

# The Origins of the “Reagan Doctrine Wars” in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan

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DPhil Thesis, Pembroke College, The University of Oxford

December 2016



## Short Abstract

This diplomatic and military history offers a new interpretation of the origins of the three fighting fronts during the final phase of the Cold War in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. Vaguely remembered today as proxy wars on the periphery, in fact, these were protracted revolutionary civil wars and regional contests for the balance of power in which millions died, while at the same time they were central to global superpower confrontation. Analysis focuses on the strategy and policy of the United States. The chronology from 1975 to 1982 covers the Ford administration's covert action intervention in the Angolan Civil War, which came to grief at the hands of Cuban troops; Jimmy Carter's effort to conduct foreign policy based on principles, which ran foul of power considerations in Angola, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Afghanistan; and Ronald Reagan's embrace of these wars early in his first term as part of the revival of U.S. strength in its competition with the Soviet Union.

The principal argument is that these wars were integral to the U.S. experience of limited war during the Cold War and that U.S. policy and strategy was ultimately consistent across presidential administrations. In strategic terms, the main conclusion is that the U.S. restricted itself to conducting economy of force contingency operations in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan as a result of its costly struggles in Korea and Vietnam. Despite declaring these peripheral wars to be central to the Cold War, avoiding the costs of involving U.S. forces directly in Third World conflicts and minimizing the risks of escalation with the Soviet Union were overriding political and military imperatives.

## Long Abstract

This thesis presents an original interpretation of the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan that marked the beginning of the final phase of the Cold War. Written as a traditional diplomatic and military history, it focuses on the strategy and policy of the United States. Rather than their accustomed portrayal as controversial proxy wars of dubious strategic importance, the unifying argument is that the Reagan Doctrine Wars were integral to the U.S. experience of limited war during the Cold War.

The timeframe is 1975 to 1982 and covers significant developments in three presidential administrations: Ford's failed intervention in the Angolan Civil War through covert action in the immediate shadow of Vietnam; Carter's desire to conduct foreign policy based on principles, which ran foul of Cold War struggles for power in Angola, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Afghanistan; and Reagan's embrace of these wars early in his first term to make them part of U.S. competitive strategy against the Soviet Union. Each of these wars was very different and had its own set of protagonists. Regarded as a whole, they were at once protracted revolutionary civil wars, regional contests for the balance of power, and central to global confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. For the superpowers, these were peripheral wars of limited aims and means. But for the direct participants they were unlimited wars for survival in which millions died and the scale of humanitarian disaster was massive. Their consequences persist today.

These wars attracted intense attention while they were underway. Contemporary media coverage and commentary, the published literature, and the official record are all extensive. Numerous recently declassified documents were available for new research.

Classic strategic principles underlie the analysis, drawn, for example, from commentaries by Thucydides on the corrosive effects of civil war and by Thomas Hobbes on the causes of protracted war. The interpretation builds on three prominent realists whose views on these wars were influential at the time: Hans Morgenthau, who warned of the challenges that the U.S. faced from the forces of revolution; Robert Osgood, who wrote about the problems of limited war for U.S. strategy in Korea and Vietnam; and Robert Tucker, who was skeptical of intervention and idealistic foreign policies. Concepts from the social sciences provide insights into leadership, decision-making, bureaucratic politics, and strategic behavior.

The narrative begins in April 1975, four weeks after the fall of Saigon, when President Ford, at Henry Kissinger's urging, approved a hasty covert paramilitary operation in Angola aligned with a secret South African invasion. Intended to prevent Marxist-Leninists from coming to power when the nation became independent from Portugal, the operation ended in defeat after Fidel Castro sent combat troops to rescue his Angolan allies. Congress subsequently took the unprecedented action of prohibiting further aid to the U.S.-backed factions.

When Jimmy Carter won the 1976 presidential election, the U.S. was in the shadow of Vietnam and gripped by a cycle of decline. The new president promised a more benign and principled American presence in the world based on human rights, non-intervention, and lowered concern with the Cold War. The Soviet and Cuban military presence in Angola immediately challenged that approach in Angola, and the U.S. proved unable to contain their further expansion in Africa. In Central America, support for human rights destabilized the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza, a long-time U.S. ally, contributing to the Sandinista-led insurrection and another Soviet-Cuban advance. Carter's overreaction to the 1979 Soviet intervention in

Afghanistan deepened Cold War confrontation. The decision to support the Afghan mujahedin imposed major costs on the Soviet Union, but also had fateful and enduring consequences.

By the end of his term, the Carter administration had attempted to resume aid to Angolan insurgents, was supporting resistance to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, adopted counterinsurgency to forestall revolution in neighboring El Salvador, and was committed to backing the mujahedin against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Thus, contrary to collective memory, the U.S. was well-engaged in these wars when Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981. His principal changes were to increase resources and to shift from defensive reaction to an offensive “forward strategy for freedom.” While he continued the revival of American military strength begun under Carter, Reagan’s war record was actually modest and he prudently kept the United States out of quagmires. In fact, the administration never declared a Reagan Doctrine of supporting anti-communist forces, which was instead the clever invention of a journalist. More accurately, U.S. support for insurgency in Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan and for counterinsurgency in El Salvador was a variant of the global strategy to contain the Soviet Union that George Kennan first envisioned in 1947. The deep historical continuity of the determination to exclude hostile foreign powers from areas declared to be of interest to the United States began with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.

The limited wars that the United States fought in Korea and Vietnam inflicted high casualties, wearied the public, and came to unsatisfactory ends. They extinguished the will to commit U.S. forces to combat in the Third World and made it politically imperative to insulate the American people from the direct costs of war. The Reagan Doctrine Wars resulted. From the beginning, these wars also figured prominently in the struggle over authority and accountability between the U.S. Congress and the Executive that arose from the Watergate scandal and

Vietnam. It was under these constraints that the national security and foreign policy agencies, with the National Security Council at the apex, remained dedicated to Cold War containment and deterrence. Conduct of these wars, termed “Low Intensity Conflict,” was indirect and diverged from the conventional model of civil-military relations and military operations. Paramilitary aid to insurgents came under primary control of the civilian CIA, while counter-insurgency remained the mission of the Special Forces. The pedigree of this arrangement evolved from support to partisans in Europe and Asia during World War II, pioneered by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and pursued energetically by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), in which resistance groups received support without regard for their political character.

What the U.S. decided not to do was as important as what it did. Despite the claims of highest purpose in resisting Soviet expansion in the Third World, the desire to avoid escalation was the governing factor. For example, the Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations seriously considered attacking Cuba, but the precedent of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and uncertainty over the Soviet reaction determined against it in each instance. As with all wars, the demands of these wars drove U.S. actions as much as intentional strategy, and the U.S. confronted limits to power at every turn. Allies such as South Africa, Zaire, Argentina, Honduras, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, pursued their own interests, often in contradiction to U.S. wishes. Interventions in support of Angolan, Nicaraguan, and Afghan insurgents came with multiple complications and controversies, which were even more entangling in the case of counterinsurgency in El Salvador. It is a myth that the Cold War was a simpler time.

U.S. involvement in the Reagan Doctrine Wars is comparable to what the British maritime strategist Julian Corbett, following Clausewitz, termed “war limited by contingent.” They were economy of force operations to secure gains at the lowest possible cost with the aim

of containing Soviet expansion and imposing costs while controlling the scope of conflict. The United States did not set out to achieve victory in the Reagan Doctrine Wars. Rather, they served U.S. grand strategy in the Cold War by expressing America's will to contend with the Soviet Union.

For both Great Powers, despite their stakes in the ideological Cold War and regional balances of power in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, these limited wars on the periphery substituted indirect confrontation for direct conflict and protraction for escalation. Mutual deterrence compelled the United States and the Soviet Union to avoid rather than to fight nuclear or conventional war in their core areas. Instead, they practiced restrictive deterrence in which actual fighting remained limited to Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. At the time these wars began in the 1970s, no one knew that within a decade the Soviet Union would collapse and the Cold War itself would end. This meant that the incentive to perpetuate these conflicts was stronger than desires either to prevail or to resolve them.

So bloody was the march of revolution . . . one may say, the whole world was convulsed; in war, with an alliance always at the command of either faction . . . the sufferings which revolution entailed . . . were many and terrible, such as have occurred and will always occur as long as the nature of mankind remains the same; The cause of all these evils was the struggle for power . . . and from these passions proceeded the violence of parties once engaged in contention.<sup>1</sup>

– Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

For Warre, consisteth not in Battel onely, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend . . . is sufficiently known: and the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as in the nature of foule Weather.<sup>2</sup>

– Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*

There is no such thing as a *little war* for a great Nation.<sup>3</sup>

– Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York, 1998), 3.82, pp. 199-200.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, ed. C.B. McPherson (London, 1968), p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> *The Speeches of the Duke of Wellington in Parliament*, Vol 2, 1839 (London, 1854), p. 259.

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## Abbreviations and Style

This thesis uses American spellings and dates, consistent with the majority of sources and quotations, as well as with the U.S. subject matter. Web citations with permanent URLs from U.S. Government and other established archives, or from widely available public documents, are abbreviated where sufficient for immediate location. More complete reference information, including the date of accession, is noted where this is not the case.

### Reference Abbreviations

ADST	Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
AmEmbassy	American Embassy (for diplomatic telegrams)
Brookings	Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CREST	CIA Records Search Tool
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSI	Center for the Study of Intelligence (CIA)
<i>CSM</i>	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>
CWIHP	Cold War International History Project, Wilson Center, Washington, DC
FAS	Federation of American Scientists
FM	U.S. Armed Forces Field Manual
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act Reading Room (CIA)
<i>FRUS</i>	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>

GPO	U.S. Government Printing Office
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington, DC
MemCon	Memorandum of Conversation
NDU	National Defense University
NSDA	Digital National Security Archives
NSDD	National Security Decision Document
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
<i>NYT</i>	<i>New York Times</i>
PD	Presidential Directive
PRM	Presidential Review Memorandum
RAND	RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA
SecState	Secretary of State (for diplomatic telegrams)
TRF	The Reagan Files, Santa Barbara, CA
UCSB	The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara
UPI	United Press International
USIP	United States Institute for Peace
VMI	Virginia Military Institute

*WP*                      *The Washington Post*

*WSJ*                     *Wall Street Journal*

**United States Government**

CIA                      Central Intelligence Agency

DCI                     Director of Central Intelligence

DIA                     Defense Intelligence Agency

DDO                    Deputy Directorate for Operations (CIA)

DOD                    Department of Defense

GAO                    General Accounting Office

JCS                     Joint Chiefs of Staff

MTT                    Mobile Training Team

NIC                     National Intelligence Council

NSA                    National Security Advisor

NSC                    National Security Council

NSPG                  National Security Planning Group (NSC)

OMB                    Office of Management and Budget

OSS                    Office of Strategic Services

PRC                    Policy Review Committee (NSC)

SAD	Special Activities Division (CIA)
SAG	Special Actions Group (NSC)
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitations Talks
SCC	Special Coordinating Committee (NSC)
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government

## Preface

This is a thesis about the origins of war, and it seems fitting to begin with a comment about the origins of this study. Fortuitously, I met Sir Hew Strachan in Kandahar while he was on a NATO tour of Afghanistan in early 2011. I was serving there as head of the strategic advisory group for the U.S. military command. During a long evening's discussion, I confessed to him my recurring desire to get a doctorate. Sir Hew responded by suggesting that I might join his Changing Character of War Programme at Oxford. The seed germinated. The following year I came to Oxford. My journeyman's experience in the practice of history has been at once a challenging intellectual expedition and fulfilling opportunity for professional development.

The topic for the thesis came quite naturally for two reasons. First, what I am calling here the Reagan Doctrine Wars were the three final fighting fronts of the long Cold War, and it seemed worthwhile to work on a new interpretation of their significance before they slipped further over the horizon of memory. Second, it occurred to me the moment I set foot on the ground at Bagram Air Base in 2008 that I had served as a Foreign Service Officer in all three of these protracted wars – in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. The thesis, of course, is not a memoir, but this experience does contribute a measure of ground truth.

My crossover from practicing international affairs to the field of strategic studies occurred when I served as a member of the exceptional faculty of the Strategy and Policy Department at the U.S. Naval War College in 2002-04. Subsequently, it continued when I was a visiting scholar at the Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS, where Eliot Cohen and Tom Mahnken were unflaggingly gracious hosts. I have also had the good fortune to

have two generous mentors in George Baer, former S&P Chairman, and Bob Tucker, professor emeritus of foreign policy at SAIS.

I am most deeply indebted to Sir Hew and CCW Director Rob Johnson, whose guidance as supervisor-colleagues has been in equal measure civilized, diligent, generous, enlightening, and absolutely essential. Rob and Sir Hew would set demanding tasks with great subtlety. They also consistently encouraged me to keep the scope of the thesis broad rather than narrow.

One major course correction did become necessary. Originally I had set out to write about the consequences of the Reagan Doctrine Wars. This seemed the most direct way to derive current value from the “lessons” of our recent past. However, the impossibility of portraying the aftermath of these wars without getting the beginning of the story right soon became evident. Thus, the refocus on origins, and, I believe, a richer interpretation built on a firmer foundation. While clambering on the wisdom of many predecessors, the result of my scholarship, for better and for worse, is my own responsibility.

# Introduction

## The Nature and Character of the Reagan Doctrine Wars

Among the more than a dozen conflicts that erupted during the late-1970s throughout what was at the time referred to as the Third World, the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan became the principal fighting fronts that marked the final phase of the global Cold War.<sup>4</sup> These were the “Reagan Doctrine Wars.” Their effects continued beyond the end of the Cold War into the era of US ‘unipolar’ dominance. Afghanistan provides the most obvious link, with it and Iraq prompting major US interventions after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The involvement of the United States as these wars began is the subject of this thesis.

The narrative sections take up each of the three in sequence, following a chronology that encompasses three presidential administrations. They begin with the second half of Gerald Ford’s term in 1975, cover Jimmy Carter from January 1977 to January 1981, and end halfway through Ronald Reagan’s first term in 1982. These wars attracted intense attention while under way and the published literature about them is vast. There are no major disagreements regarding the events or the actions of the participants. I build on existing knowledge and take advantage of recently released official documents and other new information to present an original historical interpretation of the events and to build a fuller picture of U.S. decision-making. My purpose is to deepen understanding of the origins of the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan as strategic events in the Cold War, while placing them in the context of American policy and

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<sup>4</sup> B.R. Tomlinson, “What Was the Third World?”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:2, 2003, pp. 307–321.

politics. In providing analysis and commentary on the character of these conflicts, my larger ambition is to further understanding of American strategic behavior.

This thesis addresses several myths. One of them is that somehow the Cold War was a simpler time. The common reference to these conflicts as “proxy wars” hardly captures their complexity. These were no mere “small wars” of dubious strategic significance. Even though they took place under varying circumstances with widely differing actors and geography, they can be conceived as a whole. They were wars-within-war, at once revolutionary civil wars and regional conflicts at the intersection of long-term superpower competition over the geopolitical and ideological balance of power. For the United States and the Soviet Union, they were peripheral wars whose aims and means were limited and presented no direct threats to security. For the direct participants, they were unlimited wars for survival that involved multiple antagonists and tens of thousands of combatants, and directly affected millions of people in Southern Africa, Central America, and Southwest Asia. None of these wars proceeded as their protagonists had envisioned. Atrocities occurred on all sides, millions died, the scale of humanitarian disaster was massive, and each continued for well over a decade, their disastrous consequences outlasting the end of the Cold War itself.

Although this aspect is largely forgotten, the impact on the American scene was profound. The shadow of Vietnam loomed over United States involvement as powerfully as the Cold War itself. These wars were constantly on the front pages and led the television news. Despite minimizing direct U.S. military commitment, the interplay of policy and politics was exceedingly messy:

Saigon fell in April 1975. Four months later, President Ford, at Henry Kissinger's urging, authorized a hasty covert paramilitary operation, aligned with a secret invasion by apartheid South Africa, to confront the challenge of Marxist-Leninist revolution in Angola. When Fidel Castro sent combat troops to rescue his Angolan allies, the United States lacked the freedom to escalate. Angola inflamed the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate contest between the executive and legislative branches, and Congress took unprecedented action by cutting funds for the program. The failure resulted in a Soviet and Cuban success.

Jimmy Carter won the 1976 presidential election promising a principled American presence in the world and downplaying the Cold War. However, as his term progressed, multiple crises left Carter a conflicted moralist and contributed to the perception that his foreign policy had failed. The administration's problems included an inability to stem Soviet and Cuban expansion in Africa, support for human rights that helped prompt insurrection in Nicaragua, and the December 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which brought U.S. hostility toward Moscow to its lowest point since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In cumulative reaction, Carter, egged on by his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and facing a strong challenge from Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, had by the end of his term adopted militarized containment and reverted thoroughly to the Cold War. In addition to increasing the defense budget and deploying military forces to the Persian Gulf under the Carter Doctrine, the administration attempted to resume support for Angolan insurgents, was supporting opposition to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, approved armed counterinsurgency assistance to forestall revolution in El Salvador, and was backing the mujahedin against Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

Thus, it is another myth that Ronald Reagan initiated the U.S. interventions in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. Led by Reagan's own long and deeply held moral conviction

that the United States could and should prevail in the Cold War, the new administration shifted from a defensive to an offensive posture toward these wars. This was what was new about Reagan. Despite this clear vision, the administration floundered at first. It was some time before its response added up to a coherent strategy, and the politics remained messy. The most intense focus throughout 1981 and into 1982 was on Central America. El Salvador was the administration's first foreign policy crisis, Secretary of State Al Haig provoked major domestic and international jitters with threats to attack Cuba, and paramilitary support for the Nicaraguan Contras got underway but quickly ran into controversy. By the mid-point of 1982, the administration had embraced support for Angolan, Nicaraguan, and Afghan insurgents as protagonists in a "forward strategy for freedom."<sup>5</sup> However, Congress was deeply skeptical of the Contras from the beginning, and kept its prohibition on funding for Angola in place until 1985. Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson, not the administration, was the principal champion of the mujahedin.

It was only by Reagan's second term that U.S. involvement in these wars was conceptually integrated into the comprehensive U.S. competitive strategy to impose costs on, and to outspend and outpace, the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> It is also significant that Reagan throughout his presidency remained determined to keep the United States out of quagmires. His additional use of military force was modest, limited to the invasion of tiny Grenada, the aborted intervention in Lebanon, retaliatory strikes against Libya, and lesser covert actions in Chad, Lebanon, and Cambodia.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to Members of the British Parliament," June 8, 1982, UCSB.

<sup>6</sup> Barrass, Gordon, "U.S. Competitive Strategy during the Cold War," Thomas Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stanford, 2012), pp. 71-89.

Two general themes stand out:

First, and contrary to general impressions, the administrations of all three presidents – Ford, Carter, and Reagan – pursued fundamentally consistent approaches to these wars. This is part of the longer story of containment and deterrence that emerged as U.S. strategy toward the USSR at the onset of the Cold War during the Truman administration.<sup>7</sup> Confronted in 1975 with Soviet-Cuban involvement in Angola’s burgeoning civil war, Kissinger insisted on reverting to militarized containment through covert action and by backing questionable allies. While Jimmy Carter’s subsequent effort to break with the Cold War was sincere, it did not last beyond the first half of his term, and, by the time he left office, he was applying the same methods in Central America and Afghanistan. Far from a radical reversal, Ronald Reagan represented more of a shift in attitude from defense to offense than a change in actual strategy.

Second, this consistency in U.S. behavior was less the result of intentional and rational policy- and strategy-making than it was a sequence of muddled responses to the demands of the situation, formed in the context of earlier experience. Following U.S. triumph in World War II and the subsequent hardening of the Cold War, two limited wars on the periphery in Asia had become protracted, and had inflicted high costs, wearied the public, and come to unsatisfactory ends. Initial success in Korea in 1950 turned into near-disaster with Chinese intervention, followed by two years of tedious fighting that terminated in stalemate well short of victory in 1953. The introduction of combat forces to Vietnam in 1965 turned into defeat in an even more drawn out and painful national tragedy. The cumulative effect of those experiences extinguished

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<sup>7</sup> A Report to the NSC - NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950 *FRUS* 1950, National Security Affairs, Doc. 126; Col. S. Nelson Drew (ed.), *NSC-68: Forging the Strategy of Containment* (Washington, DC, 1994).

for a generation the will to commit U.S. forces to combat for less than vital causes or for quick interventions. It became politically imperative to minimize risks of casualties, to insulate the American people from war, and to avoid becoming enmeshed in another Third World quagmire.<sup>8</sup>

The geostrategy was no less complex. At the time these wars began in the 1970s, the United States and the Soviet Union had been rivals for three decades and confrontation was increasing. Deterrence compelled both sides to avoid, rather than to fight, either nuclear or conventional war in their core areas, while opportunistic Soviet advances in the Third World combined with increases in nuclear and conventional military power led to an assessment that the strategic balance had turned against the U.S. In response, U.S. leaders found themselves simultaneously countering what they perceived as Soviet aggression while scrupulously avoiding risks of escalation. By limiting direct involvement in actual fighting and arming civil-regional wars on the periphery, both superpowers reduced risks and traded escalation for open-ended protraction.<sup>9</sup> Because no one knew at the time that within a decade the Soviet Union would collapse and the Cold War itself would end, the incentives to perpetuate these conflicts were stronger than desires either to prevail or to resolve them.<sup>10</sup>

### **U.S. Strategy in the Reagan Doctrine Wars**

How then do we characterize U.S. strategy in the Reagan Doctrine Wars? To do so, it is necessary to place both the political-ideological dimensions of super power confrontation and the

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<sup>8</sup> James McAllister, et al, H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on “Audience Costs and the Vietnam War”, 3:7, November 2014, <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-3.pdf>, accessed November 25, 2014; Bradford Ian Stapleton, “The Korea Syndrome: An Examination of War-Weariness Theory,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 17:3, Summer 2105, pp. 36-81.

