media and the public struggled to shape the course of the United States’ Central American policy international events recalibrated the debate. An important change brought on by international events occurred in 1983. The attacks in Beirut, and horrifying incidents in Central America sounded an alarm in Washington. Some scholars of the Reagan administration have focused their critiques on ideology and economics. Greg Grandin insists that a neo-conservative capitalist ideology drove the Reagan offensive. In *Inevitable Revolutions* Walter LaFeber defined the Central American crisis as the consequence of capitalist empire. Unquestionably, economics and ideology matter in the making of U.S. foreign policy. However, scholars of this subject have discounted the significance of international events in shaping U.S.-Nicaragua policy. Over the course of the next several years, terrorist events

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transformed how the Reagan administration understood threat in the world and allowed officials to shift the dialogue over Nicaragua and Central America away from Vietnam to the new less predictable danger of terrorism. This factored centrally into the establishment of a new offensive policy framework developed in subsequent years and used against the government of Nicaragua.⁹⁰

An important omission from NSDD-17 was any reference to terrorism. In 1983, however, a shifting international environment and escalation of war in Central America drove a change. Early that spring CIA intelligence noted a significant growth in the role of PLO groups and Libyans in Nicaragua. According to this information, the Palestinians were training guerrillas and pilots, and Libya was committing money and advisors to Nicaragua. The CIA noted a significant increase in PLO activity in Nicaragua, and in El Salvador, and connected this directly to the allegation that the Sandinistas exported arms and terrorist violence throughout the region. This intelligence was part of the beginning of a transformation in how the Reagan administration understood the Cold War and rationalized a more aggressive form of intervention against Nicaragua. In 1984, George Shultz led the administration in defining the new concept of international terrorism. Despite terrorism from the right or the left in Central America, the administration used international terrorism to develop a propaganda device that defined the problem as associated with an expanded communist threat, the Radical-Left. In the coming years, the terrorism problem redefined the dialogue and the policy with Nicaragua. This development

⁹⁰ Grandin, Empire’s Workshop; LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions.
encouraged a departure from containment and the adoption of offensive measures that further
challenged the norms of international behavior.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{91} Defense Department Background Paper, Nicaragua’s Military Build-up and Support for Central American Subversion, folder “The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals” Box 16, David S. Addington Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
Chapter Two

Harbor Mines

Shortly after lunchtime on March 20, 1984, the Soviet tanker, *Lugansk*, cruised into the waters near Porto Sandino on Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast. The vessel carried petroleum supplies destined for the Sandinista government. Then, suddenly, at 1:40pm an explosion rocked the ship. When the smoke lifted, five Soviet seamen were injured. The cause of the explosion was apparent immediately. The *Lugansk* had hit a mine. It was a small mine not capable of sinking the vessel, but a mine nonetheless. Shortly after the incident, the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior made a statement. The ministry insisted that the explosive mine was planted by the United States and their paramilitary ally, the Contras. The Nicaraguan government argued that this was part of a criminal U.S. led terror war, and undeclared blockade against Nicaragua. Other vessels received damage in Nicaragua’s two other major Atlantic ports of Bluefields and Corinto.¹

The U.S. mining of Nicaragua’s ports proved controversial. CIA personnel directed the construction and placement of the weapons. Together with the Contras, the operatives placed the explosives, using small boats that moved as close as twelve miles from Nicaragua’s coast. As in 1981-82, when the Reagan administration began covert assistance to the Contras, it again did not

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inform Congress of the activities.  

From January to March 1984, U.S.-Contra mines damaged six ships and wounded at least ten non-combatant sailors. Nicaragua and the Soviet Union condemned the action. Nicaragua prepared to go before the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), to argue that the United States acted in violation of international law. Not surprisingly, the United States utilized its veto power in the UN Security Council and blocked the vote on a proposal. France and the Netherlands were the most vocal supporters of the proposal to “condemn the mining of Nicaraguan ports.”  

The ICJ, however, moved forward in the process of hearing Nicaragua’s case and over the course of the next two years, the Reagan administration ignored the proceedings.

The year 1984 marked the beginning of a transition in the United States’ conduct of the Cold War, and the mining operation was evidence of this shift. During 1984, the administration began a reconceptualization of foreign policy and of the Cold War. This rethinking was in response to the spike in acts of terrorism during 1983. The operation represented an escalation of hostilities against Nicaragua. The goal of the operation was to establish a blockade of Nicaragua by targeting oil tankers and discouraging other countries from sending their vessels into Nicaragua’s ports. The first steps focused on crippling the country economically, first with an illegal military blockade and a year later with the enacting of unilateral economic sanctions. The United States mining directly violated Nicaragua’s international rights as a sovereign state. Regardless of a technical state of peace, the Reagan administration over the next three years

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developed an offensive strategy that tore down the practice of containment and further challenged the accepted norms of international behavior. The mining was the first step in this change.⁴

The mining of Nicaragua’s harbors, however, also showed that Congress and the American public were not ready for a more aggressive United States. This was a transition year. The controversy that the operation inspired both nationally and internationally meant that the atmosphere required for the acceptance of a new U.S. offensive war on terrorism was not yet established. The administration needed the terrorism crisis to escalate. It needed shocking actions perpetrated by states like Nicaragua, that verified that there existed a terrorism crisis and could help gain momentum with Congress and the American people for a new more aggressive Cold War policy. Over the course of the next two years, the Reagan administration responded to and manufactured events in an effort to create an atmosphere of fear and urgency that could justify its hardline intentions.⁵ Part of this involved the creation of the right political atmosphere. The administration employed an intense public diplomacy campaign that brought its argument to the people frequently and in earnest and created a dialogue that criminalized the Nicaraguan government. The ability of the administration to communicate their opinions was very important to creating support for a new more aggressive policy with Nicaragua in subsequent years. The public diplomacy campaign was an important tool for marginalizing the dialogue of the

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⁵ My claim that the administration manufactured events is not to assert that the leadership purposefully brought about an act of terrorism. Instead, this refers to the use of provocation by the Reagan administration to encourage violent responses from state sponsors of terrorism like Nicaragua. These actions were most visible at the beginning of 1986, covered in chapter 5.
opposition in Congress, which tended to fight administration policy in Central America by evoking the memory of Vietnam and comparing actions in Central America to the previous failure of Cold War containment policy. International terrorism proved a key tool for changing the debate over Nicaragua and mobilizing a military offensive that hinted at a new era of U.S. hegemony.

Beginning in 1983 the emergence of the terrorism crisis caused a refashioning of the Cold War and a re-definition of the Nicaraguan conflict by the Reagan administration. Terrorism is an old form of warfare that involves targeting non-combatants through assassination, bombings, shootings, and kidnappings in order to obtain some form of political objective. During 1983, the conflict in El Salvador escalated and in the process, terrorism, both rightist and leftist, developed as a significant problem in an increasingly brutal conflict. Initially, Ambassador Thomas Pickering and Vice President George H. W. Bush emphatically condemned all forms of terrorism in Central America. Despite these initial statements, during 1984 the Reagan administration led by George Shultz, reconstructed the meaning of terrorism. What were the causes and solutions of the terrorism problem? According to the Reagan administration, the cause was an offensive by the forces of the Radical-Left, the communist-terrorists, and the solution was the pursuit of an offensive policy that relied on military force against alleged state sponsors of terrorism like Nicaragua. Following the mining incident, the Reagan administration acted cautiously, but it used the period to explain their philosophical re-evaluation of the Cold War that formed the basis for a future offensive against Nicaragua.

This chapter first focuses on the controversy following the United States’ mining of Nicaragua’s harbors, which inspired a tremendous amount of domestic and international
criticism, and which the administration responded to with a new dialogue over the conflict and the Cold War. It establishes the mining as the first evidence that the United States prepared to take a more offensive military oriented approach with Nicaragua. Throughout 1984, the administration emphatically argued that the threat of international terrorism marked the advent of a new Cold War that the United States needed to address with an offensive and military oriented policy. The administration insisted that because of the emergence of the terrorism crisis in 1983 the United States had a responsibility to adopt active measures, like the mining operation, to address a Radical-Left offensive that applied terrorism as a primary weapon. The controversy forced the administration to resort far more to rhetoric than action during 1984. However, eventually this language, when combined with actual events in an escalating terrorism crisis, criminalized Nicaragua and provided a vehicle for the formal construction of a military counterterrorism offensive directed at states alleged of sponsoring terrorism. Terrorism provided the language and the reason to escalate the administration’s conflict against Nicaragua. During 1984, the administration made its case to Congress and the American people.

As in 1982 when journalists revealed the secret Contra support program, the White House at first denied direct responsibility for the mining, and argued that the problem rested entirely with the communist leadership in Nicaragua that allegedly encouraged the independent action of guerrilla counterrevolutionary forces. In response to Soviet allegations of U.S. involvement, in a White House statement released on March 21, the administration denied the charge.6 In a matter of days, however, the media again fully exposed the nature of U.S. involvement, and the

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administration struggled to defend itself.

The revelation of the mining of Nicaragua’s ports infuriated members of Congress on both sides of the isle. House Speaker Thomas (‘Tip’) O’Neill (D) summed up the feelings of many of those opposed to U.S. activity with the Contras, claiming, “I have contended that the Reagan Administration’s secret war against Nicaragua was morally indefensible. Today it is clear that it is legally indefensible as well.”7 As in 1982-83, when the Boland Amendment was first developed, many considered the Reagan Administration’s actions illegal. Even Republican Barry Goldwater remarked that the mining was “an act violating international law…an act of war.”8 The crisis over the mining of Nicaragua’s ports intensified the debate over policy, and memories of Vietnam resurfaced. Many Americans recognized what journalist Philip Taubman of the New York Times reported in April 1984 that “The last time the United States openly mined foreign harbors was in 1972, when President Nixon ordered the mining of all North Vietnamese ports to prevent the flow of arms and supplies.”9 The Reagan administration’s action challenged the accepted norms of international behavior, and it brought a storm of controversy.

Angered by the mining, Americans went to the streets to voice their displeasure with the administration’s tactics. In April, protestors forced Henry Kissinger, whom Reagan appointed to chair a problem solving committee on Central America and had defended the mining, to cancel a speech at Tufts University. The demonstrators carried caricatures “linking Kissinger to U.S.


policies in Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, and Central America.”¹⁰ Nine months later the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Santa Cruz, California, came out in public opposition to Reagan’s policy and promoted instead a policy of “nonintervention and self-determination in Central America.” Spokesperson Dean Metcalf claimed, “Everybody knows somebody who died for nothing in Vietnam.”¹¹ Metcalf hoped the nation could learn the right lesson from Vietnam. A week later, several hundred protestors gathered outside the federal building in Los Angeles. Max Inglett, a Vietnam veteran, exclaimed, “We want to be certain that another Vietnam does not happen again in El Salvador,” which was the primary reason given for U.S. action against Nicaragua.¹² Inglett was part of a small demonstration but the Gallup Poll suggested that public concern was strong nationally: in 1984-1985, 58% of persons polled feared a Vietnam-like escalation in Central America and felt that the United States should “stay out completely.”¹³ Political activism and poll figures reflected the widespread national debate about Central America. The Reagan administration struggled to win the debate, in part, because it hinged on the difficult legacy of Vietnam.

It was not only Nicaragua and the Soviet Union that complained about the U.S. led mining of another sovereign nation. Great Britain condemned the act, France offered minesweepers to assist the Sandinista leadership in clearing their ports, and the Canadian Prime


¹³ The Gallup Poll (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1986), 70-72.
Minister, recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize referred to the action as “an act of international terrorism and….an act of war no different.”

At this moment the world, Congress, and the American public appeared poised to stop the Reagan administration. However, the situation with Nicaragua was in flux, and the beginning of a terrorism crisis in 1983 would factor significantly in the upcoming course of events.

During the months following the mining controversy, Secretary of State George Shultz took the lead in establishing the groundwork for the Reagan offensive. On April 3, he spoke before the Trilateral Commission in Washington D.C. He titled his speech “Power and Diplomacy in the 1980s.” Shultz spoke about American ideals and of the interconnection between power and diplomacy. He exclaimed that the Cold War in the 1980s was different. The primary concern was the threat from small-scale conflict in the developing world. State sponsored terrorism was, he testified, a new theme in the world. He insisted that “Terrorism, particularly state sponsored terrorism, is already a contemporary weapon directed at America’s interest, America’s values, and American allies.” Shultz constructed a new image of threat in the world that linked the radical aims of communists and terrorists. Shultz believed that this Cold War was different, and involved a new kind of threat from the Radical-Left.

George Shultz was not simply giving his thoughts and ideas. The secretary was verbalizing material from a new directive for U.S. policy that President Reagan signed on the

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same day that the secretary spoke before the Trilateral Commission. As a response to the escalation of a terrorism crisis in 1983 that began with the Beirut attacks and a rise in urban terrorism in El Salvador the administration constructed “National Security Decision Directive 138: Combatting Terrorism.” This directive established the principle that the United States would take active measures to address the issue of international terrorism. The document emphasized the emergent problem posed by state sponsors of international terrorism. The administration believed that “international terrorist movements and some of those which enjoy state sponsorship [were] receiving guidance directly or indirectly from the Soviet Union.” For the first time, the Reagan administration formally adopted a position that the world was in a transition phase, and that the old Cold War status quo was changing. There was a new threat, international terrorism, allegedly driven by a Soviet-led Radical-Left. The goal of this conspiratorial coalition presented “a common problem for all democratic nations.” In the directive, the Reagan administration pledged that it would “Work intensively with others to eliminate the threat of terrorism to our way of life.” Further, the administration insisted, “States that practice terrorism or actively support it will not be allowed to do so without consequence….acts of state-sponsored and organized terrorism should be appropriately exposed and condemned in every available forum.” The emergent issue of state sponsorship of terrorism was changing the Cold War as well as outlining a new course for the future of U.S. policy.16

NSDD-138 established a two-phased program overseen by the secretary of state, secretary of defense, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the treasury

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secretary. The head of the Terrorist Incident Working Group (TIWG), Robert Oakley, would oversee the implementation of this program over the course of the following year. The central initiatives were to expand intelligence and cooperation to combat terrorism, but also to “Develop a full range of options for dealing directly with terrorism, both at the threat stage and after such acts are carried out. According to NSDD-138, the program would incorporate the use of “sanctions [and] continue improvements in the U.S. capability to conduct military operations to counter terrorism.” The authors sought most principally to, “develop a military strategy that is supportive of an active, preventative program to combat state-sponsored terrorism [and] develop a broad range of defensive measures to protect military forces, dependents, and facilities worldwide.” In response to the terrorism crisis that emerged in 1983 the United States developed a policy for a new offensive war on terrorism. The mining was the first test of this new aggressive policy against states of the Radical-Left.17

NSDD-138 leaked to the press, and in the wake of the mining controversy, this resulted in further criticism and suspicion about the intentions of the United States. The Wall Street Journal accurately reported that the administration considered the use of “preventive strikes against international terrorist groups.”18 Together the mining and the report suggested that the Reagan administration was beginning an offensive as part of a new policy direction. This caused controversy and brought significant opposition to the hardline approach called for in NSDD-138. The leaked details and the controversy of the mining meant that the offensive envisioned by top


officials in the Reagan administration had to wait, the country was not ready. In order for the United States to adopt an offensive strategy, the administration needed an atmosphere of fear and urgency. Over the course of the next two years, the public diplomacy campaign and an escalation of international terrorist events created that atmosphere, until then the administration went on damage control. Following the controversy surrounding the mining of Nicaragua’s harbors, the Reagan administration did two things: first, it actively argued for the need for an offensive approach against state sponsors, and second policy makers moved cautiously with legal actions that presented little likelihood of drawing controversy.  

A comprehensive counterterrorism policy document sent from National Security advisor Robert McFarlane to Attorney General Edwin Meese affirmed the administration’s cautious approach following the mining fiasco. McFarlane acknowledged that the controversy surrounding the mining and the leaks of NSDD-138 had caused the administration to move with caution and to deemphasize the unilateral pre-emptive military option. In prefacing his delivery of the materials pertaining to U.S. terrorism policy, he noted, “We have sought to minimize the attention placed on pre-emptive covert activities in order to preclude adverse reactions which could constrain our options.” While the operational directive for U.S. terrorism policy in 1984 was grounded in taking active measures against state sponsors the controversy moved the focus to improved intelligence and it “explicitly rule[d] out responding in kind, recognizing that this would hurt an open society far more than it would hurt terrorists.” After the revelations of the mining of Nicaragua’s ports and of NSDD-138, the pressure was on the administration and the

NSC felt it apparent that it was not the time to pursue offensive military options. NSDD-138 was a ‘lame duck’ directive.\textsuperscript{20}

Because of the controversy surrounding the aggressive activities of the United States, particularly in Central America, the administration emphasized its public diplomacy campaign. The purpose of the program was to sell the new U.S. strategy to the media, the public and Congress. Throughout 1984, the administration remained cautious about the application of aggressive military options to the terrorism strategy, but top officials like George Shultz, and President Reagan spoke frequently about the urgency of the terrorism crisis. Their goal was to convince Congress and the public of the need for the active measures called for by NSDD-138. The public diplomacy campaign was one of two key ingredients for an offensive war on terrorism.

After the controversy over the mining operation, the Reagan administration continued to follow the precedent, established by the Export Administration Act passed during the Carter administration, in terms of dealing with states alleged to sponsor terrorism. The administration relied on economic and trade sanctions in dealing with state sponsors. According to this practice, the United States reviewed the actions of suspect nations and if they deemed a government involved in acts of terrorism the United States could take a number of economic actions against the offender government. These actions could involve withholding aid or enforcing a range of economic and trade sanctions. The Export Administration Act of 1979 created the practice of keeping a list of states that sponsored terrorism and using this credential as a way of barring

various kinds of aid. In subsequent years, the Reagan administration expanded this practice and made the allegation of state support for international terrorism a premise for the execution of aggressive action. Over the next two years, the United States changed Nicaragua’s status and constructed a new framework of intervention for a military oriented counterterrorism strategy.21

In the wake of the mining controversy, the administration turned the tables on Nicaragua, and accused the Sandinistas of being the ones involved in illegal international terrorist acts. On May 9, 1984, Reagan announced to the world that this threat factored into U.S. motivations in Central America. Speaking in a televised address from the oval office the president reiterated the well-known theme of communist conspiracy abroad. The president proclaimed that “the Soviet Union and its surrogates move to establish control over Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan and recently, closer to home, in Nicaragua and El Salvador.”22 In building on George Shultz’s description of the new Cold War, Reagan connected Nicaragua to not only the Soviet bloc but also to a global terrorist network rooted in the Middle East. He insisted that the PLO and Libya were supplying the Sandinistas and helping that government drive a “reign of terror” in Central America.23 According to Reagan, communist-terrorists carried out a new kind of offensive war.

The fearsome rhetoric that emanated from the White House and State Department following the revelations of the mining of Nicaragua’s Atlantic ports portended a new kind of


Cold War. The new conflict was, for the first time, on the American mainland and Reagan insisted that it involved a more devious and insidious threat from a united communist-terrorist brand of leftism. The enemy in this new Cold War allegedly targeted civilians and used deception to undermine the American way of life.

There is no better example of the pop-culture resonance of the administration’s language in 1984 than the blockbuster Hollywood hit film, *Red Dawn*. Patrick Swayze starred in the film and it brought Reagan’s nightmarish fears to life on the silver screen. The movie depicted a first time invasion by the forces of the Radical-Left. On the surface the plot appeared little more than a movie about the Soviet Union attacking the United States, but half-way through the film the true details of the events are un-earthed as Swayze’s guerrilla band of high school students, “Wolverines,” rescued a downed U.S. pilot. Sitting in front of a campfire during winter months in the Rocky Mountain West the Captain informed the group of what transpired. His description was of a Nicaraguan and Cuban force that staged an invasion by hijacking civilian airliners flying across the U.S.-Mexican border. The film’s producers brought to life the concern that the White House and State Department peppered the American people with at this time. This was the danger of a communist-terrorist Radical-Left that was emergent in Nicaragua. The administration described a Cold War enemy that targeted civilians, hijacked planes, and used terrorist deception to attack and undermine cherished American values of freedom and democracy. Indeed, the world was not the same as when John Kennedy triumphed in the Cuban missile crisis: this was the world of a new Cold War.²⁴

Four years later, in 1988, the comedy film *The Naked Gun* also revealed the pop-culture resonance of the administration’s description of a new communist-terrorist Cold War. The film starred the American comedian Leslie Nielson, who played Lieutenant Frank Drebin of Police Squad. Drebin tended to bungle things, but despite his incompetence, he was consistently successful in defeating the villains. In the opening scene, the key elements of the Reagan administration’s Radical-Left are sitting around a table in Beirut, Lebanon. The participants included Fidel Castro, Mikhail Gorbachev, Muammar Qaddafi, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Nicaragua’s Minister of Interior Tomas Borge and others of the administration’s alleged band of communist-terrorist state sponsors. Together the group argued about their next act of terrorist violence against the United States. After the Ayatollah insisted that they must conduct an act of terrorism that would “show America, the great Satan, as but a paper tiger,” Frank Drebin, disguised as a waiter purposely burns the Ayatollah’s hand and begins to single handedly beat up the communist-terrorist leaders. At the end of the debacle one of the characters asks, “who are you” to which Nielsen responded “Lt. Frank Drebin, Police Squad, and don’t ever let me catch you guys in America!” While the scene is from a ridiculous comedy, the image conjured up by the authors was directly from the speeches and statements of the Reagan administration during the 1980s when it pledged that the United States faced a new more aggressive enemy, a communist-terrorist Radical-Left. Films like *Red Dawn* and *The Naked Gun* are evidence that the way in which Americans depicted and understood the Cold War, which was considerably different during the 1980s than in previous decades.25

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This idea of international terrorism was broad and applied to not only Middle Eastern organizations and states, but also to communist and Marxist-revolutionary states. The administration constructed terrorists and communists as mutual allies. Not all terrorists were communists, but all communists by the mid-1980s, allegedly, sought the export of terrorism throughout the world. In this respect, the administration was able to present the threat and consequences posed by Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union as effectively the same as those posed by terrorist organizations and states like the PLO, Libya, and Iran. Terrorism was a new way of defining the enemies of the United States. The idea of international terrorism and subsequent events allowed the administration to characterize the role of Nicaragua in El Salvador as criminal. Hardliners in the administration insisted that this behavior required an aggressive military oriented approach that pressed the norms of accepted international behavior.

In Central America, the conflict between Nicaragua, the Contras, and El Salvador was increasingly violent. On May 30, 1984, a bomb exploded at a press conference in Costa Rica held by Eden Pastora. Pastora was an enigmatic Nicaraguan that initially fought with the Sandinistas but turned his sympathies toward the Contra resistance following the consolidation of Sandinista power. U.S. intelligence confirmed that the bombing was coordinated by the Sandinistas and the Spanish terror group ETA. Three were killed in the attack and twenty-eight were wounded, Pastora included. Shortly following this event leftist terrorists kidnapped Eduardo Vides Casanova, the Salvadoran defense minister’s brother. The Reagan

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administration knew the close relationship between the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran revolutionaries and these events further enhanced the administration’s growing opinion that Nicaragua served as a base for the forces of international terrorism in the region. These events, however, did not provide the kind of catalyst necessary to create the atmosphere for a U.S. offensive war on terrorism primarily because U.S. citizens were not the target of the strikes. Such events barely made headlines in the United States. These were minor incidents that did not target Americans and fell far off the radar of the public and Congress in the United States.

In the summer of 1984, George Shultz continued to lead the administration’s growing public diplomacy effort designed to create a climate of fear and urgency and convince Americans that a military offensive was necessary to address a world transformed by a terrorism crisis perpetrated by the forces of the Radical-Left. That June the secretary planned to speak at the Second Conference on International Terrorism held at the Jonathan Institute. In preparation for the speech, the NSC prepared a background paper on international terrorism for the secretary and his staff. The report argued that international terrorism was a dangerous and growing threat. It was growing precisely because state sponsorship of terrorism had risen dramatically. The authors traced the problem of state support for terrorism directly back to the Soviet Union. They believed the threat was part of the Cold War. Democracies and those friendly to the West were the target of a covert terrorism promoted and indirectly supported by Moscow. However, Moscow’s role was not the primary concern for the NSC. The most significant concern was for the escalation in the role of state sponsors of terrorism. Radical-Left states like Nicaragua, Cuba, and Libya were positioned in such a manner that they could easily influence the direction of countries in less stable areas of the world. The report described these governments as “crazy states” that, unlike
the USSR, did not have smart people giving advice on the dangers of the use of weapons of mass
destruction or the outright use of terrorist violence. The authors considered state sponsors of
terrorism irrational, backward, and a new security threat for the United States. They insisted that
these sponsors were unpredictable and that active measures that included the use of pre-emptive
unilateral force were necessary to combat this more dangerous enemy.28

On June 24, 1984, George Shultz gave his speech. Following closely the outline
provided by the NSC, the secretary outlined the new terror threat and the appropriate U.S.
response. The secretary spoke of the development of a new and dangerous threat, that of “state-
sponsored terrorism.” He remarked, “In the past five years more states have joined the ranks of
what we might call the ‘League of Terror,’ as full-fledged sponsors and supporters of
indiscriminate-and not so indiscriminate-murder.”29 These state sponsors made international
terrorism more dangerous and viable because it provided safe-havens, arms, and global access.
Shultz insisted that terrorism was a fundamental threat to democracy. Regardless of the type of
terrorism, whether perpetrated by communists or Islamic militants, it posed a legitimate threat to
the most basic of American values. Because terrorism sought to achieve political ends by
creating an atmosphere of fear, it was “a threat to the democracies.”30 Likewise, Shultz argued,
“If freedom and democracy are the targets of terrorism, it is clear that totalitarianism is its

Folder, “Terrorism 3 of 4,” George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records, Press office: Subject Files, OA/ID
14923, George Bush Presidential Library.

29 George Shultz, “Terrorism: The Challenge to the Democracies” June 24, 1984, in Steven Anzovin, Terrorism

ally.” The Reagan administration constructed a world in which communism and terrorism were friends and allies. Freedom was their enemy. This perceived assault on the free world by the Radical-Left warranted a new U.S. position in the world, an aggressive and offensive posture. Over the next two years, no situation showed this new direction more than Nicaragua.

Israel was a leading power in addressing terrorism and the audience at the Jonathan Institute was strongly pro-Israel and receptive to Shultz’s calls for a military offensive against state sponsors of terrorism. He declared that the United States must “go beyond passive defense to consider means of active prevention, pre-emption, and retaliation. Our goal must be to prevent and deter future terrorist acts.” The secretary insisted that the administration “will need the flexibility to respond to terrorist attacks in a variety of ways, at times and places of our own choosing.” Schultz argued for a freer hand in military actions, the support of the public, cooperation from the international community and a strengthening of intelligence. While the United States remained in a cautious position, Shultz’s statements changed the discussion and portended the future of U.S. terrorism policy.

As the summer of 1984 ended, the United States named, for the coming year, those states that had “repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism.” The states listed as repeat offenders were Iran, Syria, Libya, Cuba, and South Yemen, and the consequences were economic and trade sanctions. Despite the directive for active measures, such as unilateral and


pre-emptive attacks, the United States continued to proceed with caution. As the controversy over the mining of Nicaragua’s ports and the information in NSDD-138 revealed, the atmosphere for offensive action did not yet exist. While Nicaragua was not on the United States’ formal state terrorism list, this did not mean that the Sandinista government did not remain a target of the U.S. allegation. The Reagan administration was building its case against Nicaragua. The administration alleged Sandinista involvement in the assassination of Somoza, and the attempted assassination of Eden Pastora. The administration made a case that the Sandinistas provided “ideological and material support” for terrorist groups throughout the region and particularly in El Salvador. The regime allegedly supported urban terrorist groups like the Clara Elizabeth Ramirez Front (CERF). CERF was responsible for the 1983 murder of U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Schaufelberger outside of the Central American University in San Salvador. In 1984, the group had killed two U.S. embassy employees in El Salvador and had fired machine guns on the outside of the building in San Salvador. In addition to the allegation of support for urban terrorism in El Salvador, the administration developed a case against Nicaragua that the Sandinistas provided safe haven and support for international terror groups from the PLO, ETA, the Red Brigades, the Argentine Montoneros and the Uruguayan Tupamaros. The Reagan administration’s case against Nicaragua was building. The key to the offensive that Shultz was promoting that year was not only pressing allegations against Nicaragua, but also enhancing the public perception of a terrorism crisis that could justify an offensive response.34

34 “Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1984,” Folder “Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism Statistics 2 of 2,” George Bush Vice Presidential Records, Task Force on Combatting Terrorism, General Office Files: Subject Files, OA/ID 15394, George Bush Presidential Library. There was a terrorism crisis at this time, however, no attacks were perpetrated on U.S. soil and American casualty figures remained relatively low. For this reason, the administration had to communicate to the American public that this crisis represented a legitimate danger to the security of the United States and its allies.
George Shultz argued that military force was the best option for addressing the problem of state sponsorship of terrorism. This contention that the threat posed by state sponsors was such that it required a hardline military response that disregarded the sovereign rights of alleged states was an area of concern for the leadership in the State Department’s Office of Counterterrorism. In 1984 a disagreement between George Shultz and the Office of Counterterrorism emerged. On August 15, 1984, the Director for the Office of Counterterrorism, Robert Sayre, spoke before the Foreign Policy Association in New York City. Sayre’s speech reiterated several key points. First, he insisted that state sponsors linked to the Soviet Union facilitated international terrorism, and in large part, were Marxist-Leninist in orientation. The agents of terrorism, he asserted, were directing the war against the United States and the democracies of the world. Unlike Shultz, however, Sayre argued that “Combatting terrorism is essentially a police and not a military matter.” In his speech, the director argued that intelligence, law, and cooperation were the best measures for addressing the emergent issue of international terrorism. Whereas Shultz insisted that state terrorism was a criminal act that required the United States to take military action that disregarded sovereign rights, Sayre insisted that legal means and international justice was the most effective tool at the administration’s disposal. This was the beginning of a significant fissure within the Reagan administration over the issue of state sponsorship and the proper response to this problem.35

In addition to the outlook proposed by Sayre, there was also concern from Congress over the proposed new direction. On September 27, 1984, Congress released a report that expressed

concern over Shultz’s and NSDD-138s proposed military offensive. The report, prepared by the Congressional Research Service, highlighted a number of issues raised by the possibility of an active military offensive against state sponsors and terrorist groups. Some of the areas of concern were related to how the War Powers Resolution applied to the new doctrine and how Congress would oversee the new approach. Since the mining of Nicaragua’s harbors and the leaks of NSDD-138 the Reagan administration’s new approach existed only in word, but Congress was concerned over the prospect of a new military offensive to combat the forces of international terrorism. Given the Contra aid program, and the mining operation, Congress had every reason to fear the potential next steps of the Reagan administration with Nicaragua.

One month later, speaking in New York City before the Park Avenue Synagogue, George Shultz again promoted the administration’s ideas for a military oriented approach. His statements further identified a divide between his thinking and top officials in the Office of Counterterrorism on this subject. The secretary outlined the Radical-Left, an alliance of tyrannical states that facilitated low-intensity covert war against the United States and the Western democracies. Terrorism, as the use of force against innocent civilians to achieve a political goal, he insisted was a key tool of the Radical-Left. Whereas the Director of the Office of Counterterrorism Robert Sayre presented only a short list of state sponsors, Shultz expanded it to include Nicaragua. The secretary insisted that “Libya and the PLO provide arms and training to the communists in Central America…Cuba and Nicaragua, in particular, used narcotics smugglers to funnel guns and money to terrorists in Colombia.” According to Shultz, Nicaragua was a part of a dangerous and unpredictable problem that represented a new and dangerous Cold War challenge.

