

## Human Rights and Democratization: United States Foreign Policy Towards Nicaragua in 1978-1983

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This paper examines United States foreign policy as directed toward Nicaragua, specifically what differences and what similarities in such policy exist between the later Carter administration and the early Reagan administration. It is a short study into the considerations of human rights which motivated foreign policy between the two presidencies. How did these motivations alter the creation of policy toward Nicaragua, and what resulted from such policy? One such motivation, human rights, will be examined against the competing motivation of advancing American influence into Nicaragua and more broadly into Central America. This paper also identifies Nicaragua as a strategically important area, and thus another motivation of both administrations.

The history between Nicaragua and the United States has been one of American interventionism in order to secure American economic interests in the region.<sup>1</sup> Nicaragua is considered to have economic importance for its raw resources and agricultural products, as well as strategic importance; Nicaragua has coastlines on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Because of this geography, the United States first invested money into the country in order to speed up the colonization of California by building docks on both coasts and railroads to connect them.<sup>2</sup> Civil unrest between Nicaraguan political parties led American businessmen to call for the Aid of the US Marine Corps to defend their holdings in 1853, 1857, 1896, 1898, 1899 and 1910.<sup>3</sup> These early interventions were marked by short term goals of search and destroy, where the Marines would land, find their enemy and destroy them, then leave as soon as possible. This pattern changed after President Taft introduced his 'dollar diplomacy' where foreign nations were encouraged to take loans from American financial institutions.<sup>4</sup> Nicaragua took one such loan during a time of heightened political instability, prompting a revolt in 1912 that threatened American interests.

The US Marine Corps was used between 1912 and 1933 to occupy Nicaragua in order to protect American business interests and support American approved puppet governments.<sup>5</sup> Marines now operated out of bases in Nicaragua to seek out rebellious forces in order to ensure that American interests could flourish even as Nicaraguans resented the foreign presence. This resentment created prominence for a particular resistance figure, Augusto César Sandino, who was made locally famous for repeatedly fighting and escaping capture by American and National Guard forces. After his death by execution at the hands of the Nicaraguan National Guard during peace negotiations, Sandino became a hero of the people and a symbol of the struggle for freedom from American oppression. His death would inspire later oppressed Nicaraguans to revolt against their oppressors.

The National Guard was created by the US Marine Corps in 1927 to police the developed

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin D. Parker, Bernard Nietschmann, and Thomas W. Walker, "Nicaragua | Geography, History, & Facts," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nicaragua>.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *The United States Marines in Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1968), 1, <https://archive.org/details/unitedstatesmari00nalt>.

<sup>3</sup> Nalty, *Marines in Nicaragua*, 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Nalty, *Marines in Nicaragua*, 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Nalty, *Marines in Nicaragua*, 7-34.

areas of Nicaragua, freeing up more Marines for anti-rebel operations in the countryside.<sup>6</sup> National Guard forces eventually were also trained to assist Marines in combat operations in the countryside, establishing it as a fully militant arm of the government of Nicaragua. The United States under the presidency of Herbert Hoover changed its diplomatic policy away from interventionism and chose to withdraw the Marine Corps from Nicaragua in 1933, leaving the National Guard to further expand and take up anti-resistance activities for the established government.<sup>7</sup> General Anastasio Somoza Garcia was a politically well-connected figure who carefully maneuvered his way into leadership of the National Guard and eventually the Nicaraguan Presidency. Upon obtaining the role of president he used his National Guard to firmly entrench himself as dictator of the country until his assassination in 1956.<sup>8</sup> The Somoza family would continue this reign until the overthrow of the country by communist rebels in 1979. The power of the National Guard kept the Somoza family in command of Nicaraguan politics and careful appeasement of American political and business interests kept Marines off Nicaraguan soil. To prevent confusion, the Somoza referred to in this paper is Somoza Debayle, who held the presidency from 1967-1979.