<sup>9</sup> John Prados, “Peripheral War: A Recipe for Disaster,” in Andreas W. Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner, and Wilfried Mausbach, eds., *America, the Vietnam War, and the World* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 89-104.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (Columbia, 1971); Charles Wolf, et al., *The Costs of the Soviet Empire* (RAND, 1983); Charles Wolf, “Arming the Reagan Doctrine,” *The National Interest*, no. 5, Fall 1986, pp. 102-05; Charles Wolf and Harry S. Rowen, eds., *The Future of the Soviet Empire* (New York, 1987).

revolutionary civil wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan in a more general strategic context. Failure in Vietnam made the preferred American way of war – concentrating forces to overwhelm the enemy with mass and firepower – infeasible for the Cold War in the Third World.<sup>11</sup> While most of the U.S. Armed Forces concentrated on preparing for conventional war against the Eastern Bloc, the ways and means of the Reagan Doctrine Wars came from a parallel strategic world referred to as “Low Intensity Conflict.”<sup>12</sup> Its methods combined support for irregular and conventional forces, covert action, political warfare, and information operations. Reinvented today as hybrid warfare in the gray zones between war and peace, the ideas and methods have older roots.<sup>13</sup>

From their inception, the undeclared Reagan Doctrine Wars figured prominently in the struggle over authority and accountability between the U.S. Congress and the Executive that followed the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. As the national security and foreign policy agencies, with the National Security Council at the apex, pursued their respective roles in accordance with the National Security Act of 1947, the operational conduct of these wars diverged from the traditional U.S. models of civil-military relations and conventional military operations.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 213; Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> “U.S. Strategy for Third World Conflict,” *Report of the Regional Conflict Working Group prepared for the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy*, May 11, 1988; Col. Howard Lee Dixon, *Low Intensity Conflict: Overview, Definitions, and Policy Concerns*, Army-Air Force Center for Low Intensity Conflict, June 1989.

<sup>13</sup> *United States Marine Corps Small Wars Manual* (GPO, 1940), pp. 1-8; Brian Linn, “The ‘American Way of War’ Revisited,” *Journal of Military History*, 22:2, April 2002, pp. 501-33; Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, pp. 9-27; Gen. James N. Mattis and Frank Hoffman, “Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Nov 2005, 131:11, pp. 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> NSC 10/2, NSC Directive on Office of Special Projects, June 18, 1948, *FRUS 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment*, Doc. 292; Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford, 1999).

U.S. support for anti-Communist insurgents and counterinsurgents had a pedigree dating to the earliest days of the Cold War. Paramilitary support for insurgents came under primary control of the civilian CIA, while military support for counterinsurgency remained the mission of the Special Forces. This arrangement evolved out of the support to partisans in Europe and Asia during World War II, pioneered by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and pursued energetically by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS).<sup>15</sup> Critically, unlike the SOE, the OSS treated resistance groups as instruments of war without regard for their political character, as long as they contributed to securing the unconditional surrender of the Axis. As the Cold War got under way, this method was carried over to the Truman administration's attempts to undo Soviet power through political warfare, including ill-fated attempts to prompt armed insurrections behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>16</sup> The anti-communist campaign then continued in Korea, Vietnam, Latin America, and elsewhere throughout the Third World.<sup>17</sup>

Although the concept did not exist at the time, the strategic character of the Reagan Doctrine Wars, can be defined as “restrictive deterrence,” a term that Thomas Rid first adapted

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<sup>15</sup> Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley, 1972); Thomas F. Troy, *Donovan and the CIA* (Maryland, 1981); Edward F. Sayle, “The Historical Underpinnings of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, 1:1, 1986, pp. 1-27; Maochun Yu, *OSS in China* (Annapolis, 1996); CIA, *The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency* (CSI, 2008); Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare* (Oklahoma, 2013); Douglas Waller, *Disciples: The World War II Missions of the CIA Directors Who Fought for Wild Bill Donovan* (New York, 2015), A.R.B. Linderman, *Rediscovering Irregular Warfare: Colin Gubbins and the Origins of Britain's Special Operations Executive* (Norman, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, 2001); Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America's Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain* (Boston, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action* (New York, 1987); Stephen F. Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* (Oxford, 1996); John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars* (Chicago, 1996); John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (London, 1986); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, “Antecedents and Memory as Factors in the Creation of the CIA,” *Diplomatic History*, 40:1, January 2016, pp. 140-54. *FM 31-20: Operations Against Guerrilla Forces*, February 1951; Col. Francis Kelly, *US Army Special Forces*, Department of the Army, 1973; Maj. Danny M. Kelley, “The Misuse of the Studies and Observation Group in Vietnam,” master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2005; William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, 1989); Major General John K. Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty* (New York, 1991); William Rosenau and Austin Long, *The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency* (RAND, 2009).

from criminal justice and applied to Israel's security policy.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of restrictive deterrence is to manage costs and risks, particularly of escalation, while containing actual fighting at the lowest possible level. The concept is distinct from, but entirely consistent with, general deterrence that dissuades an adversary from taking action through the threat of punitive retaliation, the cornerstone of nuclear strategy during the Cold War.<sup>19</sup>

Operationally, restrictive deterrence is comparable to what the British maritime strategist Julian Corbett, following Clausewitz, termed "war limited by contingent," in which the commitment of a "disposal force" would not risk the main effort if it were lost.<sup>20</sup> U.S. commitments in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan were thus classic economy of force operations, intended to secure gains at the lowest possible cost through discriminate employment and distribution of forces in secondary areas while concentrating on achieving superiority in the decisive operation.<sup>21</sup> Their purposes were to impose costs, contain Soviet expansion, and control the scope of conflict, while serving U.S. grand strategy in the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Instead of pursuing a theory of victory to terminate the civil wars or shift the regional balance, the United States aided partisans and their aligned regional parties enough to continue fighting, but remained removed from direct combat. In other words, the United States did not set out to win the Reagan Doctrine

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Rid, "Deterrence beyond the State: The Israeli Experience", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:1, April 2012, pp. 124-47

<sup>19</sup> Albert Wohlstetter, *The Selection and Use of Strategic Air Bases* (RAND, 1954).

<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 603; Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London, 1911, U.S. Naval Institute ed., 1988), p. 60-6; Michael I. Handel, "Corbett, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2000, pp. 112-13; Christopher Daase, "Clausewitz and Small Wars," in Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, eds., *Clausewitz in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 182-95; Beatrice Heuser, "Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:1, February 2010, pp. 139-62; Strachan, *The Direction of War*, pp. 143-4.

<sup>21</sup> Handel, *Masters of War*, pp. 294, 362, 442 n.4; U.S. Army, *FM 3-O: Operations*, 2008, Economy of Force, A-2, A-10.

<sup>22</sup> Bradford A. Lee, "Strategic Interaction: Theory and History for Practitioners," in Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stanford, 2012), pp. 28-46.

Wars. Rather, from their origins until the conclusion of the Cold War, they ultimately expressed America's enduring will to contend with the Soviet Union.

### **Presidential Doctrines**

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he began increasing resources for the existing covert action programs in Nicaragua and Afghanistan, as well as for counterinsurgency in El Salvador. CIA Director Bill Casey contemplated starting paramilitary operations in Cambodia, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Yemen, Colombia, and Guatemala. Attention focused first on Central America, and later incorporated Afghanistan and Angola. As the administration's strategy for long-term competition with the Soviet Union took shape during Reagan's first term, support for indirect warfare on the periphery became an integral, if often controversial, part.

However, to be clear, there never was a declared Reagan Doctrine. While it never officially disavowed the idea, the notion that the Reagan administration had made a commitment to wage wars on these terms around the world was a clever invention of the columnist Charles Krauthammer.<sup>23</sup> Even the narrative of supporting "freedom fighters", that Ronald Reagan popularized, was Jimmy Carter's. More accurately, U.S. support for insurgency in Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, and for counterinsurgency in El Salvador, was a variant of the global strategy to contain the Soviet Union first envisioned by George Kennan in 1946, then militarized by the Truman Doctrine in 1947.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Constantine Menges, *Democratic Revolutionary Insurgency as an Alternative Strategy*, (RAND, 1968); George Shultz, "America and the Struggle of Freedom," address to the Commonwealth Club of California, San Francisco, February 22, 1985, *Department of State Bulletin*, 85:2097, April 1985, pp. 16-21; Charles Krauthammer, "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time Magazine*, April 1, 1985.

<sup>24</sup> AmEmbassy Moscow, telegram 511, Chargé Kennan to Secretary Marshall (The Long Telegram),

Even though the Reagan Doctrine lacked formal status, it was entirely consistent with the historical continuity of presidential doctrines that began with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and continues today.<sup>25</sup> As a matter of policy and strategy, doctrines are not international agreements, but unilateral statements of U.S. determination to exclude hostile foreign powers from areas declared to be of interest, if necessary through the use of force. Specifically, the Reagan Doctrine was a Cold War analogue to the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904, under which the United States declared the right to intervene in Latin America to “correct wrongdoing or impotence.”<sup>26</sup> Doctrines are also subject to the messiness of American politics, as Jay Sexton discusses in his excellent analysis of the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>27</sup> They invariably combine expressions of American power and exceptionalism. They are applied with varying degrees of consistency and commitment, and similarly are subject to political debate and interpretation, redefinition, and controversy. The actions of the United States associated with the so-called Reagan Doctrine fit this pattern.

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February 22, 1946, FRUS, 1946, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, pp. 673-866; X (George Kennan), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, pp. 566-82; President Harry S. Truman, “Address before a Joint Session of Congress,” March 12, 1947.

<sup>25</sup> James Monroe, “President’s Seventh Annual Message,” December 2, 1823, *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 18th Congress, 1st Session (Library of Congress), pp. 13-14.

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress for 1904,” Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, HR 58A-K2, Record Group 233, Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine 1945–1993* (New York, 1994); Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York, 2006); Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine* (New York, 2011); Andrew Preston, “Monsters Everywhere: A Genealogy of National Security,” *Diplomatic History*, 38:3, June 2014, pp. 477-500; Thomas F.X. Varacalli, “National Interest and Moral Responsibility in the Political Thought of Alfred Thayer Mahan,” *Naval War College Review*, 69:2, 2016, pp. 108-27.

## Sources, Methods, and the Literature

This thesis is foremost an exercise in traditional diplomatic and military history. Classics on the historian's craft guide the method of investigation and documentation.<sup>28</sup> The focus is on leaders, their motives, behavior, and decisions. The issues are problems of policy, politics, strategy, diplomacy, and conflict. Analysis pursues decision-making and the associated bureaucratic politics in capitals, particularly Washington, DC, as it interacted with events on the ground. There are many good models to draw on for this approach.<sup>29</sup> In addition to developing a fresh interpretation of the origin of the Reagan Doctrine Wars, the thesis includes original work on several related but neglected topics: the alignment between the U.S. and South Africa in Angola, Argentina's initiative to organize the Nicaraguan Contras, U.S. planning to take military action against Cuba at the same time as it was conducting negotiations to normalize relations, and the consequences of initial decisions to support the mujahedin in Afghanistan.

Customary primary sources are the principal building blocks of interpretation: official documents, speeches and public statements, news reporting, published interviews, memoirs and diaries. A fair number of the U.S. documents employed here, including U.S. diplomatic telegrams, intelligence reports, memoranda, and transcripts of conversations, have been recently released and are previously uncited. Among the richest sources, the National Security Archives at George Washington University is the most important repository of these documents, along with the CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI), the American Presidency Project at the

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<sup>28</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1953); E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York, 1961); David Hackett Fisher, *Historical Fallacies* (New York, 1970); Eliot Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," *Orbis*, 49:4, Fall 2005, pp. 575-88.

<sup>29</sup>Graham Allison, Ernest May, and Adam Yarmolinsky, "Limits to Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, 48:2, January 1970, pp. 245-61; Garry Clifford, "Bureaucratic Politics," *Journal of American History*, June 1990, pp. 161-2; Kent Robert Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II* (Baltimore, 1963); Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York, 1987); Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York, 2002); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York, 2012).

University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), and the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series published by the State Department Office of the Historian. The Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) at the Wilson Center was crucial for access to Soviet and other Eastern Bloc records.

The thoroughness and accuracy of media coverage in all three cases was one of the more intriguing results of this research. Between leaks, off-the-record statements, congressional inquiries, foreign sources, and field reporting, journalists, most importantly from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, were able to present to the public a reasonably good picture of what was going on behind the curtain of official U.S. secrecy. Subsequent revelations, including the extensive investigations during the Reagan administrations, did not fundamentally alter the picture as it emerged almost simultaneously with events.

My experience as a Foreign Service Officer reinforced the importance of evaluating primary sources with a skeptical eye. For example, U.S. embassy and CIA reporting and analysis constitute communication for the official record. Reports can be wrong, but they are generally prepared to high standards of professional responsibility and judgment. At the same time, they tend to reflect the bias of the time, for example by attributing hostile intentions to all Soviet and Cuban activities. They can also serve prevailing domestic or bureaucratic political purposes, as was the case with a misleading message regarding CIA involvement in the 1979 coup in El Salvador and the watered down inquiry report of a massacre by U.S. trained and equipped troops there in 1981. Records and notes from National Security Council and other high level meetings reflect plenty of posturing, but can be taken as authentic in that they reflect the ambitions, rivalries, and orientations of senior leaders.

Memoirs by many of the leading principals from the Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations are essential for gaining insight into the often highly contentious decision-making that surrounded these wars. Qualifications regarding bias and authenticity apply. Ford's Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Carter's National Security Advisor Brzezinski, and Reagan's first Secretary of State Al Haig all wrote memoirs infused with apologia, often disregarding accuracy.<sup>30</sup> These versions make evident how all three used their powerful offices to channel passionate and near-obsessive animosity toward the Soviet Union and its perceived military aggression in the Third World. By contrast, *Turmoil and Triumph*, the memoir by Haig's successor as Secretary of State, George Shultz, is not only a reliable record, but also offers a contrasting reflection on the virtue of prudence even for dedicated Cold Warriors.<sup>31</sup> While highly useful in their original editions, the same cautions are true of the personal diaries that Presidents Carter and Reagan diligently kept.<sup>32</sup> Jimmy Carter has no definitive biographer, but Lou Cannon's *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* is a uniquely evocative and insightful portrait of Reagan as an "enigmatic monarch who reigned rather than ruled."<sup>33</sup> In a comparable vein, Bob Woodward, the *Washington Post* journalist of Watergate fame, launched a new genre of real-time leadership accounts with *Veil*, his 1987 profile of Bill Casey's tenure as Reagan's CIA Director.<sup>34</sup> The most indispensable memoir is *From the Shadows* by Robert Gates, who served in the CIA and White House throughout the period, decades before he became CIA director and Secretary of Defense.<sup>35</sup> Also helpful is *More*

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York, 1999); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York, 1983); Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat* (New York, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, Douglas Brinkley, ed. (New York, 2007); Jimmy Carter, *White House Diaries* (New York, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987* (New York, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York, 1996).

*Precious than Peace*, Peter Rodman's under-appreciated treatment of Cold War conflicts in the Third World based on his service in every Republican administration since 1969, when he was Henry Kissinger's Special Assistant at the NSC.<sup>36</sup>

Cold War scholarship is back in vogue. Much of the new work is dedicated to the themes of global and international history, which have transformed the study of the past by emphasizing the identity politics, agency, and "discourses" of previously neglected social groups and nations.<sup>37</sup> However, the purportedly enhanced empiricism of this "new history" can also over-correct. For example, post-colonial and post-Cold War relativism may too easily downplay the fundamental importance of high level decision-making in world capitals. While there is much of value in accounting for multiple perspectives, as any good work on the origins of wars must, political and ideological bias, much of it implicit, already infects much of the literature and other information related to the Reagan Doctrine Wars.<sup>38</sup> Care and distance are necessary.

The interpretation presented here is an evolution more than a break with the established accounts of the Cold War and superpower interventions in the Third World. Despite an ever-expanding number of publications concerned with specific aspects of these interventions, relatively few historians have examined them as a whole or placed them in a general strategic

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Eric Foner (ed.), *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 1997); James M. Banner (ed.), *A Century of American Historiography* (Boston, 2010); Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia, 2011); Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016); Marc Trachtenberg, "The State of International History," *E-International Relations*, March 9, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/09/the-state-of-international-history/>, accessed April 15, 2014; William R. Keylor, "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History," *H-Diplo*, Essay No. 126, April 13, 2015, <https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/e126.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York, 1995); Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Harvard, 1984); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York, 1973); Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *The Fall of the First British Empire: Origins of the American War of Independence* (Baltimore, 1982); Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I: To Arms* (Oxford, 2003); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, 2012).

context. Among the baseline authors for this thesis, Odd Arne Westad's *Global Cold War* is perhaps the single most recognized analysis of the Cold War in the Third World. He was also one of the first to complement Western sources with extensive work in the Soviet archives. However, in making the point about the destructive impact of these wars on the affected nations and peoples, his interpretation at times suffers from struggling overmuch to establish moral equivalence between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> Raymond Garthoff at the Brookings Institution was a contemporary State Department official, and his *Detente and Confrontation* is an encyclopedic record of U.S.-Soviet relations from Nixon through Reagan.<sup>40</sup> His account of the politics of decision-making, written in 1985 while the Reagan Doctrine Wars were at their peak, is highly reliable and uniquely valuable.

There are similarly few works that deal with the Reagan Doctrine comprehensively as such. I was able to identify only two, both by political scientists. In *Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter*, Marc Lagon limits his focus to the ideological drivers of U.S.-Soviet conflict while using neo-realist theory to argue that the superpowers were most concerned with searching for security.<sup>41</sup> In *Deciding to Intervene*, James Scott thoroughly analyzes U.S. decision-making on Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan based on models of bureaucratic organization and domestic politics.<sup>42</sup> Scott offers insights, but he treats complex historical events as research cases in the search for an over-arching explanation. The process strips out critically important context, contingency, and other often intangible elements that

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<sup>39</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, 2005); Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 3, Endings* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation* (Brookings, 1985); Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Brookings, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Marc Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter* (New Haven, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Duke, 1996).

shape the real world.<sup>43</sup> The end product seems constricting even as it strives to expand knowledge.

The origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars cannot be understood without establishing their context in the history of the larger Cold War. John Lewis Gaddis gives considerable attention to Third World conflicts in *Strategies of Containment*, his survey of U.S. national security strategy during the Cold War, first published in 1982.<sup>44</sup> By giving scant attention to the Carter administration, he misses a critical element of presidential continuity, which this thesis attempts to correct. Whereas the distinction between what he calls symmetric and asymmetric containment, which forms the core of his analysis, separates out these Third World conflicts, my interpretation views them as integral to the global Cold War.<sup>45</sup> In the same vein, in *We Now Know*, Gaddis proposed that, contrary to the triumphalist argument, U.S. military superiority contributed to, but did not cause, the collapse of the Soviet system, a view that is now largely uncontested.<sup>46</sup> He judged that only Afghanistan contributed to that end, while discounting the influence of the other peripheral conflicts. While Gaddis may be right in terms of their direct relationship to the Soviet Union's demise, I argue that the Reagan Doctrine Wars had extensive impact on the last decade of the Cold War.

It is now well-established that by 1979 the USSR was already decaying politically and economically. Correspondingly, in his 2016 *Marking the Unipolar Moment*, Hal Brands

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander L. George, "Crisis Management: The Interaction of Political and Military Considerations," *Survival*, 26:5, pp. 223-34; Karen Yarhi-Milo, "Process Tracing: A Symposium," *Security Studies*, 24:2 April-June 2015, pp. 200-50; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 103.

<sup>44</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61, 342-43.

<sup>46</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know* (Oxford, 1997); Ellen Schrecker, ed., *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism* (New York, 2004).

identifies 1979 as the year when the U.S. began to emerge as the predominant world power.<sup>47</sup> The significant point is that the prevailing perspective at this moment, both in Washington, DC and Moscow, was exactly the opposite. While the United States appeared to be in decline, Soviet military power was increasing and fueling extension in the Third World. As the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan got underway, in reality the Soviets had already begun their decline, but it was not until the mid-1980s that the Reagan administration was fully aware of the situation.

U.S. grand strategy was well-suited to the single-minded purpose of the Cold War, as Brands also writes.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the Reagan Doctrine Wars offer ample demonstration that, however good this grand strategy may have as a general organizing principle, it was not necessarily an adequate strategic guide to the specific wars on the periphery. The intersection of U.S. involvement in these wars with domestic politics was messy and complex, and made implementation an even greater challenge. For example, as James Patterson explained in *Restless Giant*, the broader context encompassed the “Age of Limits” that began with Vietnam and Watergate, lasted through the Carter period, and ended with renewal under Reagan.<sup>49</sup> Often, the Reagan Doctrine Wars seemed a mere backdrop or extension of American politics.

Much more literature on the Cold War in the Third World is to come as a fresh generation of scholars explores archives from Buenos Aires to Hanoi, declassification brings new documents to light, and the internet bestows global access. Among the multiple peer-reviewed journals, *The Journal of Cold War Studies* and *Cold War History* are the principal

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<sup>47</sup> Hal Brands, *Marking the Unipolar Moment* (Cornell, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?* (Cornell, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant* (Oxford, 2005).

specialized venues, while the online humanities and social science network H-Diplo offers thorough reviews and roundtables of recent publications. While time has provided some remove, care is still needed to filter even well-respected sources. On the one hand, analytical quality and objectivity are the hallmarks of authors such as Nicola Miller, who clearly establishes how the USSR opportunistically exploited revolution in Central American, but was more focused on trade with major Latin American nations, and Thomas Barfield, whose understanding of the Afghan war is unsurpassed.<sup>50</sup> Others with equally high standards are nevertheless subject to political and normative bias. For example, William LeoGrande's study of the U.S. in Central America is encyclopedic and indispensable, but clearly favors liberal interpretations. Piero Gleijeses has become the standard setter for global research through his work on the wars in Southern Africa and unique access to Cuban archives.<sup>51</sup> However, his sympathy for Cuba's defiance of the United States and discounting of U.S. fears of Soviet-backed Cuban adventurism somewhat distorts the account.

