

THE BOLAND AMENDMENTS AND THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY IN NICARAGUA: AN INEVITABLE CLASH

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After the Sandinistas seized power from Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in July 1979, Somoza's controversial National Guard remained in the area, and linked up with other opposition groups to form the Contras [counter-revolutionaries], with the intention of overthrowing the Sandinistas.¹ The Reagan Administration, seizing a chance for a Cold War victory by removing a hostile Marxist government, funded and supported the Contras, whose numbers grew dramatically in the early 1980s.² In 1981 and 1982, the Contras conducted raids on Sandinista patrols and hit and run attacks on communities in the north of Nicaragua.³ These operations were characterized by human rights abuses: rape, looting, and the murder of civilians.⁴

Members of the United States Congress, led by Rep. Edward Boland (Dem. - Mass.), became skeptical of the Contra War's objectives, which officially were supposed to be limited to stopping arms shipments from Nicaragua to the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. When two important bridges inside Nicaragua (which had nothing to do with interdicting arms shipments to El Salvador) were blown up, Rep. Boland attached an amendment to the FY 1983 Defense Appropriations Bill. The Boland Amendment (Boland I) prohibited U.S. aid to paramilitary groups " for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua."⁵

The Reagan Administration stepped up the pressure, making diminutive Nicaragua a top Administration priority.⁶ The President framed the issue in Cold War terms, bringing up the problem of having a Soviet military base four hundred miles from Texas.⁷ He threatened to hold Congress responsible if Central America fell to Communist rule, asking, "Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligations?"⁸

In all events, the Contra War did not go well for the Administration during 1984. In April 1984, Congress learned that the CIA had mined Nicaraguan harbors three months earlier, without expressly informing the intelligence committees of such an undertaking, as required by law.⁹ The Congress was also made aware of a 1983 psychological warfare manual, written by the CIA, which advocated neutralizing local Sandinista officials (assassinating foreign officials is also against the law).¹⁰ To make matters worse, Nicaragua took the United States to the World Court with complaints about the mining of its harbor and U.S. support for the Contras, but the Administration refused to accept the World Court's jurisdiction.¹¹

Thus, on the Contra war issue, the tide of opinion turned against the Reagan Administration in the summer of 1984. Given the pursuit of the Contra War by the Reagan Administration, the actions of the CIA and the actions of the Contras themselves, the second Boland Amendment was almost inevitable. The House adopted Boland II, which prohibited U.S. intelligence agencies from supplying or spending money on the Contras,¹² forcing the Republican Senate to abandon aid to the Contras, at least in the short term.¹³ The Senate did manage to get \$14 million in supplemental aid, which could only be used after February 1985, and only with the

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1 Clifford Krauss, *Inside Central America: Its People, Its Politics, and Its History* (New York: Summit, 1991), 144-147.

2 Kathryn Roth and Richard Sobel, "Chronology of Events and Public Opinion" *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 30.

3 Krauss 148-150.

4 Krauss 148-150.

5 Roth 30.

6 Krauss 149.

7 Roth 31.

8 Roth 31.

9 Roth 33.

10 Krauss 149-150.

11 Roth 33.

12 Roth 34.

13 Roth 34.

authorization of a Joint Resolution of Congress.¹⁴

When Ronald Reagan was elected in November 1980, the Contra War became all but inevitable given Reagan's world-view. Jimmy Carter had viewed the Sandinista revolution as a popular one, and had felt that the best way to influence Nicaragua toward cooperation with America was to extend favor in the form of economic assistance. But for Reagan, "the problem was Soviet expansion, and the solution was American power,"¹⁵ and he preferred the use of force against recalcitrant Nicaraguans. Reagan viewed the stability of Central America as vital to American security. After witnessing the United States relinquish her interests in the Panama Canal Treaty, he was not about to let his country be humiliated by the possibility of a Communist threat in Central America.¹⁶ The Reagan Administration made two crucial decisions in light of this view of the Nicaraguan threat. The first was to not try very hard or very long to obtain a diplomatic solution to U.S. concerns in the region.¹⁷ In the summer of 1981, the Administration offered the Sandinistas a proposal which would allow the Administration to resume the aid that had been canceled in April, but the Administration then canceled the funds it had promised to hold in suspension.¹⁸ Administration personnel could not agree on the proposal,¹⁹ and the Administration interpreted complaints by the Nicaraguan government about the aid cancellation and military exercises off its coast as a rejection of the proposal.²⁰ By the fall, "the Administration concluded that it had tried negotiations."²¹

The Reagan Administration seemed more disposed to a threatening posture in Nicaragua than to communication, as evidenced by its choice of ambassador to Managua.²² First it placed a former terrorist expert from the State Department in the post, then replaced him with a cold war warrior, the former ambassador to Soviet bloc Hungary.²³ Other evidence of the Administration's disposition was the White Paper, released only a month into Reagan's presidency, which called Nicaraguan support of the Salvadoran guerrillas a "Kremlin-directed conspiracy to take over the world."²⁴