War. Unlike Sayre, who insisted that the legal system provided the best arena for combating terrorism, Shultz proposed that military force was the first and primary way to deal with Radical-Left states like Nicaragua. He argued that “To combat it, we must be willing to use military force.” The secretary praised Israel for their cutting edge and aggressive military approach, and further he implied that international terrorism represented a gray area in terms of international law. The consequence of this was that the United States needed to take offensive military action that challenged the norms of international behavior. While the administration waited for the right catalyst for its new offensive, Shultz claimed that the most important thing was to convince the public of the value of “combating terrorism with overt power.”

The catalyst for action ultimately came in June of 1985, but until then the administration attempted to use public diplomacy to convince Congress and the American people of the urgency and the need for active military measures.

As Ronald Reagan prepared to win a stunning victory over Walter Mondale in the presidential election of 1984 U.S. newspapers published a CIA training manual that revealed that the U.S. ally, the Contras, utilized acts that many perceived as terrorism. The manual directed the guerrillas in the methods of assassination. The guerrillas were encouraged to infiltrate small villages controlled by the Sandinistas and assassinate their leaders. To make matters even more complicated for the Reagan administration, a Contra leader came out shortly after the revelations and insisted that the guerrillas goal was the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government rather than to contain them as was the official reason provided by the White House and State Department.

The training manual added further controversy to the United States policy toward Nicaragua and sent the Reagan administration back peddling yet again as it attempted to deny that there was a concerted policy of regime change or assassination promoted by the White House or State Department. Reagan dismissed the manual as produced by underlings of the CIA, and swept into office for a second term in one of the United States most thorough landslides.³⁸

Did the CIA guidebook, though, provide evidence that the Reagan administration was already pursuing a formal policy of regime change in Nicaragua? The answer to this question is no. In America’s First War on Terrorism Political Scientist David C. Wills did an excellent job of documenting the discontinuity of the Reagan cabinet. Wills demonstrates that Reagan’s managerial style often allowed the individuals directly involved with a particular incident to handle it on their own accord. This loose organizational style created certain discontinuities in U.S. counterterrorism strategy. While the CIA manual appeared to confirm that the United States was involved in supporting guerrillas that fought for the mission of regime change there was still no evidence to suggest that the administration adopted a formal policy to alter the government of Nicaragua. As Wills demonstrates, it was entirely conceivable that CIA operatives and Contra guerrillas operated in a manner inconsistent with official administration policy. In 1985, the administration did adopt a policy of regime change, but in the face of such controversy, it remained unwilling to promote such an approach in 1984.³⁹

The revelations of the CIA guidebook provided confirmation that the Contras used tactics that critics interpreted as acts of terrorism. However, the definition of the terrorism crisis was not


³⁹ Wills, America’s First War on Terrorism.
concerned as much about the nature of the violence itself as much as the ideological and anti-American purpose of such acts. The year 1984 was a transition time. It was a moment in which the Reagan administration built the philosophical and rhetorical groundwork for an offensive war on terrorism that developed amid a further escalation of the terrorism crisis in the coming year. In 1984, the administration constructed the image of an enemy that was international, monolithic, and unpredictable. This definition of the terrorism crisis and the Radical-Left enemy as “crazy,” criminal, and unpredictable meant that as the Reagan administration built its counterterrorism policy against Nicaragua that acts of assassination were a potentially effective weapon against this new and dangerous enemy. A central difference with earlier conflicts of Cold War containment was that the war on terrorism called for a new offensive framework of intervention that was justified by a more invasive and criminalizing rhetoric. In the years ahead, the United States devised a strategy that relied on aggressive actions that directly violated the sovereign rights of states like Nicaragua and placed military measures, covert ops, and even assassination programs as important components in an offensive counterterrorism policy. Shortly after the emergence of the terrorism problem in El Salvador the Reagan administration reconstructed the meaning of terrorism and so too the Cold War. In 1984, George Shultz led the way in confirming that terrorism constituted an act perpetrated by a global enemy against U.S. interests. In the war on terrorism, the act of terror itself was less relevant than the false perception that the act represented a coordinated and international opposition to the ideological principles and national security interests of the United States.
Chapter Three

The Terrorist and the Freedom Fighter

On December 14, Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Gates wrote a memo to CIA Director William Casey concerning the situation in Nicaragua. Gates believed that the United States’ policy of using the Contras to contain Nicaragua from supporting the insurgency in El Salvador was doomed to fail. Like so many members of Congress that had discussed the issue, Gates evoked the legacy of Vietnam as a lesson that the Reagan administration should follow. He wrote that “those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” For Gates the Vietnam War was a mistake, but not because the United States’ grand designs of Cold War national security policy were misplaced. Instead, it showed the shortcomings of a policy of containment. Gates accepted a macro national security outlook and considered that the United States was in danger of receiving a significant blow by the forces of the communist-terrorist Radical-Left. Gates insisted that the United States had to stop the Radical-Left in Nicaragua by taking offensive measures that went beyond containment, and could bring about the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. The first step, according to Gates, was the imposition of strict economic sanctions that would devastate the strength of the Nicaraguan government and society and make them vulnerable to an escalation of war by the Contras and even the exacting of direct U.S. attacks on the small Central American state.¹

Reagan’s second term public and private statements suggested that the administration moved closer to deploying an offensive against Nicaragua. The administration increasingly targeted the Sandinistas in statements and threats. Previously, operational directives and statements expressed an objective of containing Nicaragua by intercepting weapons shipments and using harassing guerrilla violence to prevent the Sandinistas from undermining neighboring governments. The administration’s statements at the beginning of 1985 suggested that this objective changed. At the beginning of Reagan’s second term, it was clear that the goal of the administration was to force the alteration of the government of Nicaragua that would involve either the development of a democratic process acceptable to the United States or the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government by the Contras or even direct U.S. action. In 1985 it was clear that the Sandinistas had to accept a U.S. ultimatum on their government or else face an escalation of hostilities. Several scholars have documented this moment, the outset of Reagan’s second term, as the beginning of the Reagan offensive.²

The Reagan offensive was a United States policy in the developing world that involved supporting insurgencies capable of either overthrowing unfriendly governments or forcing them to ‘democratize’ on a basis acceptable to the United States. In the grand scheme of the Cold War, this represented a departure from containment and a pursuit of offensive tactics designed to undermine vulnerable communist regimes. Some scholars date the beginning of this policy to Reagan’s second inaugural address while others like a former Reagan administration official, Robert Kagan, suggest that this was developing for a number of years prior to the beginning of the second term.

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² Arnson, Crossroads; LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard; Grandin, Empires Workshop; Kagan, A Twilight Struggle.
While there is little question as to the fact of this shift from containment to offensive in the developing world, scholars have failed to explain the degree to which terrorism factored into the Reagan offensive. The emergence of a terrorism crisis in the 1980s provided a vehicle for the construction and justification of this offensive strategy. The increasing emergence of terrorist acts led policy makers to redefine the Cold War and the threat allegedly posed by countries like Nicaragua. Top officials like George Shultz described a deterioration of national security that resulted from an expanded Cold War offensive by the Radical-Left. The alleged offensive was in the developing world and terrorism, the administration argued, was the primary weapon of this expanded global enemy. The Reagan offensive was not simply the pursuit of the ‘rollback’ of communism, but it was also the creation of a new offensive war on terrorism.

Terrorism caused two changes in U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. First, it allowed the administration to redefine what the conflict was about by employing the linguistic weapon of terrorism to criminalize the Sandinista leadership and simultaneously heroize the Contras. Over time, the dialogue that Nicaragua was a criminal nation challenged the criticism that the administration pursued a flawed containment strategy and had oversimplified the causes of the Nicaraguan Revolution and exaggerated the threat posed by the Sandinistas. Terrorism proved a powerful rhetoric that, when combined with international events, was capable of creating a heightened sense of fear and urgency within Congress and the public that could justify a more offensive approach. Second, the emergence of the terrorism crisis provided a vehicle for the construction of a new framework of offensive measures designed to deal with states that the United States deemed sponsors of terrorism. This hardline approach provided a framework for how future administrations would deal with unfriendly states in the post-Cold War period. This
chapter demonstrates the administration’s efforts to use public diplomacy to shift the dialogue over Nicaragua by incorporating the allegation of state sponsorship of terrorism into a renewed call for congressional funding for the Contras.

Responding to the administration’s renewed call for congressional support for the Contras at the beginning of Reagan’s second term the Office of Public Diplomacy intensified a propaganda campaign designed to change the argument over Nicaragua. The key to this involved promoting a dialogue that demonized the Sandinistas and glorified their enemy, the Contras. A new, and integral part of this campaign was to alleged that Nicaragua under the Sandinistas was a state sponsor of terrorism. The public diplomacy program coordinated public speeches, op-ed pieces in newspapers and magazines, personal phone calls by Reagan to members of Congress, attempts to contact news media outlets and manipulate their coverage of the Nicaraguan conflict, all of which were designed to reconstruct the image of both the Sandinistas and the Contras. In 1985, the public diplomacy campaign sought to use terrorism to redefine the Sandinistas as a criminal state and the Contras as freedom fighters. The allegation of terrorism could help demonize the Sandinistas while simultaneously heroizing the Contras and facilitating Congressional support. During the spring of 1985, the administration bombarded Congress and the public with a refined justification for its hardline approach toward the Sandinistas.

This chapter deals with the renewal of the Reagan administration’s pursuit of lethal aid for the Contras as part of an offensive policy against the Nicaraguan government. It demonstrates the attempt by the Reagan administration to shift the dialogue over Nicaragua by emphasizing the Sandinistas alleged involvement with what the administration described as the new Cold War threat of international terrorism. This involved the deployment of propaganda in the form of two
powerful linguistic devices, the terrorist, and the freedom fighter. In the spring of 1985, the Reagan administration continued to struggle to convince a Congress deeply influenced by the memory of Vietnam to support a policy of military-pressure against the Nicaraguan government, and public diplomacy was integral for the construction of a new dialogue about the situation.

In early 1985, Washington officials recognized that attempts to convince the American people of the need for a military oriented war on terrorism were falling short. According to a Roper poll in February, “67% opposed using military force in efforts to preempt terrorist actions if innocent lives were threatened, and 51% opposed using military force even to retaliate after a terrorist attack, if innocent lives were at risk.” Both the public and the media were strongly supportive of efforts to improve intelligence, and embassy and personnel security, but “significant doubts remain[ed] about preemption and retaliation, principally on the grounds of effectiveness, danger to innocent lives, and the risk of undercutting Western moral values and legal concepts.” The Counterterrorism Public Diplomacy Working Group recognized that broad public support for the development of the administration’s war on terrorism and escalation against Nicaragua was unlikely. For this reason, they focused its initiatives on convincing moderate members of Congress to support actions like the renewal of aid for the Contras and to embolden supporters by communicating through sympathetic agencies and publications like American Legion and Commentary.³

On March 12, 1985, the Office of Public Diplomacy produced a confidential directive titled “Support for the White House Educational Campaign.” The directive represented the

organization of the Reagan administration’s propaganda efforts designed to gain support for the
Nicaraguan Contras and bring about the collapse of the Nicaraguan government. The action plan
proposed a propaganda campaign that catered to Congress, interest groups, and the media and it
hinged on the development of the terrorist and freedom fighter dichotomy. The goal of the
propaganda effort was to depict the Sandinistas as criminals whose connections were not only to
the Soviet/communist bloc but also to agents of international terrorism that were involved in
poisoning the youth of the United States with their involvement in the illegal drug trade, racism
and totalitarianism. By contrast, the directive sought to humanize the Contras. The propaganda
campaign ignored evidence of the anti-Sandinistas involvement in human rights abuses and
instead presented them as freedom fighters that were underdogs, similar to the American
founding fathers, and were a legitimate democratic alternative to Nicaragua. The campaign the
administration hoped could sway Congress to support a call for aid to the Contras and for the
alteration of the Nicaraguan government.⁴

President Reagan and Secretary Shultz both took a lead role in the educational campaign.
In February, Reagan announced that his administration supported the alteration of the Sandinista
regime. He insisted that the only way that Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas could prevent the
pursuit of this a U.S.-directed offensive policy was to allow the Contras into the government and
to democratize in a manner that was acceptable to the United States.⁵ Similarly, George Shultz
threatened that if the Congress refused this most recent attempt at aid for the Contras that it could

⁴ “Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Support for the White House Educational Campaign,” March 12, 1985, in
Kornbluh and Byrne, The Iran-Contra Scandal, 22-29.

⁵ Jack Nelson, “Reagan Warning Given Nicaragua, He Backs Removal of Leftist Regime Unless it Joins Rebels in a
Democracy,” Los Angeles Times, February 22, 1985,
be necessary to use U.S. troops in the region. Shultz warned that, “If we do not take the appropriate steps now to pressure the Sandinistas to live up to their past promises, then we may find later, when we can no longer avoid acting, that the stakes will be higher and the cost greater.” Like Reagan, Shultz openly acknowledged that the administration sought a regime alteration in Nicaragua, and one that he insisted inherently required some kind of military force. Shultz hoped Congress would allow the Contras to apply the necessary force, but threatened that force was necessary. He insisted, “Whether it [a reversal of course by the government] is achieved through…unilateral actions by the Sandinistas alone or in concert with their domestic opponents, or through the collapse of the Sandinista regime, is immaterial to us.” Shultz was certain that “they will not modify” unless the United States and their allies apply military force. A few weeks later and in continuing administration attempts to humanize the Contras Reagan insisted that, “They are the moral equal of our founding fathers and the brave men and women of the (World War II) French Resistance.”

In 1985, the Reagan administration appointed Robert Oakley the new Director of the Office of Counterterrorism. Oakley replaced Robert Sayre and took the lead in the continuing public diplomacy campaign. In March, he spoke to Congress on the issue of combating terrorism. Speaking before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Security and Science and the Subcommittee on International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Relations on March 5, and then to the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Judiciary

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Committee on March 15, Oakley gave his own view of the developing U.S. counterterrorism strategy. In both speeches, he backed Shultz and Reagan for providing the leadership necessary to create the public awareness that a war on terrorism required. Like Shultz, the new director built a case against Nicaragua. He asserted that Nicaragua posed a security threat because of their alleged continued support and assistance to international terror groups, the El Salvador insurgents, and their involvement in the new danger of narco-terrorism that emerged particularly in Latin America.  

Despite Oakley’s tough talk on Nicaragua, he also moved to clarify the volatile statements made by Shultz several months earlier. Knowing the controversy that swirled around the issue of offensive military measures, Oakley was, like his predecessor Robert Sayre, more cautious about military options. The Director tried to lighten Shultz’s comments. He insisted that Shultz was simply warning state sponsors that the United States did not rule out the use of preemptive military force. However, Oakley insisted, “While use of force presents one variation of such additional activities, we should recognize that there are other active measures.” The Director placed the military option as lowest on the list of options mentioned on March 15. Unlike Shultz, who was emphatic about the necessity of force, Oakley expressed caution. He argued that “We must recognize that in many cases the disadvantages of military action from the global perspective might outweigh the advantages…rather in most circumstances other sorts of

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actions might be more appropriate than a military response.” In a further elaboration on Shultz’s earlier statements, Oakley addressed the secretary’s comment about the efficacy of Israel’s military oriented strategy by insisting that “Even key Israeli anti-terrorist experts have acknowledged…that the use of force cannot, by itself, solve the terrorist problem.” While Oakley was speaking in deference and respect of George Shultz, his comments represented the continued development of a divide between officials in the Office of Counterterrorism and those in the Department of State and the NSC over the development of a military offensive against alleged state sponsors of terrorism like Nicaragua.9

Oakley’s statements came amid a flurry of controversy at the outset of 1985. Following the mining of Nicaragua’s harbors, the leaks of NSDD-138 and Shultz’s statements that strongly suggested that a use of force was in the minds of top officials in Washington, the American public and Congress were concerned about what the administration might do next. In 1985, a swirl of controversial comments emerged relating to the issue of international terrorism throughout the world and the intentions of the Reagan administration. The administration’s efforts to use terrorism to change the dialogue over Nicaragua and the growing relevance of the terrorism problem increased the public discussion of the topic. On March 11, former president Richard Nixon emerged from the shadows and spoke publicly about terrorism. In part, Nixon was promoting his book No More Vietnams but he also spoke on the issue of international terrorism. He criticized the cautious approach of the Reagan administration, which he thought amounted to threats of war but little in the way of action, by claiming that, “The United States

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should give terrorists a single warning and then strike back even if there is some risk to innocent people.” Nixon represented a conservative element of society that believed that the administration was not acting forcefully enough.\textsuperscript{10}

Likewise, Noel Koch, Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, published an article in March that was part of the administration’s public diplomacy efforts. Koch’s article “Terrorism: The Undeclared War” published in \textit{Defense} testified to a more dangerous world in which state sponsors like Nicaragua used terrorism as a vehicle for striking the United States’ interests in a way that allowed them to maintain plausible deniability. The United States, Koch wrote, had to act against the illusive threat posed by governments like Nicaragua. The Reagan administration and its supporters increasingly insisted that the United States and its allies faced an escalation of threats from state sponsors of terrorism like Nicaragua. Increasingly, the administration and other hardline critics promoted offensive action against these alleged criminal states.\textsuperscript{11}

Other commentators were cautious at the thought that the Reagan administration was poised for a military oriented counterterrorism strategy. Journalist Brian Jenkins entered the fray with a interview and article published in \textit{USA Today} and titled “The U.S. Response to Terrorism: A Policy Dilemma.” Jenkins addressed the comments made by Shultz the previous November and his praise for Israel’s use of military counterterrorism efforts by arguing that the comparison

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{10} Press Clippings, Richard Nixon on Terrorism, Folder “Terrorism Material, 1 of 4,” Box 3/1, Donald P. Gregg: George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records, National Security Affairs, Task Force on Terrorism Files, OA/ID 19850 and 19851, George Bush Presidential Library.
\textsuperscript{11} Press Clippings, Noel Koch’s article on terrorism, Folder “Terrorism Material, 1 of 4,” Box 3/1, Donald P. Gregg: George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records, National Security Affairs, Task Force on Terrorism Files, OA/ID 19850 and 19851, George Bush Presidential Library.
\end{footnotesize}
was not as neat as Shultz made it seem and that the United States faced much greater challenges internationally if it choose to use force than did Israel. Following administration’s statements in 1984 and 1985 the atmosphere over the terrorism issue was contentious.\textsuperscript{12}

The Reagan administration’s public diplomacy efforts on the issue of terrorism turned a significant amount of attention to Nicaragua and the administration’s allegation that the Sandinista government was a significant part of the new problem of state sponsorship of international terrorism. On March 3, the \textit{Miami Herald} reported that the Sandinistas represented a haven for terrorists groups from throughout the world, from the PLO to the Red Brigades. On March 24, the \textit{Washington Post} reported that the Reagan administration had Green Berets involved in training Honduran counterterrorism forces. Such reports raised concerns about the United States’ intentions. Administration officials defended the Honduran operation as designed to assist the Honduran government in internal events like hijackings and hostage taking, but critics in Congress were concerned that the program was part of the administration’s attempts to support the Contras in their guerrilla war against the Nicaraguan government. In early 1985, and despite any preponderance of evidence, the Reagan administration’s public diplomacy efforts as well as press and media coverage moved Nicaragua to the center of the conversation over state sponsorship of international terrorism.\textsuperscript{13}

In terms of the Sandinistas and the Contras, the Reagan administration’s public

\textsuperscript{12} Press Clippings, Brian Jenkins article on terrorism, Folder “Terrorism Material, 1 of 4,” Box 3/1, Donald P. Gregg: George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records, National Security Affairs, Task Force on Terrorism Files, OA/ID 19850 and 19851, George Bush Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{13} Press Clippings, Folder “Terrorism Material, 1 of 4,” Box 3/1, Donald P. Gregg: George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records, National Security Affairs, Task Force on Terrorism Files, OA/ID 19850 and 19851, George Bush Presidential Library.
diplomacy efforts had two goals, first to criminalize the Sandinistas, and second to uplift the image of the Contras. The administration sought to change the perception of the United States’ ally, the Contras. The Contras, short for counterrevolutionary, was a collection of transnational guerrilla groups. Eden Pastora led some, others by Arturo Cruz, and others by Alfonso Robelo. The groups did not represent a united front: the individual leaders vied for power amongst themselves and for the support of the United States. The members of these movements were to a significant degree ex-members of Somoza’s armed forces, and were involved in brutal acts of assassination, sabotage, and drug trafficking. In 1985, the public diplomacy effort did two things in respect to these guerrillas: first, the administration created a new political organization, and second, it developed one of the most visible propaganda symbols in United States international relations history, the freedom fighter. The Reagan administration created the United Nicaraguan Organization, UNO. This title was for an allegedly unified political organization that represented an alternative to the Sandinistas. If the administration was to convince Congress of the need to replace the Sandinistas, there needed to be a legitimate alternative, and the Reagan administration attempted to create that alternative in 1985. The group was a product of the administration’s public diplomacy efforts, and its purpose was to cater to those in Congress. The organization though did not represent a unified and organized body. In conjunction with these efforts, the administration also sought to humanize the Contra guerrillas.¹⁴

Humanizing the Contras was a monumental task for the Reagan administration, and involved an outright denial of the significance and scale of atrocities committed by the guerrillas.

That spring two reports, one from Americas Watch and the other the Brody Report, documented

a consistent use of violence against civilians by the Contras. The two reports relied on first-hand accounts of violence against civilians conducted by the Contras.\textsuperscript{15} One of the most vivid depictions was of a Contra led robbery of a truck carrying coffee harvesters. Witnesses accused the U.S.-backed guerrillas of executing non-combatants. Some of the victims had their throats cut, others shot, and even more shocking was testimony that the Contras burned the remaining survivors alive.\textsuperscript{16} Amid the administration’s call for aid to the Contras, these reports provided a damning allegation of inhumanity on the part of the U.S. ally.

Regardless of the scathing reports of crimes against humanity in early 1985, the administration increased its efforts to humanize the Contras. Shortly after the creation of the UNO, the Office of Public Diplomacy arranged for guerrilla leaders to meet with major news media outlets like \textit{USA Today} and assert their democratic position. In conjunction with these meetings, George Shultz in a press conference acknowledged that the Contras record on human rights was not pristine, but insisted that these were limited in scope and did not reflect a systemic problem or frequent aspect of the administration’s ally or efforts. Instead, Shultz dismissed the reports as anomalies designed by the enemy to discredit the Reagan administration pursuit of funding for the Contras. The administration continued to insist that the Contras were democrats, turned away by the totalitarian shift of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the equivalent of even the United States’ founding fathers.\textsuperscript{17}

There was little basis of reality in the term freedom fighter. The Contras were militants


that were involved in a dirty guerrilla war against the Sandinistas and conducted assassinations, sabotage operations, and were reportedly engaged in regional drug smuggling. Despite the visibility of these actions, the Reagan administration deployed propaganda, the freedom fighter, to create a false image of the Nicaraguan conflict. This linguistic tool, the freedom fighter, the administration used to define similar guerrilla movements throughout the world, none of which reflected the virtuous praise that the term referenced. This propaganda was an integral part of the Reagan administration’s developing war on terrorism against Nicaragua. The allegation of state sponsorship of terrorism vilified Nicaragua and associated the leadership with the most heinous criminality while the language of freedom fighter implied the opposite. The Reagan administration’s tireless efforts to pursue a hardline strategy against Nicaragua involved these two powerful linguistic weapons. These were a primary component in shifting the dialogue over Nicaragua and escalating hostilities against the small Central American state.

Part of the administration’s efforts to change the dialogue over Nicaragua and convince Congress to support its hardline strategy against the Sandinistas involved vilifying the Sandinistas as not just agents of communism, but as criminals associated with international terrorism. For the first time a central premise of the public diplomacy campaign involved the insistence that the “FSLN [were] linked to worldwide terrorism.”18 News reports and public statements that vilified Nicaragua as a state sponsor of international terrorism came amid the Reagan administration’s new drive for regime alteration and military support for the Contras. The new push for congressional authorization for lethal aid to the Nicaraguan Contras and the confirmation of a policy of regime alteration went further with Reagan’s April 4 “peace

Cynthia Arnson and contemporary critics regarded Reagan’s peace proposal as a political trick. It asserted that if the Sandinistas accept a signed directive, the San Jose Communique, from Contra leaders to seek democratic plurality in Nicaragua that the United States would cease to aid the Contras and both parties would then enter the national political process in a democratically unified Nicaragua. The Reagan administration felt that the admission of the Contras into the political process would undermine the Sandinista leadership and result in the favorable alteration of the government. The San Jose Communique, signed in March, the government of Nicaragua had already rejected as an effort by the United States to alter its government by forcing the repatriation of elements of Somoza’s armed forces. Reagan’s offer was, in fact, a threat to Nicaragua and a ploy to Congress. Nicaragua was to accept the Contra paramilitary organization, many of which were former members of Somoza’s reviled national guards, into the nation’s democratic process. If the Sandinistas refused, the Reagan administration promised an escalation of the already on-going conflict. The proposal stated that Congress should authorize to release $14 million for humanitarian aid to the Contras. If there were no agreement in 60 days, President Reagan would have a free hand to continue to legally distribute lethal supplies to the Contras until September 1985. The proposal was a threat to Nicaragua and a ploy that divided Congress, and further verified that the administration no

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longer sought a policy of containment, but rather an alteration of the Nicaraguan government. At no point since 1981 had the Reagan administration engaged in legitimate and fair negotiations with the Nicaraguan leadership. Rather than stepping to the table with the Sandinista leadership the Reagan administration’s efforts at peace involved ultimatums that were given to the Nicaraguan government at the point of a gun. The Sandinistas would either comply or face an escalation of war. The administration regarded the Nicaraguan government as in fundamental opposition to the United States and it would only allow Sandinistas the opportunity to concede to the will the leadership in Washington. Such complete concessions were the only way that Daniel Ortega’s government could avoid an impending U.S.-directed military offensive. The Nicaraguan government could not maintain legitimacy by yielding to the ultimatums of the United States or the Reagan administration’s insistence that it accept an alteration of government. This sort of direct influence and meddling in the Nicaraguan state was the very thing that the Sandinistas revolution was about, a response to what was perceived as U.S. imperialism, and therefore such ultimatums were never acceptable to Daniel Ortega and the Nicaraguan leadership. Reagan’s so-called “peace proposal” was, in fact, an escalation of a hardline strategy against Nicaragua that the administration pursued. This approach, adopted since the beginning of Reagan’s first term in office, was the result of the administration’s acceptance of a Cold War grand strategy perspective to national security that encouraged the oversimplification of the Nicaraguan Revolution and an exaggeration of the threat posed by the Sandinistas. Because of their alleged part in a world-communist revolution, there could be no

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trustful negotiations. It was a flawed approach and it consistently resulted in more violence and a deterioration of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations.

In April, the consideration by Congress for the lethal aid to the Nicaraguan Contras went ahead. By a narrow margin, the Senate passed Joint Resolution 106, the Reagan administration’s peace proposal, which proposed principally that “The Congress approves the obligation and expenditure of funds available for fiscal year 1985 for supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua.” A narrow majority of the Senate was consistently supportive of the administration’s proposals. The House of Representatives remained the primary legislative impediment to the Contra aid package. In the House opponents rallied against the proposal. The White House asked for monetary support from Congress and did so in a vague manner. Many in Congress perceived this as a move to obtain a ‘blank check,’ and the lessons of the Vietnam War resurfaced in congressional debates as those on Capitol Hill struggled to fashion policy and control the dialogue over Nicaragua.

Opponents of the request criticized it as a dangerous proposal that brought back memories of the open-ended Gulf of Tonkin resolution that allowed for the unchecked escalation of the Vietnam War. One congressional representative reiterated a familiar theme, calling the administration’s request for funding “A 1985 version of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.” Others argued, in support of President Reagan, that if the United States failed to act it would, in language reminiscent of Vietnam, “be interpreted by our friends in the region as a sign that the


U.S. will not be able to reverse Soviet-Cuban subversion and aggression in Central America.”

Despite efforts to build support, in part, by shifting the dialogue over Nicaragua to the issue of international terrorism the relevance of the Vietnam War remained a powerful and dominating aspect of the debate. With Reagan’s mission to fund the Contras on life-support Congress entered a decisive stage on the issue of funding.

The year 1985 represented an urgent time for Reagan’s policy in Central America. A move by Congress to block any aid to the Contras threatened to undermine the administration’s policy all together because it would be the second year in a row that such funding was unavailable. The White House exercised a renewed drive to build congressional and public support. In promoting its policy, the Reagan administration cast policy in terms of ideology and national security. The administration emphasized the morality, justice, and importance of Cold War conflicts fought for the purposes of confronting the spread of communism in the Third World. Just as significant, however, the White House and State Department also presented an expanded argument about the dangerous national security threat posed by Nicaragua as an alleged state sponsor of terrorism.

During 1985, the Reagan administration pressed hard to change the dialogue over Nicaragua toward an emphasis on terrorism and the alleged criminality of the Nicaraguan government. According to the administration’s argument, the Sandinista government represented the new Cold War that George Shultz outlined in 1984. In March and April, the administration released new findings that suggested Soviet and Cuban aid to Nicaragua had grown to more than

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twenty times what it had been in 1981. In late March, Reagan proclaimed that the Soviet Union sought “to turn Central America into a Soviet Beachhead of aggression that could spread terror and instability north and south.” Reagan utilized the domino theory, suggesting that inaction would bring devastating consequences for the United States.

Besides this old Cold War rhetoric, the administration released information that made a formal case against Nicaragua for its alleged complicity as a state sponsor of international terrorism. The White House and State Department argued that agents of international terrorism from Libya, Chile, Argentina, the Spanish group ETA, and the PLO operated inside Nicaragua and with the sanction of the government. The administration insisted that Nicaragua directed terrorist acts throughout Central America. These included a 1982 Honduran airline hijacking, a power station bombing in Honduras, and the attempted assassination of Eden Pastora in Costa Rica. With urgency, the administration argued that the Sandinistas were not just communist: the Nicaraguan leadership were communist-terrorists and agents of a new and more dangerous Radical-Left. The public diplomacy operation continued a struggle to shift the dialogue about the conflict with Nicaragua.

In making the case that the government of Nicaragua represented a threat to the United States the Reagan administration placed the interest of national-security at the height of its concern. The administration constructed the new Cold War from the standpoint that states like


Nicaragua would necessarily use the weapon of terrorism against the United States and its allies. Ideological perspectives, shared by members of the Reagan administration and by Congress, that democratic change was required in Nicaragua connected to a concern over the security of the United States. The administration argued that the United States and her allies could have security only through the anti-thesis of totalitarianism and tyranny with which compromise was impossible.

The Reagan administration further attacked the credibility of the Nicaraguan government by arguing that it used methods reminiscent of Stalin, that it was totalitarian, racist and in violation of human rights. 28 That spring the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy directed the development of three research publications to document these allegations. The publications covered the expansion of Soviet and Cuban forces in Nicaragua, alleged human rights abuses by the Sandinistas, and on the Nicaraguan government’s connection to international terrorism. 29 Proponents in Congress argued from the point of the urgent need to oppose the serious threat that the Sandinistas posed to neighboring countries. Figures like Bob Dole (R) and Jessi Helms (R) spoke in the language of the domino theory but in the context of a new Cold War dominated by the communist-terrorist Radical-Left. 30 In these urgent few months in the spring of 1985, the White House did everything it could to gain support for the war against the Nicaraguan government.


The charges of the Reagan administration, however, did not possess the strength of convincing evidence. The Nicaraguan government had not directly committed an act of terrorism against the United States, and while it was true that the leadership was involved in a military build-up and enacting certain restrictions of civil liberties, these actions were in response to a U.S.-led war. The Reagan administration since 1981 sought to pursue its goals with Nicaragua through a military-pressure-first strategy: therefore, there was little surprise that the Sandinista leadership further developed its military as a basic method of self-defense. Further, in addition to the absence of any direct act of terrorism perpetrated by the Sandinista government, the allegations that the government was involved in Stalinist tactics groups like *Americas Watch* demonstrated was highly exaggerated.\(^{31}\) Without a preponderance of evidence the House of Representatives was hard to convince.