Soviet and related sources were not the focus of research, but were essential to achieving comparative perspective. For example, *A Failed Empire* by Vladislav Zubok and the edited volume on the end of the Cold War and the Third World by Radchenko and Kalinovsky, tend to validate the prevailing narrative of Soviet decline.<sup>52</sup> Among the many accounts of how Soviet reliance on military opportunism peaked in Afghanistan, the insider perspective of former Deputy Director of the USSR Defense Ministry Working Group Alexander Lyakhovsky is

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<sup>50</sup> Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America* (Cambridge, 1989); William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions* (North Carolina, 2002); Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom* (North Carolina, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (North Carolina, 2007); Sergey Radchenko and Artemy Kalinovsky, eds., *The End of the Cold War and The Third World* (London, 2013).

particularly useful.<sup>53</sup> For contrasting insights into Soviet and American perceptions, nothing surpasses *In Confidence*, the memoir by Anatoly Dobrynin, Moscow's exceptionally able Ambassador to Washington from 1962 to 1986.<sup>54</sup> Dobrynin's detailed accounts of the Politburo's unease with the Carter and early Reagan administrations, and of the leadership's fatigue with its clients in Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, add a crucial layer.

### **The Thesis and Historical Interpretation**

The principal aims of this history of the origins of the Reagan Doctrine are, first, to portray as accurately as possible how U.S. decision-making unfolded and, second, to interpret the interactions of politics, international relations, and military power with events in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. Although not taken up directly here, this approach is a bridge to strategic studies, which uses history as an anchor to guide interdisciplinary understanding (and action) in the current world. Strategic studies has its own place in the U.S. experience of war. Its origins are in the Naval War College, where strategy has been taught in some form continuously since 1895. The current Department of Strategy and Policy dates to 1972, when Admiral Stansfield Turner became president of the Naval War College, the position he occupied before he was Carter's CIA Director. In his inaugural commencement address, acknowledging that the manifest failure in Vietnam had deeply infected the U.S. military with defeatism, Turner said the Naval War College had a mission to repair "the ineffectiveness of our Military Establishment in answering the questions, criticisms, and doubts raised against it in recent years."<sup>55</sup> He placed

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander Liakhovsky, *Inside the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan*, trans. Gary Goldberg and Kalinovsky, CWIHP Working Paper #51, January 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> VADM Stansfield Turner, "Convocation Address: Challenge!", *U.S. Naval War College Review*, XXV:2/240, November-December 1972, p. 2.

history at the center of a newly revamped strategy and policy course. The case studies in the course began, and still do, by reaching back to the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. The comparison with the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union was evident to all at the time.

In a similar vein, I reasoned that the strongest interpretive foundation for the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars lay in the realist perspective. Among realism's many proponents, three serve as principal references: Hans Morgenthau, founder of the realist school in the United States, his protégé at the University of Chicago Robert Osgood, along with Robert Tucker, initially Osgood's colleague and subsequently at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.<sup>56</sup> The first reason for adopting them is the window they offer into the mindset of the time; as influential strategic thinkers and contemporary commentators, Morgenthau, Osgood, and Tucker grappled with the range of national security and foreign policy issues during the Cold War, and they figured prominently in debates over the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. The second reason is the realists' core tenet, that war is a violent struggle for power, matches the perceptions, motivations, and actions of the main protagonists in these wars.<sup>57</sup> As international relations theorist John Mearsheimer argues in support of the realist view, even the most ideologically motivated, whether neoconservatives,

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (New York, 1943); George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago, 1951); John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York, 2012); Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New Jersey, 1973); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (Columbia, 1977); Norman A. Graebner, et al, *America and the Cold War, 1941-1991: A Realist Interpretation* (Santa Barbara, 2010); Marc Trachtenberg, "Strategic Thought in America, 1952-1966," *Political Science Quarterly*, 104:2, Summer 1989, pp. 301-34.

<sup>57</sup> Cristoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, 2001); Duncan Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford, 2009); Hartmut Behr and Xander Kirke, "The Tale of a 'Realism' in International Relations," *E-International Relations*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/13/the-tale-of-a-realism-in-international-relations/>, accessed June 4, 2016; Konstantinos Kostagiannis, "Hans Morgenthau and the Tragedy of the Nation-State," *International History Review*, 36:3, 2014, pp. 513-29.

liberal internationalists, or Marxist-Leninists, found that the structure of balance of power competition and the demands of war bound their causes.<sup>58</sup> Morgenthau, Osgood, and Tucker had already written about the challenges the United States confronted from revolution, limited war, and intervention by the time the Reagan Doctrine Wars unfolded.<sup>59</sup> All three had historical minds, and they did not hesitate to use the past to develop sophisticated arguments. Thucydides, Hobbes, and Clausewitz, for example, were not merely illustrative, but rather served as sources for understanding enduring strategic issues. Finally, if the nature of war is unchanging, explanatory value comes only with appreciation of each war's specific character. Sensitive to historical fallacies, these realists avoided promoting facile analogies and patterns in the service of policy or some over-arching theory.<sup>60</sup>

The approach here follows in this tradition of using history to serve interpretation. I have already referred to Clausewitz and Corbett. Similarly, the three introductory epigraphs suggest key themes: Thucydides, like his 17<sup>th</sup> Century English translator Thomas Hobbes, believed that war originated in human nature and the struggle for power in which each adversary acted according to his own fears, honor, and interests. They lamented the tendency of passion to overcome reason and the corrosive effects of protracted violence on social and political order. They observed how local antagonists drew competing outside powers into their conflicts, while the outside powers tended to protract those same conflicts once they became involved. In his

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<sup>58</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York, 1948); Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago, 1958); Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War* (Chicago, 1957), Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Colorado, 1979); Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago, 1953); Robert W. Tucker, "The Purposes of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 59:2, Winter 1980, pp. 241-74.

<sup>60</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York, 1970); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time* (New York, 1986); Alexander George, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Harvard, 2005); Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London, 2009); Hal Brands and Jeremy Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Brookings, 2015).

remark to Parliament in 1839, Wellington observed that even war on the periphery tended to become central to a world power like Great Britain. These are the same problems that were fundamental to the Reagan Doctrine Wars, and to the wider Cold War in which they were embedded.

## **History and Social Science**

Applied social science was part of the Cold War, for better and for worse. Social science guided, or at least justified, U.S. policy and strategy from nuclear deterrence and domino theory to foreign aid, from the Marshall Plan and the Alliance for Progress to the Vietnam War. During the late-1970s and early-1980s, political scientists serving prominently in U.S. administrations participated in U.S. decision-making on Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> They included, for example, Samuel Huntington who coordinated strategic planning on Carter's National Security Council and Fred Iklé from the RAND Corporation who was Undersecretary of Defense for Policy in the Reagan administration.

True to the interdisciplinary spirit of strategic studies, this thesis employs social science in the pursuit of good history. In an intriguing article, Gaddis reasonably proposed that, because the common object of history and political science is the human experience, broad areas of overlap should result in productive synthesis.<sup>62</sup> Yet, through differences in methods and intent, the two disciplines tend to remain in parallel more than they integrate. Perhaps the most serious disjuncture with history is the search in social science for over-arching theories based on

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard, 1960); Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960); Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale, 1968); R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (RAND, 1972); Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Brookings, 1979); Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>62</sup> Gaddis, "History, Theory, and Common Ground," *International Security*, 22:1, Summer 1997, pp. 75-85.

quantitative methods derived from economics and the experimental sciences. Along with a profusion of jargon, the approach can lead seriously astray when reliance on rational actor models and the selection of variables to prove hypotheses reduce extremely complex events, such as wars, into “case studies” stripped of their historical context. The most ambitious effort to address the problem, complexity theory, adapted largely from physics, attempts to account for uncertainty, irrationality, and non-linearity in human events through statistical analysis of large-scale data.<sup>63</sup> However, unless or until social science uncovers truly predictive laws of human behavior and social systems, the more complete explanatory power will reside with history.<sup>64</sup>

The complexity of the Reagan Doctrine Wars belies the universalist aspirations of international relations theory, a subject taken up again in the Conclusion. Personal rivalries, organizational friction, and democratic politics, along with complicated motivations of fear and honor, the role of chance, and the violent clash of wills inherent to war, prevailed over the rational calculation of national interests and orderly processes in the making of U.S. policy and strategy. As already mentioned, and to be discussed further in Chapter 2, there is no better example than the missteps, misconceptions, and unintended consequences that resulted when Jimmy Carter’s desire to conduct a foreign policy of principles encountered Cold War challenges of power. His support for the Salvadoran Armed Forces, which routinely violated human rights, and for the Afghan mujahedin, who widely practiced terrorism, stand out as stark contradictions. At the same time, like Woodrow Wilson 60 years earlier, Carter’s moralism may largely have

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<sup>63</sup>Fred Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies: Bridging Theoretical Divides in International Relations* (Stanford, 2014); Santa Fe Institute, *Architectures of Complexity*, accessed June 15, 2016 at <https://www.santafe.edu/research/themes/architectures-complexity>.

<sup>64</sup> Hew Strachan, “Strategy in the Twenty-First Century,” in Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 503-23.

failed in office, yet his liberal ideals endured.<sup>65</sup> Ronald Reagan's administration did not lessen its attention to human rights, both under pressure from Congress, especially on Central America, and more generally as a political weapon against the Soviet Union.

Theory aside, evaluating the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars does contribute to understanding institutional development and patterns in politics that are the concerns of policy history and American Political Development, subfields where the intersection between political science and history are particularly strong.<sup>66</sup> Arrivals and departures of presidents proved imperfect demarcations of change. The dynamics were far more complex. Defeat in Vietnam broke the consensus on Cold War foreign policy, which partially accounted for Ford's defeat and Carter's election as a liberal outsider in 1976. The failure of Carter's attempt to break from the Cold War contributed to Reagan's election in 1980, but Reagan found his conservative revolution blunted by the struggle between Congress and the Executive. The lessons of Vietnam, and Korea before it, made it politically imperative to avoid sending U.S. troops and risking another quagmire in the Third World; Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan followed. A few months after the fall of Saigon the Ford administration engaged in militarized containment in Angola, Carter ended his term committed to indirect wars in Central America and Afghanistan, and Reagan continued by increasing resources and making these peripheral wars central to competition with the Soviet Union. Ultimately, strategic behavior across all three presidential administrations – Ford, Carter, and Reagan – conformed to the demands of war: refraining from

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<sup>65</sup> Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (eds.), *The Human Rights Revolution* (Oxford, 2012); Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970's* (Cambridge, 2014).

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Cochran, "The "Presidential Synthesis" in American History," *The American Historical Review*, 53:4, July 1948, pp. 748-59; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge, 2004); Rogan Kersh, "The Growth of American Political Development," *Perspectives on Politics*, 3:2, June 2005, pp. 335-45; Gareth Davies, "Towards Big-government Conservatism," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:4, 2008, pp. 621–635; Brian Balogh and Bruce Schulman (eds), *Recapturing the Oval Office: new historical approaches to the American presidency* (Ithaca, 2015).

direct limited war while pursuing containment and imposing costs. Such consistency also extended to the focus on the Cold War within the foreign policy and national security bureaucracy, the use of covert action, and the rejection of alternative strategies that would risk escalation, particularly the notion of attacking Cuba militarily.

From the opposite perspective, models and concepts from the social sciences provide valuable analytical tools for historical interpretation of the Reagan Doctrine Wars.<sup>67</sup> For example, Max Weber's leadership classifications apply to the charismatic Angolan insurgent Jonas Savimbi and the sultanistic Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, and Graham Allison's classic model of bureaucratic politics is an elegant framework for discussing how national interests, institutional prerogatives, and personal ambitions intersected within U.S. administrations.<sup>68</sup> Traditional realists from Thucydides to Machiavelli and Morgenthau located the origins of war in human nature. Recent advances in cognitive psychology establish scientific explanations for human motivations that reinforce their sophisticated insights. For example, loss aversion, derived from prospect theory and behavioral economics, holds that fear of losses is generally stronger than expectation of gains, proportional to the magnitude of costs and proximity in time of prior experience.<sup>69</sup> This certainly helps explain how the wars in Korea and Vietnam led to the Reagan Doctrine Wars. U.S. leaders reacted to the 1979 Soviet invasion of

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<sup>67</sup> Mark Peceny, *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets* (Pennsylvania, 1999); Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars* (Cambridge, 2005); Stephen Biddle, *Military Power* (Princeton, 2006); Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2006); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, February 2013, pp. 75-90.

<sup>68</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich (California, 1978), pp. 215-16; Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 258-32.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Advances in Prospect Theory: Cumulative Representation of Uncertainty," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 5:4, October 1992, pp. 297-323; Jack S. Levy, "Loss Aversion, Framing, and Bargaining: The Implications of Prospect Theory for International Conflict," *International Political Science Review*, April 1996, 17:2, 179-95; Mark C. Stafford and Mark Warr, "A Reconceptualization of General and Specific Deterrence," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30:2, May 1993, pp. 123-35.

Afghanistan as if it were an offensive to seize the Persian Gulf, despite intelligence assessments that it was a defensive effort to stabilize a troubled ally.<sup>70</sup> This attribution of the worst intentions to an adversary was a clear case of perception bias. In some instances, international relations theory does help further analysis. For example, the concept of intrinsic vs. extrinsic interest provides a useful scale to measure how U.S. administrations evaluated the stakes involved in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan.<sup>71</sup>

Social science complements and validates the historical analysis of the Reagan Doctrine Wars presented here. But it does not substitute for the classic principles of strategy that underpin the realist perspective. In particular, Clausewitz remains of central value. His dictum that war is the ‘continuation of politics by other means’ is foundational and takes on deeper significance from the German *Politik*, which lends itself to interpretations that encompass both policy and politics.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, his concept of ‘the value of the object’ provides sufficient basis for understanding the magnitude, duration, and acceptable level of sacrifices the United States would make in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan during the Cold War.<sup>73</sup>

### **Policy, Strategy, and the Origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars**

Wellington’s observation about the British empire that “There is no such thing as a *little war* for a great Nation” held true 140 years later for the United States in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> Even though the wars there took place with minimal U.S.

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<sup>70</sup> Mara Tchalakov, “Jimmy Carter and the US Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Case Study Of Cognitive Bias” (Oxford M.Phil. dissertation, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Michael C. Desch, *When the Third World Matters: Latin America and United States Grand Strategy* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 9-12.

<sup>72</sup> Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War* (New York, 2007), p. 163.

<sup>73</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. & trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), p. 92; Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (London, 1992), pp. 78-9.

<sup>74</sup> *Wellington’s Speeches to Parliament*, p. 289.

investment of blood and treasure, these new peripheral theaters occupied a place of central importance in the global Cold War.

If the aims declared were so high, why were the means employed so low? To reiterate, should deterrence fail, the theoretical cost of major war, whether conventional or nuclear, was absolute. Avoiding that possibility was of overriding importance. In addition, U.S. experience in Korea and Vietnam also made avoiding misfortune in another limited war in the Third World an imperative.<sup>75</sup> These dynamics drove the United States to engage in armed conflict with the Soviet Union indirectly on the periphery, where the risk of escalation was easier to control and there was no direct threat to the nation. By observing these limits on actual fighting, both superpowers practiced restrictive deterrence, which allowed them to manage conflict without seeking victory, while contesting the regional balance of power. Demands on U.S. strategy did not stem from interaction in combat and the fortunes of battle as in conventional war. Rather they stemmed from the complexities of intervening in civil wars, from the challenge of revolution, with Cuba as its motor in Africa and Latin America, from often-troublesome allies such as South Africa, the Congo, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, and Honduras, who pursued their own interests often in contradiction to the wishes of the U.S., and from liberals in Congress who were determined to restrain war-making in the shadow of Vietnam.<sup>76</sup>

The superpowers set the boundaries of these wars not only through their actions, but equally through their decisions not to act. The Truman administration set the U.S. post-World War II precedent with its much-deliberated and controversial decision to cease support for Chiang Kai Shek and the Kuomintang Army in 1949, which enabled Mao's Communist victory

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<sup>75</sup> Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes* (New York, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Strachan, *The Direction of War*, pp. 119-35

in the Chinese Civil War.<sup>77</sup> At the outset to the Reagan Doctrine Wars, U.S. administrations considered alternative strategies in pursuit of victory, such as attacking Cuba directly and unleashing the full force of Dirty War in El Salvador, but they refrained from escalation. The Soviet Union too restrained itself, most importantly by limiting the number of its troops in Afghanistan and not attacking Pakistan. Other internal wars with a Cold War dimension were also under way, but did not become sustained fighting fronts.

Although the history of covert action during the final phase of the Cold War remains incomplete, the Reagan Doctrine Wars cannot be dismissed as “a legacy of ashes.”<sup>78</sup> The façade of secret war fitted multiple purposes; the participants were well-known to each other, but public deniability buffered confrontation in the domestic realm as well as internationally. Support for Angolan, Nicaraguan, and Afghan insurgents, along with associated action among conventional forces and allies, amounted to a cost-driven strategy through economy of force contingency operations. More demanding was counterinsurgency in El Salvador, where, even with a much lighter footprint than the failed effort in Vietnam, the United States bore the responsibilities of defending a state and pursuing democracy.<sup>79</sup>

Those involved in the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars across three U.S. administrations did not yet have in sight the end of the Cold War more than a decade later. Conducted as forever wars, they mostly muddled through. Even after Ronald Reagan’s

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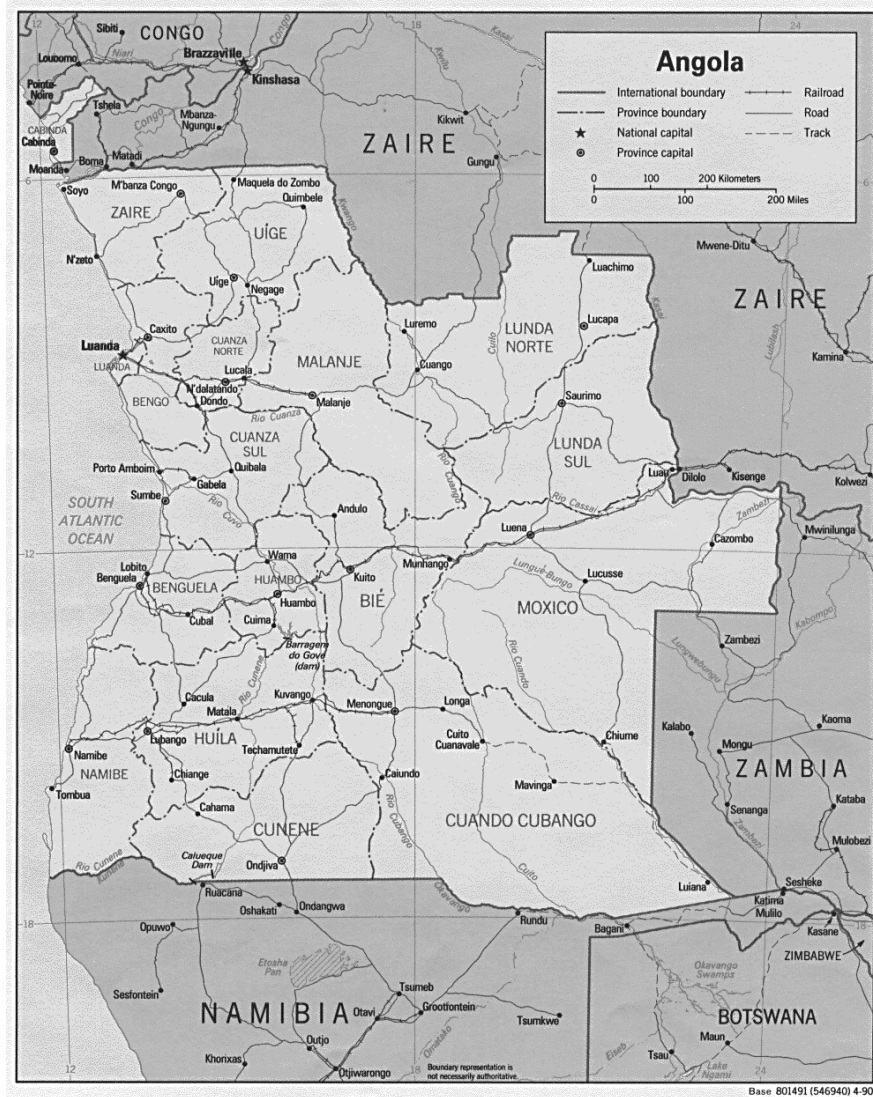
<sup>77</sup> Ernest May, *The Truman Administration and China* (Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 30-33.

<sup>78</sup> Hugh Wilford, “Still Missing: The Historiography of U.S. Intelligence,” *Passport*, 47:2, September 2016, pp. 20-7; Piero Gleijeses, “The CIA’s Paramilitary Operations during the Cold War: An Assessment,” *Cold War History*, 16:3, pp. 291-306; Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, 1988); Bruce Jentleson, “The Reagan Administration and Coercive Diplomacy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 106:1, 1991, pp. 57-82; Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security*, 20:4, 1996, pp. 136-75.

administration articulated its broader Cold War strategy of peace through strength during the second half of his first term, Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan were frequently the subjects of controversy. What mattered most was that U.S. conduct consistently served the policy and strategy of militarized containment, while ensuring that others, not American troops, would do the fighting and dying.

# Part One: Angola



## Chapter 1: The 1975 Ford-Kissinger Intervention

### I. Intervention and the Failure of Deception

On January 6, 1976, President Gerald Ford's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had the following exchange on the telephone with National Security Advisor Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft:

**Kissinger:** Maybe we should let Angola go. This is going to turn into a worse disaster. Maybe we should just not have started that operation.

**Scowcroft:** We should not have done what is right, is what you're saying.<sup>80</sup>

As the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu wrote 25 centuries ago, "All warfare is based on deception."<sup>81</sup> It was regret over the failure to deceive -- not the enemy, but the American people -- that Kissinger was confiding. The immediate targets of Kissinger's ire were the junior Senators Dick Clark (D-IA) and his colleague John Tunney (D-CA), who, in the face of military misfortune and embarrassing revelations, had engineered an abrupt and unprecedented end to Congressional funding for the U.S. covert action then under way in Angola. When President Ford first approved the secret program known as IAFEATURE on Kissinger's recommendation in July 1975, their primary concern was not particular interest in Africa or even the regional Cold War balance of power. Rather, the concern was to guard the United States' reputation for power -- its prestige -- by demonstrating, barely four months after the fall of Saigon, determination to oppose perceived Soviet-backed aggression.