### **Policy Motivations Toward Nicaragua**

Human rights were important to Carter from the very beginning of his administration and remained so despite the need to preserve American influence amid a communist takeover. In *White House Diary* and several other Carter memoirs he writes about his desire to promote human rights. Human rights are prominently featured in several of Carter's speeches. In his final State of the Union address he marked out that one of his successes had been to reaffirm American commitment to human rights through his foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

Carter's method of setting foreign policy was through the use of Presidential Review Memorandums (PRMs) and Presidential Directives (PDs). *Presidential Review Memorandum-28* released in May, 1977 laid out the full scope of the human rights objective.<sup>10</sup> Part of the objective focuses on how to use loans from the World Bank and selective aid packages to steer developing governments toward positive human rights outcomes with such positive outcomes aligning with those laid out by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. Issued in 1978, *PD-30* adds additional credibility to human rights being a legitimate goal in foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence for Carter's commitment to human rights is that military intervention was not used as a solution to the Nicaraguan Civil War. By the year 1979, Somoza Debayle earned the hatred of his people through brutal repression carried out across Nicaragua by the National Guard.<sup>12</sup> A communist rebel faction, the Sandinista National Liberation Front

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<sup>6</sup> Nalty, *Marines in Nicaragua*, 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Nalty, *Marines in Nicaragua*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Merrill and Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress; for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1994), 22-28, <https://www.loc.gov/item/94021664/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union Annual Message to the Congress – 1981," transcript by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250760>.

<sup>10</sup> Warren Christopher, *PRM-28*, memorandum, Deputy Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., July 8, 1977, [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/pdf\\_documents/assets/documents/memorandums/prm28.pdf](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/assets/documents/memorandums/prm28.pdf), 62-63, 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Presidential Directive/NSC-30*, The White House, Washington, D.C., February 17, 1978, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd30.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> For National Guard activities, see Tim Merrill and Library of Congress, *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress; for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O.,

(FSLN), named after the folk hero Augusto Sandino, had actively been waging a guerilla war against the dictator and his army since 1961 and gained enough popular support to become a real threat by 1974.<sup>13</sup> The United States under Jimmy Carter decided that a plebiscite, a vote cast by all members of a society, was the best way to peacefully remove Somoza from power and ensure a stable democratic government. Somoza was to step down to allow for a provisional government to arrange elections with the oversight of the Organization of American States (OAS). Carter was frustrated by how resistant Somoza was to the efforts of the OAS to arrange the vote and cut off support to the dictator.<sup>14</sup> Somoza finally agreed to step down if his National Guard would be preserved, a condition that was only narrowly accepted by the US Department of State.<sup>15</sup> After Somoza finally resigned his position and left the country, the Sandinistas occupied Managua without resistance and the National Guard was left without a government to support them. This time the Marine Corps was not sent to change the ruling party.

The United States would organize \$130 million in aid packages and another \$260 million in loans to the American supported Junta of National Reconstruction between 1979 and 1982 for Nicaragua.<sup>16</sup> The Junta was made up of multiple political parties, both the FSLN and those who supported American interests, and was meant to provide a peaceful transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.<sup>17</sup> Public support was not on the side of the United States or anything tied to Americans. Because the Junta was an American suggestion, it did not have the desired effect of balancing power away from the Sandinistas, who formalized relations between their government and the Soviet Union in March, 1980, in a deal that authorized the exchange of professionals, culture, and ideological materials between both nations.<sup>18</sup> Formal relations with the USSR allowed the FSLN to become the only voice that mattered in Nicaraguan politics, edging out other voices.

At the end of the Carter presidency, Nicaragua was not one of the listed human rights successes spoken of in the 1981 State of the Union Address. Successful human rights missions included guiding Jamaica toward democratic elections and the signing of a 'Charter of Conduct' affirming the importance of human rights by Costa Rica and other countries.<sup>19</sup> Carter does not go so far as to call his efforts in Nicaragua to be a failure, but he does say that it has much development to do and that the United States would continue to aid in that development. Ronald Reagan ended aid to Nicaragua that year.