In spring of 1985, the Reagan administration fought to redefine the U.S.-Nicaragua policy. According to the White House, Cuban/Soviet ideals were on the move, and the United States faced an intensified Cold War challenge to stand-up to criminal communist-terrorist states. On April 13, 1985, Reagan hoped to sway the imminent congressional decision. He claimed, “If we provide too little help, our choice will be a communist Central America, with communist subversion spreading southward and northward from Panama to our open Southern border.”\(^{32}\) The administration tried to do what politicians struggled with during Vietnam: to convince the American people of the importance of interventions against communism in the developing world. In April, the situation simply did not appear as urgent to the House of Representatives,

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which rejected the administration’s macro national security argument. The chance for peace talks was not exhausted. Some compared the White House lobbying tactics to McCarthyism. The administration’s claims were exaggerations and the White House and State Department were pressing for what many perceived as a blank check that further stirred the wounds of the Vietnam War.

A key element of the administration’s new argument involved the insistence that the Sandinistas represented a state sponsor of international terrorism, a country that was involved in a global terrorist offensive against the United States. In speeches, editorials, and briefing booklets the public diplomacy campaign had hammered away at the allegation that Nicaragua was complicit in the expansion of this new Cold War.\footnote{Jacobowitz, “Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Support for the White House Educational Campaign,” in Kornbluh, and Byrne, \textit{The Iran-Contra Scandal}, 22-29.} The evidence though did not convince a majority of Congress. In all likelihood reports of their association with other governments like Libya was accurate, but there was little evidence linking the Sandinistas to any major terrorist attack, and Congress was, in part, unwilling to grant aid to the Contras for this reason.

Nonetheless, the concept of international terrorism suggested a new, more dangerous, Cold War and overtime and with the occurrence of further international terrorist acts possessed the possibility of shifting the dialogue over Nicaragua from the old worn out label of communism to a more powerful allegation of criminality. International terrorism, if coupled with the occurrence of other actual events, like those in 1983, could transform the dialogue over Nicaragua and facilitate the formal development of a more aggressive and offensive Cold War policy. In upcoming months, international events would catapult this argument to the fore, but that spring the environment that could cause such a shift in the dialogue over Nicaragua did not
yet exist and this hampered the administration’s attempts to escalate its hardline strategy with Nicaragua.

On April 24, the House of Representatives formally voted to deny all U.S. support to the Contras, apparently dooming the administration’s policy. Secretary of State George Shultz summed up the entire period of debate in an address to the State Department on April 25, 1985. In his speech titled “The Meaning of Vietnam,” Secretary Shultz illuminated the degree to which the memory of Vietnam continued to shape the fight over Contra aid. The secretary asserted that “Our goals in Central America are like those we had in Vietnam: democracy, economic progress, and security against aggression.” Shultz drew further connections between Nicaragua and North Vietnam, claiming emphatically that “Broken promises, communist dictatorship, refugees, widened Soviet influence…here is your parallel between Vietnam and Central America.” He continued, “Do we want another Cuba in this hemisphere? How many times must we learn the same lesson?” Shultz expressed that Vietnam caused a setback for the United States in its promotion of freedom in the world. He claimed that “America lost faith in herself [and] this must never happen again.” The secretary lamented over the failure to win support for policy and the administration’s persistent inability to control the meaning of Vietnam and the dialogue over the Nicaraguan conflict.

As Robert Gates had suggested, the U.S.-led offensive to alter the Nicaraguan government began first with measures to undermine the economy of the Sandinista state. In May

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1985, the Reagan White House could not openly deploy further military pressure in their war on terrorism against Nicaragua, but it did take a major first step unilaterally in moving against that government. By a series of executive orders derived from the International Emergency Economic Power Act, Reagan ordered a thorough economic/trade embargo on the Nicaraguan government. Using these emergency powers the United States government barred “All imports into the United States of goods and services of Nicaraguan origin…all exports from the United States of goods destined for Nicaragua except those destined for the organized democratic resistance….Nicaraguan air carriers from engaging in air transportation to or from points in the United States, and vessels of Nicaraguan registry from entering in United States ports.” The first demand made by Reagan was that the Sandinista government must “halt its export of armed insurrection, terrorism, and subversion in neighboring countries.” The administration demanded that Nicaragua had to end the military build-up, remove all Cuban and Soviet military advisors, and pursue democratic pluralism and respect for human rights.\(^{37}\)

The demands attached to the sanctions regime amounted to another set of ultimatums from the United States. The Sandinista government needed to disarm, at a time when the United States was supporting an insurgency, and let the Contras into their government. If Daniel Ortega’s government refused, the United States threatened to escalate their use of aggressive hardline measures. What was most striking about the sanctions regime was the presence of terrorism as a key justification. The enacting of unilateral sanctions on Nicaragua was a first step in an offensive policy of regime alteration of a state that the Reagan administration alleged was complicit in an international terrorist conspiracy. The administration designed the sanctions to

create domestic problems for the Sandinistas that would reduce their popularity and make Nicaragua vulnerable to an increase of military pressure that would occur over the next year.\textsuperscript{38}

The creation of a sanctions regime against Nicaragua that was motivated by allegations of state sponsorship of international terrorism marked an unprecedented point in U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. Despite the failure to obtain congressional funding, two significant changes were underway. First, international terrorism offered a new way of packaging policy: the allegation of terrorism criminalized Nicaragua and represented the beginning of an important shift over the dialogue of the conflict. Second, the Reagan administration took another step in the construction of a new offensive method for dealing with alleged state sponsors of terrorism. As Robert Gates mentioned at the end of 1984, economic sanctions was the first step in an offensive policy of regime change. The perceived global threat of international terrorism drove a shift in U.S.-Nicaraguan relations that assured a continued deterioration in the months ahead.

Shortly following the congressional vote to block Contra funding, Daniel Ortega traveled to Moscow to visit the Kremlin. This dismayed many on Capitol Hill, and for several years, scholars understood Ortega’s visit as the beginning of a shift in congressional opinion on the matter of Contra aid. Cynthia Arnson, however, argued that a primary reason for the shift toward eventual support for the Contra aid package was the absence of an alternative plan proposed by liberal Democrats. Arnson insisted that the standoffish nature of the liberal position with the administration alienated moderate Democrats and shifted the consensus in Congress. According to this logic, the Reagan administration’s failure was a victory because of the failure of liberal democrats to propose an effective alternative plan. Arnson’s argument is strong and detailed,

\textsuperscript{38} Gates, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence Agency William Casey, “Nicaragua,” in Kornbluh, and Byrne, The Iran-Contra Scandal, 45.
delving into the intimate motivations of U.S. politicians. However, there are also a few shortcomings with this interpretation.39

The argument that the events in early 1985 secured eventual congressional authorization of the Reagan Offensive is an incomplete claim that denies the power of international events in encouraging a shift in counterterrorism policy. The fight over Nicaragua was far from over at this moment, and the administration used international terrorism to package the development of the Reagan offensive. The language used by the Reagan administration of a new Cold War and of a radical communist-terrorist state alliance over the coming year was integral to further support for their offensive intentions with Nicaragua. The administration described a new dangerous world in which the unpredictability of international terrorism created a new vulnerability that justified a military offensive that pressed the norms of international behavior. The security threat of international terrorism that the Reagan administration reacted to and promoted in the coming year was also significant in the pursuit of lethal aid for the Contras and for the emergence of a military offensive against the Nicaraguan government in early 1986.

While the Reagan administration suffered a legislative setback in the spring of 1985 on its initiative to use hardline measures against Nicaragua, the administration had actually taken an important step forward in the implementation of the offensive. The important step was in the realm of public diplomacy. George Shultz spoke in 1984 of the necessity of active measures to combat state sponsors of terrorism, but in 1985, the administration’s public diplomacy effort began a very significant alteration of the dialogue over the Nicaraguan conflict. This change involved the language of terrorism and through this the administration created the image of the

39 Arnson, Crossroads.
terrorist and the freedom fighter. It was a new and powerful way of labeling the enemies of the United States and it involved the criminalizing of enemies and the heroizing of allies. This new language did not suddenly change people’s minds over Nicaragua, and during the 1980s it never created a significant majority of support for the action. Nonetheless, in the year ahead the language of terrorism and the construction of the freedom fighter against the criminal factored into the justification of an escalation of the hardline policy with Nicaragua and encouraged swing voters in Congress to move to support the administration’s Contra support package. In the longer term, though, this development was even more significant. The new dialogue over the national security threat of terrorism harkened to a future in which this fear inducing rhetoric transformed how many Americans thought about the use of American power in the world. The conflict with Nicaragua was an early case in which the United States sought to use the criminalizing power of the language of terrorism to justify its intent toward offensive hardline measures.

In the history of U.S. foreign relations, the occurrence of international events and national security perspectives matter. Too often, when discussing Nicaragua, scholars reduce the situation to the ideological drives of those in Washington D.C. and the almost insurmountable power of their will. Greg Grandin is correct to outline U.S. Central American policy as driven substantially by an ideology of democratic capitalism and an unflinching will by the Reagan administration. However, one should also consider their national security perspective and of the coincidence of international events in propelling U.S. actions. International terrorism was an exaggeration derived from a macro national security outlook, the Cold War paradigm. However, the Reagan administration believed that this posed a unique security threat and policy makers

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40 Grandin, Empires Workshop.
took it seriously. The danger was unpredictable and carried a psychological power capable of damaging the will of the United States and its allies. In June, the danger and instability of this new world appeared in the form of a series of vicious terrorist attacks in El Salvador and in Lebanon. The attacks further demonstrated that the world was in the midst of a terrorism crisis. These events drove the crystallization of a new framework of intervention that Shultz spoke of in 1984 and led to the formation of an offensive framework to combat the scourge of international terrorism. The 1980s terrorism crisis led the Reagan administration to redefine how the United States dealt with sovereign states that allegedly represented an international criminal threat. International terrorism led the United States to create a policy that challenged the accepted norms of international behavior and paved the way for an expansion of U.S. hegemony in the future.
Chapter Four

June 1985

It was a warm partly cloudy June afternoon in Maryland. President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy took the thirty-minute helicopter ride in “Marine One” from Camp David to Andrews Air Force base located just outside of the nation’s capital. Reagan carried four Purple Heart medals with him. It was Saturday, June 22, and the medals were posthumous decorations for the families of four U.S. Marines that died in San Salvador a few days earlier. The gunmen used disguises and automatic weapons. They sprayed bullets throughout the café, killing nine. The gunmen escaped in a vehicle that retreated to the heart of San Salvador. As Reagan spoke amid four coffins draped in American flags two things were apparent: the nation’s grief was acute, and the president intended to act with resolve to combat a new and most troubling national security threat, terrorism. With his characteristic passion Reagan exclaimed, “They say the men who murdered these sons of America escaped, disappeared into the city streets. But I pledge to you today they will not evade the justice of the United States any more than they can escape the judgment of God. We will move any mountain, ford any river to find the jackals and to bring

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them, and their colleagues in terror, to justice." The United States’ first war on terrorism began in the aftermath of these remarks.

The ten days prior to President Reagan’s speech was a time of particular hardship for the nation. On June 14, hijackers seized TWA flight 847 shortly after it departed from Athens, Greece. The hijackers took the plane to Beirut, Lebanon. Americans were horrified to learn of the murder of a U.S. navy service member during the ordeal. The terrorists demanded that the United States force Israel to release up to 700 PLO fighters from its prisons, and a standoff ensued. When those four Marines died in San Salvador, this crisis was nearly a week old. The event in El Salvador was a capstone to an escalation of terrorist incidents throughout the world. The front page of the *New York Times* on June 21 covered three different terrorist incidents, the El Salvador killings, the TWA hijacking, and a deadly bombing at the airport in Frankfurt, Germany. This surge in terrorism provided the catalyst that the Reagan administration needed to act, and to prepare for the implementation of the active measures called for by George Shultz a year earlier.

These events represented a peak moment in a terrorism crisis and presented a unique national security problem for the Reagan administration. The threat was unpredictable and often directed at civilian targets that were difficult to defend. Likewise, while sporadic terrorist

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violence was unlikely to have any significant effect on the military capabilities of the United States, it did pose a unique psychological threat to Americans and their allies. This period marked the crystallization of a shift in U.S. foreign relations. For a year, Secretary of State George Shultz had insisted that the United States needed to develop a way to deter and defeat state sponsors of international terrorism. States like Nicaragua, Libya, and Cuba the administration insisted were the glue that allowed terrorists to operate throughout the world, and Shultz argued that the United States needed to adopt aggressive offensive measures to pre-empt Radical-Left states allegedly driven to undermine the United States. In 1984, NSDD-138 had proposed that the Reagan administration should adopt an offensive policy against alleged state sponsors of terrorism. However, the controversy with that directive coupled with the illegal mining of Nicaragua’s harbors had made it impossible to implement NSDD-138. In June of 1985, however, events that symbolized a mounting terrorism crisis provided the Reagan administration with the opportunity to put its offensive war on terrorism into action.

Following the June attacks, the administration took steps to prepare for an offensive war on terrorism against Nicaragua. Over the next six months they did two things: first, the administration stepped up its attempts to control the dialogue over Nicaragua by escalating a propaganda campaign hinged more than ever on the use of the linguistic weapon of terrorism, and second, called for the formation of a task force, headed by George H. W. Bush to review U.S. terrorism policy and develop an offensive framework of intervention to combat alleged state sponsors of terrorism. This chapter deals with measures taken by the United States to prepare for an offensive war on terrorism against Nicaragua in the following year. The task force worked to review and develop an offensive framework for combatting terrorism and worked in concert with
the administration’s public diplomacy campaign in attempting to use the crisis to influence in the media and Congress. Terrorism was a powerful linguistic weapon, and following the June attacks, the Reagan administration and its supporters worked to control the dialogue over Nicaragua by criminalizing the Sandinistas and creating an atmosphere that justified an offensive policy.

This chapter makes several important contributions. First, it expands on the ideas put forth by John Collins on the rhetoric of terrorism. In *Collateral Language* Collins suggests that terrorism is a powerful linguistic weapon that the United States used to marginalize its enemies. This chapter applies this concept to the historical case of Nicaragua in the 1980s. I demonstrate the process by which terrorism changed the dialogue over Nicaragua and Central America and facilitated an escalated pursuit of offensive measures against the Sandinista government. The language of terrorism was like that of communism, but it went one-step further by alleging criminality and even irrationality. This allegation justified the development of policies that disregarded the sovereign rights of the victimized state. Second, this project emphasizes the importance of international events and the changing national security perspective of the Reagan administration, both of which contributed to the development of an offensive policy.5

A number of significant scholars have documented the Reagan offensive in Nicaragua. However, no historical work has yet to provide a thorough analysis of the role of terrorism or the role of George H. W. Bush’s terrorism task force in the development of the Reagan offensive in Nicaragua. The second half of this chapter is largely devoted to an analysis of the terrorism task force as an important, but often overlooked aspect of the Reagan administration’s

5 Collins and Glover, *Collateral Language*. 
counterterrorism policy. A significant reason for the absence of scholarship pertaining to the task force is due primarily to the only recent declassification of many documents pertaining to this body. A majority of the documents relating to the Task Force to Combat Terrorism received declassification only in the last ten years, and many of the most pertinent in the last several years. The development of the terrorism task force is important for understanding the Reagan administration’s reaction to the terrorism crisis of the 1980s and for the development of the Reagan offensive in Central America and elsewhere. The purpose of the terrorism task force was to review U.S. policy following the attacks of June 1985. Some scholars, writing before the availability of many documents, have suggested that the task force was little more than a consensual reiteration of U.S. policy. The newly available documents suggest that the work of the task force was intricate and very important to the development of the Reagan administration’s counterterrorism approach. The second half of this chapter provides a look at the development of George H. W. Bush’s Task Force to Combat Terrorism, a story not yet told. For these reasons, this chapter provides an important addition to the already rich history of the U.S.-Nicaraguan conflict in the 1980s.

Congress was a vital part of the development of U.S. policy with Nicaragua. Congress approved or disapproved of aid to the Reagan administration’s ally in Central America, the Contras, which was a transnational guerrilla army that conducted war on Nicaragua from within and from remote areas on the border of Honduras and Costa Rica. The administration’s public diplomacy campaign targeted Congress in an attempt to gain support for an offensive against Nicaragua, a state it deemed a communist-terrorist regime. In the process, the Office of Public

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6 Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*. 

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diplomacy utilized alliances with supporters in Congress like Newt Gingrich. According to a May 30, 1985 memorandum the ‘educational materials’ about Nicaragua the Office of Public Diplomacy would “feed…to people like Newt Gingrich to read on C-Span during the open orders and enter into the Congressional Record.”

On June 20, the day after the killings in El Salvador, Congress met to discuss the terrorism crisis and it offered Reagan’s allies to voice the administration’s hardline opinions. The tone of discussion was markedly different from the previous debates held earlier that month about humanitarian aid to the Contras. Representatives Bob Dornan (R) and Newt Gingrich (R) were front and center in the renewed debate about fighting Sandinista led Nicaragua. Dornan, a former movie star from California, issued a remark that became increasingly familiar over the next year. Dornan declared that communist-terrorists carried out 95% of the terrorist violence in the world. He argued that since at least 1983 Nicaragua had acted as terrorist state. He recalled the May 1983 killing of a U.S. advisor in El Salvador, saying “communist-terrorists shot him in the face five times, as he was parking his automobile at Central American University in San Salvador.” Dornan insisted that the June killings were evidence of two facts: “the operational headquarters of the Farabundo Marti Communist guerrillas [was] in Managua,” and “communism spawns and sponsors 95 percent of the terrorism tearing our world apart.”

In Congress, supporters followed the administration in insisting that terrorism and the crisis with Nicaragua was about a global communist-terrorist offensive, a conflict defined on the lines of global bi-polarity.


Dornan was not alone in his conviction that the United States had to respond to these kinds of acts. Newt Gingrich, Joe Barton (R), Tobias Roth (R), and Robert Smith Walker (R) joined Dornan to vocalize their feelings that the United States confronted a new and dangerous security threat. They argued that this was the unique danger caused by international terrorism, and was facilitated by the communist world. These congressional representatives implored lawmakers to be aggressive and take a hardline against this new threat. Solutions to the problem were elusive, but these members of Congress pressed for a reorganization of the intelligence community in order to learn of terror plots early and be able to react to them more effectively.  

Two days later on June 22, President Reagan gave that passionate speech at Andrews Air-Force base and showed that he intended to do what some of these most vocal congressional representatives hoped. The executive planned to address the threat of international terrorism that allegedly emanated from Nicaragua.

In late spring, the Reagan administration and Congress had achieved some minor steps toward increasing pressure on Nicaragua. In May, Reagan, by executive order, directed economic and trade sanctions on Nicaragua and in June secured from Congress humanitarian aid for the Contras. From the perspective of lawmakers that opposed the Reagan administration’s attempt to aid the Contras, the humanitarian aid that Congress allocated in June represented a step in the wrong direction, a step toward the use of American troops in a war in Central America. The language following the El Salvador killings made the Democrat opposition even more concerned. Of the worried Democrats in the House of Representatives, few were as visible as congressional representative from Washington State, Tom Foley. On June 27, Foley proposed

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an amendment to the Department of Defense Authorization Act for 1986 that he hoped would guarantee that the United States could not use the $27 million in humanitarian aid as a step toward an escalation of hostile activities against Nicaragua.

The Foley amendment was consistent with congressional action since the 1983 Boland Amendment: the main goal was to prevent the Reagan administration from conducting a U.S.-led war in or over Nicaragua. This particular amendment declared that unless the United States was under attack (including embassies, territories and possessions) or had declared war on Nicaragua, that “funds appropriated to the Department of Defense may not be obligated or expended for the purpose of introducing the United States Armed forces into or over Nicaragua for combat.”\(^\text{10}\) In years prior, Congress was supportive of this type of amendment, but as the debate ensued following the El Salvador attack, it was clear that many feared that Foley’s approach did not adequately consider the unique danger presented by international terrorism.

During the debate over the Foley amendment supporters argued that the humanitarian aid was not the real goal of the administration and its supporters. Congressman Sandy Levin (D), insisted that the executive wanted Congress to approve lethal aid for the Contras. He warned that the humanitarian aid had “opened the door to obtaining the direct military aid this administration desperately wants to fund the Contras.”\(^\text{11}\) Levin supported the Foley amendment, but following the events that June a majority of the House of Representatives were nevertheless in no mood for the passage of restrictive measures. For many in the legislative branch things had changed. The perception of a new threat, international terrorism, altered the discussion.


The events of June marked the beginning of a shift in Congress over aid to the Contras. The terrorist incidents were shocking and vivid. In El Salvador, six Americans died: two civilians, and four off-duty Marines. In Beirut, one American died at the hands of gun wielding terrorists that presented their demands, with bags over their heads, through American news media. While the administration had yet to secure congressional approval for lethal aid to the Contras, the attack in El Salvador and the TWA hijacking together catalyzed the development of a shift in Congress. Supporters of the Reagan administration deployed a passionate call to action, and Congress began to take steps toward consideration of greater support for the Contras and authorization of a more active program to combat international terrorism.

The opponents of the Foley Amendment included John McCain (R), Dick Cheney(R), Newt Gingrich, Bob Dornan and others from the Republican and Democrat party. These critics were primarily concerned that in certain instances the president would have his hands tied. Duncan Lee Hunter (R) of California proposed a hypothetical scenario in which hijackers took an airline to Managua, Nicaragua. If no U.S. citizens were involved, could the president take military action? Hunter insisted, “You could have hijackings of planes carrying allies of the United States. Essentially, they would find sanctuary in Managua.”¹² Another insisted that the United States had to make a stand and not let the enemy know that the president would not act. Likewise, Henry Hyde (R) exclaimed that the United States was “under siege around the world by state-sponsored terrorists.”¹³ While Democrat opponents tried to invoke the concern of a U.S.

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military-pressure-first policy, many in Congress that day expressed a concern for the threat of international terrorism allegedly posed by states like Nicaragua.

The Foley Amendment, as originally proposed, did not have the strength to pass. Both Republicans and moderate Democrats opposed the fact that the amendment did not properly account for the threat of terrorism. Newt Gingrich exclaimed that Americans lived “in a world of terrorists.” There was a call for Congress to respond. What Congress did ultimately do was add to the Foley Amendment a modification offered by Missouri Democrat Ike Skelton. The addition authorized the president to use military force “to respond to hijacking, kidnapping, or other acts of terrorism involving citizens of the United States or citizens of any ally of the United States.”

John McCain (R) was among those that spoke in support of Skelton. The modified version passed with wide support. McCain and Skelton were among many in a Congress that felt that action was necessary to deal with the looming danger. From McCain’s vantage, the Skelton amendment was necessary to prevent the passage of legislation that ignored the role of states like Nicaragua as a sponsor of international terrorism. While still somewhat resistant to the idea of funding the Contras with lethal material, many in the Congress did acknowledge the right of the United States to use the military for counterterrorism purposes. After this debate, Congress went on a ten-day holiday to celebrate the nation’s independence.

Shortly after the July 4 holiday, the Reagan administration came out with a bombshell announcement that showed that it intended to act, and in the process, the administration escalated

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its use of the linguistic weapon of terrorism. Speaking before the American Bar Association (ABA) on July 8, Reagan took earlier assertions about Nicaragua and international terrorism to another level and affirmed that the Executive Branch was making significant policy changes following the terrorist incidents in mid-June. Reagan made it clear that the United States and the civilized world faced a new threat. He felt that state sponsorship of terrorism posed a significant danger to United States security by providing sanctuaries that allowed for unpredictable attacks on civilians and non-combatants throughout the world. The closeness of Nicaragua to the United States, he insisted, caused for a heightened sense of urgency. Reagan opened his speech by labeling five states as part of “a confederation of terror states” and a “new version of murder inc.” that had attacked the United States and its allies with “outright acts of war.” Reagan listed Nicaragua, Cuba, Libya, Iran, and North Korea as the heart of world terrorism. These states, he insisted, were “outlaw states.” As a culmination of ideas originally expressed by Shultz in 1984, Reagan acknowledged that the Cold War had changed, and that Americans should fear the activity of criminal Radical-Left regimes that sought to use terrorism against the United States’ allies and interests.

In his speech to the ABA Reagan insisted that the United States would retool its policy to deal with terrorism. The president announced his order to form a task force to evaluate and develop U.S. counterterrorism policy. Reagan appointed Vice President George H. W. Bush to head of the task force. In addition, he suggested that the threat of international terrorism required the administration to develop a policy that was aggressive and left all options, including unilateral military interventions, on the table. Reagan’s big announcement was front-page news

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on July 9, and it spurred a significant national debate. This was an important moment for the United States and the world.\textsuperscript{18} The Reagan administration declared Nicaragua a criminal state and pushed for aggressive actions that broke from the traditional expectations of state-to-state behavior. In the coming months, the task force would determine what kind of action the United States planned for nations like Nicaragua, and began formulating a new framework of intervention against states alleged of sponsoring terrorism.

Reagan’s ‘outlaw state’ speech was a call to members of Congress and the people of the United States. It represented both a shift in policy and in language. The Task Force to Combat Terrorism was going to construct a new policy for U.S. intervention, and the administration used the language of terrorism in an attempt to capitalize on the situation and enhance an atmosphere of fear and urgency. Nearly three weeks had passed since those Americans died in San Salvador. The administration demanded that the country take the steps necessary to counter the threat of international terrorism. Congress responded to the president’s call. On the same day that Reagan spoke to the ABA, supporters in Congress, as operational components of the administration’s public diplomacy operation, coordinated their own messages. Newt Gingrich quoted Benjamin Netanyahu and gave his support to the president in his efforts to reform policy. At this time, Netanyahu was a leading scholar on the issue of terrorism, and Israel was a prime example of a nation that utilized hardline measures in pursuit of solutions to terrorism. The escalation in international terrorism empowered supporters in Congress, often at the encouragement of the

Office of Public Diplomacy, to back the president in reacting to the threat allegedly posed by a global alliance of Radical-left states.\textsuperscript{19}

Like the leadership in the White House and the State Department, the descriptions given by the most visible supporters of Reagan’s position did not equate the threat of international terrorism separately from the Cold War. Instead, the administration’s dialogue linked terrorism and communism as part of a monolithic conspiracy. Many congressional supporters also argued that all communist nations acted as state sponsors of terrorism. They linked all state sponsors of terrorism with the communist bloc. While speaking in Congress on July 8 Gingrich insisted that “there is a very real parallel between Leninism…and terrorism.”\textsuperscript{20} On Nicaragua, he stated that Daniel Ortega was a bank robber in the 1970s. The Sandinista leader “was a terrorist…as part of his training as a good communist.”\textsuperscript{21} On this same day, Dan Lungren (R) reiterated the concern that the world had changed and the United States needed to develop a new approach. Lungren, who worked closely with Gingrich, called for the use of military force and an aggressive approach lest “every American around the world…be at risk.”\textsuperscript{22} The following day Dan Burton (R) added to the crescendo, insisting that “the communist Sandinista party….are supplying and harboring the headquarters of the communist death squads in El Salvador.”\textsuperscript{23} Over the coming year, the dialogue that Nicaragua was a communist-terrorist state carried significant implications for the Sandinista leadership. Members of Congress aligned with the Reagan administration,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{19} 131 Cong. Rec. H5244 (July 8, 1985).
\bibitem{20} 131 Cong. Rec. H5244 (July 8, 1985) (statement by congressman Gingrich).
\bibitem{21} 131 Cong. Rec. H5244 (July 8, 1985) (statement by congressman Gingrich).
\bibitem{22} 131 Cong. Rec. H5251 (July 8, 1985) (statement by congressman Lungren).
\end{thebibliography}
worked in-concert with the public diplomacy operation to change what the threat of Nicaragua meant. The two groups were criminalizing the Sandinista leadership, and shifting the dialogue over the conflict with the Contras.

The events of June encouraged immediate reactions from the United States. Congress took some significant legislative steps to deal with the threat of alleged communist-terrorist states like Nicaragua. In passing the International Security and Development Act of 1985, Congress finalized approval for $27 million in humanitarian aid to the Contras. Lawmakers also took several important steps on international terrorism. Congress supported the use of sanctions against any nation that supported international terrorists. The body considered the expanded use of air-marshal, and increased resistance to drug trafficking in Central and South America. Congress condemned terrorism and called for greater coordination in dealing with the threat.\(^{24}\)

While Congress authorized humanitarian aid to the Contras, a majority in the House of Representatives remained pointedly opposed to the use of military force via this transnational guerrilla group. This issue of the usage of military force remained a central divergence between a majority of Congress and the executive branch. In July of 1985, in an act that passed with a strong majority, the House of Representatives showed that as a body it was, however, in near complete agreement with the Reagan administration on the justification for why the United States should act in the case of Nicaragua. According to the International Security and Development Act, the House accepted the Reagan administration’s rationale for opposition to the Sandinistas. According to the language in the Act, the Sandinista leadership was in violation of the principle of its own revolution, acted subversively toward neighboring states, created close

ties with states of the Radical-Left like the Soviet Union, Libya, and Cuba, and were solely responsible for escalating tensions in the region. Congress agreed with the administration on the allegations, but still did not take the step of authorizing military force or military aid for the transnational non-state actor in the region, the Contras. Authorization for the Contras was highly controversial because the guerrillas acted in violation of the sovereignty of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras, and to acknowledge open support of this was to accept a violation of the accepted norms of international behavior. There was much tough talk in Congress in late June/early July, but despite the intense deployment of the linguistic weapon of terrorism by supporters like Newt Gingrich, the consensuses in the Democrat controlled body remained that the United States should avoid the military approach, and continue the use of the sanctions regime with was hoped would bring the Sandinistas to the peace table and ready to negotiate a settlement with the Contras. This issue of the use of military force via the Contras against Nicaragua continued as the major disagreement between the Executive Branch and Congress.

Despite the hang up over lethal aid for the Contras, the Reagan administration directed a military escalation in reaction to the June attacks in El Salvador. As the Iran-Contra Hearings would later show, members of the NSC John Poindexter and Oliver North were already involved in funding a military escalation against Nicaragua by providing secret unauthorized funding to the Contras. The NSC created military funding for the guerrillas through private donations and provided the guerrillas with operational advice and direct assistance. The administration, however, also took to the offensive in a more overt way. The Reagan NSC directed the El


Salvadoran government, with American helicopters and weapons and with the oversight of American advisors, to attack the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC, an affiliate of the FMLN).27 This group was allegedly aided by the Sandinistas and responsible for the June attack. This was a major offensive against the Sandinistas clients operating in El Salvador.

The PRTC, according to a special State Department report in August, was a guerrilla-terrorist army that relied on urban terrorism, assassinations, kidnappings, shootings, and bombings. According to the Department of State, the Nicaraguan government was a state sponsor of this terror group. The Sandinistas, allegedly, provided training and supplied lethal materials. Nonetheless, the report suggested that “Despite the retaliation of El Salvadoran armed forces, the success of the 19 June massacre may be accelerating a move by all elements of the guerrilla alliance toward a terrorist oriented strategy.”28 This implied a need for the United States to act. Obtaining congressional support for lethal aid for the Contras remained the primary long-term goal for the Reagan administration following the June attacks, but the Reagan administration went ahead and sent their trained and armed allies on the offensive in Central and Eastern El Salvador. By July 11, the “assault teams” had killed 25 and captured 10 in their pursuit of the suspected terrorists.29


With the precise course of U.S. policy unknown and the strong rhetoric on Capitol Hill, there is little doubt that many Americans were already a bit wary as they read the news on July 24, 1985. The *San Francisco Chronicle* was one of many news publications throughout the country to report that the Reagan administration had threatened Nicaragua. The article revealed that the United States had planned air attacks on Nicaragua in response to killings in El Salvador. The administration insisted that the Sandinista leadership had established terrorist training camps near the capital Managua, and it was here that State Department officials argued that the attack in June originated.