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<sup>80</sup> Kissinger-Scowcroft TELCON, January 6, 1976, U.S. Department of State Case No. F-2001-02979, Doc. No. C18091065, National Security Digital Archive.

<sup>81</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ed. & trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, 1963), p. 63; Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, (Colorado, 1993), p. 155.

## Historiography

The story of foreign intervention in what turned out to be the beginning of Angola's 27-year Civil War has been thoroughly told. With the exception of a few missing pieces, such as the exact extent of collusion between the United States and South Africa, the record is now well-established from multiple viewpoints, and general consensus exists in the extensive literature regarding the course of events and roles of the protagonists.<sup>82</sup> Piero Gleijeses' defining account in *Conflicting Missions* (2002) is an indispensable guide, particularly to the exceptional role of Cuba; Odd Arne Westad assesses the Soviet role and the broader international context in *The Global Cold War* (2005); and Raymond Garthoff's analysis of U.S. policy-making in *Détente and Confrontation* (1985) is an important point of departure.

A number of declassified interagency records on Angola have subsequently become available that make it possible to amplify the narrative. These include notes from meetings of the National Security Council and the interagency 40 Committee authorized by Nixon in 1970 to deal with covert action, intelligence estimates, memoranda of conversations, and reporting cables from U.S. missions in Kinshasa, Pretoria, Luanda, and Lisbon. In addition, I knew many of the direct participants and discussed the independence struggle and early Civil War with them while assigned to the American Embassy in Angola during the war's final phase between 1999 and 2002.<sup>83</sup> During those years, the scholar Jerry Bender, one of the few outsiders who experienced

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<sup>82</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*; Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-76* (North Carolina, 2002); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, 2005); Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York, 1994); Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Brookings, 1985), pp. 502-37; John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies* (New York, 1978).

<sup>83</sup> Deane Hinton, U.S. Ambassador to Zaire (1973-4); Everett Briggs, Consul General Luanda (1972-194); John McGinnis, CIA Special Activities Division, including Operation IAFEATURE (1975-76); General António dos Santos França "Ndalu", guerrilla commander, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), and Ambassador to the U.S.; General João de Matos, guerrilla commander and Chief of Staff of the

the onset of the Civil War, generously provided important introductions and perspective. Of interest, his contemporary account published in 1978 has proven largely accurate, as have those of the small number of journalists, such as Seymour Hersh and Les Gelb, who managed to penetrate the fog of U.S. secrecy that blanketed the war in Angola.<sup>84</sup>

If it seems difficult to appreciate today the intense attention the Angolan conflict compelled at the time, there is no better evidence than Kissinger's own claims to legacy. In the third and final volume of his memoirs, *Years of Renewal*, he devotes an entire chapter to Angola, followed by an additional section of over 100 pages on his belated initiative, undertaken after the military option failed, to fight the Cold War in Southern Africa through diplomacy during the Ford Administration's final year.<sup>85</sup>

### **From Detente to Confrontation**

The grand logic of restraint and peaceful coexistence that characterized détente as it emerged in the Nixon administration was intended to serve the avoidance of war. It was not an idealistic vision of world order that guided superpower behavior, but the realignment of power, particularly with Moscow's recent achievement of nuclear parity and U.S. retrenchment in the immediate wake of Vietnam. Even as the two sides refrained from conflict in Europe and other core areas, neither considered the détente code of conduct, agreed at the Nixon-Brezhnev Moscow Summit in May 1972, to apply in the Third World. John Lewis Gaddis observed that

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Angolan Armed Forces (FAA); Lúcio Laura, MPLA leader and founding member; his son MG Paulo Lara; Paulo Jorge, Foreign Minister and Director, MPLA International Division; Abel Chivukuvuku, UNITA Deputy Chief and Angolan opposition leader; and Holden Roberto, FNLA leader.

<sup>84</sup> Gerald J. Bender, "Kissinger in Angola: Anatomy of Failure," in ed. René Lemarchand, *American Policy in Southern Africa* (Washington, DC, 1978), pp. 63-143; and Robin Hallett, "The South African Intervention in Angola, 1975-76," *African Affairs*, 77:308, July 1978, pp. 347-86.

<sup>85</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 26, 791-833, 903-1016.

détente in French means “relaxation,” but also “the trigger of a gun.”<sup>86</sup> It was in this second sense that Angola became the trigger for the first clash of American and Soviet competition to break the stabilizing mood of détente. Henry Kissinger brought Angola from the periphery to the center, by deciding that any failure to oppose Soviet-backed aggression there would place U.S. credibility at stake. However, the corresponding investment remained far less, a significant difference from the earlier hot wars in Korea and Vietnam.

What kind of war was this? As global superpower competition reemerged in Africa for the first time in a decade, Angola was a peripheral war that lacked inherent strategic importance, which made it possible to control the risks of escalation. It was nevertheless a major regional war that drew in multiple states -- South Africa, Zaire, and Zambia, but also China, Cuba, and France in addition to the United States and the Soviet Union. For the African participants, the stakes were much greater and the war came closer to unlimited than limited war. The Angolan combatants had spent over a decade as insurgents fighting against Portuguese counterinsurgents. However, after 1975, this was no longer an asymmetric guerrilla war, but a full-fledged civil war. Thousands of regular troops equipped with artillery and armor ranged across hundreds of miles of territory, engaging in multiple conventional battles, and attacking unrestricted targets, including the capital city Luanda. Social, economic, and political disruptions affected millions of people; over a million died, and it lasted well beyond the Cold War itself for more than three decades. The national, regional, and even global consequences of intervention were mostly unanticipated; they are largely unrecognized, misread, and forgotten today.

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<sup>86</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 287.

In July 1975, Henry Kissinger was at the height of his unprecedented powers as both Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, when, acting at his direction, the 40 Committee oversaw a hasty covert action planning exercise. IAFEATURE got under way later that month. The precipitating event was the approach of Angola's independence from Portugal slated for November 11, 1975, which had unleashed civil war. The operation's strictly negative aim was to prevent the Soviet and Cuban-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from consolidating power by supporting two rival factions, the FNLA and UNITA. A vaguely professed desire to revive a failed political settlement among the three factions through diplomacy took a back seat to defeating the MPLA and its foreign allies by force. Angola's neighbors, Zaire to the north and Zambia to the east, had raised the alarm about the communist threat and supported covert action, while South Africa launched a secret invasion from its colony South-West Africa (Namibia). The operation ran at peak for just five months, from July to December, until money ran out and Congress refused to approve more.

### **Vietnam Blowback Leads Congress to Prohibit Covert Action**

The domestic atmosphere placed the Ford administration in a poor position to pursue the Cold War in another obscure corner of the Third World. It was less than a year after the twin humiliations of Nixon's resignation over Watergate and the collapse of "peace with honor" in Vietnam, and a newly assertive Congress was pursuing acrimonious intelligence investigations. Public trust in government had corroded badly.<sup>87</sup> Not only was Gerald Ford's status as an unelected President weak, the 1974 mid-term elections had strengthened liberals and increased Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. Public opinion that regarded the Vietnam War

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<sup>87</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, pp. 98-104.

as a mistake was in the 70-80 percent range.<sup>88</sup> Fear of sliding into another quagmire was the backdrop for contentious debate in Congress that began in November 1975, and produced two full votes by large majorities that barred “aid to private groups engaged in military or paramilitary operations in Angola.”<sup>89</sup> On December 19, 1975, the Tunney amendment to the Department of Defense appropriations bill terminated covert assistance to anti-Communist forces in Angola. Clark, who had traveled to Angola and verified the secret U.S. intervention, roused a majority to pass an amendment to the foreign aid bill which subsequently made the ban permanent, passing in the Senate 54-22, and in the House 323-99.

The rebuff aggrieved President Ford so much he accused Congress on national television of having “lost their guts” to confront the Soviet Union.<sup>90</sup> To him, Congress was replaying its refusal earlier in the year to approve his request for aid to South Vietnam, which had led to the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army as North Vietnam launched a full offensive. With the 1976 election campaign getting underway, Ford was facing a serious challenge, not only from Democrats, but from conservatives within his own Republican Party as well. The attack on the administration by Ford’s challenger on the right, Ronald Reagan, came from the opposite direction and reflected newly emerging neoconservative beliefs.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> William Lunch and Peter Sperlich, “American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam,” *Western Political Quarterly*, 32:1, March 1979, pp. 21-44; Edward Hadley, *Congress and the Fall of Vietnam and Cambodia* (New Jersey, 1982); William M. Darley, “War Policy, Public Support, and the Media,” *Parameters*, Summer 2005, pp. 121-34.

<sup>89</sup> Robert David Johnson, “The Unintended Consequences of Congressional Reform: The Clark and Tunney Amendments and U.S. Policy toward Angola,” *Diplomatic History*, 27:2, Spring 2003, pp. 215-43.

<sup>90</sup> David Craslow, “‘Congress Lost Guts’, Ford Says,” *The Miami News*, February 10, 1976.

<sup>91</sup> Ronald Reagan, “To Restore America,” Campaign Address, March 31, 1976, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/3.31.76.html>, accessed January 13, 2015.

For the United States in the 1975 intervention in Angola, the demands of restrictive deterrence, of managing conflict by fighting at the lowest level possible, were compelling and contradictory, and the limits to power were fundamental.<sup>92</sup> To demonstrate continued U.S. will at the highest level, Kissinger found himself forced to rely on taking action in secret at the lowest possible level. It was also a case of strategic myopia.<sup>93</sup> The U.S. attempt to contain the Soviet Union in Angola was not merely a unique Kissingerian exercise in *realpolitik*. It reflected the perceptions, temperament, and dispositions shared among two generations of leaders throughout the Cold War.<sup>94</sup>

## II. Why Angola became a Balance of Power Confrontation

Officially, the U.S. claimed that it was responding to Soviet aggression in Angola. But whether the U.S. or the Soviet Union were to blame for balance of power confrontations in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World was much debated at the time.<sup>95</sup> Hans Morgenthau, one of Kissinger's teachers and greatest critics, acknowledged an absence of U.S. strategic interests in Africa, but identified competing demands between "national interest in social and political order" and the requirement "not to jeopardize relations with allies in Western Europe."<sup>96</sup> The more fundamental strategic challenge for the U.S. was that of "the status quo power confronted with a revolutionary situation."<sup>97</sup> This was the same dilemma that led Harry Truman to reverse

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<sup>92</sup> Rid, "Deterrence beyond the State," p. 128.

<sup>93</sup> Bender, "Kissinger in Angola," p. 65.

<sup>94</sup> Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War and Limited War Revisited* (Colorado, 1979), pp. 82-5.

<sup>95</sup> Shannon Rae Butler, "Into the Storm: American Covert Involvement in the Angolan Civil War, 1974-1975" (Univ. of Arizona Ph.D. dissertation, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> Hans Morgenthau, Harris Foundation Lecture, November 1953, cited in Peter Pham, "Hans J. Morgenthau and United States Policy toward Africa," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 31:4, July 2009, pp. 252-60.

<sup>97</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 358-64.

Franklin Roosevelt's support for self-determination following World War II as the Cold War took hold, beginning with the return of France to Indochina.<sup>98</sup>

The revolutionary situation that initially confronted the U.S. in Angola originated not in Southern Africa, but in Western Europe. When a coup by leftist military officers in Portugal on April 25, 1974 restored democracy after four decades of right-wing dictatorship, it also provoked U.S. preoccupation with Eurocommunism in a founding member of NATO. The principal cause of the coup had been Portugal's effort to retain its anachronistic colonies in Guinea (Guinea-Bissau), Mozambique, and Angola through costly and brutal counterinsurgency campaigns, which had produced casualties seven times greater per capita than U.S. forces suffered in Vietnam. Angola, the size of Texas, California, and New York combined, with a largely tribal population of 6.5 million, had been a Portuguese possession for over 500 years and was almost completely unprepared when independence suddenly came in 1975.<sup>99</sup>

The United States had long served as an accessory to Portuguese colonialism and counterinsurgency in Africa. The determining reason was its status as a NATO ally, particularly the mid-Atlantic air and naval bases in the Azores that were essential for the defense of Europe. Although beginning with the Kennedy administration, the U.S. had expressed largely symbolic interest in Angolan independence, the regional balance of power was not a concern as long as

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<sup>98</sup> Frederik Logevall, *Embers of War*, pp. 104-07.

<sup>99</sup> Gerald J. Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese: The Myth and the Reality* (Berkeley, 1978); John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Harvard, 1969 and 1978); Gerald J. Bender, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency: An African Case," *Comparative Politics*, 4:3, April 1972, pp. 331-60; Subi L. Ishemo, "Forced Labour and Migration in Portugal's African Colonies," in ed. Robin Coehn, *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 162-5; Tad Szulc, "Lisbon & Washington: Behind the Portuguese Revolution," *Foreign Policy*, No. 21, Winter 1975-6, pp. 3-62; Kenneth Maxwell, *The Making of Portuguese Democracy* (Cambridge, 1995); Douglas Porch, *The Portuguese Armed Forces and the Revolution* (Stanford, 1977); Anthony James Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Kentucky, 2004), pp. 127-8.

Portugal, along with apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia, maintained an anti-communist cordon sanitaire across Southern Africa.<sup>100</sup> In 1969, Henry Kissinger, then-President Nixon's National Security Advisor, had led a review that reaffirmed regional Southern Africa policy. National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 39 emphasized stability and extreme gradualism, with relations oriented to supporting white-dominated regimes while minimizing support for black nationalism. The coup in Portugal made this policy instantly obsolete in Angola. The prospect of the Soviet-Cuban backed MPLA was taking power at independence in November 1975 made Angola the sudden focus of an acute regional crisis.<sup>101</sup> When the crunch came, Kissinger ruled out any consideration of a broader search for solutions.<sup>102</sup>

### **U.S. Complicity in the Origin of the Angolan Civil War**

The new Portuguese government negotiated an agreement with three nationalist parties: the MPLA led by Agostinho Neto, the FNLA led by Holden Roberto, and UNITA led by Jonas

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<sup>100</sup> Jamie Miller, "Things Fall Apart: South Africa and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973-74," *Cold War History*, 12:2, May 2012, pp. 183-204; Memorandum from USMAAG Chief Col. William Wubbena to Ambassador Frank Carlucci, "Portugal Security Assistance Program Justification," in GAO Staff Study, *Profiles of Military Assistance Advisory Groups in 15 Countries*, 1 September 1978, pp. 88-93; Alexander Cooley and Hendrik Spruyt, *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 129-31; Robert Craig Johnson, "COIN: The Portuguese in Africa, 1959-1975," *Chandelle: A Journal of Aviation History*, 3:2, June/July 1998; George Wright, *The Destruction of a Nation: United States' Policy toward Angola since 1945*, (Chicago, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>101</sup> JCS Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Policy Toward Portugal and Republic of South Africa, JCSM-528-63, 10 July 1963, NSDA; South Africa Collection; Action Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (Williams) to Secretary of State Rusk, Portuguese African Territories, April 29, 1964, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXIV, Africa, Doc. 418; Embassy Lisbon to Secstate, telegram, July 15, 1961, NSF-JFKPL, cited in Steven R. Weissmann, "CIA Covert Action in Zaire and Angola: Patterns and Consequences," *Political Science Quarterly*, 94:2, Summer 1979, p. 276; Luís Nuno Rodrigues, "About Face: The United States and Portuguese Colonialism in 1961," *Electronic Journal of Portuguese History*, 2:1, Summer 2004, pp. 1-10; John Heilbrunn, *Oil, Democracy, and Development in Africa* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 96; Daniel Dos Santos, "Cabinda: The Politics of Oil in Cabinda's Enclave," in Robin Cohen (ed.), *African Islands and Enclaves* (California, 1983), pp. 101-117; Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution*, p. 253; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 353; NSC Interdepartmental Group for Africa, A Study in Response to NSSM 39, December 9, 1969, AF/NSC-IG 69-8, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Southern Africa, Doc. 17; Edgar Lockwood, "NSSM 39 and the Future of U.S. Policy toward Southern Africa," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, IV:3, Fall 1974, pp. 63-72; Bender, "Kissinger in Angola," n. 6, pp. 129-30; "Secretary Kissinger Visits Middle East and Europe, Arrival, Lisbon, December 17," Press Release, *Department of State Bulletin*, January 14, 1974, pp. 25-26.

<sup>102</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 791; MemCon between Presidents Ford and Kaunda, The White House, April 19, 1975, MemCons, Box 11, Ford Presidential Library, NSDA.

Savimbi. Independence was set for November 11, 1975, but the agreement broke down and the struggle for power among the three factions hardened into civil war.<sup>103</sup>

The U.S. was complicit in provoking the Angolan civil war through intervention on behalf of the FNLA, which was closely tied to dictator Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko in neighboring Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Mobutu ensured that Zaire remained an African strong point in the Cold War. His flawed authority and legitimacy, mismanagement, corruption, and economic dependence gave him much in common with other U.S. anti-communist clients. Mobutu was no mere surrogate, but a contentious ally and a commitment trap, whose indispensability gave him considerable leverage to exploit the U.S. for his own interests.

In determining how to respond, the critical assumption was that covert arming of anti-communists would tip the scales in Angola, just as it had in the Congo in the 1960s.<sup>104</sup> The operation was developed in secret consultation with Mobutu through former Ambassador to Zaire Sheldon Vance (1969-73).<sup>105</sup> Mobutu received the promise of a major increase in economic and military assistance to shore up his flagging regime.

### **The Parties to War**

There was, however, a serious problem with the chosen instrument. The FNLA was led “by corrupt, unprincipled men who represented the very worst of black African racism.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Gilbert Khadiagala, “Negotiating Angola’s Independence Transition: The Alvor Accords,” *International Negotiation* 10:1, 2005, pp. 293–309.

<sup>104</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for Africa William Schaufele “U.S. Involvement in Civil War in Angola,” testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, February 5, 1976, p. 174; CIA, “Estimate of the Present Military Situation in Angola,” ND Document 005891522, FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

<sup>105</sup> AmEmbassy Kinshasa, telegram 5605, Vance to Kissinger, NODIS CHEROKEE, Breakfast with Mobutu, June 23, 1975, *FRUS* 1973-6, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 278; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 805.

<sup>106</sup> Gleijeses interview with former CIA Station Chief Robert Hultslender, n.d., <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB67/transcript.html>, accessed January 13, 2015.

Holden Roberto, a traditional leader of the large Bakongo tribe that straddles the Angolan-Zairian frontier and made up the bulk of FNLA troops was a self-serving autocrat lacking in vision or competence as a leader. Roberto was as close to being a proxy as possible, and had received a small CIA stipend on and off since the 1960's; in January 1975, the 40 Committee approved \$300,000 for a political action campaign to boost his candidacy in the elections anticipated under the Alvor accords. Nominally, the FNLA was the strongest of the three Angolan factions militarily, with as many as 20,000 troops. They were equipped with weapons drawn from the Zairian Army offset by U.S. aid, as well as from a Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) mission that had arrived in Zaire in 1974.<sup>107</sup> The FNLA also relied on South African advisors and an assortment of mercenaries. The FNLA and their backers were confident they would prevail, but once in serious combat it disintegrated as a fighting force.

UNITA, excluded from the original U.S. finding, was in 1975 the smallest of the three factions. A breakaway from the FNLA and drawn mostly from the large Ovimbundu tribe of the Central Highlands, it was highly motivated under its leader Jonas Savimbi.<sup>108</sup> With a core of about 3,000 guerrillas, UNITA received early support from the PRC, France, and South Africa. Zaire and Zambia served as sanctuaries.

The MPLA was of a higher order of political development. Formed by educated whites, mestiços and assimilated Angolans, primarily from the coastal Mbundu tribe, the MPLA was a disciplined Marxist-Leninist national liberation party. Its black nationalist credentials were unassailable. Association with Portuguese communists facilitated contacts with Moscow, and Che Guevara spearheaded links with Cuba during his two African sojourns in the 1960's.

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<sup>107</sup> Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution*, p. 257.

<sup>108</sup> Fred Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* (Edinburgh, 1986).

Lacking in military strength, the MPLA had fared poorly against Portuguese counterinsurgents as well as the FNLA, backed by Mobutu's Army. Reduced in 1975 to fewer than 3,000 troops, MPLA leader Agostinho Neto recognized they needed a serious army and appealed to the Cubans and Soviets for accelerated aid.<sup>109</sup>

As the Portuguese grip weakened and the country disintegrated into civil war, the small U.S. mission in Luanda reported that, despite its leftist orientation, the MPLA was best prepared to run Angola following independence.<sup>110</sup> Multiple officials in Washington disputed the wisdom of providing military support to UNITA and the FNLA, based on the realization the U.S. was unlikely to invest enough to determine the outcome. Among the most prominent dissenters was State Department Assistant Secretary for Africa Nathaniel Davis, who chaired the interagency Task Force that formally recommended a political-diplomatic alternative.<sup>111</sup> The Defense Department and military were content to provide security assistance to Mobutu and logistic support for IAFEATURE, but made it clear they had no stomach for deeper involvement.<sup>112</sup>

### **Henry Kissinger's Spenglerian Nightmare: Motives, Bureaucracy, and Politics**

This was all beside the point to Henry Kissinger who drove the policy, aided by a few key supporters. He dismissed those who preferred an African-oriented approach as undisciplined "missionaries" and derided the Congress as hopelessly naïve. Kissinger especially disdained the reluctant Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Colby, who had contributed to scandal by

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<sup>109</sup> Embassy Lisbon, telegram 01800, Neto Looks for Aid, March 31, 1975, NSDA.

<sup>110</sup> AmConsul Luanda, telegram 00379, Angola's Likely Future, May 28, 1974, NSDA; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 353; Gleijeses-Hultslander interview.

<sup>111</sup> Weissman, "CIA Covert Action in Zaire and Angola," pp. 282-3; Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, pp. 100-17; Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, pp. 339 – 41; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 238, 287-9; former CIA SAD Officer John McGinnis, personal conversation, February 26, 2014.