Reagan spoke much less often about human rights than his predecessor, but he spoke

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1994), 26, 32–33; For local feelings toward the Guard, see Tim Merrill and Library of Congress, *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress; for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1994), 197–198.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill, *Nicaragua: Country Study*, 197–198.

<sup>14</sup> Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 262–263, 333.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Pezzullo, message from the White House Situation Room to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Washington, DC, June 30, 1979, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, vol. 15, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v15/d251>.

<sup>16</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *Nicaragua Under the Sandinistas: A Bill of Particulars*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1984. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85M00363R000801790005-6.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Riding, "U.S. Presses Effort to Broaden Makeup of Nicaragua Junta," *New York Times*, July 6, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/07/06/archives/us-presses-effort-to-broaden-makeup-of-nicaragua-junta-latin.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Karen N. Brutents and P. Smolsky, "CPSU CC Resolution, 14 March 1980," *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/cpsu-cc-resolution-14-march-1980>.

<sup>19</sup> Jimmy Carter, *The State of the Union Annual Message to the Congress*, January 16, 1981, *The American Presidency Project*, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, University of California, Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-state-the-union-annual-message-the-congress>.

more often about spreading democracy as a means to increase human freedom. Reagan stated in his 1982 speech to the British Parliament that authoritarian states which are friendly to the United States have become more accommodating toward human rights, but it was American support of Somoza which allowed his National Guard to violate human rights for so long a time.<sup>20</sup> If it were really true that such regimes become more open to advancing human rights protections then surely it would be in the best interest of the United States to continue sending aid to Nicaragua in order to allow such change to take place. Reagan verbally attacked the Soviet Union in another speech in 1984, stating that freedom is something that the Soviet Union does not value as it works against the rights of the religious.<sup>21</sup> On the subject of Central America in a speech on human rights, all countries in the region except for Nicaragua are mentioned positively for allowing democratic voting to take place. Nicaragua is referred to negatively for suppressing political and religious freedoms.<sup>22</sup>

The Reagan administration would attempt to make it appear as if human rights were a primary consideration in foreign policy but would repeatedly fall short of that objective. The FSLN had begun a campaign of forced relocation and violence against the native Miskito people. The Sandinista government had begun to try and alter the Miskito's way of life, which earned resentment from the native peoples and thus began organized resistance to the unwanted reforms.<sup>23</sup> Due to anti-communist rebels crossing from Honduras into Nicaragua, several native communities were forcibly relocated away from the border in 1981, which led to numerous violations of human rights against the native civilians. As early as December 1981 the CIA was aware of the campaign against the Miskitos by Sandinista soldiers.<sup>24</sup> CIA reports identified the counterrevolutionary activities as well as the repression suffered by native peoples.<sup>25</sup>

When the Reagan administration took up this cause, it called on Native Americans within the United States to call attention to the rights violations and protest these actions.<sup>26</sup> This seemed ridiculous to some due to the administration not making overtures to promote the rights of indigenous peoples in the United States. The request even caused certain Native American rights organizations to announce that they would wait to hear from the FSLN before making a judgment for or against Nicaragua on the Miskito issue. Despite the hypocrisy, Reagan would go on to give an address where he specifically mentions the violence against Miskitos among the reasons why the FSLN has proven to be a disaster for the people of Nicaragua.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Address to Members of the British Parliament*, June 8, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-members-british-parliament>.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Remarks on Signing the International Human Rights Day Proclamation*, December 10, 1984, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-international-human-rights-day-proclamation>.

<sup>22</sup> Reagan, *Remarks on Signing the International Human Rights Day Proclamation*.

<sup>23</sup> Organization of American States, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin*, November 29, 1983, Part One, Section B, subsections 1–8, <https://cidh.oas.org/countryrep/Miskitoeng/toc.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The Nicaraguan Connection: A Threat to Central America*, February 24, 1982, CIA Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88B00443R001103940075-5.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians*, March 1982, CIA Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R000802000044-9.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> John Dinges, "Debate over Miskitos Divides American Indian Rights Groups," *Washington Post*, March 21, 1982, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/03/21/debate-over-miskitos-divides-american-indian-rights-groups/8a7529a4-0709-4cde-9b43-bc7bacb2962e/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America*, April 27, 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-central-america>.