The Reagan administration considered using direct military force against Nicaragua in support of the El Salvadoran offensive operations. The NSC, instead, decided to use threats while secretly escalating support for the Contra army. In the summer of 1985, these actions created a heightened tension between the United States and Nicaragua. Earlier that July the Nicaraguan government recovered an American radar buoy near El Bluff and witnessed an escalation of Contra activity and military operations in neighboring El Salvador. The Reagan administration was sending a stern message to the Sandinista leadership. The United States ambassador to Nicaragua, Harry Bergold, warned Nicaragua that if the United States linked the Sandinista leadership to future terrorist acts the Reagan administration would order air attacks on the country. Rather than seeking legitimate discussions with Nicaragua, the United States turned to threats and military pressure that antagonized the Sandinistas and revealed further that the Reagan administration was intent on a policy of regime change.

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In the weeks following Reagan’s ‘outlaw states’ speech, there was apprehension in the United States. Reports centered to a significant degree on the question of whether or not the newly formed Task Force to Combat Terrorism would create a policy based on the offensive application of military force. Some journalists insisted that Reagan preferred the use of a military force.\(^{31}\) Other reports speculated that Bush, the head of the new task force, was likely to take a more cautious approach to the terrorism crisis.\(^{32}\) Adding to the unknown, Abraham Sofaer, the State Department’s legal adviser, went on record as arguing for the right of the United States to take military action against states like Nicaragua and praising the potential deterrent effect of such methods.\(^{33}\) Even further, George Shultz, the most adamant of top Reagan administration officials for a military oriented counterterrorism strategy, began pressing for the administration to clarify the presidential ban on assassinations in the case of terrorism. International terrorists Shultz defined as criminals that were engaged in an illegal war against the United States. The ban on assassination, originally signed by Gerald Ford and renewed by Reagan in 1981, the secretary insisted needed clarification in order to open up military options for the United States when dealing with terrorists and their state sponsors.\(^{34}\) As the task force was in its formation stages, these were likely the issues that engaged citizens asked themselves as they wondered if the United States might attack Nicaragua or another one of those alleged ‘outlaw states.’


The United States had taken steps to address the threat of terrorism before, but the response following the El Salvador killings, and the hijacking of TWA 847 represented the most advanced move taken by the United States to date. Rather than patching up an existing problem by creating a law here and a law there, the Reagan administration ordered a thorough re-evaluation of the nation’s foreign policy conducted by the Task Force to Combat Terrorism. The task force was a cabinet wide review group that prepared to review the crisis and consider the most effective ways of combatting this threat. This process would establish the model for U.S. interaction with state sponsors of terrorism. It began on July 20, 1985 with President Reagan’s signing of National Security Decision Directive 179 (NSDD 179). This short NSC document operated as the modus operandi of the task force.35

The headquarters for the task force was located just to the North of the White House in the historic district of Lafayette Square. 730 Jackson Place was the nerve center for this operation.36 The offices were equipped with the most sensitive and top-secret communication mechanisms. Headquarters included secure phone lines and safes for classified material.37 President Reagan’s task force to combat terrorism involved senior officials from all pertinent departments and agencies. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the State Department, Department of Defense, the National Security Council (NSC), the White House, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Office of Budget and Management


36 Memo, Admiral Holloway to Staff September 4, 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

37 Memo, Admiral Holloway to Staff September 4 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
(OBM) as well as Departments of Transportation, Treasury, and Justice were part of this task force. This was the most thorough effort made at combating terrorism yet.\textsuperscript{38}

The group combined three distinct parts: the working group, the senior review group, and the research and analysis group. The working group and research and analysis group were responsible for conducting the investigative and written elements of the process. By contrast, the senior review group acted as directive oversight. The senior review group’s job was to keep the task force on track and make key decisions for the final report. The organization was not a bi-partisan commission. While Democrats did participate in the process, the task force derived from Reagan’s cabinet.\textsuperscript{39}

The appointment of Vice President George H. W. Bush to head the task force was a clear sign that this was a serious step by the administration. Bush carried significant insight and influence in the making of policy. Having served the United States with distinction during World War II and as the Director of the CIA, the Vice President was uniquely in tune with the motor of policy. The administration appointed Bush because he understood how foreign policy worked and what was required to address the unique threat of terrorism. The Vice President, however, was not the regular acting director of the group. This job fell to the executive director, retired navy admiral James Holloway III.

Admiral Holloway, a personal choice of Bush, was also distinguished for his prior service to the nation. In 1978, Holloway was the chief of naval operations. He remained active after

\textsuperscript{38} Memo, Office of the Vice President to Task Force, folder folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{39} Memo, Admiral Holloway to Staff September 4 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
retirement, and his participation in the investigation of the Iran hostage situation made him an ideal candidate for the position of executive director in the terrorism task force. Both Bush and Holloway played important roles in directing the shape of U.S. terrorism policy.

The initial stages of the task force lasted for about six weeks. During this time, officials received appointments and began the research and background work in preparation for the beginning of the administration’s counterterrorism program review, which would begin in September. While the task force was in its early stages, the public diplomacy campaign continued its attempts to create a Congress, media, and citizenry more sympathetic to administration’s policy with Nicaragua by increasingly deploying the linguistic weapon of terrorism against Nicaragua and other alleged state sponsors.

Prior to the first senior meeting of the task force, scheduled for September, the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy continued one of the primary methods used to control the dialogue over Nicaragua, the production of briefing books designed to convince Congress and the American people of the administration’s position. Such materials the administration fed to members of Congress like Newt Gingrich to read on the floor of the House of Representatives and be included in the daily record. Following the June attacks, this body published two reports that defined the threat allegedly posed by Nicaragua. They released the first in August. The title of the first release was “The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals.” The second report was released at the beginning of September and was titled “Revolution Beyond Our Borders.” The central argument of these briefs was that the Sandinistas were not simply communists. Instead, they were communist-terrorists. The reports insisted that the earlier understanding that the primary threat posed by Nicaragua as a communist affiliate of the Soviet bloc was only getting at
part of the equation. The other aspect of the Sandinista threat was in their alliance with radical Middle Eastern groups like the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and terrorist ‘outlaw states’--Libya and Iran. These associations implied a criminal element in Nicaragua. The authors argued that this association was not short term chance or convenience, but a fundamental relationship. According to the State Department, “Their [Sandinistas] ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) reached back more than ten years before the revolution in Nicaragua. Libya has given the Sandinistas both pre-and post-revolution aid…. [and] more recently, the Sandinistas have developed closer ties with Iran.”

The reports argued that the Sandinistas had assisted the PLO in a major airline hijacking in 1970 and, as allies of individuals like Yasser Arafat, possessed sympathetic views of anti-Semitism and anti-Westernism. The document cited remarks from Nicaraguan Defense Minister Tomas Borge and Yasser Arafat in 1980. Borge remarked that “Nicaragua is his (Arafat) land and the PLO cause is the cause of the Sandinistas.” Likewise, the document quoted Arafat as saying that “the triumph of the Nicaraguans was the PLO’s triumph.” According to the State Department, the Sandinistas harbored and provided sanctuary to the PLO. Through this alliance, they joined in anti-Semitic goals. The propaganda document claimed that those in high leadership positions in the Nicaraguan government hijacked airlines and abetted the worst criminal elements in the world. The documents portrayed Daniel Ortega, the president of

40 State Department Report, The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals, folder “The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals” Box 16, David S. Addington Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

41 State Department Report, The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals, folder “The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals” Box 16, David S. Addington Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
Nicaragua, as not only a communist but as terrorist and a criminal.\textsuperscript{42} This type of propaganda represented an attempt on the part of the Reagan administration to shift the dialogue over Nicaragua.

The task force to combat terrorism’s senior review group met for the first time on Wednesday, September 11, 1985. The meeting began at 9:00am and lasted for an hour. The purpose was to bring together the chief members of the administration and consider essential objectives. Two members were unable to attend: from the State Department, Ambassador Robert Oakley and from the NSC, Rear Admiral John Poindexter. Ambassador Parker Borg filled in for Oakley while Oliver North replaced Poindexter. The meeting began with opening remarks from Executive Director James Holloway III.\textsuperscript{43}

This meeting represented the early stages of the Reagan administration’s attempt to grapple with the threat of international terrorism. For this reason, the first steps in this inaugural meeting were rather basic in nature. The United States had never provided a formal definition of international terrorism, and so Holloway convened the meeting by outlining the particular issue. International terrorism, he asserted, was the usage of criminal actions to “intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion or to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping.” Further, this threat occurred outside the boundaries of the United States and involved the need for states and territories to


\textsuperscript{43} Meeting itinerary, Agenda for Task Force on Combatting Terrorism Senior Review Group, September 11, 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
provide sanctuary and support. International terrorism was, like terrorism in general, “the calculated, criminal use or threat of violence for political purposes to intimidate a target audience beyond the immediate victims.” The phenomenon, it was alleged, was primarily an extension of the global Cold War and conducted by affiliates of the Radical-Left against the United States and the democracies of the world. The task force agreed that terrorism, whether in Nicaragua or Lebanon, was part of a global communist-terrorist offensive. This definition formed the basis of the work of the task force.\textsuperscript{44}

The central goal of the task force was to evaluate U.S. terrorism policy, make recommendations to the president, and create a more effective model for dealing with this threat. December 20, 1985 was the task force’s deadline to have their final report ready for approval by Vice President Bush and President Reagan. In order to meet the December deadline Admiral Holloway and Vice President Bush broke the work into three phases. The first phase was research and analysis and it began on August 8: the second phase commenced on October 25 and involved a review and discussion of issue points: and the final phase, “program formulation” began on the day when the first two phases concluded, November 18.\textsuperscript{45}

Consultation was a primary method for achieving the goal of phase I. This was carried out in four specific areas; interviews with important minds on the issue of terrorism, meetings with pertinent members of Congress, negotiations with members of the media, and trips to relevant diplomatic posts. This four-part method allowed the task force working group to gain an

\textsuperscript{44} Meeting itinerary, Agenda for Task Force on Combatting Terrorism Senior Review Group, September 11, 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{45} Memo, Admiral Holloway to Staff, September 9 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
idea of how intellectuals, members of Congress, the media, and allies in the areas most affected by the terrorist threat understood the issue of international terrorism. By undertaking this form of analysis, members of the task force believed they could get a feel for the pulse of the issue and thereby formulate the best policy possible.

On September 15, Attorney General Edwin Meese publicly reiterated the administration’s July 8 position. Meese claimed that Nicaragua was “part of a broader network of state-sponsored and supported terrorism.” He insisted that Nicaragua provided sanctuary to major terror groups like the PLO, Basque, ETA, Baader-Meinhof and even the IRA. The next day the members of the task force conducted their first meetings with congressional leaders. The Reagan administration was acutely aware that, particularly in the post-Vietnam world, the executive needed congressional support for the success of foreign policy endeavors. No other case displays this as clearly as Nicaragua. The administration’s policy of escalation against Nicaragua and against international terrorism required congressional legislation and authorization. The task force established a liaison and on September 16 convened both Republican and Democrat members of Congress to “reinforce the Administration’s resolve to combat terrorism and at the same time solicit Congressional support and advice.”

Slated to attend the meeting, among others, were Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R), Dick Lugar (R), and Strom Thurmond (R).

Those that were supportive of the task force’s position would take to the floor of Congress, and

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48 Memo From Admiral Holloway to Vice President, Congressional Delegation Meeting on Terrorism September 16, 1985, folder “VP/Congressional Meeting Sept 16, 1985,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
make the case for the administration’s policy by promoting the passage of legislation designed to back a more aggressive U.S. foreign policy allegedly needed to combat international terrorism in places like Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, the task force met for the second time at the White House on September 18. This was the first time that the heads of all pertinent agencies and departments attended. Secretary of State George Shultz, Director of the Office of Counterterrorism and Emergency Planning Ambassador Robert Oakley, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Wickman, Deputy Director of the CIA John McMahon, Director of the FBI Judge William Webster, and Attorney General Edwin Meese, joined Vice President George H.W. Bush and Executive Director Holloway in the Roosevelt Room at 10:30am. There were a number of members of the White House at the meeting; in addition to the vice president, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Vice Admiral John Poindexter, Staff Member for the Office of National Security Affairs Oliver North, and Chief of Staff Craig Fuller joined this executive meeting of the President’s cabinet.49 This was the first time that these high-ranking officials would provide their direct insight to the task force on the course of U.S. terrorism policy.50

Vice President Bush opened the meeting. Bush knew that only with congressional support could the United States take the more aggressive actions that both he and Shultz believed this security threat demanded. He also understood that international terrorism provided the

49 List of Participants for the Second Meeting of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism, September 18 1985, Folder “Second Meeting With Task Force Principles,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

possibility for congressional support for active measures against ‘outlaw states’. Furthermore, he understood that terrorism was a powerful rhetorical weapon that might help swing the debate over Contra aid in the administration’s favor. In his opening remarks he insisted that “Once the President approves the recommendations of this task force this congressional support affords a real opportunity to package legislation under ‘anti-terrorism’ that will stand a good chance of passage.” In other words, this new threat introduced a new discursive tool that could allow for the authorization from Congress of a more aggressive foreign policy. The attainment of lethal aid for the Contras was of central importance to the task force and the Reagan administration, and this new approach provided a potential avenue to the achievement of this funding. In his opening remarks at this closed-door meeting, Bush acknowledged that international terrorism changed the game and made the attainment of these goals possible. Terrorism implied a criminality that allegations of communism did not. The language of terrorism was a powerful tool in the creation of a more aggressive framework of intervention.

Members present at the meeting agreed that what made this new threat unique, thereby requiring a new approach was that it was internationally connected. Domestic terrorism or terrorism within a country at war had occurred for many years. According to the members present, the international character and its role in a global anti-American offensive made this threat unique. The acts involved state supported transnational criminal agents. They targeted citizens, soldiers, and world leaders through a network of loosely connected state sponsors, like Nicaragua. Secretary of State George Shultz insisted that “the international aspect of terrorism is

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the essence of the matter….the terrorist connections are international.”

Shultz also suggested broadening the dimensions of what represented international terrorism by further incorporating the illegal drug trade into the catalogue of international terrorism. The allegation of Sandinista involvement in drug trafficking, narco-terrorism, enhanced the administration’s call for military escalation. Shultz argued, “There is a definite connection with illicit drugs as a source of financing activities.”

Later during the meeting, as the task force considered the use of active measures in combatting international terrorism and there was some debate over offensive actions that might violate sovereignty or prove controversial. At this moment Shultz, the leading advocate of an offensive approach, again entered into the discussion to assert frankly that “We often torture ourselves with these moral dilemmas of justice when we forget the victims and the consequences of the incident.”

The Secretary acknowledged that the threat was new, and the United States needed to respond aggressively and without the restraint of certain moral impediments of international law.

It was clear from this meeting that unilateral military action, aid to transnational guerrilla forces and other preventative and pre-emptive measures were all on the table as potentially acceptable options for dealing with ‘outlaw states’.

52 Memo, Admiral Holloway, Minutes of the Second Task Force meeting September 19 1985, folder “Second Meeting With Task Force Principles,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

53 Memo, Admiral Holloway, Minutes of the Second Task Force meeting September 19 1985, folder “Second Meeting With Task Force Principles,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. As the administration had escalated its hostile tone against Nicaragua and groups in El Salvador and Colombia supporters of the administration began to connect these agents to the drug trade.

54 Memo, Admiral Holloway, Minutes of the Second Task Force meeting September 19 1985, folder “Second Meeting With Task Force Principles,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

On the same day as this meeting, the administration established the itinerary for another aspect of the terrorism policy evaluation, diplomatic missions. Several days after the September 18 meeting, Admiral Holloway led an envoy to Great Britain, Ambassador Edward Peck and Robert Earl to Central and South America, Dave Cole to Italy, and Dave McNunn to the Middle East. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of the nature of this threat by visiting the diplomatic posts most urgently threatened by international terrorism. Ambassador Peck’s envoy visited the two places considered most at risk by Nicaraguan backed terrorism, El Salvador, and Colombia. On this trip, the task force members met with heads of state, military officials, and businessmen that were involved in projects like the Colombian oil pipeline. John Poindexter and Charles Allen both adamantly opposed Peck’s visit to San Salvador. The situation in El Salvador remained very dangerous and the two feared that urban terrorists with affiliation to the FMLN and to the Sandinistas might target the envoy as reprisals for the U.S.-backed El Salvador offensive in July. Their concern was not without warrant. Ambassador Thomas Pickering had two attempts on his life thwarted by the United States and the El Salvadoran government a year earlier. Peck, however, insisted, “The trip [was] necessary to insure that the final report has a proper assessment of the terrorist threat worldwide [and] El Salvador is a particularly important

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56 Memo, Admiral Holloway to Staff, September 9 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

57 Diplomatic Missions, International Consultations, September 11, 1985, folder “VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.


59 Wills, The First War on Terrorism.
country to visit because of the ongoing terrorist activity. The administration took the terrorism crisis seriously and intended to create a complete understanding of the situation and a coherent framework of intervention in response.

On September 18 and 19, 1985, members of the House of Representatives continued to work in the interest of the Office of Public Diplomacy’s propaganda campaign. Supporters in Congress quoted for the record sections from the State Department’s two recent publications, “Revolution Beyond Our Borders” and “the Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals.” Dan Lungren of California, a prominent supporter of a more aggressive posture, argued against those that suggested that both the United States and Nicaragua were conducting state sponsored terrorism in Central America. The argument that the United States was attempting to declare a war on terrorism while also conducting a terror war was a prominent accusation leveled against the administration. Lungren repelled this assertion by using the language of terrorism as the primary way of defining the enemy, the Sandinistas, and the U.S. ally-- the so-called freedom fighters. He insisted that dissenting members read “Revolution Beyond Our Borders” and understand whom the real terrorists and freedom fighters were. Congressional supporters like Lungren were important tools for the deployment of the language of terrorism.

The next day congressmen continued to reiterate the dialogue in “The Sandinistas and Middle Eastern Radicals” by asserting that not only was Nicaragua guilty of state sponsorship of terrorism, but also was fundamentally linked to the Middle Eastern nations and groups

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60 “Proposed Terrorism Task Force Visit to San Salvador,” Folder, “Terrorism” (4 of 9), Box 2 OA/ID 19849, Donald P. Gregg Files: George Bush Vice Presidential Records, National Security Affairs, George Bush Presidential Library.

understood as at the center of the new crisis. One representative argued that the Sandinistas were close allies with the PLO. He insisted that the two possessed similar Radical-Left ideologies that included anti-Semitism. On September 30, Congressman William Broomfield (R) leveled an even more thorough reiteration of the administration’s argument. Broomfield insisted that the game had changed. He said, “The Sandinista government provides passports to undesirable radicals and other terrorists from the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America. PLO operatives use Nicaragua as a base for their terror operations in Central America. Known terrorists from the Basque terrorist group, the ETA, the German Basdar-Meinhof and other murdering gangs make Nicaragua their home.” These congressional representatives insisted that the Sandinistas were not only communists and enemies but also criminals of the worst kind, those that facilitated international terrorism. Vice President George H. W. Bush knew that this dialogue could shift the attitudes of Congress and public opinion. He was likely very pleased to hear the arguments on Capitol Hill that fall. Those voices were important to the deployment of a propaganda operation that increasingly positioned the language of terrorism at the center.

These early volley’s in the initial exchanges of the renewed fight over lethal funding for the Contras were followed by a proposal from two of Reagan’s allies in the Senate, Dick Lugar and Claiborne Pell (D). Lugar and Pell sponsored the Central American Counterterrorism bill. This called for $26 million in police assistance, $1 million on the counter-terrorism protection fund, and $27 million in new military assistance to the region. The counter-terrorism protection fund was a proposed fund for protection of informants, and it served as incentive for those that

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might seek the reward money that the United States offered for the capture of terror suspects. The idea of military assistance again caused controversy on Capitol Hill. The bill proposed providing support to police forces that were allegedly involved in human rights abuses and which Congress had refused to fund for this reason. The language of terrorism, however, was altering the nature of debate. Many opponents recognized this as an attempt to open an avenue for further support to the Contras beyond the already authorized humanitarian aid. The debate on this piece of legislation continued into December, and it was the first legislative attempt since the past spring to gain new military assistance for the region.

In the fall of 1985, the Reagan administration developed its war on terrorism amid a feeling of urgency caused by a terrorism crisis. On October 7, 1985, international events again reminded officials of the danger. The world watched as terrorists with links to the PLO hijacked the cruise ship Achille Lauro in the Mediterranean. In the course of the events a Jewish-American man, Leon Klinghoffer, died and the hijackers threw his body over the side. In response, President Reagan ordered fighter planes to intercept an Egyptian passenger airline that carried four of the Palestinian hijackers attempting to escape to safe havens. The action forced the plane to land in Italy and the authorities arrested the hijackers. The widow of Klinghoffer praised Reagan: she was “glad the president did something.” The Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was, however, not pleased. Mubarak accused the United States as having conducted

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“an act of piracy.” In the midst of these events, the task force worked on as planned, but time was of the essence.

During late September and throughout October 1985 the situation with Nicaragua did not improve. The Sandinistas continued to pursue a case against the United States at the Hague International Court of Justice (ICJ) in Holland. Daniel Ortega countered the United States’ claim that he was an agent of terrorism by labeling the United States a state sponsor of terrorism. The Reagan administration refused to participate in the ICJ and Ortega had a world stage. However, Oretga made several diplomatic errors. In the middle of October, the Sandinista leadership placed restrictions on civil liberties in Nicaragua. The restrictions involved shutting down some media outlets, religious groups, and political parties. President Daniel Ortega justified the actions as necessary to focus on the conflict with the U.S. backed Contras. The Reagan administration was constantly searching for hard evidential reasons to demand an escalation of hostilities against the Sandinistas and Ortega either did not understand this or believed that the Reagan administration was undeterred in its will to attack Nicaragua. Ortega’s first mistake during these critical moments when U.S. aid to the Contras was still uncertain was traveling to Moscow after the rejection by Congress of lethal funds to the Contras the previous spring. The Sandinista’s crack down on civil liberties played further into the hands of the Reagan administration.


Following Ortega’s announcement to restrain freedom of press, speech and assembly in the middle of October, other circumstances further damaged the position of the Sandinista leadership. In Early September, guerrillas kidnapped Ines Guadalupe, the daughter of Jose Napoleon Duarte, the president of El Salvador. On November 1, after the release of his daughter, President Duarte declared publically that Nicaragua was responsible for the terrorist act. In a passionate speech to the National Press Club he exclaimed that “In Central America, in my own country, countless persons from all walks of life, and in the case of my family….would not have been victims of merciless violence of the terrorists if terrorists did not have the support, direction, approval and timely protection of the terrorist dictatorship in Nicaragua.”

Duarte affirmed the position of the Reagan administration, and the United States’ criminal allegations against the Sandinistas grew more powerful.

Throughout November, tension continued to rise. On November 3, Bob Woodward, the iconic investigative journalist for the Washington Post, published a piece that suggested that the Reagan NSC planned to begin a new covert war against Libya. Woodward argued that the Reagan administration intended to replicate the surrogate counter-terrorism war in Nicaragua in the territory of other alleged ‘outlaw states’. The following day tension with Nicaragua increased further as a U.S. SR-71 Blackbird overflew Cuba. The Cuban air defenses unsuccessfully fired on the plane. The last time that such an engagement occurred over the island of Cuba was during the Cuban Missile Crisis when Cuban air defenses brought down a U-2 spy plane.


plane. The SR-71 spent nearly an hour over Cuban airspace. The result was outrage from the Cuban and Nicaraguan governments, but the intelligence added more fuel to the administration’s argument. The Reagan administration identified Soviet and Bulgarian military equipment being unloaded and prepared for shipment elsewhere. The administration insisted that it was destined for shipment to Nicaragua and from there to El Salvador. The intelligence also included evidence of Soviet made tanks allegedly going to Nicaragua. These assertions came two weeks after Daniel Ortega had pledged to defeat the Contras in a matter of weeks.\textsuperscript{70} A few days later, the Sandinista government detained 14 Nicaraguans working at the United States embassy in Managua for questioning. These new intelligence revelations and the reactions of the Sandinista leadership provided fuel for the Reagan administration already involved in the construction of an offensive framework for intervention and diligently attempting to use rhetoric to criminalize the Nicaraguan government.

That same week in November, only one month since the United States task force team had visited, a horror unfolded in Colombia. Neither Colombia nor the United States were ready for what happened on November 7. The Colombian group, April 19 Movement (M 19), attacked the Colombian Supreme Court. The terrorists took hostages and a 25-hour siege unfolded in downtown Bogota. The deadlock was broken when military and police forces stormed the building. The results were shocking: 89 lay dead. The dead included Alfonso Reyes, the head of the Supreme Court, and six other judges.\textsuperscript{71} The tragic event the United States would investigate


and a month later insisted that Nicaragua had helped facilitate the actions of the M-19 faction. The Reagan administration exaggerated the role of the Sandinistas in the attack. The link was only the presence of several small arms of Nicaraguan origin that were involved in the attack.\(^{72}\) Nonetheless, eager to use any evidence it could in their elaborate propaganda campaign, this event provided yet another justification for the Reagan administration to demand that Congress allow aggressive action against Nicaragua, the alleged communist-terrorist state.

While the situation in the Americas and the world escalated, the task force continued with their work. The group appealed to the best and brightest minds in American foreign policy. Members of the task force working group conducted interviews with dozens of specialists. The list of those scheduled for interview included Henry Kissinger, Bob Woodward, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Alexander Haig, and many others from groups as wide ranging as Interpol and the Department of Defense. Through this process, the task force hoped to gain a broad spectrum of insight on the terrorism issue and through this process construct an efficient way of combatting the problem.

Of those interviewed, Henry Kissinger was one of the most highly admired. Many members of Reagan’s cabinet felt admiration for Kissinger’s advocacy of realism in foreign policy. In order to ensure balance the task force also interviewed the more liberal minded Brzezinski. Carter’s former secretary of state responded by fundamentally rejecting the administration’s macro interpretation of terrorism as a phenomenon related to global bi-polarity. Brzezinski suggested to the task force that the United States should not wage a military oriented

war on terrorism. He believed that the issue of terrorism was regional and local. A grand strategy, he argued, was an ineffectual route. The final report of the task force proved that they ignored Brzezinski’s opinion. Brzezinski’s outlook, though, provided a potent insight into a fundamental flaw of the Reagan administration’s policy on terrorism and with Nicaragua. Brzezinski warned that the administration’s insistence on interpreting the terrorism crisis from the standpoint of Cold War global bi-polarity was flawed and dangerous because it simplified matters that involved complicated local and regional factors. The Cold War outlook exaggerated the threat and oversimplified the causes of revolution and conflict by reducing it to designs of world communism and radicalism. The administration’s insistence that international terrorism was a symptom of global bi-polarity encouraged war and slowed the peace process. This outlook had, as early as 1981, encouraged the pursuit of a military oriented strategy that created tension with Nicaragua and increased the deterioration of that situation rather than promoting solutions. The administration’s perspective in the wake of the terrorism crisis further escalated tension with Nicaragua.

In contrast to Brzezinski’s views, the final report of the task force would show that it stood in agreement with Henry Kissinger. Kissinger was intimately involved in the United States’ work in Central America. In 1984, he headed a team, appointed by President Reagan, which went to Central America and reported on the details of and solutions to the violence in the region. Kissinger was on the top of the list for consultations on the issue of international terrorism, and on November 11, the task force got their chance. Nixon’s former secretary of state interpreted events through the lens of super power competition. Terrorism and communism, he

73 Meeting with Brzezinski, folder “Brzezinski Meeting with Vice President, 11/19/1985” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
insisted, were connected entities and the United States needed to be aggressive with terrorists. Terrorism was a different kind of threat, it was criminal, and Kissinger argued that the United States should use force when necessary and never negotiate with terrorists. He argued that “innocent lives must, and will be sacrificed in pursuit of this higher purpose.” This aggressive hard line macro national security approach embodied the leanings of many in the task force.

Vice President Bush knew that achieving the goal of a more active and effective counter-terrorism policy required not only the support of Congress, but also the United States public. Terrorism was a powerful linguistic weapon that represented a new opportunity to control the attitudes of the American public and the dialogue over the conflict in Nicaragua. The task force considered public opinion extensively, they were aware that prior to the TWA-847 hijacking and the killings in El Salvador that a Roper Poll found 78 percent of Americans saw terrorism as “one of the most serious problems facing the United States government today.” The task force also understood that a Washington Post-ABC news poll found 80 percent in favor of the Reagan administration’s response to the Achille Lauro hijackings. The task force understood the potentially negative impact of public opinion and dissent from their experiences during the Vietnam War. The group sought to understand and manipulate the attitude of the public by controlling the dialogue over terrorism and Nicaragua.

74 Meeting with Henry Kissinger, folder “Meeting with Kissinger, Tuesday November 11, 1985” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

75 “Background Information, Public Opinion Survey” folder “VP Task Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

76 “Background Information, Public Opinion Survey” folder “VP Task Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
In early November, the task force contracted a research group, *Populus Incorporated*, to conduct a scientific review of attitudes about terrorism and U.S. policy. There were 106 subjects, ages ranging from 18 to 64 that were news readers/viewers. The survey balanced the subjects in terms of political ideology and geographical location. The surveyed individuals came from Iowa, Southern California, Texas, New York, and Connecticut. The report noted that Americans saw terrorism as a danger that threatened U.S. prestige in the world. A consensus was that the administration needed to address international terrorism, and that the United States should not back down to terrorists and must do anything necessary to protect innocent lives. The task force’s consensus on the final report was that “Americans will welcome actions which are swift, proactive, and even aggressive.” The key, the report implied, was that counter-terrorist actions needed to be relatively quick with few casualties. From the perspective of the task force, this gave authorization from the public to conduct a more aggressive policy against state sponsors of terrorism. The report indicated that the American people supported covert/surrogate actions, like those in Central America, and quick strike missions for rescue or retaliation.\(^7^7\)

The public diplomacy effort focused not only on public opinion, and influencing Congress, but also on the role of the media. The Media was one of the primary groups that the administration hoped to influence. The media, perhaps more than the White House itself, controlled the public perception of the terrorism crisis and U.S. policy. The task force hoped for greater cooperation from the media in reporting terrorism events and U.S. counterterrorism activity. On November 23, Admiral Holloway and Vice President Bush convened a meeting of

\(^7^7\) “Terrorism, View Point of the American People” folder “National Security Council Meeting, Jan 7 1986, Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
senior news media executives. The task force hoped a cooperative and sympathetic media could report news on terrorism and U.S. policy in a manner less harmful to the position of the United States. The meeting was held at 10a.m. at the vice president’s personal residence. Since the terrorist events of the past summer, the administration was increasingly critical of the media. In particular, many Republicans and Democrats in Congress considered the coverage of the TWA-847 hijackings problematic. The media televised the events on that runway in Beirut and provided the hostage takers with a ‘news conference’ to propose demands. George H. W. Bush knew that if the United States responded more aggressively to terrorist acts and to state sponsors like Nicaragua and Libya, the manner in which the media covered such events would determine how many Americans perceived of such offensive actions. The task force hoped that if it could create an alliance with media leaders to report terrorist acts and U.S. responses in a manner sympathetic to the administration’s position that it would significantly assist their efforts to control the dialogue over the terrorism crisis.

The participants at the meeting included: Ben Bradlee of the Washington Post, Ed Turner of CNN, Shelby Coffey of U.S. News and World Report, Ron Cohen of United Press International, Jack Smith of ABC, George Watson of CBS, Bob McFarland of NBC, Bill Kovach of the New York Times, Ann Blackman of Time, Morton Kondrake of Newsweek, and Charles Lewis of the Associated Press. Bush and Holloway hoped to find these senior media executives in a mood to cooperate. However, from the beginning of the meeting it was clear that these media representatives perceived this meeting as an attempt by the administration to control news reporting to serve its own ends. Even before the meeting, CBS declared, “The shape and content of the news must not be calibrated to serve the administration or any other entity.” The
meeting did not begin well. Ben Bradlee of the *Washington Post* expressed immediate frustration. He exclaimed “why you guys always trashing the press?” At the outset of the meeting, the task force attempted to control the dialogue. Initially, Admiral Holloway proposed a hypothetical of how potentially damaging media coverage of a Delta Force rescue operation might be, but the media executives denied the relevance of the point and turned the task force’s idea around. Ed Turner from CNN insisted that “hypotheticals don’t work.” Morton Kondracke of *Newsweek* reminded the task force that there is an agreement among journalist to avoid reporting things that might endanger troops or civilians in the field. At this point, the media members made a suggestion that established the tone for the remainder of the hour and a half meeting. The executives proposed the idea that television media coverage may have saved the lives of those involved in the TWA hijacking rather than endangering them. Ben Bradlee supported this position by suggesting that television put pressure on the situation, thereby forcing the parties involved to a resolution. After the meeting, the minutes acknowledged, “The task force should have thought this through.”