<sup>112</sup> JCS Chairman GEN George Brown, 40 Committee Memorandum for the Record, November 21, 1975, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Doc. 139.

testifying openly to Congress about CIA excesses and whom Ford replaced in November 1975 with then-Ambassador to China George H.W. Bush.<sup>113</sup>

There is no need to speculate about the U.S. motive for intervening in 1975. For Kissinger, covert action was above all intended as a demonstration of U.S. prestige and will to preserve international order in reaction to perceived Soviet aggression.<sup>114</sup> As noted, there were contrary views. In the run-up to the President's decision on Angola in the third week of July 1975, the majority of the NSC Task Force proposed committing the U.S. to diplomacy and opposed covert action.<sup>115</sup> The conservative tenets of policy set in 1969 that gave priority to dealing with white regimes should remain in place while the U.S. refrained from action in Angola and elsewhere. A recommendation to "pay more attention to Africans" and incrementally increase aid was essentially a public relations approach that did not disguise a firm commitment to do nothing material.<sup>116</sup> Only after public revelations led to heated, Vietnam-inflected debate did doubt about covert action creep in. On November 18, 1975, Kissinger, in a Spenglerian mood, told President Ford, "We are living in a nihilistic nightmare. No one will ever believe us again if we can't do this."<sup>117</sup> There is here more than a hint of the expressive warrior

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<sup>113</sup> State Department MemCon on Angola, December 18, 1975, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Southern Africa, Doc. 152; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 799-800.

<sup>114</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 79-85; Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, pp. 50-7; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.76, p. 43, 2.63.1, pp. 125-6; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 791-93, 809-11, 819, 830; State Department MemCon of Conversation on Angola, *FRUS*, 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Doc. 152.

<sup>115</sup> NSC Angola Task Force Report, Report of the House Select Committee on Intelligence (the Pike Committee), *The Village Voice*, February 16, 1976; Nathaniel Davis, "The Angola Decision of 1975: A Personal Memoir," *Foreign Affairs*, 57:1, Fall 1978, pp. 109-24.

<sup>116</sup> Action Memorandum to Secretary Kissinger from Director of Policy Planning Lord and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Africa Mulcahy, US African Policy, June 27, 1975, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. E-6, Doc. 29.

<sup>117</sup> Henry Kissinger to Gerald Ford, the Oval Office, December 18, 1975, NSA, Ford Library, Memoranda of Conversations, 1973-7, NSDA; Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 177.

in Kissinger's portraying Angola as so central to grand strategy even though it was so inconsequentially tied to concrete aims and interests.<sup>118</sup>

### III. The U.S. and South Africa vs. the Soviet Union and Cuba

Jockeying for power among the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA had turned increasingly violent when the full National Security Council met to discuss Angola on June 27, 1975. It was the first such meeting since January.<sup>119</sup> Overriding the interagency Angola Task Force, Kissinger's directed the 40 Committee to draft a covert action plan. The formal objectives were:

To contain the present conflict in Angola and to foster a peaceful transition to an independent Angola that is stable and follows a policy of cooperation and friendship with the United States.<sup>120</sup>

In truth, there was no political aim beyond preventing an MPLA victory. The military objective was to gain control of Luanda; the faction holding the capital city at independence would possess the country's principal source of authority and have the strongest claim on international legitimacy. Military support was geared to equipping African tribal forces fighting "a poor man's bush war."<sup>121</sup> There is no evidence of systematic campaign planning. The Working Group cautioned that in the event of escalation, "We do not enjoy the same freedom to raise levels of support as do the Soviets and still keep it covert."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 305; Hans Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>119</sup> Minutes of NSC Meeting, "Angola," June 27, 1975, NSC Meetings File, 1974-77, Box 2, Ford Presidential Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/guides/findingaid/nscmeetings.asp>, accessed January 13, 2015; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 509; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 290-91; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 805-.

<sup>120</sup> Director of Central Intelligence Briefing for June 27 Meeting, "Angola," June 27, 1975, NSC Meetings File, 1974-77, Box 2, Ford Presidential Library.

<sup>121</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 300.

<sup>122</sup> "Talking Points for Secretary Kissinger," National Security Council Meeting on Angola, June 27 1975, NSC Meetings File, 1974-77, Box 2, Ford Presidential Library.

## The Decision for IAFEATURE

Angola in 1975 was the first U.S. use of force in an internal conflict after Vietnam. In making decisions in both cases “the system worked” in the sense that the bureaucracy selected a means to a given end, but the result was an ill-suited, second best solution and a gap between policy and performance.<sup>123</sup>

Managing resource constraints proved a decisive weakness in Angola. Rather than determining what level of funding would be necessary to achieve desired objectives, the available funds that could be reported to Congress without seeking formal authorization budget drove what the U.S. was willing to do.<sup>124</sup> Rather than the original July 1975 CIA proposal of \$100 million, Ford approved \$31.7 million for IAFEATURE in three installments between July and December, supplemented by about \$26 million from Defense Department stocks.<sup>125</sup>

Angola had been seething with armed sparring between factions for six months when foreign intervention increased the level of open warfare during August and September 1975. Aid to the FNLA and UNITA provided by the CIA, with U.S. military logistic support outside of Angola, consisted of infantry weapons, communications, transportation, air drops, and psychological operations, along with the recruitment of a loose assortment of former Portuguese commandos and mercenaries, including British, French, Brazilians, South Africans, and

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<sup>123</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 2, 13; Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, p. 26.

<sup>124</sup>Memorandum for the Record, 40 Committee Meeting, November 21, 1975, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Doc. 139.

<sup>125</sup> AmEmbassy Kinshasa, telegram 3767, Vance Mission: Fourth Meeting with Mobutu, July 23, 1975, Foreign Relations, 1969-1976, Vol. E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973-1976 <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e6/67177.htm>, accessed January 13, 2015.

Americans.<sup>126</sup> Once IAFEATURE got underway, the CIA optimistically assessed that the “good guys” had the upper hand right up to the eve of independence on November 11.<sup>127</sup>

In September, the MPLA had achieved enough control to set up administrations in 12 of Angola’s 16 provinces, but by the end of October the situation had reversed. Luanda remained firmly in MPLA hands, but the FNLA had marched 400 miles south from Zaire and was close enough to shell the capital with artillery. In mid-October, the South African Defense Force (SADF) launched a secret invasion that advanced rapidly to within 100 miles of Luanda from the south. Holden Roberto and Jonas Savimbi boasted they would take the capital by Independence Day. Although UNITA and the FNLA were more likely to attack each other than to cooperate, the two groups jointly proclaimed a CIA-inspired Provisional Republic in Huambo, UNITA’s stronghold in the Central Highlands, on November 10.<sup>128</sup>

### **Cuba to the Rescue**

The standard speculation at the time was that Operation IAFEATURE, in association with the SADF, would win. However, Cuba sent combat forces. So focused had U.S. attention been on Eastern Bloc support for the MPLA that the arrival of a Cuban military training mission during the summer of 1975 had gone unnoticed. It was an even greater surprise when several thousand Cuban Special Forces arrived in early November on Operation Carlota to rescue the

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<sup>126</sup> Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, pp. 221-26; Wilfred Burchett and Derek Roebuck, *The Whores of War: Mercenaries Today* (New York, 1977); MemCon, Secretary Kissinger and members of State Department Staff on Angola, December, 19, 1975, Library of Congress, Kissinger Papers, Angola Chronological File, NSDA.

<sup>127</sup> “CIA Intelligence Checklist,” November 14, 1975, cited by Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 329; Marvin Howe, “For Lisbon, the Parting With Angola Cuts Deep,” *NYT*, November 12, 1975; Secstate to All Diplomatic Posts, telegram 265503, Angolan Recognition, November 8, 1975; Secstate to Amconsul Luanda, telegram 246921, Portuguese Arms in Angola, October 17, 1975, NSDA.

<sup>128</sup> AmEmbassy Lusaka, telegram 02116, Conversation with Savimbi, October 30, 1975, NSDA; AmEmbassy Kinshasa, telegram 09845, Huambo Government, November 11, 1975, NSDA.

MPLA.<sup>129</sup> U.S. officials initially argued that Cuban troops were paying an IOU for Soviet aid. The truth was that Fidel Castro took the decision to send combat forces on his own and initially used ships and planes under Cuban control to get them from the Caribbean to Africa.<sup>130</sup>

Castro was an expressive warrior for whom defiance of the U.S. was even more important than his commitment to socialism. Having failed at revolution in Latin America, he made Angola central to Cuba's foreign policy and national identity.<sup>131</sup> The Brezhnev regime – enjoying détente and the prospect of a Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) agreement with the U.S. – initially disapproved of Castro's initiative. But the Cuban tail wagged the Soviet dog, much as Mobutu did with the United States. Once Castro committed his troops to Angola, the Soviets were simply in no position to turn their backs on their Cuban client and the prestige its revolutionary credentials brought them in the Third World.

Although it was not evident at the time, the culminating point in the war for Angola came when the FAPLA, reinforced with several hundred Cubans and a sole Soviet advisor, decisively defeated the FNLA, accompanied by two reluctant Zairian battalions and about 120 mercenaries, in the battle of Quifangondo on November 11, Independence Day.<sup>132</sup> A separate group of Cuban and FAPLA forces repulsed an attempt to seize the oil-rich Cabinda enclave by the separatist

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<sup>129</sup> Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (New York, 2005), pp. 68-115; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 228-41; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 328-46.

<sup>130</sup> DCIA Colby, 40 Committee Memorandum, November 21, 1975; Bender, "Kissinger in Angola," n. 46, p. 138; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 373-74.

<sup>131</sup> Fidel Castro, speech to the First Party Congress, Havana, December 22, 1975, the Southern Africa Committee, *Southern Africa*, IX:3, March 1976, pp. 10-12.

<sup>132</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, pp. 73-91; Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, pp. 213-16.

FLEC that had the support of Zairian troops and mercenaries in the service of the French intelligence service.<sup>133</sup>

The most serious threat came from the South where the government of Prime Minister Vorster, with urging from his far-right Defense Minister P. W. Botha, alarmed at the prospect of a communist Angola, ordered the secret invasion of Angola for nothing less, they believed, than the survival of apartheid.<sup>134</sup> Cuban combat forces halted SADF armored columns less than 100 miles from Luanda. After a protracted retreat, South Africa withdrew into Namibia at the end of March 1976. To deflect the disgrace of having been bested by black Africans and Cuban Communists, South Africa blamed the U.S.<sup>135</sup>

On November 11 in Luanda, victorious MPLA leader Agostino Neto raised the new national flag of independent Angola. Yet, its claim of authority over the new state was tenuous, and the new socialist peoples' republic faced a struggle to acquire international legitimacy. The United States, in alignment with South Africa, led opposition to granting international recognition. With 25,000 Cuban troops remaining to safeguard their Angolan partners, Moscow seized the opportunity to turn on the weapons tap and even exhibited some ideological enthusiasm.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> NSC Meeting Minutes, June 27, 1975.

<sup>134</sup> Jamie Miller, "Yes, Minister. Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975-1976," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 15:3, Summer 2013, pp. 4-33; H-Diplo Article Review, No. 440, December 20, 2013, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR440-Response.pdf>, accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Spies, *Operasie Savannah*; Sean Gervasi, *Continuing Escalation in the Angola Crisis*, Report of the American Committee on Africa, December 19, 1975; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 321-30, 339-42; Hallett, "The South African Intervention," p. 383.

<sup>136</sup> Georgi Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York, 1992), pp. 195-196; Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 179; Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 241.

## Bravado on Angola in the 40 Committee

Foreign interventions in the Angolan civil war were evident to those fighting on the ground, but had remained largely opaque elsewhere. The first U.S. press report on covert aid to Angola appeared on September 25, 1975.<sup>137</sup> It garnered relatively little attention. As fighting heated up and independence approached, journalists began to report more regularly from the field, while leaks that infuriated Kissinger grew to a flood. Journalists who came of age during Vietnam seized on the presence of foreign troops in Angola and the politically toxic collaboration between the United States and South Africa.<sup>138</sup> Their reports fueled debate in Congress over U.S. assistance to the Angolan insurgents, which had become covert only in name.

On November 14, 1975, senior U.S. officials, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of the CIA, and the Deputy Secretaries of State and Defense, met as the 40 Committee responsible for covert action to discuss Angola. Chairing the meeting was Kissinger's trusted deputy, Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft. The record of the meeting is revealing.<sup>139</sup> Some of the group realized that Operation IAFEATURE was headed to failure, while others remained optimistic and committed to success. Discussion of tactical steps overshadowed consideration of policy and strategy. Money for IAFEATURE was nearly exhausted and the administration faced having to ask Congress to approve more. The issues for decision were how much to ask for and what else should be done? (Subsequent quotations are from the Memorandum of the 40 Committee Meeting on November 14.<sup>140</sup>)

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<sup>137</sup> Leslie Gelb, "U.S., Soviet, China Reported Aiding Portugal, Angola," *NYT*, September 25, 1975.

<sup>138</sup> Seymour Hersch, "Soviet Build up Followed Ford Aid to Angola," *NYT*, December 19, 1975.

<sup>139</sup> Memorandum for the Record, NSC 40 Committee Meeting, November 14, 1975, *FRUS*1969-76, XXVIII, Doc. 137.

<sup>140</sup> Working Group on Angola, Paper No. 92, November 13, 1975 (referred to in Doc. 137, but noted in *FRUS* as not found); Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 814; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, n. 7, p. 487.

Referring to a misleading judgment of success, Scowcroft said, “We’ve accomplished our objective and should now work for military disengagement...We have the momentum now and the question is, how do we keep it up?”

James Potts, who as Chief of the CIA Africa Division was closest to the situation, flatly contradicted this assertion. In his judgment, “The other side has got us to a level where we can’t cope.”

CIA Director Colby was equally dubious. He said, “I think we’ve not yet seen the Cuban effect ... We are in a no-win position—just buying time.” Although Colby recommended more funds immediately to continue paramilitary action, he preferred instead “a crash effort on the political front; keep the South Africans involved; work on the Soviets to get out.”

The 40 Committee instead focused on military aims; there was no mention of political objectives within Angola. There was no consideration of options in the ground war, other than inconclusive discussion about hiring more mercenaries. Nor was there an appreciation that UNITA and the FNLA had reached their operational capacity, a constraint that additional money could not overcome. After asking what it would take “to win,” Scowcroft’s concluding instruction was merely to “work up something that will keep us in the ball game.”

Also evident was the tension between the secret U.S. association with South Africa and deep concern over international and domestic reaction as that association became public. Contrary to some interpretations that South Africa had invaded Angola at U.S. behest, the record of the November 14 meeting showed the participants knew better. CIA Division Chief Potts observed, “The South Africans have put their own units in with armor and done the actual

fighting,” but they were “political dynamite.” The extent of collaboration remains imprecise, but U.S. association with apartheid South Africa was a “deadly moral handicap.”<sup>141</sup>

Ambivalence had turned to doubt when the 40 Committee met again a week later on November 21. The Cuban effect and the rising fortunes of the MPLA had become apparent against the gross limitations of UNITA and the FNLA. A CIA paper recommended options for diplomacy, support to South Africa, increments of hardware, and air support.<sup>142</sup> Again the focus was on tactical measures, especially acquiring air defense weapons through a request to France. Under Secretary of State Sisco told the group, “We do not see the diplomatic alternative as a viable one...of no pressure on the Soviets unless the military activities are stabilized.” CIA Director Colby reported that the South Africans would “like to get their troops out, and hire mercenaries. They say that they don’t have the money to do this and have turned to us.” Adding to resource problems, IAFEATURE was out of money. Scowcroft, now in the chair as National Security Advisor, tasked new proposals, directing that they “start with one that is bare bones to keep things together.”

The CIA, reversing its pre-independence optimism, recognized that 11,000 Cuban troops and a continuing flow of Soviet military equipment gave The MPLA, military superiority.<sup>143</sup> It

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<sup>141</sup> Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 173; National Security Decision Memorandum 81, Cooperation with South Africa on Ocean Surveillance System, November 8, 1975, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Doc. 79; Hilton Hamann, *Days Of The Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa’s Apartheid-era Military Generals* (Capetown, 2001), pp. 1-42; Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, pp. 187-8 Amembassy Pretoria, telegram 4365, A Plea from Vorster, November 14, 1975, NSDA; AmEmbassy Pretoria, telegram 4467, SADF Requests Aid to Rebels, November 18, 1975, NSDA.

<sup>142</sup> NSC 40 Committee Meeting, November 21.

<sup>143</sup> CIA, “Estimate of the Present Military Situation in Angola,” (n.d.), FOIA Document 005891522, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0005891522>, accessed June 15, 2015.

acknowledged that to restore the military balance would require introducing conventional forces to match Cuba, or undertaking guerrilla and political war.<sup>144</sup>

### **Ford Requests a Second Best Solution**

In the end, the President approved the lowest possible option. A request for \$28 million was the limit that could be reprogrammed from the Defense Department to the “black budget” without having to ask Congress for a new budget appropriation. This time, unlike the case in July, Congress would still have to approve. In the space between desire and possibility, the administration could do no better.

On December 19, the Tunney Amendment passed in the Senate, which cut off reprogrammed Defense funds for Angolan insurgents, and the Clark Amendment subsequently prohibited all U.S. assistance. The restriction of covert action by the two liberal senators set a new precedent. IAFEATURE came to an ignominious end. Residual portions of the already released \$31.7 million continued to trickle out until September 1976 to compensate former mercenaries, to pay for aircraft expenses, and to mollify Mobutu.<sup>145</sup> The cutoff amounted to a vote of no confidence in armed intervention as an instrument of containment. Senator Tunney grounded his explanation in pragmatic criticism of the strategy, not politics.<sup>146</sup>

When the 40 Committee met on February 3, 1976, the Angola operation had been reduced to a holding action.<sup>147</sup> Recently confirmed DCI George W. Bush distanced himself from

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<sup>144</sup> Bender, *Kissinger in Angola*, pp. 103-4; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 515; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 826.

<sup>145</sup> Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, pp. 233-5.

<sup>146</sup> Senator John Tunney, “U.S. Involvement in Civil War in Angola,” testimony before the SFRC, February 6, 1976, p. 166.

<sup>147</sup> Memorandum for the Record, NSC 40 Committee Meeting, February 3, 1975, Ford Administration Intelligence Files, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XXVIII, Doc. 173.

his briefing with the remark that, “These are the words of CIA, not mine.” South Africa was withdrawing (and apparently had stopped sharing information with CIA), the FNLA had collapsed, and Savimbi had fled into the bush. Discussion centered on how to salvage the situation, but the group took only one decision. New Deputy Secretary of Defense Ellsworth told of the hard time Congress had given him about the criminal behavior of mercenaries, including Americans, who were still with the dwindling FNLA. This group of perhaps 200 proved to be bloody-minded and largely incompetent. The subsequent trial in Angola of 14 of them, including three Americans, for atrocities became an international scandal.<sup>148</sup> The 40 Committee agreed to stop to CIA-funded recruitment of mercenaries.

#### **IV. The Failure of War in Angola Leads to Diplomacy in Southern Africa**

The United States did not become involved in war in Angola because diplomacy failed, and conflict resolution was never a U.S. objective. As in Vietnam, war had been the first choice; diplomacy was the resort only after war failed. The exclusive emphasis on geopolitical considerations and militarized containment came at Kissinger’s insistence, despite putative adherence to détente between Moscow and Washington, and despite the preference among majorities in the interagency groups for a political-diplomatic solution.<sup>149</sup>

In his memoir, Kissinger asserted that IAFEATURE was working in the service of diplomacy and that the strategy was having success until Congress cut aid.<sup>150</sup> This was not the

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<sup>148</sup> Burchett and Roebuck, *The Whores of War*, pp. 114-19; Chris Dempster and Dave Tomkins, *Fire Power* (New York, 1980); Interview with Dave Tomkins, NSA, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/tomkins1.html>, accessed June 15, 2015; “Death for ‘War Dogs,’” *Time Magazine*, July 12, 1976.

<sup>149</sup> Amb. Edward W. Mulcahy, oral history interview, ADST, March 23, 1989; Colin Legum, “The Soviet Union, China, and the West in Southern Africa,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1976, pp. 746-62; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 337, 341; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 516-17; Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin (eds.), *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (USIP, 2003), pp. 359-420.

<sup>150</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 816.

case. Instead it was a dubious excuse that conflated the sequence of events, disregarded IAFEATURE as a minimalist economy of force effort, and obscured an approach that harnessed diplomacy to a military solution without regard to the nature of the political outcome. Whether or not success might have compelled the Soviets and Cubans to withdraw, a victory by the U.S.-backed FNLA and UNITA would have left tribally-based rival factions in power to confront a disaffected Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party that enjoyed significant popular support. This was hardly a formula for stability, even if it had resulted in a non-communist regime perched between Mobutu's Zaire and apartheid South Africa.

### **The International Aftermath: China, the Safari Club, U.S.-Soviet Diplomacy, and Planning to Attack Cuba**

Angola featured prominently in U.S. diplomacy with China during 1975, with each side encouraging the other to do more to support the FNLA and UNITA militarily against the MPLA and their Soviet and Cuban backers. The lack of particular results demonstrated the limits of U.S.-PRC alignment in the Third World.

China and the USSR had competed for influence with the Angolan liberation movements since the 1960's. Whereas the Soviets maintained close, if troubled, relations exclusively with the MPLA, the Chinese had variously and at times simultaneously courted all three factions. China was the FNLA's principal source of military assistance in 1974, but unwilling to become tainted by association with the South African invasion, China withdrew its mission from Zaire ceremoniously but abruptly in October 1975. China had also been an early supporter of Savimbi.