The policy of national security by 1982 was created to reverse the influence of the Soviet Union and its allies. The top objectives were to use a strong military force to deter aggression from the USSR and to block efforts by the USSR to expand diplomatically and economically.<sup>28</sup> Other objectives included ensuring that the United States had ample access to markets and resources in the Third World, a goal which also included the development of "humane social and political orders" in developing nations.<sup>29</sup> The words used to discuss the Soviet Union and communism were harsh; Reagan once said that democracy would leave communism "on the ash-heap of history."<sup>30</sup> In a 1983 speech concerning Central America and the Caribbean there was also the explicit goal of combating communist insurgencies.<sup>31</sup> Nicaragua is referred to directly only once, to note its potential for use as a staging area by Soviet and Cuban forces in the case of war.<sup>32</sup> He makes sure to explicitly state that the United States does not seek to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, but the United States does wish to see that Nicaragua ceases to sponsor revolutions in the territory of its neighbors.<sup>33</sup> This explanation was necessary because the harsh rhetoric had raised questions about the goals of policy toward Nicaragua.

*The New York Times* published one article pointing out that lawmakers simply do not believe that the administration was being honest about their intentions for Nicaragua's government.<sup>34</sup> The article does agree with Reagan that there are human rights abuses against the Miskito people and that Nicaragua does very closely align itself with the Soviet Union, but counters his claim that the Sandinista government must be opposed due to human rights violations by pointing out that the United States is supporting the repressive governments of Guatemala and El Salvador with money, guns, and military training. An article from the *Washington Post* also points out that the Reagan administration was allowing the Guatemalan dictatorship access to this support with only vague promises that Guatemala would become more democratic at some point in the future without setting any sort of set timetable for when such reforms would take place.<sup>35</sup> The overall opinion of the media was against intervention in Nicaragua despite all of Reagan's attempts to convince the public that intervention was needed. Although such intervention was not favored by the public, the CIA had been active in Nicaragua since 1981.<sup>36</sup>

Attempts made by Ronald Reagan to support counter revolutionaries in Nicaragua were limited by the Boland Amendments, a series of amendments introduced to defense appropriations bills between the years 1982 and 1986 which sought to limit the amount of

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<sup>28</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Decision Directive 32: U.S. National Security Strategy*, May 20, 1982, with attached study *NSSD 1-82: U.S. National Security Strategy*, April 1982, declassified Top Secret document, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20310-national-security-archive-doc-25-national>, 31–32.

<sup>29</sup> *NSSD 1-82: U.S. National Security Strategy*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Reagan, *Address to British Parliament*.

<sup>31</sup> *NSSD 1-82: U.S. National Security Strategy*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> *NSSD 1-82: U.S. National Security Strategy*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Reagan, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America*.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Wicker, "Reagan's Big Stick," *The New York Times* (op-ed), July 26, 1983.

<sup>35</sup> Lou Cannon, "Reagan Praises Guatemalan Military Leader," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1982.

<sup>36</sup> National Security Council, *Scope of CIA Activities Under the Nicaragua Finding*, July 12, 1982, declassified "Top Secret" memo hosted by the National Security Archive, accessed [access date], [https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding\\_the\\_Iran\\_Contra\\_Affair/documents/d-nic-24.pdf](https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-nic-24.pdf), 31–32.

funding which could be sent to the anti-Sandinista rebels, known as Contras.<sup>37</sup> Although the Boland Amendments did not prohibit private citizens from donating money to the Contras, the CIA and the Department of Defense were totally banned from supporting them in 1983.<sup>38</sup> In 1984 the amendment was altered to allow for no more than \$24 million to be spent on “paramilitary activity” in Nicaragua, but expanded in scope to include all United States agencies in the dollar amount.<sup>39</sup>

The Contras had been active for some time in Nicaragua. They used the same guerilla tactics the Sandinistas had found to be so successful, hiding out in southern Honduras and then crossing the border to attack government security forces.<sup>40</sup> The FSLN claimed that the Contras were former members of Somozas' hated National Guard and used stories of Contra activity to try and stir national unity. Considering how many weapons the Contras had access to it was also claimed that the CIA had been funding and training the counterrevolutionaries.<sup>41</sup> Considering the order to support anti-communist forces in Nicaragua, it is almost certain that the Contras of 1982 were being supplied by the CIA.