78 “Memorandum for the Record: Vice President’s Meeting with the Media, November 25, 1985” folder “VP Task Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The tense beginning set the tone for the entire session. Throughout the meeting, either Vice President Bush or Admiral Holloway proposed various scenarios as if the conclusion was self-evident, but each time the media executives responded with a rebuttal. After the failure of the first hypothetical, Admiral Holloway resorted to a suggestion about the fragile and naïve nature of the America public by insisting that “People see the media treatment of a terrorist
incident as *Dallas*.⁷⁹ The media members immediately disagreed, and again Kondrake contended that publicity helped solve terrorist incidents. At this point Holloway backed down and acknowledged that there was no evidence to disprove the position taken by Kondrake, Bradlee and others. Vice President Bush expressed his frustration. Bush seemed to feel as though the group was bickering over a self-evident truth and he insisted that there existed a common attitude in the United States over the media. He described the attitude as one of “frustration.”⁸⁰ According to Bush, the careless role that the media played in issues that involve the lives and credibility of the United States frustrated many Americans. However, Charles Lewis of the *Associated Press* responded that the task force’s concern with the media were not self-evident. He insisted that an important job of the media was to put pressure on the president and force him to do his job effectively. Throughout the meeting, the media leaders turned the tables on the task force and frustration on the administration’s side was evident.⁸⁰

By the end of the meeting, the task force and the media executives simply did not see eye to eye. The media representatives disagreed that the reporting of the United States’ free media was a problem. The media executives argued that in many cases, like the TWA hijacking, free media helped rather than hurt the situation. As the meeting closed, Admiral Holloway summed up the main points. Holloway, likely with a certain degree of emotional exhaustion, concluded that the meeting demonstrated that “There will be media coverage of future terrorist incidents,

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⁷⁹ “Memorandum for the Record: Vice President’s Meeting with the Media, November 25, 1985” folder “VP Task Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Holloway referenced the popular television series *Dallas* and implied that the American people could not tell the difference between TV and media coverage of terrorism.

⁸⁰ “Memorandum for the Record: Vice President’s Meeting with the Media, November 25, 1985” folder “VP Task Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
the coverage will not be controlled by the government, the press has its own guidelines, and the
government must rely on press judgment.” Having entered the discussion in the hope that the
press would agree to some set of guidelines, like pledging not to broadcast terrorist incidents
live, the task force members were frustrated. The task force wanted to control the dialogue over
terrorism in order to empower its actions, but the United States’ free media resisted.

The meeting’s final remarks testified to the task force’s failure. Kondrake spoke last for
the media and again put the onus on the administration. He insisted that “The important lesson
was that the national leadership must not get rattled [by press pressure].” At this moment NSC
advisor, former CIA operative and friend of Bush’s, Don Gregg, caused shock and outrage from
the press when he exclaimed that “there was little terrorism in countries with a contro-

81 “Memorandum for the Record: Vice President’s Meeting with the Media, November 25, 1985” folder “VP Task
Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan
Presidential Library.

82 “Memorandum for the Record: Vice President’s Meeting with the Media, November 25, 1985” folder “VP Task
Force Meeting with Selected Media, November 23, 1985” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan
Presidential Library.

From September to November, the task force used the information obtained from the
foreign visits, consultations, meetings with members of Congress and the press, as well as public
opinion polls to develop forty-five issue papers. Decisions made on these issues created the basis
for the final report of the task force. The papers each presented a topic that the task force would
consider in developing the final report, which was due for completion by December 20. The issues ranged from the definition of terrorism and of national policy, as well as to specific issues like extradition treaties, border control, airport and port security, intelligence sharing, and types of military responses.  

An important and interesting topic in these papers was the push to make terrorism a crime. The United States had never acknowledged terrorism itself as, a crime. Instead, the crime was hijacking, kidnapping, robbery and so on. The concept of terrorism developed rapidly in the months following June 1985 and part of this development was to construct terrorism as a unique crime that was, somehow, more heinous, treasonous and conspiratorial, and to use this linguistic weapon against the administration’s enemies, in this case the Sandinistas. This carried with it consequences for the nation-states that the United States alleged were state sponsors of terrorism.

Despite the absence of a formal war, the allegation of criminality on the nation-state level coincided with the United States position that on the grounds of national security it possessed the right to take active measures to isolate and ultimately eliminate the threat presented by an alleged ‘outlaw state’. The United States defined revolutionary nations like Nicaragua as communist-terrorist. During 1985, the Reagan administration unjustly alleged that the Sandinista government was a criminal state sponsor of international terrorism in Central and South America. The reconstructing of Nicaragua as, not only a communist state, but also a terrorist

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83 Issue Papers, folder “Senior Review Group Meeting Nov 7, 1985 (Folder 1 of 3)” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

84 Issue Papers, folder “Senior Review Group Meeting Nov 7, 1985 (Folder 1 of 3)” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
state, provided an important justification for the United States to move more aggressively in the
coming year.

The Reagan administration’s war on terrorism against Nicaragua began in 1985 with
preparatory actions designed to create a more accepting atmosphere for a war on terrorism.
Following the terrorist attacks of June the administration reacted and began the formulation of a
coherent policy designed to oppose what officials perceived as a conspiratorial global
communist-terrorist offensive. After labeling Nicaragua an ‘outlaw state’ and working with their
supporters in Congress to shift the dialogue over the Sandinistas the administration escalated
tension by openly spying on and threatening Nicaragua as well as backing military operations
against the PRTC in El Salvador. The administration positioned terrorism at the center of the
conversation and Congress responded with support for economic sanctions and, greater
agreement over the nature of the Nicaraguan threat. The United States’ actions following the
June attacks were not limited to public denunciations and reactionary measures. The
development of the Task Force to Combat Terrorism represented a concerted effort to develop a
lasting policy strategy to combat states that the United States alleged supported terrorist acts. In
1986 the task force’s policy would go into action against Nicaragua. Measures taken in the six
months following the attacks of June 1985 amounted to preparations for an offensive
counterterrorism operation that specifically targeted Nicaragua in the coming year.
It was Monday, December 2, 1985, and tension was high between the United States and Nicaragua. The National Security Council’s (NSC) private funding program for the Contras had yielded some dividends. The Contra army numbered over 10,000 and operated deep inside Nicaraguan territory. On December 2, the guerrillas were on operations near Mulukuku, which was a lightly populated jungle region located near the geographic center of Nicaragua. The guerrillas moved through the countryside about 85 miles northeast of Managua, and around 75 miles south of the Honduran border. The Nicaraguan government forces were on alert and in pursuit of the guerrillas in Soviet supplied Mi-8 helicopters. The Contras spotted one of the helicopters and with a surface to air missile (SAM) fired and destroyed the craft. This was the first time that the Contras employed SAM technology, and the first time that the Nicaraguan government admitted to the loss of a military helicopter. All fourteen members of the crew died, and the guerrillas reported that at least one of the dead was a Cuban officer.

There was an immediate reaction when news of the attack reached Washington. On December 5, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams insisted that the Cuban officer flying with the crew was further evidence of Cuba’s involvement in fighting

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1 The Mi-8 was one of the most widely produced military helicopters. Most were manufactured in the Soviet Union and like the U.S. Huey, it served as both a troop transport and gunship. These were used widely during the late Cold War by allies of the Soviet Union.

the Contras. Abrams feared that “We may be seeing Cubans move into a combat role on the mainland.” The following day Secretary of State George Shultz congratulated the Contras for shooting the Mi-8 down. He insisted that Nicaragua was a repressive state and the administration knew that there was a “relationship of that government to terrorism in the region.” Shultz referred to evidence that Nicaragua helped facilitate the M-19 attack on the Colombian Supreme Court a month earlier as well as the killing of several Americans in a café in San Salvador the previous June. The secretary made it known that the Reagan administration intended to push hard for congressional authorization of military support for the Contras. At the dawn of 1986, the United States was poised to launch an offensive.

A number of scholars have written about the Reagan offensive in Central America. The goal of this chapter is to use recently declassified material to expose an aspect of this subject that has received too little attention. In particular, the focus of this chapter is the controversial development of the offensive counterterrorism doctrine that George H. W. Bush’s Task Force to Combat Terrorism and the Reagan administration put into action in 1986. Scholars have yet to

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5 M-19, also known as the April 19th movement, was a Colombian guerrilla/terrorist organization. In November of 1985 the group attacked the Colombian Supreme Court taking hostages and resulting in a significant standoff. Among the dead was the court’s chief justice. While Nicaragua’s closest support was to guerrilla/terrorist groups in El Salvador the United States also connected them to the supply of small arms to groups like M-19. While there was no evidence to suggest that the Nicaraguan government was involved in planning the attack U.S. policy makers like George Shultz took evidence of weapons sales as evidence of their affiliation with this particular act of urban terrorism.


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examine the role of the terrorism task force in the development of the Reagan offensive. Recently declassified material allows this dissertation to examine what role the task force played in the development of a controversial offensive framework to combat alleged state sponsors of terrorism like Nicaragua.

The terrorism task force built on the proposal of NSDD-138 for active measures against state sponsors of terrorism. In December of 1985, the final proposal of the task force represented the creation of a coherent framework for offensive intervention to counter the global terrorism threat. Whereas a cloud of increasing opposition surrounded the earlier release of NSDD-138 that limited the use of the directive, the report of the task force came at the height of the 1980s terrorism crisis and represented an operational directive for offensive hardline action against alleged state sponsors of terrorism, Nicaragua and Libya. The proposal, which culminated in NSDD-207 and superseded NSDD-138, outlined a three-fold strategy for combating these states. The policy was based on hardline measures that included diplomatic non-negotiation, economic and trade sanctions, and a complete spectrum of military force options. These were designed to pressure Nicaragua into either voluntarily altering their government to the designs of the United States or to bring about the collapse of the regime. The proposal of the task force created a new framework of intervention that encouraged diplomatic isolation, economic ruin, and increased war in order to alter the government of Nicaragua. The task force called for an aggressive hardline war on terrorism that was capable of deterring the threat posed by alleged state sponsors of terrorism, and Nicaragua was a primary target.

Since the beginning of the Reagan administration, the purpose of diplomacy with Nicaragua was to isolate the leadership by presenting it with ultimatums and an increasingly
powerful propaganda that by this time hinged less on the rhetoric of communism and far more on the criminalizing language of terrorism. The administration’s public diplomacy campaign continued to utilize the language of terrorism as a primary method of shifting the dialogue over Nicaragua. In this process, however, the task force refused to define terrorism, except that it was a weapon of the Radical-Left. The administration designed the public diplomacy campaign to maximize the damning linguistic power of terrorism in such a way as to criminalize the Sandinistas while simultaneously distancing the actions of its ally, the so-called freedom fighters from the concept.

An array of military force options were the central component of the task force’s proposal. Economic measures were in place, but the task force’s proposal insisted that military pressure promised greater effectiveness. The military oriented nature of the task force’s policy proposal was highly contested by two outspoken officials in the Office of Counterterrorism, Parker Borg and Robert Oakley. The insistence of a military oriented strategy in the task force’s report alarmed these two individuals and they argued, instead, for a multilateral diplomatic approach. These high-ranking members of the Office of Counterterrorism pleaded with their counterparts to back away from a policy that emphasized a military offensive against nations like Nicaragua. There were many hardliners and pragmatists within the Reagan administration. However, Oakley and Borg stood out for two reasons: first, the Reagan offensive was a product of a re-evaluation of U.S. counterterrorism strategy, and second, the position of Oakley and Borg as the top officials in the Department of State’s Office of Counterterrorism made their criticisms to the program significant. Some may criticize the portrayal of Borg and Oakley as ‘voices in the wilderness’, but their positions as terrorism specialists within the Task Force to Combat
Terrorism make them the most significant opponents of a misguided U.S. strategy, and examples of individuals that attempted to shift the course away from the military option. I do not imply that no other opposition existed within the administration’s cabinet, but only that Borg and Oakley represented a visible and vocal opposition from key counterterrorism specialists that provided a clear alternative to the course proposed. Their status as top counterterrorism specialists make their opposition to a military oriented framework of intervention a potent lesson that suggests that other avenues were available, but ignored. In the end, their opposition was futile and the United States continued the descent into another troubling chapter in U.S.-Central American relations.

During 1986 the United States directed an offensive war on terrorism at two states, Nicaragua and Libya, both of which the administration vilified with the language of terrorism and conducted invasive hardline actions against. This study is concerned particularly with Nicaragua, but U.S. action against the Sandinistas was part of a broad counter-terrorism offensive that targeted alleged state sponsors that the administration insisted were part of a new Cold War offensive against the United States. The Reagan offensive against Nicaragua was more than a war against communism: it was also a war on terrorism. Recently declassified government documents located at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and at the George Bush Presidential Library form the basis of the content in this chapter. The release dates for these documents range from 2006-2012 and they provide convincing evidence that at the beginning of 1986 the terrorism task force created an offensive framework for action against states alleged of sponsoring terrorism. Nicaragua and Libya were the primary targets. In 1986, the administration launched the Reagan offensive, the United States’ first modern war on terrorism.
As 1985 neared to a close, the terrorism crisis engulfed the world. Incidents of international terrorism were at an all-time high: hijackings, bombings, shootings, and kidnappings occurred on a monthly basis in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. After ranking members of the Reagan administration publically alleged that Nicaragua was a state sponsor of international terrorism in July of 1985. The Sandinista leadership resisted the overt hostility of the Reagan administration and responded in kind. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega accused Washington of state sanctioned terrorism. On December 6, Ortega gave a press conference in which he argued that the United States had supplied the SAM missile that brought the Mi-8 helicopter down a few days earlier. He insisted that the Reagan administration was “stimulating a wave of international terrorism and leaving the way open for anybody to use truly dangerous weapons.” Ortega threatened Washington when he stated that the use of the SAM had “opened the floodgates.” He implied that Nicaragua might provide similar weapons to their paramilitary allies fighting in El Salvador. As he spoke, a crowd marched on the United States embassy in Managua, chanting, “Yankees, here no one surrenders.” Tension between the United States and Nicaragua escalated.7

The following day a Soviet made Lada car crashed in Honduras, and when the police searched the vehicle, they found it loaded with weapons. The contents included 7,000 rounds of ammunition, 21 grenades, 86 blasting caps, 12 radios, and 39 “code booklets” that the Department of State alleged were for terrorist communication with their headquarters in

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Nicaragua. This incident, from the perspective of officials in Washington, was further evidence of the Sandinista role in aiding subversive elements in neighboring countries. In December 1985, as tension grew, the United States and Nicaragua angrily blamed one another for escalating violence.

The administration’s policy with Nicaragua was to use diplomatic, military, and economic pressure to force the Sandinistas either to give into the wishes of the United States or to react in a manner that escalated tension and justified a further expansion of the administration’s hardline strategy. The response of the Nicaraguan government to U.S. allegations and pressure in the fall of 1985 enhanced Washington’s argument that the Sandinistas were a threat. The regime had increased military aid from the USSR, Libya, and Cuba. Ortega resorted to firebrand rhetoric in response to U.S. claims, and despite a plea from 80 members from the United States Congress refused to relax restrictions placed on civil liberties. These choices by the Sandinista leadership played into the hands of the Reagan administration, and helped lead to an intensification of tension between the two nations.

While the atmosphere worsened amid escalating hostilities and allegations of state terrorism, the international community took some important first steps on the issue. The same day that Shultz spoke suggestively about escalating hostilities against the government of Nicaragua, the United Nations (UN) passed a landmark resolution. The UN recognized an act of international terrorism as a crime. The resolution “unequivocally condemns, as criminal, all acts,

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methods and practices of terrorism wherever and by whoever committed, including those that jeopardize friendly relations among states and their security.”

Cuba voted against the resolution, Iran abstained, but Nicaragua and other nations that the United States had alleged were state sponsors of international terrorism voted for the measure. Nicaragua and Libya argued that the UN should have specifically singled out the United States for conducting state terrorism. In the days following, the Organization of American States (OAS), a Washington D.C. headquartered league of American nations that included virtually every nation in the hemisphere from Nicaragua to Brazil, passed a similar resolution that outlined “torture and terrorism as international crimes.” In the process, the OAS labeled Nicaragua a human rights violator. As 1985 neared to a close, the United States was not alone in its concern over terrorism. The international community also recognized terrorism as a global problem.

In early December, the task force was revising its report, which was due for completion by December 20. Since the terrorist attacks in June 1985, the task force worked urgently to address the unpredictable and escalating issue of terrorism. In that month, terrorists shot and killed six Americans at an outdoor café in San Salvador and hijacked TWA flight 847 and held it on the tarmac in Beirut, Lebanon. The task force’s report formally outlined the Reagan


administration’s counterterrorism policy. George H.W. Bush insisted that this policy was “the gospel” for future U.S. counterterrorism policy.\footnote{Oakley to Holloway, December 6, 1985, folder “Incoming 12/6/1985,” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.}

On December 6, the same day that George Shultz spoke with resolve and intention to increase military pressure on Nicaragua, there was controversy among members of the task force. Ambassador at Large for Counter-Terrorism, Robert Oakley, sent a critical letter to Executive Director James Holloway. Oakley was the head of the Office of Counterterrorism, which was located in the Department of State. The purpose of the ambassador at large was to coordinate counter-terrorism policy with U.S. diplomatic posts. While Oakley praised the overall process and the move to get serious on the issue of terrorism, his three-page letter to Holloway was a harsh critique of the final report.

Oakley was primarily upset over the final report’s reliance on the usage of active military measures to combat terrorism. He argued that the administration was not framing the issue of international terrorism correctly, as though the use of military measures was a solution to the problem. The ambassador exclaimed, “The report and issue papers taken as a whole convey a very clear impression that there is a solution to international terrorism and that it lies primarily in the better use of active measures by the United States government. In my judgment, this is as erroneous a conclusion as it is dangerous.”\footnote{Oakley to Holloway, December 6, 1985, folder “Incoming 12/6/1985,” Box 32/34, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.} Oakley argued that the task force was getting it all wrong. He was concerned that the report over-emphasized the credibility of military measures
and would ramp up public and congressional sentiments by overstating the significance of the terrorism threat.

Robert Oakley recognized that terrorism was a problem, and that Nicaragua was part of the problem. During 1985, Oakley gave numerous speeches on the emergent issue of international terrorism. He frequently indicted Nicaragua as a state sponsor of terrorism.\(^{15}\) Oakley was not dismissive of the issue of the Nicaraguan government’s alleged connection to international terrorism. Instead, the divide between Oakley and figures like Bush and Shultz was with the role of the military and on the actions of the public diplomacy campaign that exaggerated the threat of terrorism to the people. Oakley believed in a multilateral diplomatic approach that the United States could undertake without panicking the public. He acknowledged the potential role of the military in counter-terrorism strategy, but his own understanding was that the military role was only for use as a last resort.\(^{16}\)


\(^{16}\) In contrast with Oakley, Bush and Shultz believed that the United States needed to address the immediate issue of state sponsored terrorism with force and that an emphatic public statement of the threat provided a vehicle for obtaining authorization for this approach. On September 19, 1985 while addressing one of the early meetings of the task force, Vice President George Bush insisted in his opening remarks that, “Once the President approves the recommendations of this task force this congressional support affords a real opportunity to package legislation under “anti-terrorism” that will stand a good chance of passage.” Bush recognized that terrorism provided the opportunity for the administration to achieve long sought initiatives, like funding the Contras, by overstating the significance of the terrorism threat. Convincing the public and Congress of the urgency of the terrorism problem was a central goal of the administration. This was a necessary step in achieving support for the use of force against sovereign nations like Nicaragua. See, Memo, Admiral Holloway, Minutes of the Second Task Force meeting, September 19 1985, folder, “Second Meeting with Task Force Principles,” Box 32, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Since 1984 George Shultz led the way in outlining a new strategy to address the dangerous world of the late Cold War. He proposed the need to take active measures that included offensive military options that would put other state sponsors on notice. Oakley did not agree with this strategy. See, George Shultz, “Terrorism: The Challenge to the Democracies” June 24, 1984, in Anzovin, Terrorism, 50-54.
While Shultz was pushing for military pressure on Nicaragua, top officials in the Office of Counterterrorism believed that military approaches were not the way to go. Controversy swirled around the task force’s report. Members of the task force, including Robert Oakley, knew that once signed by the vice president and the president, this document represented the policy doctrine for the future. The report outlined, among other things, the possible measures that the United States could take against state sponsors like Nicaragua. These included continued support for insurgents, clandestine operations of assassination, and unilateral military strikes. The task force also outlined conventional military and naval maneuvers that provided the administration the opportunity to threaten another nation, provoke a reaction and/or to use it as a distraction for other military measures and even outright invasion. In addition to economic sanctions, all military options were on the table.

Officials in the Office of Counter-Terrorism believed that the report of the task force was flawed. On December 10, following up Oakley’s letter to Holloway, the Deputy Director for Counter-Terrorism, Parker Borg, sent a detailed letter to Holloway and the members of the task force, assailing the proposed approach suggested in the task force’s report. The draft shocked Borg, and he complained that “The report reflects a certain bias toward activist military responses to the terrorism problem which is dangerous and overly simplistic.” He pointed out three specific flaws in the draft. Borg argued that the report represented a dangerous shift in U.S.

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19 “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.
policy. He exclaimed that “Military options are given unwarranted prominence [and] do not accord with this country’s policies or practices.” According to Borg, and Oakley for that matter, the draft of the report also gave little attention to the real solution, which was multilateral and diplomatic. Finally, he regarded the draft as sloppy and carelessly composed. Together these two senior officials on counterterrorism agreed that the task force should rewrite the report. Borg doubted that the task force had the time to do such a thorough rewrite. He suggested that they request an extension of at least a month.20

Borg’s memorandum to the task force was a scathing critique complete with thorough comments.21 In this eight-page document, the deputy director explained in detail why he felt the draft was so poor. Borg’s biggest concern was the bias toward military measures. The document suggested that the administration was preparing for a military escalation. He lamented that the two most important sections, “Criteria for Response” and “Deterrence,” only considered military, particularly unilateral options. The proposal pushed importance of diplomacy to the side. Borg noted with concern that the section on deterring state sponsors was “concerned with preemptive military strikes, not on diplomatic activity, which is the proper focus.”22 The administration was preparing for a militarization of policy and Borg hoped to head this problem off.

20 “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.


Bob Earl wrote extensive comments in the margins of his draft of Borg’s memo. Earl’s thoughts on the deputy director’s reservations to the report represented the opinion of the majority faction in the task force. Earl disagreed on the issue of military deterrence and the role of diplomacy. He insisted that “diplomatic is not the proper focus.” Borg decried the section on “Crisis Response” as “the worst” primarily because it “implied that the only useful solutions were military.” Borg was concerned about the creation of policy that utilized the military option more often and with less concern for a prior understanding of the international system. Borg also feared that the draft acknowledged that the administration sought to “avoid a precise definition of terrorism.” This loose definition allowed the United States greater freedom to use military force in the name of counter-terrorism and in the place of its choosing rather than only when warranted of the charge. If such information leaked, Borg feared that “The Soviets will have a field day with it.” He further warned that the openly militaristic approach “will be disastrous for the United States if such a concept becomes known publicly.” Earl responded to these concerns. He simply “disagree[d] to omit stuff that might leak [and] we [the United States] gotta be up first.” According to Earl, the United States had to step up and take on the forces of the Radical-Left. In his view, and in that of the majority of the task force, it was time for the United States to go on the offensive. As far as Earl was concerned, the Reagan war on terrorism was a go.


This document revealed that a fissure existed among members of the task force. Parker Borg insisted, “We should be talking here about assistance, training, exercises, and other forms of cooperation.” Borg was concerned that this policy might lead to sending American forces into places against the will of the host country. He insisted that “Our forces are unlikely to be willing to go into an environment where the host government has refused to permit access.”

Earl responded emphatically, “Bullshit, they’ll go if ordered to!” Borg similarly criticized the section on “Retaliation” by insisting that it focused exclusively “on types of military actions, use of special operations forces and surrogate forces bringing in non-military actions as a weak afterthought on the last page.” Earl’s response was that Borg’s attitude was a “subjective judgment” and that his faction was “too defensive.”

Earl was far less concerned about the ramifications and potential consequences for the United States than Borg was. On the fifth page of the memo, in response to Borg’s concern that “We should assume that this report will receive wide dissemination and will be read by the

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terrorists,” Earl drew a frown next to the word “terrorists” and commented, “They don’t read.”

Earl displayed the sort of reckless reliance on the use of military force that concerned Borg and Oakley. In considering the ramifications for making war and taking human life, the jest of drawing a frown and making a joke reflected a failure among some members of the task force to consider the gravity of military action. Nonetheless, the Contras were the United States’ counterterrorism surrogate force fighting the Radical-Left in Central America and Earl represented the majority in the task force, and the task force intended to use the guerrillas in pursuit of a military oriented strategy that was justified with the linguistic weapon of terrorism.

The same day that Borg’s concerned memo went out, December 10, Secretary of State George Shultz spoke to the Pilgrims Society in London on the issue of aid to the Contras. Shultz re-iterated the position taken by Earl. The secretary argued that with communist-terrorists states like Nicaragua the problem and the solution were military. He insisted that “Only when they see the futility of their military ‘solutions’ and the resolve of opposing strength will real compromise become possible.” Shultz pressed for the United States to support the Contras, he argued that “The immediate problem [was], regrettably, openly military….a Nicaraguan attempt to subvert neighboring countries, and Cuban combatants using Soviet weapons in Nicaragua. Diplomacy is unlikely to work, unless there is effective resistance.” Shultz insisted that Nicaragua posed a national security threat as a state sponsor of international terrorism, and that the best course of

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action for the United States was the type of “covert action” that was offered by support of the Contras.\footnote{“Excerpts from Shultz Remarks on Aid to Rebels,” \textit{New York Times}, December 11, 1985, http://search.proquest/docview/111233548?accountid=14902.}

Since 1984 Shultz was a primary proponent of the adoption of offensive hardline measures to deal with Nicaragua and other states alleged to sponsor terrorism. Such a policy was illegal and directly violated Nicaragua’s sovereignty. The administration’s legal office had argued several times over the past two years that such an approach the United States could justify under the right to self-defense.\footnote{Wills. \textit{The First War on Terrorism}, 10-13.} The Reagan administration, however, exaggerated the threat and oversimplified the causes of terrorism in the world. The Sandinistas were not a significant threat to the United States. It was true that Nicaragua received arms and aid from the Soviet Union, Cuba and Libya, and that the Sandinistas had a substantial military that worried neighboring states. However, these developments were not because the Nicaraguans were part of a grand plot by the Radical-Left to destroy freedom and undermine the United States. Instead, Nicaragua reacted to the hostility of the Reagan administration, which through the CIA and the Contras had sought military pressure against the Sandinistas since the beginning of Reagan’s presidency.

The positions of both Parker Borg and Robert Oakley represented a minority opinion. These two top officials in the State Department’s counterterrorism office correctly criticized the administration for exaggerating and oversimplifying the terrorism threat. Borg believed it was incorrect to equate guerrilla insurgency and Marxist revolutionary states with the terrorism problem. Borg and other members of the Office of Counterterrorism believed that the
administration was misconstruing the scope of the terrorism crisis.\textsuperscript{34} Regardless of their positions as terrorism specialists, their views regarding the administration’s war on terrorism and hardline policy against Nicaragua were in vain if the administration’s top figures did not agree, including the Secretary of State. Shultz proposed that a military course of action was the best form of deterrent against the offensive of the Radical-Left. The next day Attorney General Edwin Meese, speaking in Vienna, supported Shultz when he remarked that Nicaragua was a “terrorist country club” and part of an international conspiracy to undermine the Western world.\textsuperscript{35} To the dismay of Borg and Oakley, the leadership argued that this was not a time for diplomacy but rather a time for military action against communist-terrorist states like Nicaragua.

At 12:06 p.m. on December 14, President Reagan gave a radio address to the nation. Speaking from the Oval Office, Reagan began the speech, as he often did, with “My fellow Americans.” He ushered a call for the use of force against Nicaragua. In his grandfather-like tone, he explained to the American people that a Sandinista crackdown on civil liberties was evidence of domestic human rights abuses. Enhancing allegations that linked the Nicaraguan government to anti-western terror groups, the president emphasized the repression of Christians in Nicaragua. Reagan lamented the present danger of “Nicaragua transformed into an international aggressor nation, a base for subversion and terror.” He insisted that Nicaragua was a sanctuary for radical terrorist groups and communist bloc members. Further Reagan argued, as Shultz had already done, that Nicaragua helped facilitate the M-19 attack on the Colombian

\textsuperscript{34} Parker Borg, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, August 12, 2002, Parker Borg interview transcript, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Va.

Supreme Court and the June killings in San Salvador. The president urged support for the Contras exclaiming that “If Nicaragua can get material support from communist states and terrorist regimes and prop up a hated communist dictatorship, should not the forces fighting for liberation, now numbering 20,000, be entitled to more effective help in their struggle for freedom?” These so-called freedom fighters were the primary offensive weapon that the administration employed to attack communist-terrorist states of the Radical-Left.36

Not surprisingly, Reagan’s speech was not a fair description of reality. The speech like those made by George Shultz was part of a propaganda offensive that involved the use of rhetoric to control the meaning of the conflict. Because the Cold War model of national security grounded the administration’s counterterrorism approach, it remained in stubborn. Negotiation with communist-terrorists policy makers believed was futile. Terrorism resulted in an increased understanding of the danger and urgency of the Cold War and this factored centrally into their renewed offensive push against Nicaragua. However, because the administration defined the terrorism problem from the standpoint of global bi-polarity, it was oversimplified. The support for M-19 that the administration alleged was actually the presence of a handful of small arms that originated in Nicaragua, and there was no evidence to suggest that the Sandinista government played any direct role in the attack.37 Likewise, the so-called freedom fighters were anything but the noble heroes that Reagan’s speech implied. These fighters were guerrillas, many former members of Somoza’s armed forces, and were widely documented as being involved in acts of


violence against non-combatants. However, for the Reagan administration these were all moot points, because top officials in the White House and Department of State were already convinced of a grand Cold War conspiracy against the United States. The Radical-Left, the administration insisted, used terrorism as a new weapon primarily because of limited culpability, and because of the political impossibility of a direct military incursion guerrilla mercenaries were the best weapon to use in support of its hardline policy against Nicaragua.

Freedom fighter and terrorist were both linguistic devices designed to control the dialogue over the U.S.-Nicaraguan conflict. The language of terrorism criminalized the enemy while the language of freedom fighter heroized the United States’ ally. Often the concept of freedom fighter relates only to an offensive against the forces of communism, but the idea of the freedom fighter, as well as the ‘Reagan offensive’ derived significantly from the perceived threat of international terrorism rather than exclusively from that of communism. This was a Cold War offensive, but it was different because terrorism had altered the way in which officials in Washington perceived national security.