During this period, the PRC shipped weapons to UNITA through Tanzania and Zaire, but also halted when the South African connection became public.<sup>151</sup>

President Ford, on his December 1-5, 1975 state visit to China, urged joint efforts to oppose the Soviets in Angola. In their meeting on December 2, Chairman Mao replied, “You don’t seem to have any means. Nor do we.”<sup>152</sup> Then-Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping deflected Kissinger’s entreaties to resume providing weapons to UNITA and the FNLA. China recognized the new Angolan government shortly afterward, although it would take nearly a decade to establish full relations.<sup>153</sup>

Kissinger placed considerable stock in French promises of support on Angola. President Giscard d’Estaing had assured him France would provide helicopters for close air protection to the FNLA, station Mirage fighters in Zaire, help find “auxiliaries” (mercenaries), and gain diplomatic support from French African countries. In addition to working with the United States to exclude the Soviets, France had its own interest in extending its long-standing influence in Africa to Angola after the Portuguese left. However, France became more reluctant to operate on its own after Congress cut U.S. aid and overtly did little. By February 1976, it had switched positions, was preparing to recognize Angola, and urged the U.S. to negotiate directly with the MPLA.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 529; Bender, “Kissinger in Angola,” pp. 72-3.

<sup>152</sup> MemCon, Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, President Ford, Secretary Kissinger, and others, Beijing, December 20, 1975, Ford Library, Kissinger Reports, *FRUS* 1969-76, Vol. XVIII, China, Doc. 134.

<sup>153</sup> MemCon, Deng Xiaoping, December 3, 1975, Doc. 118164, NSDA; Steven F. Jackson, “China’s Third World Foreign Policy: The Case of Angola and Mozambique, 1961–93,” *The China Quarterly*, 142, June 1995, pp. 388 – 422; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 226-227, 245.

<sup>154</sup> Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal* (Connecticut, 1987), p. 245; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 822-5, 845; MemCon, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, December 18, 1975, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of Conversations; Message From Secretary of State Kissinger to French President Giscard d’Estaing, December 19, 1975, NSA Kissinger-

The collapse of IAFEATURE led the French to open up a secret channel for combatting the Cold War in Africa. Director from 1970 to 1981 of the French External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service (SDECE), forerunner of the current General Directorate for External Security (DGSE), Count Alexandre de Marenches, was a colorful anti-communist ideologue with an American mother, whose association with the United States and the intelligence world dated to his service with the French Resistance and Free French Army in World War II. Because “our American friends were in trouble,” Marenches brought together Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco in an informal alliance.<sup>155</sup> Known as The Safari Club, after the resort in Kenya where its founding meeting took place in 1976, their charter was to combat the spread of communism throughout Africa and the Middle East.<sup>156</sup> The group became an enthusiastic promoter of Jonas Savimbi; its most important accomplishments occurred during the Carter administration and are discussed in the next chapter.

The U.S. first offered to talk directly with the Soviets about Angola on November 20, 1975. In multiple subsequent attempts, Kissinger argued that his only interest was to achieve a “balance of forces,” which amounted to demanding that Cuban forces withdraw and the Soviets reduce their assistance to the MPLA. The one point of U.S. leverage was to denounce lack of Soviet restraint and threaten damage to détente. Not only did this appear hollow given the

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Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Box 12, MemCon between Kissinger and Mr. Journiac, Staff of French President Giscard d’Estaing, January 24, 1976, LOC Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, Box CL 344; AmEmbassy Paris, telegram 4652, France Plans to Recognize MPLA, February 16, 1976, National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, P840090–1675, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/documents>, accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Count de Marenches and Christine Ockrent, *The Evil Empire* (London, 1986), pp. 77-78; Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, p. 105.

<sup>156</sup> John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (London, 2002), pp. 15-18; Rachel Bronson, *Thicker than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 132-6; Mohamad Hassanein Heikal, “The Story of the Safari Club,” cited in Khair El-Din Haseeb (ed.), *The Arabs and Africa (RLE: The Arab Nation)*, Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1985 (Abingdon, 2012), p. 305.

exposure of IAFEATURE, the two material linkages to détente – SALT II and grain sales – were equally in U.S. interest. In addition, Moscow was confident by then the military tide had turned and, as occurred in negotiations with North Vietnam, the U.S. was trying to salvage what it had already lost.<sup>157</sup> The Soviets read the ploy correctly. In Moscow on January 21, 1976, Brezhnev gave Kissinger a “lesson in power politics,” flatly and definitively rebuffing him on Angola “in a crude and humiliating fashion,” according to Peter Rodman who was present.<sup>158</sup> Ford noted after being briefed, “Angola is now foremost in our policy concerns.”<sup>159</sup>

Kissinger had also overestimated Moscow’s influence on its Cuban client and underestimated the value to the Soviets of its advance in Southern Africa. The crux of the strategic problem for the United States in Angola was not the global or regional balance of power; both at the outset were fundamentally in its favor. Nor was perceived “lack of Soviet restraint” in an area of presumed Western predominance the real issue. What mattered most were military dispositions on the ground, and there the problem was Cuba. It was Cuban combat troops that acted decisively, arriving in Angola at precisely the right moment with sufficient strength and motivation to aid the FAPLA in defeating military challenges from the FNLA, UNITA, and, South Africa. As an authentic revolutionary, Fidel Castro grasped the situation, measured the risks, and calculated that Moscow would support him.<sup>160</sup> The political effect of Cuba’s military action was to enable its MPLA allies to consolidate authority and legitimacy.

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<sup>157</sup> MemCon, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft with Amb. Anatoly Dobrynin, December 9, 1975, *FRUS* Vol. XXVIII, 1973-6, Doc. 145; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 523, 532-4.

<sup>158</sup> Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 163.

<sup>159</sup> Ford, *Time to Heal*, p. 358.

<sup>160</sup> Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 307.

Cuban troops then remained to sustain the new balance of power in Southern Africa. Soviet aid flowed and the U.S. was without the means to reverse the situation.

When Kissinger first determined it was time for diplomacy over Angola in November, after the tide had turned, his instinct was to open talks directly with the Soviet Union. When he and Ford suggested to Ambassador Dobrynin that they find, “Some sort of settlement where no one would lose face,” Dobrynin adroitly countered, “Why don’t you talk to the Cubans?”<sup>161</sup>

Getting Cuba out of Angola became the central aim of U.S. policy in Southern Africa, and would remain so for the next 14 years.<sup>162</sup> After Congress prohibited further covert action, Kissinger told President Ford, “I think we are going to have to smash Castro.”<sup>163</sup> For the next six months, a Restricted Interagency Planning Group contemplated alternatives for taking military action directly against Cuba.<sup>164</sup> The basis for air, naval, and ground operations was OPLAN 316-62, the invasion plan that President Kennedy had on his desk during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>165</sup> Kissinger was adamant that Cuba and the Soviet Union had to pay a price and that the

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<sup>161</sup> Dobrynin with Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, December 9, 1975.

<sup>162</sup> NSSM 241, “United States Policy in Southern Africa,” April 21, 1976, Ford Library.

<sup>163</sup> MemCon, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft in the Oval Office, February 25, 1976, NSDA.

<sup>164</sup> CIA Estimate, Document 005891522, p. 4; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 770; Gervasi, “Continuing Escalation in the Angola Crisis,” p. 6; David Martin, “American Warships Are ‘off Angola,’” *London Observer*, January 11, 1976.

<sup>165</sup> Talking Paper for JCS for Meeting with the President, November 16, 1962, “Military Aspects of the Cuban Situation” (Tab B), NSA Cuban Missile Crisis Doc. 38, NSDA; Memorandum From the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to President Kennedy, August 20, 1963, U.S. Action in the Event of Cuban Attack on U.S. Aircraft/Ship, National Records Center, RG 330, OSD Files: FRC 330-77-131, NSDA; U.S. Department of Defense, Historical Analysis of Command and Control Actions in the 1962 Cuban Crisis, C&C Internal Memorandum No. 40, August 1964, [http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/International\\_security\\_affairs/cuba/519.pdf](http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/International_security_affairs/cuba/519.pdf), accessed June 15, 2015; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Brookings, 1989); Desch, *When the Third World Matters*, pp. 100-14; Marc Trachtenberg, “White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Introduction to Documents,” *International Security*, 10:1, 1985, pp.175-6; Raymond Garthoff, “Handling the Cienfuegos Crisis,” *International Security*, 8:1, Summer 1983, pp. 46-66; Asaf Siniver, “The Nixon Administration and the Cienfuegos crisis of 1970: crisis-management of a non-crisis?” *Review of International Studies*, 34:1, January 2008, pp. 69–88.

United States could permit no further “Angola style” aggression.<sup>166</sup> However, the resulting “Study of Cuban Contingencies” firmly recommended against offensive military action, because of the certain danger the Soviets would react.<sup>167</sup> The Carter and Reagan administrations would also undertake contradictory initiatives to negotiate with and attack Cuba. The risk calculations of restrictive deterrence left Fidel Castro’s Cuba free to promote revolution and send troops to Angola and elsewhere from its otherwise extremely vulnerable position in America’s backyard.<sup>168</sup>

### **Henry Kissinger Goes to Africa**

Turning from war to diplomacy, the Ford administration did manage to recover from the stumble in Angola to some extent. On his first and only trip to Africa from April 23 through May 7, 1976, Kissinger unveiled a new policy of “Africa for Africans.” U.S. backing for the transition of white-ruled Rhodesia to majority-ruled Zimbabwe headlined the new approach. The renewed emphasis on nation-building, accompanied by increased economic aid, was intended to stem radicalization, while security themes received subdued attention. Nevertheless, an ambitious proposal for arming Mobutu in Zaire offset the Soviet-Cuban fait accompli in Angola.<sup>169</sup> Having

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<sup>166</sup> Henry Kissinger, “Foreign Policy and National Security,” address at Southern Methodist University to the World Affairs Council of Dallas, Texas, March 22, 1976, *Department of State Bulletin*, LXXIV:1920, April 12, 1976, p. 457; Record of the Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, March 24, 1976, Cuba Doc. 3, NSDA; Memorandum for the SecDef from Acting A/Sec for International Security Affairs Harry Bergold, US Policies with Respect to Possible Cuban Military Intervention in Rhodesia and Namibia, 23 March 1976, Box 3, Cheney Files, Ford Library, NSDA.

<sup>167</sup> Cuban Contingency Plan Summary, Paper 1, and Paper 2, the Ford Library, Cuba Documents 4-6, NSDA.

<sup>168</sup> William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (North Carolina, 2014); CIA, Paper for the Standing Group of the NSC, June 8, 1963, “Proposed Covert Policy and Integrated Program of Action towards Cuba,” Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Cuba, General, 6/63, NSDA; The Select Committee on Intelligence, Legislative Oversight of Intelligence Activities: The U.S. Experience, Committee Report, 103 Congress, 2d Session, October 1994, <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/10388.pdf>; accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, p. 104; Kissinger speech, “United States Policy on Southern Africa,” Lusaka, Zambia April 27, *Department of State Bulletin*, LXXIV:127, May 31, 1976, pp. 672-9; MemCon Kissinger and Scowcroft with President Ford, May 9, 1976, MemCon Collection, Ford Library; NSC Meeting, Secretary Kissinger’s African Trip, May 11, 1976, Box 2, NSC Meeting File, NSDA; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 923.

attempted to sustain an unsustainable status quo, this rapid shift to diplomacy in Southern Africa was typical of Kissinger's approach when events outside the Great Power core turned against the United States.<sup>170</sup>

### **Imposing Costs on Cuba and the Soviet Union**

The sense that diplomacy was an improvisation after war had failed leads to questions: Had IAFEATURE succeeded in helping the FNLA and UNITA defeat the MPLA, then what? What ultimately was the utility of pursuing covert action in Angola?

The militarization of Angola's political evolution in 1975 differed from the post-colonial bush warfare and Cold War sparring in the 1960's Congo. Escalation raised the stakes substantially once Cuba and South Africa opposed each other directly on the front line. Had Congress approved the \$28 million that President Ford requested to keep IAFEATURE going in December, it almost certainly would have made no difference to the outcome. By March 1976, Cuba had sent over 30,000 troops to Angola equipped with major weapons, including T-34 tanks and MIG-21 aircraft, and Soviet aid had reached an estimated \$400 million (\$1.8 billion in 2014 dollars.)<sup>171</sup> Even if economy of force covert action had made sense at the outset, measured up to this commitment, it was strategically insufficient and the best that can be said is that the additional money would have done little more than keep the U.S. "in the ballgame." The implication is that, in the absence of victory, cost-imposing was a second best solution. This says

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<sup>170</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 333.

<sup>171</sup> Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, Soviet and Cuban Aid to the MPLA in Angola from March through December 1975, NIO IIM 76-004C; Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, Soviet and Cuban Aid to the MPLA in Angola during February 1976, March 1976, NIO IIM 76-013C; Memorandum for The President from DCIA George Bush, The Cuban Presence in Africa, April 9, 1976, NSDA.

much about the character of open-ended warfare that both superpowers engaged in on the Third World periphery during the last decade of the Cold War.

When Kissinger admitted to having second thoughts over IAFEATURE, Scowcroft consoled him by saying at least they had “done what is right.” Angola was certainly not his finest hour. Laying the blame for the U.S. failure on Congress was an insufficient excuse. Just as in Vietnam, misfortune resulted from errors that were cumulative and came earlier.<sup>172</sup>

Success in Angola boosted Soviet advances in the Third World, albeit these were temporary. Fidel Castro’s prestige grew, and Cuba thrived as a motor of revolution in the Third World. Tacit alliance with South Africa in Angola placed the U.S. on the wrong side of history. Angola exposed five lessons on the deceptive costs of strategic failure on the periphery: The power of inertia made it extremely difficult for the U.S. to adapt to the sudden end of Portugal’s colonial rule in Africa, even though change was well-anticipated. Cold War balance of power concerns in Angola led to misconceiving the nature of the challenge that overshadowed equally critical regional and internal dimensions. Out of prestige, the U.S. remained reactively wedded to a flawed covert military solution, even though the Angola Task Force had recommended a viable political-diplomatic approach. Doing the minimum promoted greater fighting, including South African intervention, but was almost certainly never a path to success. When the war escalated the U.S. was without means to respond at an acceptable cost, because post-Vietnam reticence combined with restrictive deterrence established the limits to power. As Clausewitz said, “In war, too small an effort can result not just in failure, but in positive harm.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 235; Strachan, *The Direction of War*, pp. 103, 116, 208-9; Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, pp. 37-48.

<sup>173</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 588.

The failure lay in treating this lesser, unconventional application of force as if it were a mere expedient free of cost or consequences, rather than a serious method of war.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> George Kennan, "Containment: 40 Years Later," *Foreign Affairs*, 65:4, Spring 1987, pp. 827-30; Hans Morgenthau, "The Pathology of American Power," *International Security*, 1:3, Winter 1977, pp. 3-20.

## Chapter 2: Power vs. Principle in Carter's Divided House

### I. Carter's Idealism

Angola was the first place where Jimmy Carter's ideals first clashed with the realities of the Cold War. There is insufficient space to review Carter's foreign policy as a whole, but some background is necessary.

In his memoir of his four-year tenure as Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, boasted how he advised the new President that "It is possible to blend a concern for moral principle with the imperatives of national power so as to create a meaningful policy."<sup>175</sup> *Power and Principle* Brzezinski titled the book, but friction between the two was far more prevalent, and *Power vs. Principle* would have been more accurate. In fact, despite pledging his allegiance to a policy of principles, Zbigniew Brzezinski was from the outset the Carter administration's principal agent of power politics. Like Henry Kissinger, Brzezinski was Eastern European, the son of Polish diplomats exiled by the Cold War, and once he was in the White House he used his position to pursue the struggle against the Soviet Union with a fixation that was, if anything, even more single-minded than his rival predecessor's.

Carter had campaigned and won the election by portraying the country's recent international experience as a betrayal of American ideals:

Every successful foreign policy we have had...was successful because it reflected the best in us. And every foreign policy that has failed – whether it was Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, Angola, or the excesses of the CIA – our government forged ahead without consulting the American people, and did things that were contrary to our basic character.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. xiv.

<sup>176</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Our Foreign Relations," *The Presidential Campaign 1976* (GPO, 1978), I:111.

Although he began his presidency in January 1977 with a promise to transcend foreign policy dominated by national security and the balance of power, it ended in January 1981 intensely enmeshed in them. The Cold War authors already introduced chronicled this arc, along with several others who have subjected Carter's international performance to detailed and largely negative evaluation, notably Gaddis Smith in *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*.<sup>177</sup> A wave of more positive reassessment first appeared in the 1990's and has recently taken on new life with the appearance of publications such as Barbara Zanchetta's *The Transformation of International Power in the 1970's*.<sup>178</sup> According to this view, if Carter's policies sometimes failed, it was because of inevitable difficulties with implementation and because he was ahead of his time.

Several points frame the interpretation presented here. The predominant narrative remains one of well-intentioned but naïve and ultimately misguided dedication to remaking the world. A shift in national mood and priorities complicated the domestic political environment, while personality and policy conflicts within the administration remained unresolved until the very end. These contributed to a sense of muddle and vacillation on the world stage. The character and personality of the President himself was a critical factor, although it is impossible to adjudicate between self-inflicted wounds, bad luck, poor timing, bureaucratic politics, and the complex accumulation of challenges. The Carter administration was capable of acting with

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<sup>177</sup> Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York, 1986); Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cornell, 2009).

<sup>178</sup> Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970's* (Cambridge, 2014); Douglas Brinkley, "The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The 'Hands on Legacy' of Our Thirty-Ninth President," *Diplomatic History*, Fall 1996, pp. 505-29; Robert A Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Louisiana, 2000); Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York, 1991); David F. Schmitz and Vanesa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, 28:1, January 2004, pp. 113-43.

prudence when it came to Cold War confrontation, especially in the Third World, but a reactive tendency prevailed, and in some instances amounted to rank over-reaction.

Detractors and defenders alike acknowledge that the perception of failure obscured Carter's manifest successes. These included the Panama Canal Treaty, his first initiative begun in early 1977; the Camp David Accord between Israel and Egypt in 1978; the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which extended American military power permanently into the Middle East and the Persian Gulf; normalization of relations with China; and dedication to majority rule in Southern Africa. Crucially, these accomplishments resulted not from dedication to human rights or other principles, but from pragmatic pursuit of U.S. interests directly related to geopolitics and the exercise of power, and they built explicitly on groundwork laid during the Nixon and Ford administrations with Henry Kissinger as principal architect.

Contrary to common remembrance, Carter's reversion to Cold War containment did not happen suddenly with the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Concrete action first took place in response to a military incursion into Southern Zaire, termed Shaba I, from March to May 1977. The underlying factor was the presence of Soviet-backed Cuban troops in Angola.

### **Declinism in the United States**

The history of decline and its strategic consequences has long captured the Western imagination.<sup>179</sup> Carter had the bad luck to hold office at the bottom of a complex and persistent

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<sup>179</sup> John Jay, "Federalist No. 5: Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence", and Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 8: The Consequences of Hostilities Between the States", *The Federalist Papers*, <https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers>; Lester J. Cappon (ed.), *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (North Carolina, 1988); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York, 1987); Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics*, pp. 159-86.

cycle of decline.<sup>180</sup> Defeat in Vietnam shrank America's will to compete, a retraction that fed a perception of Soviet political-military advances, as Angola demonstrated.<sup>181</sup>

### **Early Foreign Policy Initiatives**

Carter presented himself as a harbinger of renewal. Infusing his approach to foreign affairs with Christian morality, he pledged the United States would behave benignly, exercising its power in the service of principle, downgrading the Cold War, and eschewing military force, especially in the Third World.<sup>182</sup>

Implementation began on January 21, 1977, the day after inauguration. Brzezinski initiated eight Presidential Review Memoranda (PRMs) that directed a comprehensive revision of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>183</sup> PRMs on SALT and Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction made arms control the overriding focus of relations with the Soviet Union. One PRM directed development of a North-South Strategy, while others underpinned diplomatic initiatives intended to transform U.S. relations across the Third World, beginning with negotiations on the Panama Canal. All would be controversial, not least PRM 4, which directed a review of U.S. policy toward Rhodesia, South Africa, and Namibia. Its primary purpose was to develop negotiating options for

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<sup>180</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals: Address to the Nation," (The Crisis of Confidence Speech), July 15, 1979, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3402>, accessed September 20, 2015.

<sup>181</sup> David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Harvard, 2000); Robert W. Tucker, "America in Decline: The Foreign Policy of 'Maturity'," *Foreign Affairs*, America and the World 1979, 58:3, pp. 449-84; Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S. - Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs*, 67:2, Winter 1988, pp. 76-96; Robert Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What our tired country still owes the world," *The New Republic*, May 26, 2014, pp. 4-18.

<sup>182</sup> Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," May 22, 1977, UCSB; "Interview with Jimmy Carter on his Faith-Filled Presidency," *Christianity Today*, January 2012, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/januaryweb-only/interview-jimmy-carter.html>, accessed September 20, 2015; Jimmy Carter, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1977, UCSB; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, 1982); Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York, 2010).

<sup>183</sup> PRMs issued January 21, 1977: PRM 1 - Panama, PRM 2 - SALT, PRM 3 - Middle East, PRM 4 - South Africa and Rhodesian Negotiations, PRM 5 - Cyprus/Aegean, PRM 6 - Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction Talks, PRM 7 - International Summit, PRM 8 - North - South Strategy, Carter Presidential Library, [http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/pres\\_memorandums.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/pres_memorandums.phtml); Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 51-2.

achieving Namibia's independence from South Africa and majority rule in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. A series of Presidential Directives (PDs) issued in March also formalized bold initiatives to normalize relations with Angola and Cuba (and Vietnam), and to promote "the progressive transformation of South Africa," placing them alongside top U.S. foreign policy priorities of SALT negotiations and nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>184</sup>

In Hans Morgenthau's judgment, Carter's application of "Wilsonian conceptions" to foreign affairs, including in Africa, produced contradictions and violated the "supreme virtue" of prudence.<sup>185</sup> Consistently with the "liberal strain of American idealism," Robert Osgood observed, Carter sought to "to escape the problem of limited war altogether" by "devaluing the prevailing estimate of the threat."<sup>186</sup> Robert Tucker diagnosed this as a case of "immoderate optimism."<sup>187</sup>

### **Distrust in Moscow**

The Soviets distrusted Carter personally, and the dynamics between Washington and Moscow would harden into an older pattern of hostility and a sense of mutual betrayal.<sup>188</sup> With the emergence of the Soviet Union as a full-fledged military rival of the United States, the

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<sup>184</sup> Presidential Directives issued between March 9 and 24, 1977: NSC 5 - Southern Africa, NSC 6 - Cuba, NSC 7 - SALT Negotiations, NSC 8 - Nuclear Non-proliferation, Carter Presidential Library, [http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pres\\_directive.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pres_directive.phtml).