The goal of promoting human rights was important to the United States before the Carter presidency and would continue to be important in the Reagan presidency. Both administrations saw democratic forms of governance as the best way to assure human rights and sought to change authoritarian governments into democracies. The difference between the two administrations is how the goals of promoting human rights were achieved. Carter used diplomatic and economic methods as the primary tools for advancing his goals, while Reagan was not afraid to use military force to secure democracy. How both presidents spoke about this goal differ as well even though their goal is the same. Carter enshrined human rights as the reason to democratize, while Reagan enshrined democratization as a way of promoting human rights.

### **Nicaragua as a Strategic Location**

Both the Carter and Reagan administrations viewed Nicaragua as vital to national security because Cuba and the Soviet Union were using the nation to move war materials to communist revolutionaries in Central America. The economic and diplomatic methods used to keep support away from the Sandinistas were shared between the Carter and Reagan administrations, but the Reagan administration would add military intervention as a method of maintaining American influence over that of communist states. Ronald Reagan would utilize numerous National Security Decision Directives (NSDD) to guide foreign policy.

The Carter administration began the shift away from cooperation with the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan. In the 1979 State of the Union address spoke of how cooperation with the USSR would benefit national security.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, the State of the Union

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<sup>37</sup> American Embassy (Managua), *Assessment of Recent Counterrevolutionary Activity*, May 13, 1983, confidential cable, National Security Archive, [https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding\\_the\\_Iran\\_Contra\\_Affair/documents/d-nic-28.pdf](https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-nic-28.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> *Summary of Boland Amendment Provisions*, April 21, 1987, declassified memorandum hosted by National Security Archive at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, accessed [access date], <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitalibrary/smo/counsel/culvahouse/cfoa1131/40-123-12011812-CFOA1131-049-2018.pdf>, 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Summary of Boland Amendment Provisions*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Assessment of Recent Counterrevolutionary Activity*, 1–2.

<sup>41</sup> *Assessment of Recent Counterrevolutionary Activity*, 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> Jimmy Carter, *The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress*, January 23, 1979, *The American Presidency Project*, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, University of California, Santa Barbara,

address of 1980 states how the Soviet Union was an imperialistic power that was threatening to destabilize the world by invading Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> The 1980 presidential debate mentions war several times, but Nicaragua is not discussed.<sup>44</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the hostage crisis in Iran overshadowed any mention of Central America and the Caribbean. President Carter was criticized for his slow response both to perceived Soviet aggression as well as for his seeming inability to secure American hostages from the revolutionary forces in Iran. Reagan is asked about the crisis, but he dodges the question by saying that he would not want to say something which would endanger the hostages or delay their release.<sup>45</sup> This type of strong language reveals that diplomacy with the Soviet Union made Nicaragua incompatible with cooperation from the United States.

Numerous documents in 1978 and 1979 show that powers from across the Spanish speaking world in Central America and beyond felt strongly about developments in Nicaragua, especially as security was concerned. The Sandinistas were suspected to be operating from bases both inside and outside Nicaragua, which once resulted in an air attack on the public security minister of Costa Rica, then Mario Charpentier.<sup>46</sup> US Army Intelligence had identified that Venezuela had stationed fighter jets in Costa Rica to help defend against violent incursions from Somoza's government.<sup>47</sup> Carter's correspondence with Venezuelan President Perez may be seen as a stern, but diplomatic way of trying to halt any escalation of an already bloody conflict.