After U.S. allegations that Nicaragua was a state sponsor of international terrorism, opponents in U.S. Congress and throughout the world argued that the Contras also utilized terrorist tactics, and that the United States should not support them for this reason. The assertion that “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” was a popular cliché at this time and it forced the task force to grapple with how to differentiate between international terrorism and the actions of the anti-Sandinista rebels. While Borg and Oakley questioned the absence of a formal definition of terrorism in the task force’s report, the majority decided not to provide a precise definition of terrorism in part because of a fear that it might apply to U.S. allies and their
actions or that it could limit the extent to which the administration could use the claim as a justification for action. A vague definition of terrorism allowed the administration greater freedom to use language to vilify enemies while simultaneously heroizing its allies. Exaggeration and manipulation of the terrorism threat were part of the administration’s hardline diplomatic efforts. Borg and Oakley did not agree with this approach, but it was nonetheless fundamental to the United States’ war on terrorism. The majority opinion on the issue understood international terrorism as an element of an offensive by the forces of totalitarianism. In pursuit of its war on terrorism, the Reagan administration deployed the powerful linguistic weapon of terrorism against the Sandinista leadership while simultaneously using the language of the freedom fighter to defend the cause. The public conduct of the Reagan offensive involved a struggle to manipulate public attitudes by using language in an attempt to control the meaning of the conflict.

Freedom fighter was a charged term used to counter allegations that the United States supported terrorists. This construct was the result of the development of a U.S. war on terror. Vice President George H. W. Bush summarized this distinction in an essay that he wrote in 1986 titled “The Terrorism Dilemma.” According to Bush, “The phrase, one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist…misses a very significant point, and that is the concept of innocence. With terrorism there is no sense of innocent victim…With terrorists there are no laws of war,

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38 This same justification was at the heart of many other examples of the United States supporting non-democratic regimes in alleged support of democracy. Opposition to a totalitarian Communist-bloc menace justified such alliances of convenience. The relationship with groups like the Contras was the essence of a relationship of convenience that was justified on the grounds of a simplistic understanding of global national security.

39 George Bush, “The Terrorism Dilemma”, Folder, “Terrorism” (5of 6) OA/ID 19849, Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.
non-combatants or neutrals…freedom fighters…have a sense of rules, order or codes.”

Bush insisted that terrorists were those that attacked the United States’ cherished ideological values of democracy and justice. The difference between the two for the majority in the administration was not located in actions, but rather in the political and ideological motive involved. Formed in the background of the Cold War, terrorists, like communists, the Reagan administration considered a threat and enemy because the objective was to undermine America’s values of capitalist democracy. The ends of the Radical-Left were the anti-thesis of the goals of the United States. In contrast, the freedom fighter’s ends were a friendly relationship with America, and this justified the means taken. The administration cloaked a calculated Cold War realism in the eloquent rhetoric of the freedom fighter, and used the language of terrorism as a weapon against its enemies. The nature of actual acts committed by either was far less relevant because the administration defined terrorism as an act perpetrated by the Radical-Left.

The freedom fighter concept was a product of the Cold War. The enemy, however, was no longer simply the agent of world communism. In the 1980s, the emergence of international terrorism changed the Cold War for those in the Reagan administration. The enemy of the West represented an alliance between the forces of communism and those of international terrorism. Together these two made up the Radical-left, a body that contained revolutionary Marxists, Eastern communists, and nationalist Middle Eastern powers. The issue of terrorism was often a localized issue, but in constructing the policy, administration officials could not escape the influence of the Cold War, and built national security from the standpoint of global bi-polarity and superpower competition. International terrorism emerged within a world conditioned by the

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40 George Bush, “The Terrorism Dilemma”, Folder, “Terrorism” (5of 6) OA/ID 19849, Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.
Cold War, and the Reagan administration used it to reconstruct the Cold War as an expanded and illusive threat driven by the forces of the Radical-Left. The administration’s offensive counterterrorism strategy remained built on an oversimplified notion of national security that justified offensive measures against states like Nicaragua.

Despite the criticisms from Robert Oakley and Parker Borg, the task force’s final report went ahead as scheduled. The statements made by Bush, Shultz, Reagan, Earl and Meese suggested that the majority in the NSC, Department of State, and the task force believed that the United States should escalate military operations against states like Nicaragua. On December 20, 1985, the task force’s recommendations went to President Reagan. One month later Reagan signed “National Security Decision Directive Number 207: The National Program for Combatting Terrorism” (NSDD-207) and made the report of the task force official policy.\(^\text{41}\) The administration implemented the new policy in the following months.

In addition to economic sanctions, the framework that the task force developed centered on several military options. These included support for insurgents, unilateral military strikes, clandestine operations of sabotage and assassination, and military and naval maneuvers designed to threaten, provoke, and/or act as a cloak for other military operations.\(^\text{42}\) The administration reaffirmed a “no-concessions policy.”\(^\text{43}\) This meant that the United States refused to negotiate with terrorists and their sponsors, and that the alleged criminality of states like Nicaragua meant that


\(^{42}\) “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.

the United States would not step to the table for fair negotiations. The consequence for relations with Nicaragua was that the administration continued to refuse to seek legitimate negotiations first, and instead promoted a military oriented policy. The directive insisted that “The U.S. government considers the practice of terrorism…a threat to our national security…and is prepared to act in concert with other nations or unilaterally when necessary to prevent or respond to terrorist acts.”

Further, the document pledged, “States that practice terrorism or actively support it, will not be allowed to do so without consequence.”

To deal with this threat “The entire range of diplomatic, economic, legal, military, paramilitary, covert action, and informational assets at our disposal must be brought to bear against terrorism.” In order to deter and defeat the alleged state sponsors the Reagan administration asserted a hardline that included restrictive economic measures, and an entire range of military options.

The unique national security threat posed by state sponsors of terrorism drove the Reagan administration to assert a policy that tested the boundaries of accepted international behavior. Despite the sovereign status of Nicaragua, and the absence of a U.S. declaration of war, the Reagan administration pursued a policy that authorized overt paramilitary/surrogate war within that country as well as any other state that was allegedly involved in the criminal act of international terrorism. Terrorism provoked a shift in U.S. Cold War policy. The administration believed that the categorization of a state as a sponsor of terrorism authorized a range of

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offensive measures. Despite a technical status of peace, the new policy rested on measures that violated the international sovereign rights of a nation not at war with the United States. For the Reagan administration, though, this was not a violation of rights. It was action necessary to deal with the criminal actions of these governments. The assertion that these nations were committing crime stood as the primary justification for a U.S. interventionist policy.

Because of the proposal for offensive measures against alleged criminal states, the administration remained acutely aware of the need to convince the American people of the danger. The task force created the position “Deputy Directory for Public Diplomacy” to oversee the expanded conduct of this vital element of the administration’s policy that was now largely hinged on the application of the language of terrorism. This was a year of controversy and war. To help prepare the American people for what lay ahead the task force published a public version of the report scheduled for release on March 6, 1986. The administration sought to sell its story to the American people.

On February 12, Robert Oakley penned another short letter of concern, this time to Bush’s adviser, Donald Gregg. Oakley was concerned about the nature of the public report. He was again dismayed: the draft of the report he feared did not emphasize the need for international diplomatic cooperation, but rather the unilateral military power of the United States. Oakley spoke for the Office of Counterterrorism when he pleaded with Gregg to have Bush look over the report and revise it so that it emphasized international cooperation more and unilateral military power less. Oakley appealed to the astuteness of Vice President Bush and exclaimed, “Some of our (Office of Counterterrorism) additions put emphasis on the international angle, a point which

the Vice President has frequently made and where he has been much more enlightened than others in accentuating the limitations on our unilateral capabilities.”48 This remark indicated Oakley’s dissatisfaction with the majority opinion in the task force, and appealed to Bush’s intelligence. As the United States stood on the precipice of a war, the Office of Counterterrorism sat on the sidelines, dismayed at the proposed path.

At the outset of 1986, the United States was poised to focus the new counter-terrorism policy at Nicaragua. The “Public Report of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism” explained the policy to Congress and the public. Parker Borg had argued that the only effective approach was one that addressed the situation as a global problem and not as a simplistic conspiracy against the United States, but rather one that was relevant to nations throughout the world.49 He criticized the American-centric nature of the task force’s official report, but the leadership did not acknowledge these criticisms. The public report suffered from these same maladies. While speaking at times of multilateralism, the report was American centered and considered the United States response the most critical.50

The public report acknowledged that the administration had reacted to an escalation of international terrorist incidents. In particular, the June TWA hijacking and the killing of six Americans in San Salvador the authors insisted had pushed the administration to act. However,

48 Robert Oakley to Donald Gregg, February 12, 1986, Folder, “Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article (1 of 3)” OA/ID 19849 Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.


while Oakley and Borg were concerned about overdramatizing the issue, the authors decided to do exactly this. The majority opinion in the task force wished to expand the language of terrorism as an exaggerated and criminalizing language that could create fear and justify a more offensive and hardline U.S. policy. The proposal insisted that “During the past decade, terrorists have attacked U.S. officials or installations abroad approximately once every 17 days. In the past 17 years, terrorists have killed as many U.S. diplomats as were killed in the previous 180 years.” 51 This statement was an intentional exaggeration of danger of the threat. There was at this time a terrorism crisis, even critics like Parker Borg and Robert Oakley were acutely aware and concerned about this crisis. However, these two wanted to move quietly and not arouse public opinion. In contrast, the majority in the task force wanted to arouse the concern of Congress and the public as a vehicle for the pursuit of offensive measures against the enemies of the United States. The purpose of public diplomacy was to change the dialogue over Cold War conflicts like the one in Nicaragua. In order for this to work the task force wanted Congress and the American people to feel that the issue was an urgent and global offensive launched against the United States. Terrorism was a linguistic weapon that if used correctly could criminalize an enemy and justify a strong U.S. response. Bush and the other architects of the administration’s policy understood this and used the language of terrorism as an opportunity to get people behind the Reagan offensive.

As with the classified report, the document did not acknowledge the opinions of Borg and Oakley. Both expressed a concern that the task force understood the solution to the problem

primarily in military terms. Shortly after Oakley’s memo to Donald Gregg in early February, Bush penned his own summation of the findings of the terrorism task force. According to Bush, both he and President Reagan “Recognized that the time had come to place the emphasis on more active measures, to take the offensive against terrorists and those who support them…”

The section in the public report titled “U.S. Policy and Response to Terrorists” further emphasized this point and showed that Borg and Oakley’s concerns were secondary. The response proposed to the American people was a militaristic approach that dismissed effective diplomacy. The report insisted that terrorism was a crime perpetrated by “international criminals.” Tactics such as pre-emptive strikes and unilateral military action, both overt and covert, the task force regarded as the best methods of deterrence. According to the report, “Our principles of justice will not permit random retaliation against groups or countries. However, when perpetrators of terrorism can be identified and located, our policy is to act against terrorism…unilaterally when necessary to prevent or respond to terrorist acts. A successful deterrent strategy may require judicious employment of military force…” The task force did not heed the criticism of Borg and Oakley, but it acknowledged that the unilateral military approach against a sovereign nation challenged the accepted norms of international behavior.

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52 George Bush, summation of the findings of the terrorism task force, February 1986, Folder, “Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article (1 of 3)” OA/ID 19849 Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library.


The task force insisted that the allegation of criminality justified such actions as in self-defense of the United States and their allies.\footnote{George H. W. Bush, Interview for American Legion, Folder Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article, 3 of 3, Box 1 OA/ID 19849, Donald P. Gregg Files: Task force on Terrorism File, George Bush Presidential Library.}

Despite the concern of Borg and Oakley, it was not surprising that the task force did not adopt their criticisms. Secretary of State George Shultz and Vice President George H. W. Bush were leading architects of the development of the offensive against the alleged forces of international terrorism. Both of these top officials argued that the use of force was necessary to send a message and put the state sponsors on warning. Throughout 1984 and 1985, the secretary spoke frequently about the need for the United States to adopt active measures.\footnote{Shultz, “Terrorism: The Challenge to the Democracies,” in Anzovin, Terrorism, 50-54.} These measures involved non-military avenues that the Office of Counter-terrorism agreed with. However, the majority in the task force also emphasized the importance of using military options as a way of deterring state sponsors.\footnote{“Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.} Since the architects of this war on terror insisted that military force was a prerequisite to addressing the problem of state sponsorship, it was not surprising that they ignored the opinions of two wary diplomats in the Office of Counter-terrorism.

In the early months of 1986, the Reagan administration implemented its new offensive policy against Nicaragua. The first step involved a renewal of the gritty legislative battle to obtain congressional authorization for military aid to the Contras. The administration had sought funding for these anti-Sandinista guerrillas since 1983, when the Boland amendment eliminated such support. Concerns over international terrorism enhanced the renewed pursuit of this funding.
by the Reagan administration in 1986. On February 25, Reagan formally asked Congress to provide $100 million in funding for the Contras. According to Reagan, the aid was desperately needed because “the Nicaraguan communists will steadily intensify their efforts to crush all opposition to their tyranny, consolidating their ability to use Nicaragua...as a base for further intimidating the democratic nations of Central America and spreading subversion and terrorism in our hemisphere.”58 The new policy against terrorism demanded that the United States target the most active, threatening and vulnerable state sponsors. According to the Reagan administration, the Sandinista government was an ideal target. The country was small, relatively weak, located close to the United States’ border and the Panama Canal, and already immersed in a conflict with the Contras.

The rationale behind the United States’ action against alleged state sponsors was that international terrorism was a war crime, and that regardless of national sovereignty, criminality warranted offensive measures and a break from the pursuit of containment. This was the central premise for the construction of the administration’s new offensive framework of intervention. On March 5, Ambassador at Large and Director of the Office of Counterterrorism Robert Oakley delivered a message to the British at the U.S.-UK Bilateral Meeting on Terrorism. The confidential statement was from Deputy Secretary of State, John Whitehead, and clearly emphasized the shift in U.S. policy on the issue of terrorism and the Cold War. He asserted that the “USG [U.S. government] has concluded that the past approach has not yielded adequate

results, [and we] must move to [a] more active, offensive policy." 59 The statement continued, “Numbers and casualties of international terrorism demonstrate who is winning despite our intensified, defensive, containment approach.” 60 Ironically, one of the stronger critics of such a policy had the responsibility for delivering the message that acknowledged the launch of Washington’s offensive war on terrorism.

The following day, Vice President George H. W. Bush and Admiral James Holloway announced the release of the public report of the terrorism task force. Despite the looming storm of a U.S. military offensive the two gave orchestrated cautious summations of the terrorism policy. Even though the policy directives positioned military options at the forefront, Bush and Holloway barely implied the concept of military force in their opening statements. Instead, they spoke of diplomacy, improved intelligence, extradition, and better cooperation with international allies. The public report contained these subjects, but it also placed emphasis on the importance of the application of unilateral military force. 61 When asked by members of the media on the role of the use of force, Admiral Holloway gave no specific targets, but acknowledged that the task force and the administration considered the use of unilateral military force a necessary


requirement of the new policy. The press conference provided subtle evidence that the United States was preparing for an offensive.

The assistance of recently declassified materials has exposed something yet unseen from the press conference. Admiral Holloway did offer a few details. Of all the countries and regions that the task force considered at risk or involved with international terrorism, he spoke briefly about Latin America, specifically Nicaragua and Cuba. Admiral Holloway insisted that “More terrorist acts were directed at U.S. citizens in Latin America last year than in any other region. Both Nicaragua and Cuba have been implicated in terrorist activity in Latin America.” This statement when coupled with recently declassified documents makes it clear that the White House was planning to direct their new framework of intervention against Nicaragua. One of the first targets of the war on terror was Central America.

Pursuit of congressional authorization for lethal support for the Contras and the use of this guerrilla group was not the only way that the Reagan administration moved against Nicaragua. The power of surrogate guerrilla forces, like the Contras, was only one aspect of the new policy framework for the use of force against alleged state sponsors of terrorism created by the task force. The new framework included not only the use of insurgent guerrilla war, but also “conventional land maneuvers” in neighboring countries. If a friendly government bordered an

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62 Admiral James Holloway, response to press questions, March 6, 1986, Folder, “Terrorism” (1of 6) OA/ID 19849 Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

63 George Bush, summation of the findings of the terrorism task force, February 1986, Folder, “Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article (3 of 3)” OA/ID 19849 Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.

64 George Bush, summation of the findings of the terrorism task force, February 1986, Folder, “Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article (2 of 3)” OA/ID 19849 Box 1, Donald P. Gregg: Task Force on Terrorism Files, George Bush Presidential Library.
offender state, the task force determined that the United States could conduct military maneuvers and construction projects “in close proximity to the offending group/state.” The operations would issue “a stern warning to an offending sponsor state” and provide the potential opportunity for the conduct of “special operations against terrorist groups using exercise as a guise.” This was a plan of threat, provocation, and deception. In order for this to work, though, the presence of a friendly host nation was required. Central America was the perfect location for the implementation of this aspect of the war on terror.

The new framework of intervention that the task force constructed was a culmination of ideas that were in development for a number of years, and the concept of provocation was no different. Oliver North first offered the idea that the United States could provoke the Sandinistas and bait them into giving the United States a justification for escalation. On July 15, 1985, North submitted a secret proposal titled “U.S. Political Military Strategy for Nicaragua.” The document was a detailed outline for how the United States could launch an offensive and overthrow the government of Nicaragua via the Contras. North suggested that “should the Sandinista military invade either Honduras or Costa Rica” the Reagan administration would gain much greater support for Contra aid and even “a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua.” The task force incorporated this

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65 “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.

66 “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.
plan into the new framework on intervention and the administration acted on it in the spring of 1986.\textsuperscript{67}

Honduras made the implementation of the plan possible. The small nation bordered Nicaragua was an American ally, albeit one that was increasingly uncomfortable about the U.S.-led conflict. In March, the United States began major conventional military maneuvers along the border of Nicaragua. These included the construction of an airstrip capable of handling military aircraft and parachute drops of Honduran troops only a matter of miles from Nicaragua’s northern border. Already convinced of the need to take offensive military action against Nicaragua, the White House used the operations as a show of force. The Sandinistas would either change their tune or, more likely, respond militarily to the provocation.\textsuperscript{68} This was a first step in initiating an offensive hardline policy that would force the Nicaraguan government into submission on the terms of the United States. If provoked, the administration could use a Nicaraguan offensive to demand congressional support for the Contras.

With these operations underway, President Reagan pleaded with Congress and the American people to fund the Contras. The month of March was full of controversy as the administration pushed Congress to authorize offensive operations against Nicaragua. At noon on March 8, President Reagan gave his weekly radio address on Nicaragua. He began, “My fellow Americans, I want to speak to you today about our request to help the Nicaraguan freedom

\textsuperscript{67} Oliver North, “U.S. Political/Military Strategy for Nicaragua,” July 15, 1985, in Kornbluh and Byrne, \textit{The Iran-Contra Scandal}, 50.

The president emphasized, as he had numerous times since 1983, that Sandinista aggression presented a national security threat directly in the United States’ backyard. The language in this speech, however, reflected the growing concern over international terrorism. He insisted that the Sandinistas violated the civil liberties of the Nicaraguan people. Reagan pressed Congress for aid by arguing that “This dictatorship now becomes more dangerous as a flood of weapons and manpower pour in from the Soviet bloc and their cold blooded allies the PLO and Libya.” Reagan insisted that support for the so-called freedom fighters was the only way that the United States could prevent the regional subversion allegedly directed by Nicaragua.

The following week, the public diplomacy onslaught continued. On Thursday, March 14, Reagan conducted a briefing from the White House. The next day at noon, he again focused the attention of his weekly radio address to the issue of Nicaragua. These two briefs, however, were only a prelude to his appearance the following day. On Saturday night, Reagan appeared on primetime television and his speech again insisted that Nicaragua was a communist-terrorist threat, and a tyrannical criminal nation. Reagan pledged that military force alone could prevent the consolidation of “a second Cuba, a second Libya on the doorstep of the United States.” He feared that there was little time to act because, “Gathered in Nicaragua already are thousands of Cuban military advisors, contingents of Soviet and East German and all the elements of international terror-from the PLO to Italy’s Red Brigade. Why are they there? Because as Colonel Qadhafi has publically exalted: Nicaragua means a great thing, it means fighting


America near its borders….fighting America at its doorstep.” Reagan hoped this hyperbolic language could build support for the offensive in Congress and the public. After two weeks of pressure, Congress did not heed the administration's plea. Shortly following this round of speeches, the Democrat controlled House of Representatives responded by again voting against the aid.

Undoubtedly, the tense atmosphere and the language of terrorism helped make this a very close vote. The legislation failed by merely twelve votes, which was closer than ever. Reagan’s public diplomacy team had contracted a polling and statistics group out of McLean, Virginia, *Decision/Making/Information*, to determine what went wrong. According to the report, Reagan was successful in convincing Americans that the Sandinistas were a security threat. The allegation of terrorism had created a sense of fear and unease in the United States. Nonetheless, the press for aid to the Contras appeared to hurt, at least slightly, the administration’s position. Americans did not like the Sandinistas, but they did not like the Contras either. Following the president’s primetime speech, only 26% of those polled possessed favorable perceptions of the Contras. 52% of Americans believed that Nicaragua would accept Soviet nuclear missiles, and 47% believed that the Sandinistas backed the PLO and Libya in their terrorism campaigns. The public diplomacy campaign successfully created fear about the alleged threat posed by Nicaragua. Most Americans, though, still thought that aid to the Contras might open the door to a Vietnam-like conflict. 61% of those polled agreed with the rejection of aid by the House of Representatives. Many Americans believed that the Sandinistas were a dangerous communist-

terrorist threat, but they were also concerned about the potential development of U.S. military involvement and the inpropriety of the United States’ ally.\textsuperscript{72}

Two factors figured centrally into the position of the House of Representatives and the American public on aid to the Contras. First, while the Sandinistas were allegedly involved in escalating terrorist and subversive activities throughout the region, when Reagan spoke on primetime television there was little recent evidence that suggested that the president’s fear invoking rhetoric was accurate. At that time, the Nicaraguan government was holding talks with regional nations in pursuit of a peace proposal, and it had not been involved in any open act of aggression in 1986. Many Americans perceived the Reagan administration as unnecessarily escalating the situation when a diplomatic solution was possible. Second, although polled Americans liked the Sandinistas less than they did the Contras, Americans held neither group highly.\textsuperscript{73} Americans read the reports and accounts of the guerrillas involved in human rights abuses, and largely they did not accept the idea that these allies were noble ‘freedom fighters’. The Monday following Reagan’s speech the PBS news program, \textit{Frontline}, aired a report titled “Who’s Running this War?” The program depicted the Contras as little more than a right-wing funded band of mercenaries comprised primarily of former members of Somoza’s National


Guard. Members of Congress and the American public were concerned about war and the intentions of the administration’s ally.⁷⁴

Despite the failure in March, the struggle for aid to the Contras as part of the United States new counter-terrorist offensive was not over. On March 25, less than a week after the House narrowly rejected military aid to the Contras in the first round of the year’s military appropriations battles, the U.S.-Honduran maneuvers provoked the Nicaraguan government. The report, first released by the White House, was that the Sandinistas had unleashed a significant military offensive against rebel base areas within neighboring Honduras. Over 1,000 Sandinista troops were engaged in major battles as far as twenty miles inside Honduran territory. The Nicaraguan offensive began with sporadic low intensity fighting on March 17.⁷⁵ The area of the assault was a Honduran border region that jutted slightly into Nicaragua. It was a lightly populated jungle region that was only accessible by a few remote dirt roads. This was a central operational headquarters for the U.S.-backed rebels. Reporters described the fighting as intense and casualties measured in the hundreds. The Sandinista armed forces caught the U.S.-backed guerrillas by surprise, and Sandinista soldiers breached the base perimeter. However, the recently resupplied Contras responded effectively with an estimated death toll of 200 Sandinistas and 40 Contras.⁷⁶

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The attack was a consequence of U.S. military maneuvers designed as an intentional effort to provoke Nicaragua and further vilify the leadership. According to the military options that the task force recommended to President Reagan, military maneuvers near a state was one way of putting them on notice. For dealing with an alleged Radical-Left state, the task force recommended “conventional land maneuvers” that were conducted “in close proximity to the offending group/state.” The purpose was to issue “a stern warning to an offending sponsor state” but also as a way to conduct “special operations…using exercise as a guise.” The Reagan administration put this plan of attack in operation against Nicaragua in the spring of 1986, and intentionally provoked the Sandinistas to launch a counterattack against the Contras out of fear that the United States was preparing to attack Nicaragua.

After the Sandinista offensive began, U.S. aviators flew Honduran troops to the front line. The Honduran forces did not engage in battle, but took defensive positions in case the operation expanded. 50 U.S. aviators used 4 twin rotor Chinook and 10 Huey helicopters to airlift a battalion of Honduran artillery and infantry units toward the area of fighting in the so-called Las Vegas salient. As part of the administration’s offensive on state sponsors of terrorism the United States used provocation against Nicaragua as a key aspect in the implementation of this war on terrorism. The administration hoped that this provocation, an integral aspect of the new strategy, would lead to acceptance by Congress and the American people of the need for further military oriented policies and affirm the support of the Contras.

77 “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.

The Reagan administration’s intentional provocation was unknown to Congress and the U.S. public. As a result, the Nicaraguan invasion left Congress dismayed. The Sandinista offensive developed just prior to the upcoming Senate vote on aid for the Contras, and at first, some of Reagan’s opponents thought that the news report was a trumped up charge on the part of the administration. As the events unfolded, though, it was clear that the event was all too real. The Honduran government requested U.S. support, and the Reagan administration responded by providing $20 million in emergency aid.\textsuperscript{79} While the Government of Honduras technically denied the presence of the Contras in its territory and wanted to have little to do with Washington’s operation, the government also pledged to defend the country and sought U.S. support privately. Once journalists made these details known, opponents of the Reagan administration’s policy lamented the turn of events. Washington State congressman, Tom Foley (D), remarked that “I can’t express my dismay enough at what’s happened…It was a close vote before, and this turn of events is likely to make it more difficult [to deny the president].”\textsuperscript{80}

Shortly following the Sandinista offensive the Senate voted 53 to 47 in favor of providing military aid to the Contras. Prior to the House vote, Democrat House Speaker Thomas (Tip) O’Neil declared that his body would vote on the appropriation a second time.\textsuperscript{81} Following the offensive, many believed that the administration had the necessary votes from moderate


Democrats and Republicans in the House.\(^{82}\) The military action was further proof, to many, that the administration’s allegations about Nicaragua were correct. Little did they know that the events were the result of a U.S. offensive designed to draw a Sandinista attack, and to build support for the administration’s new policy.

After the Honduran raid, lethal aid to the Contras received a renewed push in Congress. The Sandinista raid seemed to prove the accuracy of the United States’ claims. According to *Decision/Making/Information* Reagan’s primetime speech prior to the Honduran raid was not as widely watched as previous speeches and the president did not gain significant support for his Contra aid plan despite his intense allegations of their role as a state sponsor of international terrorism. However, after the Honduran raid the president experienced a 7% jump in support of his handling of the situation in Nicaragua. When asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Ronald Reagan is handling the situation in Nicaragua,” 46% of those polled said yes.\(^{83}\) This represented a significant change over a two-week period and with 44% disapproving it marked the first time Reagan possessed a positive approval rating on the situation. Even House Speaker Tip O’Neil, the most visible opponent of support for the Contras, expressed his view of Ortega as a “bumbling, incompetent, Marxist-Leninist communist.”\(^{84}\) The position of the House of Representatives on aid to the Contras remained uncertain, and a majority of Americans still


believed that Congress should not aid the Contras, but the Honduran raid improved the administration’s position with Congress and the public on the issue.\textsuperscript{85}

The accusation of state sponsorship of international terrorism coupled with secretive military action against Nicaragua as part of the administration’s war on terror escalated the conflict in Central America and helped build opposition to the Nicaraguan government in the United States. The new war was, however, not limited to Nicaragua. The Sandinista government was one of two states targeted by the United States in 1986: Libya was the other. Simultaneously with U.S. military maneuvers on the border of Nicaragua, the Reagan administration also provoked a Libyan attack on U.S. naval vessels conducting maneuvers in the Gulf of Sidra, an area that Libya openly avowed as its territorial waters. Naval operations were, like conventional land maneuvers, another aspect of this war against Radical-Left states that allegedly sponsored terrorism. According to the framework of intervention developed by the task force, “[a] naval demonstration of strength [was] useful against sponsoring states.”\textsuperscript{86}

Like the U.S.-Honduran maneuvers, the operations in the Gulf of Sidra provoked a response from Libya. The Libyans attempted to shoot down U.S. navy planes and the United States responded with an assault on missile sites in Libya, and on April 15, the United States followed this with a unilateral strike on that government. In a document released in 2012, NSC advisor John Poindexter acknowledged that the Libyan strike as part of a successful operation


\textsuperscript{86} “Policy Framework for the Use of Force in Response to Terrorist Incidents,” folder, “Program Review of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combating Terrorism- March-April 1987,” Box 1, Carolyn Stettner: Subject Files OA/ID CF01523-004, George Bush Presidential Library.
against state sponsors of terrorism. In a memo to the president, Poindexter acknowledged that the “unilateral military action….decreased terrorism at the source by putting state sponsors on notice.” While many Americans remained skeptical of support for the Contras, the Libyan and Nicaraguan provocations together represented a U.S. war on terrorism. As a result, the Reagan administration was in the strongest position to deliver a vital aspect of its policy, authorization for lethal aid to the Contras.

The events during the first several months of 1986 represented operational aspects of a war on terrorism. The task force outlined a policy against state sponsors that relied on the application of the entire spectrum of military options. The administration wanted to use force to deter alleged state sponsors throughout the world. The use of military maneuvers and surrogate guerrilla units was one option for deterring the governments of the Radical-Left. From the outset of 1986, the United States zeroed in on Nicaragua. The administration pressed for long sought congressional aid to the Contras, and further escalated hostilities against the Nicaraguan government by using provocative conventional military maneuvers and vilifying the Sandinistas with the criminalizing rhetoric of terrorism.

The pursuit of a military solution with Nicaragua in 1986 was a dangerous course of action. Despite the pleas of Parker Borg and Robert Oakley to pursue an evenhanded diplomacy that relied on better intelligence and multilateral cooperation, the United States sought a military solution. The administration did not emphasize exhausting diplomatic options first, but rather using military and naval maneuvers to provoke violence and justify its prior decision to apply a

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policy of force. Shortly after the United States’ provocation of Nicaragua, the Central American peace talks collapsed amid heightened tension between Nicaragua and Honduras. In the United States, Congress moved toward passage of lethal support to the Contras. By the fall of 1986, the expansion of military measures led the Reagan administration into the most damaging political controversy since Watergate. Iran-Contra was only one of the problems created by the pursuit of a military offensive rather than a sound diplomacy.88

In order to understand the Reagan offensive one must recognize the role that the language of international terrorism and the perception that it represented a global national security threat played in making this possible. The Reagan offensive represented the United States’ first modern war on terror. Bush’s task force created the structure for an aggressive offensive against states that allegedly sanctioned acts of international terrorism. Parker Borg and Robert Oakley struggled to avert the implementation of a policy founded on unilateral militarism, but the majority in the administration and the task force ignored their pleas. The result was a policy that positioned military options as the key to dealing with the threat of international terrorism rather than measures that promised long-term solutions through non-military means. Despite the concerns of officials in the Office of Counterterrorism, the United States fashioned a strategy for dealing with state sponsors of international terrorism that disregarded diplomacy, cast-off the containment policy and challenged the accepted norms of international behavior.

To the Reagan administration international terrorism represented a new phase in the Cold War. It reflected an expanded threat from a loose alliance of communist and terrorist states. These agents, the administration believed, conducted a terror war against the United States and

its allies throughout the developing world. No area was as important to officials in Washington as Central America. This development drove the Reagan administration to adopt an offensive military strategy to combat the unpredictable threat of international terrorism conducted from regional powers like Nicaragua. This was the Reagan offensive, but it was more than a new way of fighting the Cold War. It was a framework of intervention for the United States to follow in the post-Cold War world.