<sup>185</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 10-11; Morgenthau, "The Pathology of American Power," pp. 15-16; Morgenthau, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," symposium remarks, Council on Religion and International Affairs, New York, 1979, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/archive.html>, accessed September 15, 2015; Korwa G. Adar, "The Wilsonian Conception of Democracy and Human Rights: A Retrospective and Prospective" *African Studies Quarterly*, 2:2, 1998, pp. 33-44; Maria Stella Rognoni, "Carter and the African Morass: US Policy and the Failure of the State-Building Process in Angola and the Congo," in Max Guderzo and Bruna Bagnato (eds.), *The Globalization of the Cold War: Diplomacy and Local Confrontation, 1975-85* (Abingdon, 2010), pp. 87-103.

<sup>186</sup> Osgood, *Ideals and Self-interest in America's Foreign Relations*, p. 446; Osgood, *Limited War*, pp. 189, 240; Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, p. 69.

<sup>187</sup> Robert W. Tucker, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914-1917* (Virginia, 2007); Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, address to Congress on War Aims and Peace Terms, January 18, 1918, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/wilson14.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp), accessed September 15, 2015; Tucker, *The Purposes of American Power*, p. 21.

<sup>188</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 568-73, 585; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 248, 282-3.

intensity of superpower competition increased, especially on the Third World periphery, where the costs and risks were lower.<sup>189</sup> The Carter administration's self-imposed constraints presented opportunities for the Soviets, who sensed that "The world was turning in our direction."<sup>190</sup> Angola was the latest example.

### **Carter's Confused Response**

This is not to say that the U.S. remained supine as the Soviets exploited their growing military strength. At the same time as the NSC was issuing transformative directives in February 1977, it commissioned PRM 10, a Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review. The study, directed by Samuel Huntington, bore no relation to the administration's professed desire to downplay East-West confrontation. Instead its purpose was to "identify a wide range of alternative military strategies" in response to the Soviet Union.<sup>191</sup> PRM 10, completed during the summer of 1977, included a key judgment that "The U.S. would have substantial advantage over the Soviet Union in the deployment of combat forces to sub-Saharan Africa."<sup>192</sup>

The problem lay not in capabilities, but in response. Here, the administration struggled. The first problem was that Carter's own team was "a house of divided counsels."<sup>193</sup> The division

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<sup>189</sup> Yevdokim Yegorovich Mal'tsev, "Leninist Concepts of the Defense of Socialism," *Strategic Review*, Winter 1975, p. 99; Maj. Richard E. Porter, "Correlation of Forces: Revolutionary Legacy," *Air University Review*, March-April 1977, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/aureview/1977/mar-apr/porter.html>; Julian Lider, "The Correlation of World Forces: the Soviet Concept," *Journal of Peace Research*, June 1980, 17:2, pp. 151-71; Daniel I. Gouré, "Overview of the Competitive Strategies Initiative," in Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pp. 90-105.

<sup>190</sup> Odd Arne Westad, "Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974-1976: A New Pattern of Intervention," *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8/9, Winter 1996, p. 21; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York, 2005), pp. 23-4; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 402-7.

<sup>191</sup> PRM 10 - Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review, February 18, 1977, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm10.pdf>; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 52, 177-8.

<sup>192</sup> PRM 10 - Military Strategy and Force Posture Review, p. 9.

<sup>193</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 348.

was sharp at the most senior level, particularly in the closely-observed and much-commented contest between National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. President Carter himself, despite his idealistic and moralistic disposition, tended to be detail-oriented and hesitated to fit specific issues into the big picture. As Carter recounted in his annotated diary, he relied on Brzezinski for “strategic thinking and innovation” and on Vance to manage policies rather than create them.<sup>194</sup> Neither Brzezinski nor Vance opposed their President openly or appear intentionally to have conspired against his vision. The problem was the two were at opposite ends of a classic hawk and dove dichotomy, with irreconcilable belief systems. Much of what appeared to be weakness on foreign policy stemmed from the President’s vacillation between these incompatible world views.<sup>195</sup> Confusion rather than balance was often the result.

Vance’s his own memoir, *Hard Choices*, is less dynamically written than Brzezinski’s, but franker about the sharp differences between them.<sup>196</sup> He was a liberal internationalist who, as a lawyer, emphasized solving problems on a case-by-case basis. When it came to the Soviet Union, his goal was cooperation in the spirit of détente, with arms control the overriding priority. Highly skeptical of the use of force, Vance focused on resolving conflicts on regional and local terms, explicitly minimizing the Cold War dimension.

Brzezinski had won his way into Carter’s confidence in 1976, impressing him with what became a blueprint for the candidate’s enlightened approach to the world.<sup>197</sup> Defenders, who

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<sup>194</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 198, 363-4; Sumner Benson, “Review of *Hard Choices* and *Power and Principle*,” *The Public Historian*, 7:4, Autumn 1985, pp. 92-4; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>195</sup> Mara Tchalakov, “Jimmy Carter and the Limits of Empathy, 17; Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (USIP, 1993), p. 130; Jack Matlock, “Empathy in International Relations: A Commentary,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 12:2, 2010, p. 73.

<sup>196</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1983).

<sup>197</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “America in a Hostile World,” *Foreign Policy*, 23, Summer 1976, pp. 65-96.

have subsequently regarded the administration's record as under-appreciated, attributed its success to Brzezinski as a broad-minded, nuanced, and forward looking grand strategist.<sup>198</sup> However, at the core of his ingenious use of international principles was an exclusive and traditional dedication to contending with the Soviet Union. At the same time as he provided broad geostrategic direction, as in PRM 10, he also revealed himself as an expressive Cold Warrior, especially when it came to frustrating Soviet advances in the Third World. In frequent memoranda and notes to the President, he referred to the purpose of activities, ranging from securing greater cooperation with China to supporting anti-communist insurgencies, as opportunities "to bleed the Soviets."<sup>199</sup> There was clearly an element in this desire of what Sir Julian Corbett called:

. . . a primitive and unscientific conception of war, which was governed mainly by a general notion of doing your enemy as much damage as possible and making reprisals for wrongs he had done you.<sup>200</sup>

CIA officer Robert Gates spent much of the Carter administration as the NSC liaison to the intelligence community. Siding with Brzezinski, he believed that Carter and Secretary of State Vance naïvely "signaled weakness and invited further Soviet aggressiveness in the Third World."<sup>201</sup> Gates' opinion reflected the dominant perspective in the national security bureaucracy. Even as the Carter administration attempted to implement its new human rights mandate along with the broader range of progressive foreign policy initiatives, resistance and disputes came from within the agencies charged with executing them. They remained

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<sup>198</sup> Robert Jervis, H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable, 7:4, November 2014, <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-7-4.pdf>; Charles Gati (ed.), *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore, 2013).

<sup>199</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 202-7, 211-12; Westad, *Global Cold War*, pp. 248-9; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 142-3; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 346-8.

<sup>200</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 96.

<sup>201</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 77.

fundamentally oriented to fighting the Cold War, and Brzezinski drew support from them.<sup>202</sup>

Inside the U.S. military, aversion to war so soon after Vietnam corresponded with the mood in Congress, the press, and the American public. The Cold War in the Third World mattered, as long as U.S. forces would not be directly involved in the fight.<sup>203</sup>

## II. Principles First in Africa

Carter began as a reluctant Cold Warrior, dedicated to moral principles and hesitant to exercise power. Over time, as the administration's term advanced, it was Brzezinski's approach not Vance's that prevailed.<sup>204</sup> In the beginning, however, the separation of force from diplomacy in pursuing idealistic aims in the Third World produced unresolved confusion. This first became apparent very early, in the spring of 1977 over Angola.

Nothing symbolized the sincerity of the administration's desire to downgrade the Cold War and transform relations with the Third World more than the prominence of Andrew Young, who in the beginning ranked alongside Vance and Brzezinski in Carter's inner foreign policy circle. The first African-American Ambassador to the United Nations, Young's long-standing international activism centered on Africa and paralleled his leadership of the civil rights movement in the United States. He saw himself as a "diplomatic avenging angel" dedicated to righting the wrongs of the U.S.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Stephen Krasner, "Are Bureaucracies Important? Or Allison Wonderland," *Foreign Policy*, 7, Summer 1972, pp. 159-79; Michael J. Glennon, "National Security and Double Government," *Harvard National Security Journal*, 5:1, January 2014, pp. 1-114.

<sup>203</sup> Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, pp. 141-5; Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1988), pp. 259-75.

<sup>204</sup> Melissa Jane Taylor (ed.), *FRUS 1977-1980*, Vol. VI, Soviet Union; vii-viii; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 344.

<sup>205</sup> Carl Gershman, "The World According to Andrew Young," *Commentary*, August 1, 1978, pp. 2-8.

As a Congressman in 1975, Young had led opposition in the House of Representatives to U.S. intervention in Angola. He knew the MPLA leadership and maintained that there was “nothing to fear from Marxists in Angola.”<sup>206</sup> As UN Ambassador, Young led the promotion of majority rule in Southern Africa aided by his deputy Donald McHenry and Assistant Secretary for Africa Richard Moose, both high-ranking black career Foreign Service Officers, along with State Department Policy Planning head Tony Lake. The initiative represented a momentary triumph for the Africanists who had long advocated U.S. support for black nationalism as the antidote to communist expansion and Cold War geopolitics.

In February 1977, Young travelled to Angola on his first overseas trip as a Carter administration representative, prior to his confirmation as UN Ambassador. His mission was to pave the way for normalization, which Carter had promised to implement whether or not Cuban troops were present. The logic was that Soviet-backed Cuban troops were in Angola only to protect the MPLA government from its hostile U.S.-backed neighbors Zaire and South Africa. By quickly establishing relations with Angola, the U.S. would secure an independence agreement for Namibia, South Africa would withdraw, and the Cubans would leave. Just prior to his departure from the U.S., Young provoked furor among conservatives when he stated, “There’s a sense in which the Cubans bring a certain stability and order to Angola.”<sup>207</sup>

Young’s sympathy for Angola was evident when he met with President Agostino Neto in Luanda on February 8. Neto, reflecting Fidel Castro’s own position, told Young that there was no obstacle against relations with the U.S., but said he would reject preconditions, specifically any demand to remove Cuban troops. He justified the bases Angola allowed for insurgents – the

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<sup>206</sup> Andrew DeRoche, *Andrew Young: Civil Rights Ambassador* (Delaware, 2003), pp. 61-2.

<sup>207</sup> K. Teltsen, “Young Taking over UN Duties Prepares to Leave for Africa Today,” *NYT*, February 25, 1977; Helen Thomas, “The Andrew Young Style,” *UPI*, April 22, 1977.

South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) from Namibia, the African National Congress (ANC) from South Africa, and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) from Rhodesia – all of which received Soviet and Cuban military assistance, saying, “As the MPLA discovered in Angola, liberation cannot be achieved without force.”<sup>208</sup> Young may have opposed the 1975 U.S. intervention in Angola, but he was not an advocate of armed revolution. Seen through the prism of the American civil rights movement, black nationalism in Africa was for Young a political, not a military, process. He responded mildly that he “Hoped... Neto might reconsider his advocacy of guerrilla struggle as the only means for independence.”<sup>209</sup>

Cuban troops remained. The U.S.-Angola normalization talks that were set to begin in April never did take place. The same power confrontation that had framed Kissinger’s realpolitik in Southern Africa constrained Andrew Young and the administration. In the first place, Angola was a *fait accompli*. With the failure of militarized containment and the Clark Amendment in place, the U.S. lacked leverage to oppose the Soviet-Cuban presence. Progress on Rhodesia or Namibia required cooperation from South Africa; despite revulsion over apartheid and support for majority rule, harsh rhetoric was not going to change the regime or halt South Africa’s aggressive military posture in Namibia and Southern Angola. Nor would dedication to human rights lead the US to abandon the faulty and embarrassing Mobutu in Zaire. The contradictions between diplomatic cooperation and Cold War confrontation in Southern Africa were a “Gordian knot.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Amconsul Kaduna, telegram 0140, Meeting with Neto, February 8, 1977, NSDA.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ryan M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford, 2012); Westad, *Global Cold War*, pp. 207-87; Sue Onslow (Ed.), *Cold War in Southern Africa: White Power, Black Liberation* (New York, 2012); Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 103-43.

The President and Secretary Vance publicly supported Young's positions, even if they blanched at his more extreme remarks. When Young pushed relations with South Africa into a tailspin in April 1977 by characterizing the regime as "illegitimate," it prompted the first of several embarrassing State Department retractions.<sup>211</sup> Nevertheless, when asked whether Young represented U.S. policy, President Carter defended him as a "national treasure," adding rather patronizingly that Young helped show "those small and weak and poor countries they can trust us."<sup>212</sup> Brzezinski bided his time.

### **Shaba I - Principle Prevails**

The first post-independence clash that would set up the next decade of Cold War conflict in Angola took place in March 1977 and became known as Shaba I. By mid-1976, Cuba had completed its mission of helping the MPLA consolidate Angola's independence. Neto and Castro agreed on a withdrawal plan that would reduce Cuba's military presence down to a 7,000 man training group by 1978.<sup>213</sup> Instead, insurgent activity, continuing hostility with neighbors, and solidarity with liberation groups kept over 20,000 Cuban combat troops in Angola.

South Africa continued what it termed the Border War and remained Angola's biggest threat. SADF units remained permanently stationed in Northern Namibia where they maintained a buffer and kept the insurgent fires stoked by supporting UNITA from its base in the Caprivi Strip. Anti-South African insurgents from SWAPO, with their political headquarters in Luanda, raided deep into Namibia from bases in Southern Angola, prompting South African incursions.

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<sup>211</sup> Graham Hovey, "Young Sets off Furor by Agreeing South Africa Rule is 'Illegitimate,'" *NYT*, April 16, 1977.

<sup>212</sup> Jimmy Carter, "ABC News Interview, Plains, GA, August 10, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (GPO, 1981), pp. 1471-2.

<sup>213</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 43; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, p. 169.

The first crisis, though, came not in the South, but in the North. The FNLA, still under Holden Roberto, had regrouped to some extent and continued to trouble the MPLA government. Their sanctuary and support came from Zaire, but Mobutu was more vulnerable than the South African regime. The Angolans had an instrument for striking at him, the former Katanga Tigers, gendarmes who had fought to secede from the Congo in the early 1960's, but had failed and fled to exile in Angola. Well-armed and able fighters, they had been important allies of the MPLA during the civil war. They remained cantoned in Northern Angola where they received military support from the government that allowed them to serve as a defensive buffer with Zaire. The Katangans still aimed to seize control of Shaba Province (formerly Katanga), rich with copper and cobalt mines, just across the border, and they desired revenge against their enemy Mobutu. On March 15, 1977, over a thousand Katangan fighters crossed the border. The incompetent Zairian Army failed to repel the incursion. Mobutu was more skillful in raising the cry that he was being invaded by Cuban-backed communists. In its most overt action, the Safari Club equipped and airlifted Moroccan troops with French advisors to prevent the Katangans from over-running Kolwezi, the capital of Shaba and center of the province's rich installations where thousands of European nationals resided. They departed in May after the FLNC soldiers had filtered back into Angola and Nigeria brokered an agreement by which Angola would disarm the Katangans and Zaire would halt support for the FNLA.<sup>214</sup>

The moderate U.S. response to Shaba I balanced power with principle. In the first dispute between Brzezinski and Vance, Vance prevailed. Brzezinski believed the Shaba incursion was a

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<sup>214</sup> Peter Mangold, "Shaba I and Shaba II," *Survival*, 21:3, 1979, pp. 107-15; Piero Gleijeses, "Truth or Credibility: Castro, Carter, and the Invasions of Shaba," *The International History Review*, 18:1, February 1996, pp. 70-103; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 623-30.

Soviet test and wanted a strong military response.<sup>215</sup> Vance disagreed, but did not want to see Zaire destabilized.<sup>216</sup> The U.S. supported the French-Moroccan rescue as well as the Nigerian mediation, and sent \$15 million in military aid to Mobutu. Making a half-pregnant distinction that the Carter administration would also use in Central America and Afghanistan, the assistance was designated “non-lethal.” On the understanding that the Angolans had unleashed the Katangans to halt raiding from Zaire, the State Department declared that there was no evidence of Cuban involvement, but at Brzezinski’s insistence, the U.S. continued the Ford/Kissinger policy of non-recognition over the presence of Cuban troops within Angola.<sup>217</sup>

### **Shaba II - Power Preempts**

Mobutu persisted in supporting FNLA incursions. After a year of protests, Neto sponsored a second surprise invasion by the Katangan gendarmes. Shaba II, launched on May 13, 1978, was a more serious affair, as was the reaction of the United States. In what was to become a pattern for the Carter administration, the reaction flared into a misguided Cold War crisis.

Despite the tense Angola-Zaire border and his own provocations, Mobutu had done little to prepare. Again, his Army proved incapable of responding as 5,000 FLNC soldiers crossed into Zaire and picked up hundreds of internal collaborators. They seized Kolwezi, taking more than 2,000 Westerners hostage, including several dozen Americans. About 120 of them, none U.S. citizens, died in the ensuing violence, dozens by execution.

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<sup>215</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>216</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 70.

<sup>217</sup> CIA “Weekly Summary,” May 27, 1977, CREST; DIA “Intelligence Appraisal: Angola-Zaire Mediation Efforts,” June 16, 1977, NSDA; Mangold, “Shaba I and Shaba II,” p. 110; Robert David Johnson, “The Unintended Consequences of Congressional Reform: The Clark and Tunney Amendments and U.S. Policy toward Angola,” *Diplomatic History*, 27:2, April 2003, p. 240.

This time the response was swift and of a different order of magnitude. In a combined security and humanitarian intervention, 2,000 French Foreign Legion paratroopers and Belgian Paracommandos were on the ground within days. U.S Air Force C-141s and C-130s, along with ground crews, provided logistic support, while the minor participation of UK and Italian Air Forces gave the operation a NATO flavor. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division went on alert, but did not deploy. It took about a week for the intervention force to clear Kolwezi and evacuate the Westerners. The Katangans conducted an orderly retreat from Zaire back to Angola, while the Zairean Armed Forces, fueled with \$12 million in emergency U.S. security assistance, reoccupied the region, conducting reprisals along the way.<sup>218</sup>

A follow-on mission by a quickly-formed Inter-African Force (IAF) with Safari Club and other Western aid assembled 2,700 troops from Morocco, Senegal, Togo, Gabon, and Côte d'Ivoire, and equipped them with Egyptian arms. They replaced the French-Belgian force and remained in Zaire until September. By providing an “African solution to African problems,” the IAF relieved African suspicions of Western intentions and the West of its reluctance to intervene directly, and set a precedent for stability operations in Africa.<sup>219</sup>

Negotiations also got under way immediately. Deputy U.S. UN Representative McHenry mediated with Zaire, while the Cubans did the same with Angola, Neto met with Mobutu secretly in July 1978 at the OAU conference in Khartoum. The Angolans agreed to disband the FLNC, confine the Katangans to their encampments, and reopened the Benguela railway that

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<sup>218</sup> LTC Thomas P. Odom, “Shaba II: The French and Belgian Intervention in Zaire in 1978,” Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, April 1993; David Mets, *Land-Based Air Power in Third World Crises* (Maxwell AFB, 1986), pp. 121-37; Nathaniel Powell, “Saving Mobutu: An International History of Africa’s First Peacekeeping Force,” draft conference paper, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 2014.

<sup>219</sup> Mangold, *Shaba I and Shaba II*, p. 112.

carried copper from Shaba to the port of Lobito in Angola. In exchange, Zaire halted support for the FLEC separatists in Cabinda, as well as for Savimbi's UNITA, and Holden Roberto found himself exiled to Paris, putting an end to FNLA interference in Angola. Neto's employment of the Katangans was a competent use of limited war that ended the threat to Angola from Zaire and made him the net winner.<sup>220</sup>

At one level, the U.S. response to Shaba II was like Shaba I, consistent with Secretary Vance's approach and with Carter's initial sympathies. The administration could claim credit for supporting the rescue of Western citizens, international peacekeeping, and principled diplomacy. As a pragmatic exercise, the outcome was an application of restrictive deterrence, which used military resources to reduce regional tensions and stabilize the line between the two countries as a front in the Cold War. That replay was also an opportunity for the United States to invest Shaba II with geopolitical significance, which had been absent in the relatively complacent reaction to Shaba I one year earlier. Increasing military backing for Mobutu, supporting the troops of other nations, putting the 82<sup>nd</sup> on alert, and using strategic air lift to project power added up to a loud demonstration of capability and resolve.

The Cubans and Soviets were not the only audience for the message that the U.S. was prepared to deter and contain further Eastern Bloc encroachment. When Shaba II broke out, Brzezinski was orchestrating a trip to Beijing to further normalization of relations and pursue his ambition to turn the budding U.S.-PRC relationship into an explicit anti-Soviet alliance.

Brzezinski used Shaba II extensively to showcase U.S. will and appealed for aid to UNITA.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Walter Pincus and Robert G. Kaiser, "U.S. Envoy Dispatched to Angola: Talks With Neto To Focus on Calming Tensions With Zaire," *WP*, June 22, 1978; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 64; Gerald T. Bender, "Angola: Left, Right & Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, 43, Summer 1981, pp. 53-69.

<sup>221</sup> MemCon, Dr. Brzezinski's Meeting with Foreign Minister Huang Hua, Beijing, May 20, 1978, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XIII, China, Doc. 108.

As they had with Ford and Kissinger in 1975, the Chinese espoused common cause in opposing the Soviets, but remained wary of active security cooperation with the United States and noncommittal on aid to UNITA.