Carter felt that the only way to establish a successful democracy in Nicaragua was to allow the Nicaraguan people themselves to vote for their new government. He expressed this to Presidente Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela, saying that the United States supports the goal of Central American democratization, but does not want any nation to commit to any military intervention to achieve that goal.<sup>48</sup> This specific statement about military intervention was certainly meant to discourage Venezuela from aiding any Nicaraguan political faction, especially considering that US intelligence had identified an airfield in Costa Rica hosting Venezuelan fighter jets supposedly stationed to aid the Sandinistas.<sup>49</sup> Another report instead covers the

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<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-state-the-union-address-delivered-before-joint-session-the-congress-0>.

<sup>43</sup> Jimmy Carter, *The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress*, January 23, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, University of California, Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-state-the-union-address-delivered-before-joint-session-the-congress>.

<sup>44</sup> White House Communications Agency, *Transcript, Presidential Debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter*, October 28, 1980, audio-video transcript, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/1980-ronald-reagan-and-jimmy-carter-presidential-debate>.

<sup>45</sup> White House Communications Agency, *Transcript, Presidential Debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter*.

<sup>46</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Nicaraguan Planes Bomb Costa Rican Official's Boat," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/10/15/nicaraguan-planes-bomb-costa-rican-officials-boat/eae03474-1a67-4632-95b7-ec968778b510/>.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, *Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Annual Historical Review, Fiscal Year 1978*, declassified report, National Security Archive (hosted by George Washington University), accessed November 16, 2023, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16792-office-deputy-chief-staff-operations>.

<sup>48</sup> United States Department of State, *Presidential Reply to Pérez Letter on Nicaragua (Telegram 43981)*, February 18, 1978, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980*, vol. XV: Central America, 1977–1980, doc. 71, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v15/d71>.

<sup>49</sup> *Annual Historical Review, Fiscal Year 1978*, 126.

possibility that Perez may be defending Costa Rica from a potential attack from Nicaragua.<sup>50</sup> Stating to Perez that there should not be any reason for military intervention is surely a not so subtle hint that Venezuela should not assist any Nicaraguan faction. Considering that Venezuela did not use military force to engage Nicaragua, diplomacy succeeded in this case.

It is often thought that Cuba was totally subservient to the Soviet Union, but this is not entirely true. Indeed, the Cubans were a part of the communist world, however they strove to actively spread revolution by sending men and materials to as many communist revolutionaries as possible, including the Sandinistas. Despite the aid to revolutionaries, Carter chose to normalize United States-Cuban relations by holding direct diplomatic discussions with Cuba, authorizing this in 1978 with *PD-6*.<sup>51</sup> Although diplomacy with Cuba was opened, it was later decided the next year that Cuba should be contained due to its role in supporting revolutionary movements in Central America. The containment methods laid out by Carter in *PD-52* were the use of diplomacy as well as economic and also toyed with the idea of limited military aid initiatives to unite nations in the Third World against Cuba.<sup>52</sup> While *PD-52* did lay out an increased importance in military initiatives, intervention was still to be a last resort while human rights were to be a priority.

The Soviet Union was not directly involved until 1980 when the FSLN formalized relations with the Russians. By then Carter had already determined that the Cubans were a direct threat to the goals of the United States and authorized National Security Advisor Brezinski to order a new policy, *PD-52*, against the island nation and its Soviet allies. Although secret diplomacy was to be maintained, harsher measures were to be considered as American power became threatened. This decision to view Cuba again as an enemy was built upon by Reagan with *NSDD-17*, declaring that Cuba was sending weapons and support to aid leftist insurgents in Central America.<sup>53</sup> The specific means of assuring this included tightening economic restrictions against Cuba as well as actively preparing military measures to combat Cuban forces in Central America.<sup>54</sup> When the Soviet Union moved a squadron of MiG-23 fighter jets into Cuba, *NSDD-21* was designed to accomplish previous national security directives while pre-approving the right to destroy them if they became an offensive threat from either Cuba or Nicaragua.<sup>55</sup>

Evidence that Nicaragua had a direct hand in sponsoring Central American revolutions was compiled by the State Department early in 1981. This evidence was said to have been captured from the communist party of El Salvador the year before and the work is a collection of

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<sup>50</sup> United States Department of State and Myles Frechette, *Assessment of Venezuelan Capability to Intervene Militarily in Nicaragua*, December 1978, declassified memorandum, hosted on WikiLeaks, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://file.wikileaks.org/oc/oc/2694/319351.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> National Security Council, *Presidential Directive/NSC-6: Cuba*, March 15, 1977 (Secret), Presidential Directive 6 (PD 6), declassified, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32751-document-5-presidential-directive-presidential-directive-ns6-subject-cuba-march-15>.