The Cold War and a long history of U.S. imperialism in the developing world were the primary cause for intensifying domestic and regional differences and leading to the development of revolution and conflict. The Reagan administration, blinded by assumptions of global national security, considered the Nicaraguan conflict only in the broad terms of freedom against tyranny. The emergence of terrorism in Central America and throughout the world did not change the Reagan administration's assumptions about the Cold War world, but instead created an enhanced urgency to combat an alleged offensive of the Radical-Left in the developing world with aggressive measures that further challenged the norms of international behavior. For officials in the Reagan administration, the unpredictable and psychological power of this new threat demanded offensive measures. As a product of the Cold War, the administration’s counterterrorism policy did not reflect a multi-polar view of the world or on the long-term solution to problems of domestic inequity and violence. Rather than address local and regional divides, officials in Washington reacted to the threat from the standpoint of bi-polarity and the short-term gains of military action. Many recognized that ideologically terrorists and communists possessed only loose ties, but policy makers still could not escape the tendency to affiliate the two in a grand anti-U.S. conspiracy orchestrated by the Radical-Left. To justify this policy the
Reagan administration employed the language of terrorism as a rhetorical device that helped justify its war by further undermining the credibility of the Nicaraguan government. This was the Reagan offensive, a legally dubious and aggressive military offensive, which violated national sovereignty and tested the bounds of international behavior while simultaneously using language to undermine the credibility of the Nicaraguan leadership and create an atmosphere of fear and urgency in the United States.
Chapter Six

War for Peace

At 11:30am on March 7, 1986, the White House announced that Ambassador Philip Habib was the new special envoy to Central America. Habib was a senior diplomat, and popular choice among moderate Democrats and Republicans to represent the United States’ efforts in the peace process in Central America. Amid an escalation of tension and hostility with Nicaragua, this appointment suggested that the Reagan administration was serious about negotiations.¹ Several days later Habib boarded an airplane bound for Central America. While Congress and the White House fought over a proposal to fund the Nicaraguan Contras, and as the United States and Honduras conducted provocative military maneuvers on Nicaragua’s borders, Habib met for the first time with representatives of El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.

Contrary, however, to the impression of fair diplomacy, the purpose of the mission was to facilitate the administration’s offensive strategy. The administration hoped that Habib’s visit would assure the backing of the Central American democracies and further isolate the Sandinista leadership, as well as to gain support in the United States House of Representatives for funding for the Contras. The Reagan administration used the mission to create support among the four Central American democracies for a policy that relied on military force as the primary means to achieve peace on the United States’ terms, a peace that was only acceptable when the Sandinista government yielded to the will of the United States. The support of El Salvador, Honduras, Costa

¹ “Announcement of Ambassador Philip C. Habib as Special Envoy to Central America” March 6, 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
Rica and Guatemala, the administration hoped, could give its aggressive policy the kind of approval necessary to solidify the strategy of using force to obtain a change of leadership in Nicaragua. In the short term, it appeared that the administration succeeded.

In considering the Reagan administration’s involvement with Nicaragua, scholars often focus exclusively on the power of Washington neo-conservatives’ intent on bending Central America to their will. What scholars often overlook in this story, however, is the integral role played by the leaders of the four Central American democracies. The administration wanted to alter the Sandinista government by isolating Nicaragua and escalating the conflict. The policy represented a new framework for intervention that relied on hardline measures that included military pressure, economic sanctions, and diplomatic non-negotiation and manipulation. The only way that this plan could succeed, however, was through the support of the U.S. Congress and the Central American democracies. Without funding for the Contras and a continued authorization by Costa Rica and Honduras to allow the Contras to use their territory, their policy with Nicaragua could not succeed.

This chapter demonstrates the vital importance of the Reagan administration’s public diplomacy campaign in the continued prosecution of a war on terrorism against Nicaragua. After implementing the task force’s new framework for intervention with a military provocation in March 1986, the next phase of the plan involved developing the international angle of the public diplomacy operation in a way that could secure military support for the Contras from the Democrat controlled House of Representatives. To achieve this, the administration attempted to create a coalition of Central American states that would isolate Nicaragua politically, diplomatically and militarily. Affirmation from the leaders of the Central American democratic
states that the administration’s hardline approach was desirable was an integral component in securing support from Congress, isolating Nicaragua and providing a stable ground from which to escalate the war conducted by the Contras. Clearly, the will of the Reagan administration mattered significantly in this story. Their long and hard fought efforts in waging this conflict demonstrate the power of their will. However, the Central American coalition did not unite behind the administration’s policy. The coalition was the result of a significant degree of diplomatic coercion by the Reagan administration, and this played critically in the collapse of the coalition and the demise of the United States’ plan for Nicaragua.

Throughout 1986 and 1987, the Reagan administration did not attempt to secure a peaceful agreement between Nicaragua and the other Central American governments. Instead, the purpose of its diplomatic efforts were to create unity and support among the Central American democracies for a U.S. hardline policy which was designed to force Nicaragua to accept an agreement on the Reagan administration’s terms. The missions did not involve Nicaragua and did not represent an effort by the United States to have fair discussions with the Central American leaders. The Reagan administration expected the leaders of the Central American democracies to agree with the United States and pursue a course amenable to the will of the larger North American neighbor.

The first Latin American peace negotiations designed to deal with Nicaragua and the Central American crisis, the Contadora talks, began in 1983. Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama led these early negotiations. These four nations comprised the Contadora group.2 Mexico was the most influential player of the four. Between 1983 and 1986, Contadora

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consistently failed to produce an agreement. The primary reasons for this failure were due to the Reagan administration’s escalation of military activity in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador, which increased the divide between the Sandinista leadership and its neighbors. Mexico was consistently supportive of the Nicaraguan position and angered by the Reagan administration’s use of hostile action. Likewise, a Mexican led peace agreement was unacceptable to the United States because it would leave the Sandinista regime stable and intact. The Reagan administration spoke positively in public about Contadora, but undermined the talks by increasing hostility and disunity within the region. In addition, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica felt that Mexico favored Nicaragua and that the talks provided little concern for their own interests.³ The United States used this situation to create a Central American coalition that would make their military oriented strategy effective. By 1986 the United States and the Central American democracies continued to give lip service to Contadora, but the Habib mission in March 1986 was designed to encourage the demise of the regional peace talks in favor of a united Central American coalition that could facilitate the United States’ offensive strategy and create the kind of peace agreement that was desired by the Reagan administration. The agreement they sought was one that altered the Nicaraguan government.

In the spring of 1986, when ambassador Habib traveled to Central America Costa Rica was the key state for the administration’s diplomatic mission. Honduras and El Salvador were the most closely aligned to the Reagan administration, and these two nations sought a unity with the United States in hopes that this would provide security against a Nicaraguan state increasingly antagonized by the U.S. led Contra War. Costa Rica was very important to the

Central American coalition that the Reagan administration wanted to build. Costa Rica, the neighbor to the south, however, was less amenable to the administration’s aims. President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica was a domestically oriented leader and he did not want his government associated with the continued U.S. effort to use war to isolate and undermine the Nicaraguan government. The Habib mission placed tremendous pressure on Arias to fall in line and do as the United States desired. There were two primary objectives for Habib’s March mission to Central America. First, the mission sought to guarantee that none of the Central American governments made any statements that could discourage U.S. Congress from voting for lethal aid to the Contras. Second, the mission tried to prevent border-states with Nicaragua, particularly Costa Rica from producing a bilateral border patrol agreement with the Nicaraguan government that could undermine the guerrilla’s operational capabilities.

In part, the goal of the Habib mission to Central America was to prevent positive developments for peace between Nicaragua and its neighbors, while simultaneously implying to Congress and the world that the mission was an honest attempt at a diplomatic solution. Costa Rica and Nicaragua were, in March, on the edge of securing a bilateral agreement. The agreement meant that the two governments would work together to patrol their borders. The reason for the development of this agreement stemmed from the United States’ war against Nicaragua and support of transnational guerrillas that operated in border areas and conducted cross border raids into Sandinista territory. The raids were a primary way that the United States exerted pressure on the government of Nicaragua, but they were also the root of tremendous instability in the region. Because of the continual escalation of U.S. directed hostilities, Costa Rica and Honduras feared major Nicaraguan reprisals into their territory in response to the
operations of the United States’ transnational guerrilla ally in the region. As a result, Costa Rica and Nicaragua neared an agreement to police their border and effectively put an end to the Contra cross border activity.

The Reagan administration perceived the pending agreement between Costa Rica and Nicaragua as a threat to its war aims and the Habib mission sought to halt the agreement. According to Secretary of State George Shultz, the United States opposed the pending bilateral agreement because “Border agreements with Nicaragua would remove one of the incentives for the Sandinistas to negotiate a regional agreement.” The incentive that Shultz referred to was the ability of the United States to make war on Nicaragua through cross border Contra raids that violated the sovereignty of both Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The regional agreement proposed by the United States referenced a U.S.-backed ultimatum that the Sandinistas disarm and accept the Contras into a new democratic government or else continue to face the consequences of an increasingly aggressive U.S. war on terrorism. The goal was not peace with the current governments in the region, but rather peace that resulted from regime change in Nicaragua brought about by military pressure.

The border agreement that Costa Rica and Nicaragua negotiated in 1986 did not line up with the Reagan administration’s overall goals to alter the government of Nicaragua, but it did represent a promising accord for peace in Central America. Such bilateral settlements promised to use cooperation as a way to reduce the war making abilities of transnational guerrillas that were invading Nicaragua’s sovereign territory. Those raids represented a danger to peace in Central America because they threatened the Sandinista government, encouraged their further

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militarization, and inspired significant cross border reprisals like the Honduran raid that occurred shortly following Habib’s March mission. Border agreements would create peace between Central American states, but they would also insulate Nicaragua from the designs of the United States. This reality ran counter to the Reagan administration’s objective of regime change.

Habib chastised President Oscar Arias for negotiating the bilateral border patrol agreement with Nicaragua. The Reagan administration was livid about Costa Rica’s attempt to create a bilateral agreement with Nicaragua, and Habib told Arias that, “President Ronald Reagan is not a masochist and will not pay people to dump on him.”

To this, the Costa Rican leader, clearly intimidated, reassured Habib that “his call for a timetable for establishing democracy in Nicaragua [was] evidence of his opposition to the Sandinista regime.” Shortly following this exchange, Arias shelved the border arrangement between the two nations in favor of the demands of the Reagan administration for an agreement that was regional and simultaneous. The United States would only accept an agreement that incorporated direct talks with the Contras and upon which all Central American states agreed. Costa Rica was compelled to align with Honduras and El Salvador and dismiss any bi-lateral understanding that would undermine the Reagan administration’s goal of using Central American unity to isolate and attack Nicaragua.

While the United States strong-armed Costa Rica into compliance, the other Central American democracies, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, expressed support for the United

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States but also concern for the ramifications of U.S. policy. The primary purpose of Habib’s missions to these governments was to examine any statements or positions that the leaders of the nations might assume publicly or in meetings with members of U.S. Congress prior to the upcoming vote in the House of Representatives. The Reagan administration wanted to be certain that these Central American leaders, with whom important swing voters in Congress planned to meet, spoke in full support of the administration’s policy and, at the least, said nothing that could encourage members of the House of Representatives to vote against a proposal to aid the Contras. The diplomatic effort involved creating the impression of unity among the Central American states with the administration’s policy and using this to facilitate the conduct of an offensive military oriented operation.

Contrary to the intention of the Reagan administration, in March of 1986, the Central American states lacked unity or un-waivered support for the United States. President Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador was the only Central American leader to offer complete backing for the Reagan administration. On March 12, Duarte expressed his support for the Contras. He agreed to tell U.S. congressional representatives visiting El Salvador that “the Nicaraguan resistance constitute[d] a much needed barrier to Sandinista subversion.” Further, he said that at upcoming talks with Nicaragua, scheduled for May in Esquipulas, Guatemala, “he would press his counterparts [the other Central American democracies] to limit discussion to regional matters and to refrain from references to external factors.” In other words, Duarte would do everything in his power to support the continued U.S. offensive via the Nicaraguan Contras. Duarte was a long-time ally of the Reagan administration from which he relied for support in his war against

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the Nicaraguan backed guerrillas in El Salvador’s brutal civil war. His complete and cooperative support was, however, unique.

The purpose of the diplomatic missions was to gain reassurances that these leaders would act in a manner consistent with policy of the Reagan administration. The United States demanded their support for the Contras and for a settlement that was consistent with the administration’s desire for regime change in Nicaragua. President Azcona of Honduras, the first democratically elected leader since the 1930s, expressed his continued support for the U.S.-Contra program, but insisted that he could not do so publicly due to the controversy in his country over the activity of the Contras.

President Cerezo of Guatemala also expressed his intention to push Nicaragua to hold democratic elections. Cerezo assured Habib that “he [would] not publicly oppose military support for the resistance.”

The Guatemalan leader expressed a sense of homage owed to the United States for his position. Cerezo was grateful to the United States, and he expressed that he would not be in power without the support provided by the United States. However, like Arias, while he promised that his government would not undermine the Reagan administration’s policy, but he also explained that he could not give full public backing. Mexico influenced by Guatemala, one of the most powerful states of the region and a state that was opposed to the United States’ policy with Nicaragua. This relationship made Cerezo unable to join the informal Central American coalition that the Habib mission attempted to create.

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Behind closed doors, there was concern among the Central American states that the United States’ war effort might cause an escalation of regional state terrorism directed from Nicaragua or lead to a broad general war throughout Central America. On March 14, Cerezo expressed that he was concerned about “generalized war.” To this point, Habib spoke plainly, and Cerezo was not likely reassured. Habib told the Guatemalan president that “a Cuba on the American mainland was unacceptable. Nicaragua is a cancer that will destroy an otherwise healthy Central America. The democracies must work together aggressively to expand democracy, or force would be the only option left.” The United States was involved in a military offensive and Habib threatened Cerezo that, if it was necessary, the Reagan administration would escalate further. What the United States sought was the Central American democracies’ insistence on Nicaragua’s entry into a direct dialogue with the Contras and pursuit of democratization that would alter the Sandinista leadership. The Reagan administration insisted on achieving this goal through military means in the form of the Contra resistance. To this, Cerezo insisted that he was reiterating this to Contadora group nations and that even “Colombia and Venezuela [were] beginning to understand that Nicaragua has to be pressured.” Cerezo, however, was concerned about an expanded war and afraid that the U.S. policy might lead to a return of “Somocismo.”

The Reagan administration’s war on terrorism against Nicaragua caused a continuous escalation of the conflict to the point that Central American governments, like Guatemala, were fearful that the situation could explode into a regional war.

After the House of Representatives’ initial rejection of aid to the Contras in late March Habib went back to meet with the leaders of the Central American states in April. The Reagan

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administration took the House vote as a setback, but in the wake of the Nicaraguan raid into Honduras following provocative U.S.-Honduran military maneuvers, the administration felt reinvigorated. The framework of intervention produced by Vice President Bush’s task force proposed that a major Nicaraguan offensive into Hondurans could substantially shift the opinion of Congress and the American public.\textsuperscript{11} The administration brought about this event through provocation and the Honduran raid helped turn the public dialogue in the favor of the administration in late March. Following this escalation in the U.S.-backed war with Nicaragua, Habib found the Central American democracies concerned about the Reagan administration’s policy and doubtful that the Sandinistas would sign a treaty at the first meeting of Central American states in Esquipulas, Guatemala, scheduled for late May.\textsuperscript{12}

Following the Honduran raid and the positive Senate vote that March, the situation with Nicaragua remained controversial in the United States. Several New England businessmen sued the United States for the sanctions regime against Nicaragua. The sanctions had just turned one year old, and were one of the primary methods that the Reagan administration used to isolate states alleged of sponsoring terrorism. Some Americans argued that the sanctions, which prohibited Americans from traveling to or conducting business with Nicaragua, were a further violation of international law. These individuals were only a small representation of members of the public concerned about the sanctions and the overall approach taken by the Reagan

\textsuperscript{11} Oliver North, “U.S. Political/Military Strategy for Nicaragua,” July 15, 1985, in Kornbluh and Byrne, \textit{The Iran-Contra Scandal}, 51.

\textsuperscript{12} Philip Habib, “Meeting with Guatemalan President Cerezo,” April 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
administration. In 1986, author Salman Rushdie traveled to Nicaragua, collecting information for his scathing critique of the United States’ sanction program on Nicaragua, *The Jaguar Smile*. Even the iconic pop/rock star Jackson Browne, famous for hit songs like “Stay” and “Running on Empty,” traveled to Nicaragua and exclaimed opposition to Reagan’s policy. Browne reiterated a several year old critique that concerned over the Vietnam-like similarities evident in U.S. policy with Nicaragua and Central America. Since the beginning of the fight over U.S. involvement with the Contras and the conflict in El Salvador, a primary method of voicing opposition to the program was by recalling the Vietnam analogy. In 1986, this concern remained a powerful part of the dialogue over the conflict. Not only did Browne consider the conflict similar to Vietnam, so too did opponents in Congress as they fought the Reagan administration’s $100 million Contra aid package. Nicaragua remained an increasingly volatile domestic topic in the United States.

Reagan’s supporters were, however, more emboldened than at any other time by developments in Nicaragua. Shortly after the United States’ unilateral attack on Libya on April 15, thousands of Nicaraguans protested the United States action and spoke in support of an informal ally that faced a similar kind of aggressive policy from the United States that Nicaragua experienced. To some this seemed to verify the rhetoric of the Reagan administration that the Libya and Nicaragua were closely allied state sponsors of international terrorism. Not long after these demonstrations, a U.S. federal circuit court judge ruled on the lawsuit brought by business

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owners upset by the restrictions on trade with Nicaragua. The judge ruled that the administration’s sanctions against the Sandinista government were legal.\textsuperscript{15}

Following the Honduran raid, there appeared a relative ground swell of support for the Reagan administration’s policy of aggressive action via the Contras. The administration’s war on terrorism that already involved unilateral sanctions regime, the employment of military pressure, and increasing criminalization of Nicaragua with the language of terrorism appeared to be gaining ground in shifting the dialogue over the Contras and the Sandinistas. The growing support for the administration was to a significant degree manufactured. Whereas in June 1985, the administration had reacted to a peak in a world terrorism crisis, the situation in 1986 was largely the result of purposeful manipulation of the part of the Reagan administration. The new framework of intervention involved provocation with both Nicaragua and Libya and purposely encouraged the victimized states to respond with force and play into the hands of the United States that continued to use every avenue to emphasize the good standing image of the Reagan administration while simultaneously vilifying its enemies. The provocations created momentum for the public diplomacy operations, and Habib’s attempt to manipulate the Central American democracies into an informal coalition capitalized on this momentum.

Despite the dissension of visible pop-culture icons like Jackson Browne, the direction of events continued did not bode well for those hoping to derail U.S. policy in the region.\textsuperscript{16} In May, the government of Nicaragua expelled two American diplomats on allegations of espionage. The


Sandinista government accused the individuals of using cameras hidden in cigarette lighters. The Reagan administration denied the claims, but responded by expelling two Nicaraguan officials from the embassy in Washington D.C. 17 Reports appeared to provide further confirmation of the administration’s position. In the months following Nicaragua’s attack on the rebels in Honduras the momentum in the United States shifted further against the Sandinistas.

In the spring of 1986, a number of influential figures testified vocally about the correctness of the U.S. lead war on terrorism against Nicaragua. John Norton Moore, an esteemed specialist on National Security Law at the University of Virginia, published an article that supported the approach of the Reagan administration. Moore noted that international terrorism, particularly by Nicaraguans, represented a change in the nature of threat in the world. He insisted that “the core threat to the contemporary world order has been state-sponsored terrorism, guerrilla warfare and other forms of covert attack.” He lamented that “a policy of non-action against violence and terrorism may lead to a complete collapse of world order.” 18 Further insisting the importance of this shift, Moore argued that “Perceptions of U.S. and Latin American interests focus heavily on the national security threat of a Soviet base in this hemisphere. But the real, short term issues are…the expanding program of state-supported terrorism and subversion that is being used to destabilize other countries such as Colombia.” 19 Moore represented a group within the scholarly community that believed in the approach implemented by the Reagan administration. Moore’s argument evidenced the fact that ‘state


sponsorship of international terrorism’ was no mere label. International terrorism, albeit wrongly placed on Nicaragua, many perceived, increasingly, as a new kind of security threat that required a new policy.

Geoffery Levitt, legal advisor for the Reagan administration, also spoke on the danger of state sponsorship of international terrorism. Levitt argued that international terrorism involved a globally coordinated political goal directed at the free societies of the world by an international terrorist network. The danger rested in the psychological effect caused by sudden and unprovoked attacks against civilians. Levitt recognized that this was a new danger primarily because the world’s growing technologies of communication, transportation and of arms sales made a global terrorist network a dangerous precedent for the future. He cited the events of June 1985, the shooting of six Americans in San Salvador, and the hijacking of TWA 847, as primary examples of the growth of this issue. While Levitt praised certain elements of international cooperation regarding airport security and extradition treaties and of improved intelligence efforts that resulted in the thwarting of many terrorist plots in 1985, he acknowledged the challenges that state sponsorship of international terrorism posed to international law.

Levitt lamented the reality that free world nations had made no successes in imposing multilateral sanctions regimes on Radical-Left states like Nicaragua. He insisted that state sponsorship of terrorism was a new and desirable way of attacking the free world because it allowed states to incorporate brutal and psychologically damaging attacks, which could eventually involve weapons of mass destruction, and receive no culpability or punishment for doing so. Levitt reiterated the position of George Shultz and the Reagan administration more generally, arguing that state sponsorship of international terrorism pressed the bounds of
international law and that for this reason the United States needed to respond or act pre-
emptively to alleviate what it described as a dangerous criminal threat to the international order.
Levitt joined the administration and independent scholars like Moore and insisted that because
state sponsorship of international terrorism posed a unique and elusive threat that the United
States possessed the legal right and responsibility to act in a manner that most effectively
alleviated the threat.\textsuperscript{20} The threat of international terrorism authorized a new form of warfare, a
new form of response that challenged previously accepted norms of international behavior. The
United States could no longer guarantee a nation’s sovereign rights amid the allegation of
international terrorism. Such an assertion by the United States authorized the assumption of
activities that violated a state like Nicaragua’s sovereign status. It was a world that faced a new
danger and this threat altered previously accepted norms of behavior.

Former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick joined the crescendo of vocal
support for the war on terrorism. Kirkpatrick, an authority on foreign policy, insisted that the
Sandinistas possessed strong economic and military support from Libya, the PLO, and Iran.
Nicaragua, she argued, was the conduit for international terrorism in this hemisphere.\textsuperscript{21} Likewise,
later that month, \textit{American Legion} published a headline interview with Vice President George H.
W. Bush. The title was “We Will Defend Our People.” In the article, Bush explained that
Nicaragua represented a new menace. Nicaragua was a state sponsor of terrorism, and it was
opening up the United States’ southern border for terrible attacks against Americans and the

\textsuperscript{20}Geoffrey Levitt, “Combating Terrorism Under International Law,” Folder “Terrorism: Material for Doug
Menarchik” 4 of 6, OA/ID 19849, Box 1, Donald P. Gregg Files: George H. W. Bush Vice Presidential Records,
Task Force on Terrorism File, George Bush Presidential Library.

\textsuperscript{21} Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Nicaragua’s Libyan Connection,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, May 11, 1986,
http://search.proquest/docview/290933469?accountid=14902.
Likewise, on May 13, administration official Craig Coy gave a speech to the National Defense Transportation Association in San Francisco, California. Coy reiterated the evolving argument of the administration that Nicaragua represented a criminal state sponsor of international terrorism that justified a U.S. policy that challenged the norms of international behavior. Coy was concerned and he reflected that “I am not a philosopher, but I have to wonder about the future of a society that refuses to aggressively protect its citizens and interests from wanton killing and destruction by criminal elements or criminal nations.” These individuals continued to demand that the criminality of Nicaragua warranted an offensive policy that tested the bounds of international behavior.

The assertions made by Coy, Bush, Moore, Levitt, and Kirkpatrick were, in one sense, rhetorical ‘old-hat’. This was the same argument that the Reagan administration had pushed for over a year. Collectively, however, their opinions provided further evidence that international terrorism was not simply a convenient label to apply to any enemy of the United States’ choosing. In one respect, propaganda, particularly the criminalizing language of terrorism, was important for the successful implementation of their strategy. However, vocal proponents in the academic, political, and legal realms showed that many important minds took the terrorism issue very seriously. The terrorism crisis of the 1980s drove a re-evaluation of Cold War conflicts by introducing a new kind of national security threat. By 1986, the dialogue of terrorism was

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22 George H. W. Bush, Interview for American Legion, Folder Terrorism- II: Terrorism Article, 3 of 3, Box 1 OA/ID 19849, Donald P. Gregg Files: Task force on Terrorism File, George Bush Presidential Library.

beginning to encourage a shift in the meaning of the conflict in Nicaragua and the role of American power in the world.

The United States’ offensive war against alleged state sponsors of terrorism placed military elements as the primary tool in a new framework of intervention developed by the terrorism task force. The new policy relied on aggressive actions designed to attack and provoke hostility from a targeted government. The unique danger posed by terrorism, administration proponents insisted, required a new kind of warfare. During 1986, the United States applied the task force’s framework; the goal was to isolate Nicaragua by undermining them diplomatically and economically, and by directing unilateral, pre-emptive and invasive offensive measures designed to alter the government of Nicaragua. This framework of intervention challenged the bounds of accepted international behavior and left Central American leaders fearing the development of a general war.

The key to making this war on terrorism effective was for the United States to operate in a climate of urgency and fear. The exaggeration of threat was a critical component of the new framework of intervention compiled by the terrorism task force. The United States, in part, reacted to events that were beyond its control and, like the ones in June 1985, provided evidence of a real danger in the world. There was a terrorism crisis in the middle of the 1980s. However, the administration also worked to manufacturer a climate of fear. For two years, the Reagan administration had increasingly employed the language of terrorism to criminalize Nicaragua and create a climate of fear and suspicion about the Sandinistas. The administration also created this climate of urgency by escalating hostilities and bringing attention to increasing violence in the region. In 1986, the Reagan administration intentionally provoked Nicaragua through
conventional military maneuvers and through the continuous military harassment carried out by transnational guerrilla surrogates. Once provoked, once violence increased, the Reagan administration’s public diplomacy operation construed the events in a light sympathetic to its intentions to alter the government of Nicaragua. This exemplified an aggressive policy construed around the assumption that the course to peace was first through war. To make this new framework of intervention possible the United States manufactured an exaggerated fear and urgency around the issue of state sponsorship of international terrorism.

Public Diplomacy facilitated the United States’ offensive against Nicaragua. The administration used language to present the issues in such a way as to most vilify the enemy and likewise justify the correctness of its own position. This was modern-era propaganda designed to serve the interest of the Reagan administration in its pursuit of solutions via military force. This required the administration to convince Congress, the public and international partners that the United States waged a just and necessary war on terrorism. In 1986 the Reagan administration used three courses of action in this area: first, convincing the American public and Congress by vocalizing its position in numerous speeches and publications in a way that criminalized Nicaragua and humanized its own position; second, fostering a Central American diplomatic alliance that verified the United States’ position; and third, convincing Congress that the Contras represented a viable political alternative. The role of the Central American democracies proved vital, in the short-term, to the process of using war for peace in Central America. However, the offensive policy of the United States in the longer-term left the Reagan administration helpless in the region, and gave Central American states like Costa Rica the opportunity to find an alternative peaceful solution that was acceptable to all Central Americans.
At this stage, the administration’s public diplomacy campaign targeted not just Congress, but also international audiences, particularly in Latin America and in Europe. The Reagan administration defended the program for increased military pressure on the Sandinistas and for the alteration of the Nicaraguan government. The goal was to convince the international community of two main points: first, that the Central American democracies were on the side of the United States and were under siege from Nicaragua, and that the Contras represented an organized political movement. Second, Nicaragua was a legitimate international terrorist threat that required a military-oriented response from the United States. The administration insisted “That the Sandinistas support[ed] international terrorism and that Sandinista external subversion threaten[ed] the nascent democracies in neighboring countries.” Further, the administration insisted that the Sandinistas possessed ties with “terrorists in Latin America…and elsewhere (including the Middle East), arms and drug runners [and the] Sandinista practice of providing passports to terrorists.”

On the cusp of gaining congressional authorization for lethal aid to the Contras, the administration emphatically pressed the importance of this action as part of its new and necessary framework of intervention. They emphatically appealed to the language of terrorism in an attempt to create a heightened sense of fear and urgency over the Central American crisis.

Another critical element of the United States’ effort to use force against Nicaragua involved refashioning the image of the Contras. The Contras were widely perceived as brutal guerrilla mercenaries. If the United States were to succeed in its efforts to use these elements to reshape the government of Nicaragua, the administration had to make the Contras appear

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democratic and politically sound. The resistance was a collection of organizations that the
Reagan administration encouraged to attack Nicaragua and to facilitate the alteration of the
Sandinista regime. If the plan of gaining lethal aid were to work, the situation needed to appear
as a civil war and the resistance a democratic political alternative. As part of this important
aspect of the public diplomacy operation, the administration referred to the resistance as the
United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), a political organization that the public diplomacy
campaign had created a year earlier.

Ambassador Habib met with Contra leaders in Miami, Florida, on May 14, 1986. He met
with the three most prominent leaders, Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo, and Adolfo Calero. Habib
expressed the importance for the guerrillas to remain united and for them to promote themselves
as a legitimate democratic option to Latin Americans, to Europeans and, of course, to the United
States Congress. The three guerrilla leaders were pleased that the Reagan administration
supported them and expressed their desire to show themselves as a democratic political
alternative in what they described as Nicaragua’s “civil war.”25 Over the course of the next
several months, the Contras drafted a concord agreement among the various factions that
tested to the guerrillas resolve to pursue democracy in Nicaragua. The Reagan administration
also published profiles and biographies of the leaders. In 1986, the Reagan administration’s
freedom fighters emerged as an apparently legitimate political organization. This development,
along with the support or at least non-resistance from the Central American democracies, further
Sandinista entrenchment, and Ronald Reagan’s convincing phone calls factored centrally into the

25 Memorandum of Conversation, “Ambassador Habib with the UNO Leadership,” May 14, 1986, Box 5, John
upcoming second vote in the House of Representatives on the lethal aid package for the transnational guerrillas led by Cruz, Calero, and Robelo.

In May, the Central American democracies met with the representatives of the Nicaraguan government for peace talks at Esquipulas, Guatemala. The meeting did not go well, and the results appeared to implicate the Sandinistas further as intransigent and hostile. The four Central American democracies, led by Arias, presented a proposal that demanded democratization in Nicaragua and a reduction of the Sandinistas military arsenal by 20%. This number was far below the number desired by the Reagan administration and yet Ortega, still concerned and agitated by the U.S. activities, would not agree to this arrangement.26 Arias expressed disappointment at the extent of the gap between Nicaragua and the other Central American states.27 News reports appeared to provide further confirmation of the Reagan administration’s position. President Azcona of Honduras reiterated Arias lament that the Sandinistas refused to downsize militarily.28 Far from reaching an agreement, Habib left Central America in early June, believing that the United States should continue to “pursue Contra funding as an indispensable element of a two track policy that puts military pressure on Nicaragua at the service of an active diplomacy.”29 With Nicaragua still unwilling to incorporate the Contras into the democratic process, the United States continued to focus on efforts to use


military force against Nicaragua as a way of altering the government in a manner that favored the interests of the Reagan administration.

On June 7, Reagan insisted to Congress that a failure of the aid package meant “Nicaragua as a refuge for terrorism.” He further reiterated the claim that inaction would result in another Libya in Central America.30 The following day Vice President Bush publicly disclosed that “drug smuggling [was] a major security threat because it is intimately linked with terrorism.”31 The next day the Reagan administration reported that new shipments of arms from the Soviet Union had arrived in Nicaragua.32 Capitalizing on the uniqueness of a direct arms shipment from a Soviet vessel, the White House insisted that this was another escalation. They further increased the tension by suggesting that Soviet pilots were conducting reconnaissance in Nicaragua.33 In reality, this was likely not an escalation, but rather a standard support and resupply operation. The only difference was that the shipments typically went through Cuba and these were direct Soviet shipments.34 Shortly after this announcement, Reagan gave his “closing argument” before Georgetown University’s Center for Strategic and International Studies. In this speech, he further reiterated his claims about Nicaragua as a communist-terrorist state that posed


the potential of another Libya.\textsuperscript{35} With the critical vote in the House of Representatives upcoming, the public diplomacy program was in high gear, and Reagan’s political skills were critically important to the success or failure of such a controversial measure in the Democrat controlled body.