Given this perspective, the Administration must have found it painless to make the second, more crucial decision. The decision to support and fund the Contras was a result of the Administration's view of Soviet power and of Nicaragua's importance to the United States. It was to have significant impact on the direction of American foreign policy towards Central America in the 1980s.²⁵ The decision was made in the fall of 1981, and in November, Reagan approved \$19 million in Contra aid.²⁶

Once the Administration decided to secretly fund the Contras, and especially after that decision became public--in February 1982, President Reagan demonstrated his commitment to the Contras by framing the issue in Cold War terms in a speech to a Joint Session of Congress--it became very difficult for the Administration to back down.²⁷ One commentator said, "Republicans revel in the patriotic rhetoric of fighting Communists and supporting [so called] freedom fighters'.²⁸ To back down might have appeared like a capitulation.

14 Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1987), 230.

15 Pastor 230-231.

16 Pastor 233-236.

17 Pastor 234-235.

18 Pastor 234-235.

19 Pastor 235.

20 Pastor 234-235.

21 Pastor 235.

22 Pastor 235-236.

23 Noam Chomsky, Morris Morley, Michael Parenti, and James Petras, *The Reagan Administration and Nicaragua: How Washington Constructs Its Cause for Counterrevolution in Central America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1987), 1.

24 Pastor 231-238.

25 Roth 27.

26 Pastor 237-238.

27 Pastor 260.

28 Krauss 147.

However, the Administration found itself on a collision course with Congress over the issue of Contra aid, because of CIA action in support of the Contras and the actions of the Contras themselves. It was in March 1982 that the Contras, led by CIA agents, blew up two economically important bridges inside Nicaragua. Since the original National Security Directive only authorized the Contras to interdict arms shipments to El Salvador, Congress became skeptical of Contra objectives, reasserted itself, and passed Boland I.²⁹

Reports of Contra abuses became widespread. The press reported that the Contras were killing civilians, including teachers, coffee pickers, and health workers, during their raids. In 1982, a Contra commander, nicknamed Suicide, "went on a month long binge of murder and rape." And in 1983, the Contras killed fourteen peasants, raping and slitting the throats of two women and a sixteen year old girl.³⁰ Congress and the American people were appalled, but public opinion was not, at the time, a significant factor in the formation of policy on Nicaragua.

The actions of the CIA did not help the Administration's stand on aid to the Contras. The mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the psychological warfare manual, which had advocated the assassination of Sandinista officials, violated both domestic and international law, and Americans like to believe that their government acts lawfully in the international arena. The actions of the Contras and the CIA between 1982 and 1984 contributed to a widespread distrust within the Congress about the Administration's foreign policy objectives, and led to a reassertion of Congress's demand to participate in foreign policy making.

Congress supported Administration foreign policy in a meaningful way between 1981 and 1984 (and again from 1985 to 1987), despite a growth in negative public opinion. Shortly after the Administration's Nicaraguan policy became public in February 1982, a Harris poll found that 64% of the public disapproved of the Administration's handling of the Nicaraguan situation, yet Congress approved \$19 million in classified aid to the Contras.³¹ In November 1983, when Congress approved \$24 million in outright military aid to the Contras, another Harris poll found that only 29% of the public agreed with the Administration's policy in Nicaragua.³² William LeoGrande found that in the House of Representatives, there was no correlation between individual representatives' voting records on Nicaraguan policy and public opinion in their respective districts.

In conclusion, there were three major factors that led to Congress' decision to adopt the second Boland Amendment. First, the Reagan Administration's worldview and perception of powerplay in Central America, led to a dogged pursuit of a poorly thought-out policy. The administration refused to countenance a Communist victory only a few years after the fall of South Vietnam. This was especially true for the Western Hemisphere, where Cuba was a worrying reminder of America's failure to keep Communism out of her backyard. Second, the actions of the Contras and the CIA in carrying out the Administration's policy in Nicaragua pushed Congress toward Boland II. The secrecy, illegality, and probable immorality of the Contra War helped to prod the American Congress into action.

Congress was forced to act when these two factors came up against the third: Congress' desire to reassert itself vis-a-vis the President and regain power in the formation of foreign policy. After a string of embarrassments, where Congress was shown to be out of touch with hard information on how the Administration was conducting the Contra War, and realizing that it had no control over the war, Congress moved to reassert its powers. The second Boland Amendment, which cut all aid to the Contras from October 10, 1984 to June 12, 1985, was the result of this reassertion of power. The second Boland Amendment led to the Iran-Contra scandal and the downfall of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, his associates and immediate superiors.

²⁹ Krauss 150.

³⁰ William M. LeoGrande, "Did Public Opinion Matter?: The Impact of Opinion on Congressional Support for Ronald Reagan's Nicaraguan Policy." *Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid*, edited by Richard Sobel (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 185.

³¹ Roth 23.

³² LeoGrande 185-186.