<sup>52</sup> National Security Council, *Presidential Directive/NSC-52: U.S. Policy toward Cuba*, October 4, 1979, Secret, declassified memorandum, National Security Archive, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/pd/pd52.pdf>.goodtimesweb.org+15

<sup>53</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Decision Directive No. 17: U.S. Policy on Cuba and Central America*, January 4, 1982, Secret, declassified, National Security Archive (hosted at FAS.org), <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> *National Security Decision Directive No. 17: U.S. Policy on Cuba and Central America*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Decision Directive No. 21: Responding to Floggers in Cuba*, January 29, 1982, declassified memorandum, National Security Archive (hosted at FAS.org), <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-21.pdf>.



letters from communist nations.<sup>56</sup> The content of these letters shows direct involvement between the revolution in El Salvador and the FSLN who were supplying the guerrillas and hosting them within Nicaragua.<sup>57</sup> Cuba was also closely involved with training fighters as well as being a staging ground for weapons and other supplies before these items were sent to Nicaragua. The FSLN halted shipments of arms to the rebels in El Salvador briefly, but then resumed operations.<sup>58</sup> Such arms came from as far as Vietnam and the USSR, indicating to the White House that the Soviet Union itself was involved in military support for rebels in Central America.<sup>59</sup> The desire to view Cuba as a foe was so great that even civil support could be worth demonizing, as shown by the CIA writing that Cuban doctors, teachers, and construction teams were partly to blame for the Miskito uprising.<sup>60</sup>

Maintaining the view that Nicaragua was a staging ground for Cuban and Soviet troops and taking into account the factor of advanced fighter aircraft, *NSDD-59* lays out contingency plans for a possible war between Nicaragua and its neighbors.<sup>61</sup> The possibility of United States activities provoking a war between Honduras and Nicaragua that such a possibility was shut down in Congress by the 1982-83 Boland Amendment. *NSDD-59* also includes a provision that Cuban forces will be warned to withdraw from the mainland if such a Cuban force were to land.<sup>62</sup> It should be assumed that such a force would be engaged in combat even if the warning had yet to be issued, as per prior directives. *NSDD-100* was made under the assumption that Nicaragua was an exporter of revolution as well as a base for Cuba and the USSR while focusing on how to strengthen surrounding governments friendly to the United States.<sup>63</sup>

The CIA identified several key points which illustrate the strategic importance of Nicaragua. Firstly, Nicaragua was a base for communist guerillas to train in before going to fight Central American governments friendly to American interests.<sup>64</sup> This makes sense if the rumors about the Sandinistas operating out of hidden camps in Honduras and Costa Rica are true or considered true by the CIA. It was stated that any diplomatic attempts for a peaceful resolution of existing civil wars would prove to be attempts by Cuba and the FSLN to rally and supply revolutionaries for a renewed campaign against government forces.<sup>65</sup> El Salvador was found to be presently strong enough to maintain its fight against the rebels within its borders, but Guatemala was unstable and in need of support.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> United States Department of State, *Communist Interference in El Salvador: Documents Demonstrating Communist Support of the Salvadoran Insurgency*, February 23, 1981, Bureau of Public Affairs White Paper (Special Report No. 80), Washington, D.C., [https://archive.org/details/dos-report\\_s-12c-73-9](https://archive.org/details/dos-report_s-12c-73-9).

<sup>57</sup> *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 10–11, 31–34.

<sup>58</sup> *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 68–73.