In addition to the charm and cunning of Reagan in lobbying Congress, the State and Defense Departments together produced another public briefing book detailing the communist-terrorist threat posed by Nicaragua. Titled “The Challenge to Democracy in Central America” the new report reiterated the position that Nicaragua affiliated itself with the clients of international terrorism and communism. According to the report, agents of the PLO and Libya sought to construct a “new Nicaragua.” The document was hopeful that the offensive approach of aiding the Contras could prevent further consolidation of the communist-terrorist regime in Managua.\textsuperscript{36} Coupled with evidence that the Nicaraguan government was not prepared to talk and that the Sandinistas were further militarized, the Reagan administration’s case appeared more powerful than at any other point.

On June 25 the House of Representatives voted, for the second time that year, on the $100 million aid package for the Contras. The spectacle was unique and about as exciting as a CSPAN broadcast could get. The Democratically controlled House of Representatives was broken up into factions, and the debate and amending process ran into the night. When the voting occurred on the main $100 million package, $70 million for lethal weapons and $30 million for


non-lethal material, cheers, and sighs resonated as opponents and proponents responded to the ballots of swing voters. Cheers from throughout the hall rang out when George M. Obrien, a Republican suffering from cancer, showed up in his wheelchair to vote in favor of aid. This vote in the House of Representatives marked a pinnacle of the administration’s efforts with Congress and it was a hard-fought and dramatic moment for Congress.

In all, eleven key members of the House of Representatives switched their votes to favor the administration’s plan to provide lethal aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. In this second vote in 1986, the White House succeeded and the House of Representatives approved the measure proposed by the Reagan administration. In her 1993 book, *Crossroads*, Cynthia Arnson suggested that two primary factors caused this positive vote: the pressure and incessant phone calls of Ronald Reagan and the inability of the liberal Democrats to create a viable alternative solution, which, according to Arnson, was the most significant in securing the positive vote. While Arnson is correct in her claim that the Reagan’s personal efforts and the lack of coherence from liberal Democrats factored significantly in the shift in the House of Representatives in June 1986, her account does not fully explain the reasons for the shift. The support of the Central American democracies and efforts by the Contras to organize politically were also critical in the motivations of several important swing voters to change their position.

Following the up-vote, the White House directed staff members to create a report to determine the key motivations for the change. While there was no single answer, the report noted

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several important factors. Some important changes occurred on the domestic front: Reagan’s personal phone calls and the constant bombardment of the administration’s public diplomacy program. Internationally, however, there were several important developments. The impact of the Honduran raid, the meetings that members like Olympia Snowe (R) had with the Central American leaders, and the organization of the Contras into a seemingly organized political body served to further vilify the Sandinistas and to motivate swing voters to favor the military pressure offered by the Contra aid package. Of course, the Honduran raid, the testimony of the Central American democracies and the political organization of the Contras resulted from tireless efforts on the administration’s part. Nicaragua’s militarization and hostility was a direct consequence of the Reagan administration’s efforts to attack, provoke, and threaten them. Likewise, Philip Habib’s diplomatic missions guided the testimony of the Central American democracies. These factors were critical in achieving success in the June vote and in making the Reagan administration’s war on terrorism even more effective. The vote was 221 to 209, six Democrats and five Republicans joined in support of the measure.  

The success of the administration’s program to achieve Contra aid and increased pressure on the Sandinistas hinged on the Central American coalition’s support. While the image of Nicaraguan isolation served the administration’s efforts in the House of Representatives, the coalition was unstable. The Central American alliance was due to coercion not to agreement, and this was a hidden flaw. The aggressive posture of the Reagan administration forced the Central American democracies to accept, despite concerned reservations, the U.S. position of using force

against Nicaragua. The Habib mission was a case of diplomacy used as a tool for obtaining support for military measures, and there was significant objection from the President of Costa Rica and Guatemala. Despite the perception of unity, Guatemala was assuming a more neutral role, and the administration coerced Costa Rica into acceptance of the United States’ policy.

Since the Honduran raid and the Habib visits, three of the four Central American democracies became public supporters of the Reagan administration. The administration hoped to create unity among all four governments, but Guatemala distanced itself from the process. Guatemala, while not disparaging the United States’ policy, adopted a position of “active neutrality” as Cerezo refused to isolate Nicaragua in the manner that Washington hoped. Mexico, which was an ally of the Sandinistas and opposed to the U.S. activity in the region influenced Guatemala. All of the Central American democracies were increasingly concerned about Nicaragua’s failure at the negotiating table and the increasingly militaristic posture of both the Sandinistas and the United States. The democracies, particularly Costa Rica and Honduras, found themselves in a difficult position. The United States’ support for the Contras, which implicated the two nations in the Contra war increased tension with Nicaragua. Because of this, Nicaragua had increasingly militarized, tightened their grip internally, and brought ICJ cases against both Honduras and Costa Rica. These U.S. allies were fearful of Sandinista aggression, concerned about guerrillas, but unable to say ‘no’ to the increasingly adventuresome United States.

Following the House of Representatives approval of aid for the Contras in the form of $70 million in lethal aid and $30 in non-lethal aid, the leaders of the “core three” Central American democracies expressed concern, but also cautious support for the United States’ policy...
of using military pressure to force a peace that involved fundamental democratic change in Nicaragua. The Central American democracies felt slighted by the earlier Contadora peace talks because major Latin states, particularly Mexico, tended to ignore their interests. By summer of 1986, the leaders of El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras felt that the process favored Nicaragua. For this reason, the Central American democracies exercised their agency and aligned at least privately with the United States’ policy of using war for peace. They did not fully endorse the administration’s approach, but the opportunity to place Central American states at the fore of diplomacy in the region helped draw them together in a weak and tentative relationship.

Following the House vote, the “core three” expressed a legitimate fear of Sandinista aggression. In early July, Habib was back in Central America. On July 10, Habib was pleased at comments made by Arias to a large group of reporters. Pressure from the United States forced Arias to balk at a bilateral border agreement with Nicaragua and adopt a position more in tune with will of the United States, and he appeared coerced to the position of the Reagan administration. Habib noted that President Arias was “more helpful than in the past” for telling reporters that “the U.S. Congress was merely responding to Sandinista aggression and repression when it approved assistance to the resistance.”

President Azcona of Honduras and President Duarte of El Salvador, the two closest supporters of the United States, both expressed deep concern to the ambassador that the Sandinistas, in the backdrop of the House vote, were assuming an increasingly hardline position and that they feared further escalation from Nicaragua. Increasingly nervous that the United

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States’ escalation might further threaten El Salvador, Duarte sought reaffirmation that the Reagan administration would continue to send support to his country, which struggled to fight the Sandinista-backed insurgency. The Honduran leadership was, like El Salvador, concerned that the approval of the Contra aid package would lead to Nicaraguan military and terrorist responses. The commander of Azcona’s armed forces, General Regalado, expressed his concern that the Honduran government had “intelligence that when the Contra activity begins to pick up, the Sandinistas will react by initiating terrorist actions in Honduras.”

The “core three” Central American states felt little choice but to support the war for peace policy of the United States against an increasingly hostile Nicaragua, but they also feared that an expanded war might be a consequence of the continual efforts of the Reagan administration to increase military pressure against Nicaragua.

In the summer of 1986, the “core three” Central American states moved cautiously into the United States’ camp. All of the leaders faced problems and expressed concerns with Nicaragua, but also feared that the United States’ surrogate war might result in an expanded conflict. Costa Rica and Honduras were angry for Nicaragua filing a case against them with the ICJ for their complicity in allowing the Contra guerrillas to use their territory to launch strikes into Nicaragua. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, fearful of an expanded war, began a closer regulation of Contra activities within his territory. At the demand of the United States, Costa Rica did not accept the bilateral border agreement, but the Arias government did begin to police the guerrilla activity more thoroughly. Likewise, President Duarte of El Salvador was continuing a war against Sandinista supported guerrillas in his country. The “core three” states, by summer 1986 (July 1986)

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of 1986 were cautious supporters of the Reagan administration’s policy. The United States’ policy implicated its territories in a cycle of escalating hostilities and with Nicaragua increasingly isolated and intransigent against the U.S. war, the “core three” states had little choice but to align with the Reagan administration. Following these developments, they shelved the peace process and waited for the new military aid package for the Contras to begin to place the kind of pressure on Nicaragua that would force them to disarm and reach an agreement that satisfied the Reagan administration’s desire to achieve regime change through a pro-Contra democratization. The core three states wanted peace, they did not want an escalation of hostiles, but their position left them little option but to acquiesce to the approach of the United States.

The Contra package was included as a rider attached to the military construction bill for 1987. Congress authorized lethal aid to the Contras with only a few exceptions. First, while American personnel could train Contra guerrillas, they could not do so within twenty miles of the Nicaraguan border, and they could not enter Nicaragua. Second, the aid was scheduled for three installments, $40 million immediately, then $20 million in October 15 (released only if negotiations were not possible), and $40 million on February 15, 1987. In about six weeks the Senate, amid threats of filibuster, narrowly approved a call for cloture and voted to approve the

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measure by the predicted margin of 53 to 47. The administration’s war on terrorism against Nicaragua was well underway, and this vote represented a long sought shift in Congress.

Since the outset of the Reagan administration’s surrogate war against Nicaragua in 1981, opponents had challenged the White House that its policy represented the dangerous potential to repeat the catastrophe of the Vietnam War. During the majority of Reagan’s first term the administration defined the conflict in the guise of Cold War containment, and this rationale found limited support in Congress. However, after the emergence of international terrorism as an expanded and relevant security threat, the administration redefined the conflict and this redefinition marginalized the power of the dialogue over the errors of Vietnam. During the final attempts to undermine the Contra aid package in the Senate, Patrick Leahy, Democrat from Vermont, drew on the Vietnam analogy once more when he remarked that “There are going to be ugly scenes on nightly television of dead and maimed civilians, destroyed schools, and hospitals, school buses blown up by mines.” While no member of that body could predict the future, Leahy understood that this legislation equated to the making of war. The Vietnam analogy, used for several years as a way of opposing military support for the Contras, was powerful, but amid a new war on terrorism, this language no longer resonated the way it did during Reagan’s first term. Although this was still a divisive issue, the administration had managed to shift the dialogue over the conflict.


During the summer of 1986, a *New York Times* reporter gained access to a Contra rebel base. The image painted by the journalist was vivid. He interviewed Contra leaders and observed the pallets of supplies destined to be air dropped to guerrilla units inside Nicaragua. Military leaders made plans for ordering new supplies and prepared to launch offensive operations into Nicaragua. At this base, whose existence the Honduran government publicly denied, there was a military hospital and all the signs of an already brutal war. The report documented those with amputations and injured child soldiers, including a fifteen-year-old girl who had over a year of combat experience. This was a war, and the Reagan administration continually pressed for its escalation.\(^\text{46}\)

The Reagan administration’s reliance on a military oriented war on terrorism carried significant consequences. Some of these consequences were for the people of Central America. The conflict left thousands displaced, maimed, or killed. Another was growing tension among neighboring states increasingly threatened by a militarized Nicaragua backed into a corner by the aggression of the United States. The unabashed aggression of the United States, however, also carried significant consequences for the administration’s own policy. On October 6, 1986, something happened that marked the demise of the administration’s efforts.

On Monday October 6, 1986, a U.S.-built C-123 transport aircraft entered Nicaraguan airspace. The transport carried military supplies for the Contras operating within Nicaraguan territory. Shortly after entering Nicaraguan airspace, the Sandinista air defenses shot the plane down. Of the four-man crew, three died. The only survivor parachuted safely to the ground and the Sandinista armed forces took him captive. The United States Congress, the American public,

and the international community, were shocked to learn that the survivor was a 45 year-old American from Marinette, Wisconsin name Eugene Hasenfus. Two of the three dead were also United States citizens. While Congress had recently authorized lethal support to the Contras, the Reagan administration was never to allow any U.S. citizens to operate militarily within the sovereign borders of Nicaragua.\(^47\) Over the course of the following weeks and months, the incident marked the beginning of revelations eventually known as the Iran-Contra Affair. In Central America the Reagan administration’s continual insistence on ignoring the accepted bounds of international behavior dealt a fatal blow to its policy.

The downing of Eugene Hasenfus’s C-123 transport plane marked the end for the Reagan administration’s offensive war on terrorism against Nicaragua. This event represented the consequences of an arrogant policy that placed military measures before diplomacy and did so with little concern for the norms of international behavior or for the oversight of Congress. The administration’s offensive policy of regime change in Nicaragua relied on Congressional backing and support of the Central American leaders. The scandal critically wounded the administration’s war on terrorism.\(^48\)

Shortly after Hasenfus’s downing the Wisconsin resident testified that he was working as part of an elaborate CIA directed program to drop supplies to transnational guerrillas operating illegally inside Nicaraguan territory.\(^49\) Despite the escalated U.S.-led war, few in the United


States, Latin America, or Europe were prepared to accept a policy that so clearly violated the sovereignty of another nation. In the coming months, the congressional investigation following the Hasenfus capture led to one of the most damaging political scandals in the nation’s history. The Iran-Contra affair seized the spotlight. President Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George Shultz came through the controversy with their careers intact, but the impetus for their offensive against Nicaragua was lost with that C-123 on that Monday in October.

Following the development of the Iran-Contra scandal, however, Arias had a new opportunity to act as an agent and find an avenue for peace in Central America. The United States policy with Nicaragua was to use war to force the Sandinistas to agree to terms that the Reagan administration desired. The Reagan administration remained uncompromising. The United States demanded that the Nicaraguan government allow the Contras to participate and reform the Sandinista government. This goal was the most efficient way that Washington felt it could achieve the effect of regime change in Nicaragua. For this reason, the strength of war was the primary objective for the administration. Arias, on the other hand, disagreed with this policy. At the beginning of 1987, Arias revealed his own plan for peace in Central America.

While the Iran-Contra scandal festered on Capitol Hill, Arias seized on his opportunity. The democratically elected leader of Costa Rica went to the United States and met with Democrats in Congress, including Senator Chris Dodd who supported his pursuit of a Central American peace led by Costa Rica. On February 25, 1987, Ambassador Habib reported to Washington on his perception of Arias’ plan and his motivations. Habib believed that the plan was inadequate because it did not do enough to guarantee the disarmament of Nicaragua and the incorporation of the Contras into the Nicaraguan political process. Habib was increasingly
skeptical of Arias who he alleged possessed a “distorted and one-sided view of the American political scene” that congressional leaders like Chris Dodd (D) gave him. Arias walked a tightrope: on the one hand, the domestic driven leader wanted to achieve peace as quickly and efficiently as possible, but on the other hand, he felt compelled to appease the increasingly disgruntled Reagan administration.

To do this, Arias played two cards: first, he promoted a peace agreement that he hoped and believed would succeed and second, he attempted to reassure Habib that he expected his plan to fail. The U.S. ambassador understood this and reported to Washington his distrust of Arias’ intentions by claiming, “at least this [failure of his initiative] is what he says he expects.” Habib felt that the plan was an attempt by Arias to take the spotlight, and he was concerned that the proposal “could seriously complicate our [U.S.] policy.” However, Habib also understood that the Iran-Contra investigation had seriously damaged the position of the United States and that for this reason he advised the administration not to openly oppose the proposal and hope for the best arrangement possible. As Arias developed a plan for a Central American peace deal, the Reagan administration sat on the sidelines, less able than at any point to control the outcome.

The Arias peace plan was a Central American plan for the Central American states. Unlike the original Contadora plan that involved many Latin American states, like Mexico, Arias’ plan was a five-power agreement among Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The five Central American states would vote on the agreement at a second meeting in Esquipulas, Guatemala, scheduled for the summer of 1987. The Arias plan was one of the worst scenarios for the Reagan administration, however. Following the escalation of its

offensive war on terrorism at the beginning of 1986, the United States hoped to use a forceful diplomacy to make the Central American democracies serve the policy of war for peace. During the summer of 1986, it was clear that Guatemala was not on board with any policy that sought to isolate and attack Nicaragua. President Cerezo of Guatemala influenced by Mexico could not go along with the Reagan administration’s attempt to use the Central American democracies to surround Nicaragua and bring unyielding force upon the Sandinistas. Without Guatemala, the Reagan administration still felt that they had a winning policy so long as Costa Rica stayed on board with El Salvador and Honduras. However, the emergence of the Iran-Contra scandal mortally wounded the administration’s policy and Arias used this opportunity to disassociate himself from the United States’ policy. 51

The Reagan administration was highly critical of the Arias plan because it placed little emphasis on the need to provide security by forcing the Sandinistas to disarm or to enter into a direct and open dialogue with the guerrillas. The plan was a rejection of the administration’s original policy of using the Central American democracies to isolate and make war against Nicaragua. Over the next year, Arias tried to reassure the Reagan administration that he was certain that Nicaragua would reject his plan or would fail to fulfill the plan after signing. Arias insisted that if the Sandinistas fell short of the agreement then the United States would have the necessary justification to return to aggressive measures of coercion. 52 Arias knew that the United States’ position was increasingly unpopular. Following Hasenfus’s capture and the emergence of


the Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration was increasingly isolated. No major European or Latin American power supported Reagan’s policy of aiding the Contras, and the U.S. Congress was increasingly reluctant to provide aid to the Contras when the program was up for renewal in November 1987. Arias stepped into this situation as an opportunity to make peace and to show the world that Costa Rica was a leader in the process.

The only two governments that remained strong supporters of the Reagan administration were El Salvador and Honduras. Both of these governments joined the United States in opposing the Arias plan. However, these two governments did not guarantee that they would not sign Arias’ proposal. A significant reason for this was that the developing Iran-Contra scandal left them feeling vulnerable. President Duarte of El Salvador and President Azcona of Honduras were concerned that the Iran-Contra issue left the Reagan administration less capable than a year before and that the United States was on the eve of potentially pulling out and leaving the Sandinista government unchanged. While Ambassador Habib tried to convince Azcona and Duarte otherwise, he could not change their concerned perspectives. After the February 15 meeting with Arias, the Honduran president asked to delay the Esquipulas summit of the five Central American states long enough for the Contras to leave Honduras and station themselves entirely inside Nicaragua. Arias, desiring a quick solution, felt he made a significant compromise when he agreed to this delay. By June, the Contras operated largely within Nicaraguan territory and Azcona did not want the guerrillas to return to Honduras. The Reagan administration was unlikely to regain a capability of coming to the aid of Honduras and President Azcona did not want the Contras return to his country and leave his administration holding the burden of dealing

with the transnational army. Both Azcona and Duarte understood that the United States was unlikely to provide the kind of support that the Reagan administration pledged verbally and they did not want to be left alone in the face of an agreement and potentially vulnerable to a Sandinista offensive unchecked by United States power.\textsuperscript{54}

In spring and summer 1987, Habib and Arias continued to struggle over the peace proposal. The United States demanded that the Arias plan needed significant changes in order to assure that the Contras remain viable if Nicaragua should renege on the agreement, and that there was verifiability in the form of UN inspections to assure Nicaraguan compatibility. In June, meetings between Arias and Habib grew tense on a number of occasions. In his attempts to promote peace while simultaneously appeasing the United States, he again insisted to Habib that he hoped for the plans failure, either with Nicaragua as the only Central American government refusing to sign or with Nicaragua’s reneging on the agreement proposed at Esquipulas. Arias implied to the U.S. diplomat that in such an eventuality Nicaragua would appear in the wrong and the Reagan administration might have another chance to use military pressure to secure concessions from the Sandinistas. To Habib, Arias insisted that he sought to use his plan as a way of exposing the Sandinistas. However, the United States did not trust Arias whom Habib called “stubborn.” Habib recognized that Arias was emboldened by his consultations with European leaders and opposition leaders in U.S. Congress to promote the proposal and oppose efforts by the Reagan administration to increase hardline military oriented measures.\textsuperscript{55} The


Habib mission insisted that Arias should make necessary changes that would satisfy the demands of both El Salvador and Honduras, but Arias consistently retorted that such changes would result in a failure at Esquipulas by dividing the Central American states and resulting in Guatemala and Nicaragua voting against the measure.\textsuperscript{56}

During the June meeting, Arias was irritated by Habib, who wrangled with him over the terms of the agreements. Arias insisted that the United States, following the Iran-Contra affair, was isolated and that the United States’ intentional usage of the transnational guerrillas had challenged the norms of international behavior and was widely opposed throughout Latin America and the world. Further, the administration’s manipulation of Costa Rica in the previous year angered Arias. He exclaimed that the Reagan administration had “used Costa Rica.” Arias, in a position of strength, insisted that if the upcoming Esquipulas summit failed, he would “walk away” and the United States “could invade Nicaragua.” Arias emphatically asked Habib to stay out of the Esquipulas summit. He tried to reassure Habib that he was confident of the proposal’s failure and that when it failed the United States could return to its military efforts to pressure the Sandinistas. However, Arias exclaimed that regardless of whether his efforts succeeded or failed that the United States should not go back to its policy of support for the Contras. The use of those transnational guerrillas threatened the region, violated international and implicated states like Honduras and Costa Rica while the Reagan administration avoided the full blame that was

\textsuperscript{56} “Ambassador Habib’s Meeting with President Arias,” June 1987, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
Arias felt that the Reagan administration had bullied and used the smaller Central American states.

As the Esquipulas meeting loomed, the Reagan administration, embattled on the domestic front and powerless on the diplomatic side, could do little more than watch its original strategy of using offensive military pressure fade in favor of a Central American peace agreement of which the administration was highly skeptical. Prior to the meeting in Guatemala that August, the administration secretly hoped that the Arias plan would fail. However, on August 7, 1987, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras all signed the Treaty of Esquipulas. Following the agreement, the Sandinistas agreed to schedule free and fair elections held in 1990 in accordance with the Nicaraguan Constitution. While sporadic cases of Contra violence continued over the next year, the guerrillas laid their arms down and joined political negotiations with the Sandinistas. The Reagan administration and supporters like Jack Kemp and Newt Gingrich were appalled because the agreement failed to facilitate a necessary change of the Nicaraguan government and potentially allowed the consolidation of the Sandinista regime. The Reagan administration, however, was on the wrong side of history. The world celebrated the agreement and it earned Oscar Arias the noble peace prize in 1987. The Costa Rican leader took advantage of the weakness brought on by excessive adventurism by the Reagan administration and succeeded in creating a diplomatic solution that the United States preferred to derail.

Often scholars speak of the Reagan administration’s activities in Central America as though the United States exclusively dictated the terms. Greg Grandin is among those that assert an absolute power to neo-conservative policy makers in Washington. The Reagan administration

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did exert tremendous influence and will in this story. The administration went to tremendous lengths: they bullied allies, manufactured military violence and encouraged an escalation of the conflict, and used propaganda to build a coalition in Congress and Central America that made the offensive against Nicaragua possible. However, the capture of Hasenfus and the emergence of the Iran-Contra scandal destroyed this body of work. After these revelations, a majority of Congress lost faith in the justice and legality of the administration’s policy and moved against renewing aid to the Contras. Likewise, the loss of congressional support destroyed the loose Central American coalition. Despite the tendency on the part of scholars to emphasize the will of the Reagan administration, leaders in Central America carried through the endgame.

Oscar Arias of Costa Rica observed the Reagan administration’s policy as mortally wounded following the emergence of the Iran-Contra scandal. Previously, the United States coerced Arias into supporting its policy, but when the opportunity emerged, the Costa Rican leader acted. With the Central American alliance shattered and the Reagan administration’s hands tied, Duarte and Azcona believed that the United States would desert them. El Salvador and Honduras, strong supporters of the administration’s policy, had little choice but to go along with any peace agreement that developed. The Reagan administration constructed and deployed a new offensive war on terrorism, but this policy relied on the cooperation of Central American leaders and the authorization of Congress. When the Iran-Contra affair, a consequence of the United States’ war on terrorism, emerged it augmented their ability to act in Central America, leaders like Oscar Arias exercised their agency and showed that regional actors were most capable of brokering the best peace possible.
In 1990, elections in Nicaragua resulted in the Sandinistas losing its majority control. The new president was Violetta Chamorro, the widow of La Prensa editor Pedro Chamorro whose murder in 1978 sparked the beginning of the Nicaraguan revolution. However, the Sandinistas remained a politically viable party in Nicaraguan politics. They suffered from the domestic policies during the embattled 1980s, but the political party and its leaders remained strong and intact. A decade later, the Sandinistas and Daniel Ortega again rose to the majority in Nicaraguan politics. Since 2000, the Nicaraguan people have elected Ortega to the presidency twice. Today the Nicaraguan state, under Ortega, has built a close relationship with nations that the United States alleges are potential state terrorist threats, Iran and Venezuela.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration created an offensive war on terrorism. The policy challenged the norms of international behavior by asserting a full range of unilateral military measures to use against sovereign states that the White House alleged were state sponsors of international terrorism. This policy hinged on isolating, threatening, and provoking Nicaragua into the kind of military actions that could justify the United States’ continued support for a transnational guerrilla army that no Central American government or the United States Congress could comfortably recognize. The policy hinged on two general components that authorized the administration’s right to a military oriented approach: first that the situation was urgent, and second that the administration’s policy was legitimate. The Reagan administration achieved this through an elaborate propaganda campaign that controlled the dialogue over the conflict with Nicaragua by constructing the Sandinista threat as criminal, while simultaneously depicting the United States’ policy as supported by democratic regional states and groups. In reality this
program was a façade, it was an elaborate program designed to legitimatize a policy of regime change. Public diplomacy was the vehicle for a fatally flawed military oriented war on terrorism.

The U.S. policy with Nicaragua flaunted standards of international behavior, particularly respect for national sovereignty, and this unabashed policy brought negative consequences. The covert war that the United States conducted created thousands of refugees and casualties. It also unleashed a political scandal in the United States that made any continued pursuit of this offensive war on terrorism impossible. The political damage caused by this offensive opened the door for Central Americans to step in and create a peace that only they could make. This is a story of the shortcomings of solutions that are offensive and militaristic in nature. It provides a lesson for future administrations, which may need to deal with the threat of terrorism: that is, fighting a war on terrorism via aggressive offensive military oriented measures often creates many more problems than solutions. The true solutions rest with the people and the leadership in the region. Central Americans created solutions and cleaned up a mess created by a militaristic and condescending approach from the United States.
Epilogue

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration reacted to a terrorism crisis from a perspective conditioned by the Cold War. Despite pleas from officials in the Office of Counterterrorism, Parker Borg and Robert Oakley, to approach the crisis multilaterally and diplomatically, the Reagan administration’s top officials could not escape the Cold War. A majority of the administration defined the world along the binary of free democracy and totalitarian communism and insisted that the best way to address this was through the application of hardline measures. It was this point, the use of hardline and military oriented measures that Borg and Oakley resisted so strongly. George Shultz and George H. W. Bush created the administration’s doctrine that terrorism represented a threat from the Radical-Left, which was a construct that presented a united front of Marxist-revolutionary regimes, Communist-bloc states, and nationalist Middle Eastern powers. These states the administration believed sought to expand tyranny and undermine the freedom seeking United States. Bush and Shultz insisted that force was the most efficient tool at the United States’ disposal to address a global terrorist conspiracy. The Reagan administration’s response to the surge of terrorist attacks in Central America and elsewhere in the mid-1980s demonstrated that U.S. policy makers were looking at the new terrorist enemies through the old Cold War lens.

International terrorism was a concept created and defined by the Reagan administration. The administration considered terrorism an extension of anti-American and leftist threats during the Cold War. However, because of the fundamental change that the terrorism threat represented,
the Reagan administration re-conceptualized the manner in which the United States reacted to this new communist-terrorist threat. The United States pursued offensive measures designed to fight a new Cold War characterized by the emergence of a global terrorist alliance, the Radical-Left, allegedly dedicated to employing the psychologically devastating weapon of terrorism against the free world. The primary methods that the Reagan administration developed to combat alleged state sponsors of terrorism relied on a new framework of intervention that the terrorism task force put into action. This framework involved three aspects of coercion: economic, diplomatic and a wide variety of military pressure. The United States refused to engage in fair negotiations with an alleged sponsor of terrorism. Instead, the policy of the United States was to provide ultimatums that carried consequences if ignored. The consequences were crippling economic sanctions, and a wide-range of military measures. Military pressure was a critical part of this new offensive program, and it involved military and naval maneuvers designed to provoke a targeted state, covert warfare, support for insurgent movements, and direct U.S. military actions in the form of air strikes or naval mining and clandestine operations of sabotage. These were the critical elements of an offensive framework of intervention, which the United States developed in the 1980s and continues to use against alleged state sponsors of terrorism.

The critical components of diplomacy in this new counterterrorism campaign involved not just ultimatums and non-negotiation. It was also rooted in an invasive and powerful public diplomacy or propaganda campaign designed to use terrorism as a linguistic weapon that criminalized enemies and created domestic fear and urgency. The war on terrorism today exhibits one of the most dangerous legacies of the Reagan administration’s counterterrorism program, which involved the use of an exaggerated dialogue of the terrorism threat to create and
exploit societal fear. The events of the 1980s were not nearly as invasive or widely developed as in the aftermath of the 2001 terror attacks. However, the roots of this issue are in the 1980s and with the Reagan administration’s first employment of the language of terrorism as a tool of social control that hinged on creating a climate of fear capable of justifying a more offensive form of interventionism.

In 2006, historian Lloyd Ambrosius wrote an influential article that appeared in *Diplomatic History*. Ambrosius engaged a group of highly esteemed contemporaries like John Lewis Gaddis, Melvin Leffler and David Kennedy on the issue of the place of the Bush Doctrine in the history of U.S. international relations. The central question that Ambrosius’ article engaged was, just how unique was George W. Bush’s strategy of pre-emption? Judged from the scale of the means applied by George W. Bush in Iraq, Ambrosius insisted that this doctrine was unprecedented. This dissertation adds to this discussion by insisting that while the overt and conventional nature of the Bush administration’s preemptive action against Iraq was unique, the principle from which it was organized possessed deeper roots. The Reagan administration’s conflict with Nicaragua and the world during the 1980s provided the foundation for the Bush administration’s policy. The Reagan administration established and put into action a counterterrorism policy that insisted that the best method for dealing with state sponsors of international terrorism was through the application of offensive military measures that involved the use of unilateral and pre-emptive applications of force, economic sanctions, and high-handed unilateral diplomacy. The Reagan administration created a framework for dealing with alleged state sponsors of terrorism that challenged the norms of international behavior. It was this
example that provided the backdrop from which the Bush administration acted in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹

In the 1980s, as in the first decade of the 21st century, the United States possessed alternatives to the use of military force. These alternatives were, during President Reagan’s time, articulated most clearly by two officials in the Office of Counterterrorism, Robert Oakley and Parker Borg. Despite an insistence that military measures provided a way to show alleged state sponsors of terrorism the seriousness of the United States, both Oakley and Borg insisted that the use of force would only make matters worse. These two argued that the United States should address terrorism with economic, political, and diplomatic measures that involved improved cooperation with allies, improved intelligence and the recognition that military approaches were not capable of stopping terrorism. Oakley and Borg realized that terrorism was a problem that was too elusive for an offensive military policy to stamp out. For this reason, they sought to curtail the application of military force and pursue legal, diplomatic, and intelligence-oriented solutions instead. The Reagan administration ignored Borg and Oakley’s criticisms. The Reagan offensive against Nicaragua resulted in more problems than solutions and left the mess to the Central Americans to clean up themselves. History tells that Washington policy makers ought to heed the criticism of Borg and Oakley that military measures to combat international terrorism create more problems than solutions. In the future, the United States should pursue the war on terrorism through diplomacy, intelligence, and legal measures rather than through military means

as the case of Nicaragua shows that the application of an offensive and hardline oriented war on terrorism is fundamentally problematic.
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