<sup>59</sup> *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 58–60, 42–51.

<sup>60</sup> *Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians*, 8 (bottom left column–top right column).

<sup>61</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Decision Directive No. 59: Cuba and Central America*, October 5, 1982, declassified memorandum, National Security Archive (hosted at FAS.org), <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-59.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> *National Security Decision Directive No. 59: Cuba and Central America*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> National Security Council, *National Security Decision Directive No. 100: Enhanced U.S. Military Activity and Assistance in Central America*, July 28, 1983, declassified memorandum, National Security Archive (hosted at FAS.org), <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-100.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *Short-Term Prospects for Central America (SNIE 82/83-82)*, June 8, 1982, Secret, declassified Special National Intelligence Estimate, National Security Archive (hosted by George Washington University), accessed [access date], <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16571-document-02-short-term-prospects-central>, 1–2.

<sup>65</sup> *Short-Term Prospects for Central America*, 3–5.

<sup>66</sup> *Short-Term Prospects for Central America*, 13–14.

No matter how truthful or fictitious the estimate about Central America, Reagan acted on it with decisive military intervention when the United States invaded Grenada in October 1983. The expressed purpose of the invasion was to protect American citizens as well as to defend freedom and democracy.<sup>67</sup> In the same speech it was stated that the island was being made into a stronghold for the Soviet Union for the reason that an airfield was being built by Cubans, assumed to be Cuban military reservists, which seemed to be large enough to accommodate bomber aircraft. The reasons for the invasion are mixed enough to draw a comparison to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, with some feeling that a supposed rescue mission is a lame excuse for war.<sup>68</sup> No matter the explanation for invading an island nation of just over a hundred thousand people, the removal of a Cuban/Soviet installation supports the goals stated in *NSDD-32*. If the CIA report concerning arms shipments is to be believed, then it would support the removal of arms and other support to Nicaragua.

## Conclusion

United States foreign policy concerning Nicaragua experienced complex change between 1978 and 1984. Jimmy Carter writes about his commitment to human rights many times in his memoirs. This commitment is best backed up by government documents early in his presidency, but this commitment seems to have decreased as the need to combat communist influence in Central America increased with the fall of the Nicaraguan puppet government and its replacement by the popularly backed Sandinistas. *PD-30* enshrined a clear human rights goal in the foreign policy of the United States, but later directives such as *PD-52* and *NSDD-32* show that such a priority had fallen away as Cuba and the Soviet Union came to replace the United States as the most influential powers.

The measures designed to affect foreign policy included economic and diplomatic pressures, but also included the consideration for military initiatives in the way of funding and supplying American allies abroad when they came under threat by a foreign power. As applied to Nicaragua, the United States unsuccessfully tried to use diplomatic pressure to remove a dictator only to hand the country over to the communists before turning to the use of aid packages and loans to win FSLN support. When it became clear that these measures were ineffective and that the Soviet Union was the major influencer, Reagan cut off aid from the country and began military intervention against the Sandinista government in the form of covert operations.

The Soviet Union was a direct influencer of Nicaragua by the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, but Cuba had been sending aid to the Sandinistas before them. Weapons from all over the world were said to be in the hands of communist soldiers, including American small arms captured by the North Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War. Reagan wanted to fight communism in Central America and planned to do so by funneling weapons and money to anti-communist rebels. Numerous justifications were produced by the CIA to make the case for sending aid to Contras in order to counter communist forces in Nicaragua. Early attempts to arm the Contras were disrupted by the Boland Amendment, a set of amendments attached to several defense appropriation bills which specifically blocked any military aid or funds being sent to Nicaragua.

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<sup>67</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada*, October 27, 1983, delivered from the Oval Office, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-events-lebanon-and-grenada>.

<sup>68</sup> David Hoffman and Don Oberdorfer, "He Calls It a 'Rescue Mission': Grenada No Invasion to Reagan," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/11/04/he-calls-it-a-rescue-mission-grenada-no-invasion-to-reagan/218ca813-67f8-4e5d-9dee-df1054b8be10/>.