The administration also inflated Shaba II into a Cold War case for domestic reasons. By May 1978, concerns had begun piling up in the White House that the President was looking weak. Carter's approval was declining in the polls, particularly over his handling of foreign affairs. Influential voices, both within the administration and in Congress, were questioning Soviet sincerity on détente and arms control as its military power grew and the Brezhnev regime projected an assertive image that 'the world was going our way.' Conservatives in Congress, including Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, were also demanding the U.S. get tough with Cuba. Administration warnings to the Soviets to show restraint in the Third World had no effect.

From the Right, Ronald Reagan was preparing to challenge Carter for the presidency in the 1980 election. Reagan warned of an expanding Soviet empire and accused the President of having a "view of the world that ranks along with belief in the tooth fairy."<sup>222</sup> Carter began to set aside his foreign policy of principles and speak in terms of power, warning of Soviet military expansion, especially in Africa.<sup>223</sup> (Soviet-Cuban action in the Horn of Africa is outside the scope of this thesis.<sup>224</sup>) The administration, unwilling to intervene, struggled for leverage and

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<sup>222</sup> Ronald Reagan, "America's Purpose in the World," speech delivered at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Washington, DC, March 17, 1978, [http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Americas\\_World\\_Purpose.asp](http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Americas_World_Purpose.asp), accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>223</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Address at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina," March 17, 1978, UCSB.

<sup>224</sup> Westad, *Global Cold War*, pp. 250-287; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, pp. 143-164; Documents on the Horn of Africa Crisis, The Wilson Center, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/42/>, accessed June 15, 2015.

instead found itself unable to respond effectively. was seeking Now it sought to confront Havana and Moscow wherever it could.<sup>225</sup>

Shaba II provided the opportunity to lash out. U.S. efforts were at one level pragmatic, proportional responses to a serious but localized conflict. Yet the administration rhetorically unchained itself to inflate Shaba II into a Cold War crisis. Soon after the Katangans crossed the border into Zaire on May 13, and with Mobutu raising the anti-communist cry, U.S. officials began accusing Cuba of complicity in the incursion. On May 19, the White House and the State Department spokesman, under direct instruction from the NSC, went on the record specifically accusing Cuba of training the Katangans and supplying them with Soviet weapons. Headlines reflected ominous concerns about the prospect of a pro-Soviet takeover in Zaire. Arriving dramatically at the recaptured Kolwezi airport, Mobutu denounced the presence of Cuban fighters with the Katangese rebels. Evening news broadcasts showed dead Europeans in the streets as U.S.-supported Belgian paratroopers and the French Foreign Legion rescued survivors.<sup>226</sup>

There was a major problem, however. There was no evidence that Cuba had assisted the Katangans.<sup>227</sup> Fidel Castro vehemently denied it and made it a point of pride in several interviews on U.S. television and in meetings with U.S. officials. He insisted he had tried to restrain Neto from enabling this second invasion of Zaire. President Carter complained about

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<sup>225</sup> Crawford Young, "Zaire: The Unending Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1978, pp. 181-92.

<sup>226</sup> David Ottaway, "Zaire Conflict Poses Dilemma for U.S.," *WP*, May 18, 1978; John Goshko, "U.S. Seen as Powerless to Contain Cuba in 3<sup>rd</sup> World," *WP*, May 25, 1978; Walter Cronkite, Marvin Kalb, "Headline: Zaire Conflict," CBS Evening News, May 19, 1978, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/program.pl?ID=257909>, accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>227</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "White House Cites C.I.A. Material on a Cuban Role in Zaire Invasion," *NYT*, June 16, 1978; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, p. 174; Gleijeses, "Castro, Carter, and the Invasions of Shaba," pp. 70-103.

“the Soviet Union’s unchecked ability to send Cuban troops into foreign adventures in Africa” and even pushed Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, who simply dismissed the notion that Moscow had anything to do with either of the Shaba invasions.<sup>228</sup> The White House made public a CIA memo that summarized the presumed evidence of Cuban involvement in Shaba II. It was based entirely on second- and third-hand sources and did nothing to convince the skeptical press corps.<sup>229</sup> U.S. intelligence analysts cautioned that Castro rarely lied, and subsequent literature substantiated that he was telling the truth.<sup>230</sup> Beating the Cold War drum over Shaba II turned into an exercise in hyperbole, false attribution, political exaggeration of intelligence, and internal division. In the end, as the dispute played out, it was Castro’s credibility that benefitted and Carter’s that suffered.

During the second half of May and until the crisis died down in late-June, it appeared almost as if two different U.S. Governments were responding. The initial State Department reaction had emphasized the international response to Shaba II in much the same matter of fact tone as it had during Shaba I. Secretary of State Vance along with UN Ambassador Young, while not dismissing worries about Soviet expansionism, were skeptical about the charges of Cuban participation and appeared willing to give Castro the benefit of the doubt.<sup>231</sup> Many in the administration, including on the NSC staff, agreed, but it was the President who was leading the charge with Brzezinski backing him up.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> John Goshko, “Carter Accuses Cuba on Zaire Raid,” *WP*, May 26, 1978; MemCon: President Jimmy Carter et al. - Foreign Minister A.A. Gromyko et al., the White House, May 27, 1978, NSDA.

<sup>229</sup> McClean, *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1978; Gwertzman, “White House Cites C.I.A. Material,” *NYT*. *NYT*

<sup>230</sup> Wright, *Destruction of a Nation*, pp. 83-90; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Backchannel to Cuba*, pp. 172-4; Gleijeses, *Vision of Freedom*, pp. 54-60.

<sup>231</sup> F. Halliday, “United States Policy in the Horn of Africa: Aboulia or Proxy Intervention,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 10, September-December 1977, pp. 8-33.

<sup>232</sup> *WP*, May 17 and 21, 1978, cited in George V. Wright, “President Carter's Response to Shaba II: Or, How to Play the Cuba Card,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 9(3), 1980, p. 105; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 58.

## Brzezinski Bleeds the Soviets

Zbigniew Brzezinski had kept a low public profile during his first year as National Security Advisor. In something of a coming out, he had revealed his intense anti-Soviet disposition in a much-discussed interview in the May 1 issue of the *New Yorker*, shortly before Shaba II. In it he had talked about finding a way to bring the Soviets to “their own Vietnam in Angola or somewhere else on the periphery.”<sup>233</sup> Grabbing the spotlight on his return from Beijing, Brzezinski made his first major television appearance on May 28. Instead of China, the interview began with a barrage of questions about the allegation of Cuban complicity in Shaba II. Asked “What can you tell us about the evidence?”, Brzezinski said, “I am confident that the judgment expressed by the President will stand up.”<sup>234</sup> But hedging, he reduced the charge to indirect Soviet and Cuban responsibility and claimed:

I do not believe that this kind of Soviet-Cuban intrusion ought to be cost-free . . . [We] think we know from history that it is wiser to contain a conflict at a time when it is still subject to containment through . . . limited countermoves than at a point when it has become a major conflagration.<sup>235</sup>

The lack of any indication that the Cubans, much less the Soviets, had actually been involved in Shaba II undermined Brzezinski’s chain of aggression logic and weakened the credibility of his unspecified threat. When Carter used similar language a few days later, a commentator noted: “Change the southern drawl for a fuzzy German accent and he could have sounded like former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warning of the communist menace.”<sup>236</sup>

On June 7, Carter gave a speech about Soviet policy at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Drafting much of it himself, his intent was to marry a confrontational

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<sup>233</sup> Elizabeth Drew, “A Reporter at Large: Brzezinski,” *The New Yorker*, May 1, 1978, pp. 90-130.

<sup>234</sup> *Department of State Bulletin*, “Interview: National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski on ‘Meet the Press,’” 78:2016, July 1978, p. 26.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> John McClean, “Why Carter is Blasting Soviets,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1978.

attitude toward the Soviets to his desire for cooperation. Addressing Africa and Shaba II specifically, he said:

The persistent and increasing military involvement of the Soviet Union and Cuba in Africa could deny this hopeful vision . . . And this is why I and the American people will support African efforts to contain such intrusion, as we have done recently in Zaire.<sup>237</sup>

Carter noted in the June 7 entry in his diary that reaction to Annapolis was good and “will provide a benchmark for our decisions in the future.”<sup>238</sup> In fact, so disjunctive were its contradictions that, according to John Lewis Gaddis, “Jokes abounded that the President had simply stapled together drafts by Brzezinski and Vance.”<sup>239</sup>

With Shaba II remaining an issue, the President maintained his hard line against Soviet-Cuban military moves in Africa in press conferences on June 14 and again on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Carter testily said, “I don’t really desire to get into a public dispute with Mr. Castro through the news media”, and insisted there was proof of Cuban involvement. He asserted, “The fact is that Castro could have done much more had he genuinely wanted to stop the invasion.”<sup>240</sup> But when pressed on what he was going to do to about it, the President backed off.<sup>241</sup>

Carter griped with injured pride to his diary on June 13:

Castro has blamed all the problems concerning Cuba and the Shaba Province raid on Brzezinski. Whenever I tighten up a little on the Soviet Union or Cuba, the liberal press erupts in a spate of criticism. [Castro’s] joined the Soviets and Israelis and everyone else – when they have a problem with me, to blame it on Zbig.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> President Jimmy Carter, United States Naval Academy Address at the Commencement Exercises, June 7, 1978, UCSB.

<sup>238</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 199.

<sup>239</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 347.

<sup>240</sup> The President: News Conferences, June 14 and 26,” *Department of State Bulletin*, 78:2017, August 1978, pp. 6-10.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 199.

The former chief of the Havana Interests Section commented about the Cuban allegations, “The problem is they weren’t going to do anything about it, and so on top of everything else they look like wimps.”<sup>243</sup>

At the same time as this Cold War drum beating was going on, Secretary Vance continued trying to uphold the contrary message. In June 19 testimony to Congress Vance insisted that the highest U.S. goal was to “reduce the dangers of uncontrolled military competition through effective and sensible arms control,” continuing:

U.S. relations with the Soviet Union involves our mutual conduct in other areas of the world. While this is a global problem, I will address . . . the African perception that we see them and their problems in their own terms, and not as an arena for East-West differences.<sup>244</sup>

The next day, Vance insisted that:

Helping African nations meet their pressing human and economic needs; strengthening their ability to defend themselves; building closer ties throughout Africa; and assisting African nations to resolve their conflicts peacefully.<sup>245</sup>

For all of his pragmatism and lawyerly sophistication, there was an element of strategic naiveté in Vance’s assertions that the United States and the Soviet Union shared the same approach to “our mutual conduct in other areas of the world” and that Cuban troops might be convinced to leave Africa. However, on one point, the administration was unified. In the Question & Answer period Vance drew a sharp post-Vietnam line: “The United States will not enter into armed

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<sup>243</sup> Interview with Wayne Smith, cited in Gleijeses, “Carter and Shaba II,” p. 102.

<sup>244</sup> Cyrus Vance, “Elements of U.S. Policy toward the Soviet Union, Statement before the House Committee on International Relations on June 19, 1978,” *Department of State Bulletin*, August 1978, pp. 14-16.

<sup>245</sup> Cyrus Vance, “Address before the 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the U.S. Jaycees in Atlantic City on June 20, 1978 and Question and Answer Session Following Atlantic City Address,” *Department of State Bulletin*, August 1978, pp. 10-14.

conflict. The United States has no intention of involving American troops on the continent of Africa.”<sup>246</sup>

### **The Hawks Beat the Doves over Africa**

The administration had two problems: What was it willing and able to do? And how was it going to resolve the incompatibilities of power and principle within its own divided house? The rivalry between Vance and Brzezinski as well as the President’s new-found need to appear tough on communists were wrapped up in the issue, but crucial underlying questions of strategy and policy: How could American prestige be recovered without resort to military power? Could diplomacy and conflict resolution answer the challenge of revolutionary Cuba? What threat did the Cuban and Soviet military presence in Africa actually present to the U.S.?

To the extent that a single direction would eventually predominate, it was Brzezinski’s hyper-strategic focus on contesting the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Vance would continue to downplay superpower confrontation, to press for arms control, to eschew the use of force, to advocate human rights, and to seek resolution of crises in Africa and other areas of the world. Until he finally resigned in April 1980, in just about every instance when principles clashed with Cold War concerns, the hawks beat the doves.

Brzezinski professed appreciation for Third World perspectives. Yet, masking disdain with understatement, he wrote that while U.S. relations with black Africa benefitted from “the President’s personal commitment to human rights and the efforts of Cy Vance and Andy Young,” on the other hand, they “took an excessively benign view of the Soviet and Cuban penetration of Africa, underestimating its strategic implications.”<sup>247</sup> Just as Brzezinski’s concern

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 143.

for strategic implications in Africa was virtually indistinguishable from Kissinger's, so was his exploitation of the institutional dimension. Carter had entered the White House opposed on principle to the Kissinger model of foreign policy, but Brzezinski proved just as adept as Kissinger in using proximity to the President to concentrate power in his role as National Security Advisor.<sup>248</sup> While they appreciated Carter's efforts to downplay East-West confrontation, and to promote human rights and other progressive issues, officials across the bureaucracy were bound to resist his attempt to divert U.S. grand strategy from its core purpose of containing and deterring the Soviet Union.

## II. The African Periphery as Power Arena

In the eyes of the intelligence agencies, the Soviet threat in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World was growing. The military balance had already tipped. That assessment was not without foundation and conveyed a thinly veiled judgment on U.S. policy.<sup>249</sup>

For example, an April 1977 DIA Intelligence Appraisal attributed a marked improvement in Moscow's position to the lack of U.S. response to Angola (and Ethiopia).<sup>250</sup> The DIA had begun issuing a monthly tracker titled "Cuba: Worldwide Involvement," which contrasted the low level of Western military presence in Africa with the much greater Soviet and Cuban commitment. According to the June report, outside of Zaire and Egypt, U.S. security assistance was in the low millions of dollars, and there were fewer than 200 American military personnel in

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<sup>248</sup> Kevin V. Mulcahy, "The Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor: Foreign Policy Making in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 16:2, Spring 1986, p. 286; Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, pp. 88-93.

<sup>249</sup> Raymond Garthoff, "Estimating Soviet Military Intentions and Capabilities," in Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett (eds.), *Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA's Analysis of the Soviet Union* (CSI, 2007).

<sup>250</sup> DIA, "Southern Africa: The Podgorny Visit and Its Implications," Intelligence Appraisal, April 1, 1977, DIA1APPR 115-77, NSDA.

the continent.<sup>251</sup> The 10,000 French troops stationed in former colonies counted as a stabilizing influence. But that total racked up against 4,000 Soviet and 35,000 Cuban Armed Forces in 13 African countries, about two-thirds of them in Angola, and this was prior to the deployment of another 12,000 Cuban combat troops to Ethiopia. By the end of 1977, concern that Cuban troops with Soviet arms, logistic support, and advice had become a formidable force for expeditionary power projection overshadowed the equanimity about East-West competition that had greeted Shaba I six months earlier.<sup>252</sup>

For the first time, in April 1978, the CIA formally articulated the view that Soviet military power on the periphery was increasing while the U.S. was declining. According to the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) “Soviet Goals and Expectations in the Global Power Arena”:

Soviet leaders are encouraged to persist by what they see as basic trends, notably the withdrawal of the United States from long-established positions and flagging US public interest in contesting Soviet influence in the Third World. . . . They seem to perceive the American withdrawal from Vietnam as a watershed, marking the end of an era in which US readiness to intervene militarily dominated Soviet risk calculations in the Third World.<sup>253</sup>

Particularly in Africa, anchored by success in Angola, the NIE concurred with the Soviet perception that the world was turning their way:

Where a palpable Soviet military preponderance can be achieved, the Soviets believe that it will, over time, encourage regional actors to seek security arrangements based on Moscow’s good will, especially as . . . alternative alliances prove less attractive.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> DIA, “Cuba: Worldwide Involvement,” June 29, 1977, DIA1APPR 214-77, NSDA.

<sup>252</sup> IISS Adelphi Papers, *Africa, Volume I* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 280-1.

<sup>253</sup> Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate 11-4-78: “Soviet Goals and Expectations in the Global Power Arena,” April 11, 1978, NSDA, p. 38.

<sup>254</sup> Soviet Goals and Expectations, pp. vi-vii, x.

According to Gates, the new appreciation “was sobering, a cold shower” that helped tip the psychological balance within the administration.<sup>255</sup> Subsequent reports continued in the same vein.<sup>256</sup>

### **Southern Africa as a Front in the Cold War: a Strategic Response?**

The April 1978 NIE on the Soviets in the global power arena concluded that the Soviet Union had the advantage in Africa even though the U.S. had superior capabilities, because they, alongside the Cubans, had the will to act militarily. The June 1977 PRM 10 - Military Strategy and Force Posture Review included an extensive limited war scenario involving a U.S. response to an attack on Zaire by Angola, supported by Soviet and Cuban forces.<sup>257</sup> The preferred option was to use a Korea-style limited option to defeat Soviet-backed conventional military aggression, but it was largely irrelevant to the political-military conditions and the challenges to strategy that actually existed.

Once the Soviet-Cuban lodgment in Angola was a *fait accompli*, restrictive deterrence set boundaries that restrained escalation. The most important U.S. decisions were effectively decisions not to act.

The first casualty was the effort launched in March 1977 to normalize relations with Cuba. At the time, NSC Latin America director Robert Pastor, supported by the State Department, had argued that making agreement with Cuba contingent on removing its troops from Angola and Ethiopia would derail negotiation. Brzezinski acquiesced and exploratory talks

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<sup>255</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 74-6.

<sup>256</sup> CIA National Foreign Assessments Center, “An Analysis of Cuban Military Interventions in Angola and Ethiopia,” October 31, 1978, NSDA; Garthoff, “Estimating Soviet Military Intentions and Capabilities”; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>257</sup> PRM/NSC 10 - Military Strategy and Force Posture Review Final Report, p. 9, II-7-8.

went forward, but he had no intention of legitimizing the Cuban military presence in Africa. The President at one point peremptorily told the U.S. Congressman who was mediating talks with Cuba, “Just tell them to get out of Angola.”<sup>258</sup> Although Vance and Young struggled to keep the initiative going, Shaba II brought it to an end. PRM 36, issued on May 28, 1978, formally reversed direction, dedicating any steps the U.S. might take to limiting Soviet/Cuban influence in Africa.<sup>259</sup>

The administration was also careful to end U.S. military support in response to Shaba II within 60 days, before the untested 1973 War Powers Resolution required the President to seek specific authorization from Congress.<sup>260</sup>

Nowhere did power ride rough shod over principle more starkly than in non-action over South Africa’s Border War with Angola. On May 4, 1978, just nine days before Shaba II broke out, the South African Defense Force launched a surprise offensive against SWAPO concentrations in Southern Angola. Strikes included an air assault on Cassinga, a UN-supervised refugee camp 160 miles from the border, where the SADF massacred over 600 Namibians, mostly noncombatants, before Cuban troops based 15 miles away drove them off in a pitched battle.<sup>261</sup> International censure followed, but the U.S. declined to sanction South Africa.

President Carter was exceedingly mild:

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<sup>258</sup> Interviews with Robert Pastor and Representative Richard Nolan in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, pp. 165, 175.

<sup>259</sup> Presidential Review Memorandum NSC 36 – Soviet/Cuban Presence in Africa, May 28, 1978, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm36.pdf>.

<sup>260</sup> *War Powers Resolution*, 50 U.S. Code § 33-1431; House Committee on International Relations, *Congressional Oversight of War Powers Compliance: Zaire Airlift*, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, August 10, 1978, pp. 16-33; “Jimmy Carter, Opening statement at a May 26 press conference in Chicago,” *WP*, May 26, 1978

<sup>261</sup> Bernard Cazaux, “Hundreds buried in mass grave at Angola town after South African raid.” *The Times of London*, May 10, 1978; IOL News (South Africa), “Battle of Cassinga Still Rages,”

<http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/battle-of-cassinga-still-rages-1.353716#.VEz7IMk8Ti0>, accessed June 15, 2015; Gary Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War' Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (London, 2014.)

I think you all know that the South Africans claim that it was just a retaliatory raid against the SWAPO forces . . . We've expressed our concern to the South African Government and asked them for an explanation.<sup>262</sup>

In contrast, three weeks later, the President expressed his “abhorrence and distress over the violence” committed during Shaba II, a “human tragedy [for which] the Government of Angola must bear a heavy responsibility... a burden and a responsibility shared by Cuba.”<sup>263</sup> Brzezinski’s hand was clear in the kid glove treatment for South Africa and false allegations of Soviet and Cuban aggression; Secretary of State Vance and UN Ambassador Young were appalled.<sup>264</sup>

### **The Attempt to Revive Aid to Angolan Insurgents**

Brzezinski insisted the U.S. should make the Soviets and Cubans pay a price over Africa, but the problem was how? Shaba II had been a one-off demonstration. Major aid to Mobutu stabilized Zaire for the longer-term. Beyond that, other security assistance programs were miniscule and the conventional warfighting scenarios offered no guidance. The diplomatic track of supporting self-determination and conflict resolution that Vance and his team of Young, McHenry, Moose and Lake pursued at State drew much attention and effort, but distinctly lacked a cutting edge.

The other track – secret war – beckoned. “Carter and most of the rest of the team had entered the White House with a deep aversion to covert action, yet the administration had continued pre-existing clandestine political and propaganda programs targeted against the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.”<sup>265</sup> With Soviet and Cuban activism in Africa growing, consideration

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<sup>262</sup> Jimmy Carter, Portland, Oregon Informal Exchange With Reporters Upon Departure From the Olson Residence, May 5, 1978, UCSB.

<sup>263</sup> Jimmy Carter, Opening Statement, May 26, 1978.

<sup>264</sup> Piero Gleijeses, “Test of Wills: Jimmy Carter, South Africa, and the Independence of Namibia,” *Diplomatic History*, 34:5, November 2010, pp. 853-91.

<sup>265</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 136.

of covert paramilitary action appeared on the agenda, again featuring Jonas Savimbi's UNITA in Angola.

Although formally estranged, liaison with South Africa continued and fed the CIA's favorable view of UNITA. It reported that UNITA had grown from 8,000 to 20,000 troops, was contesting one-half of Angolan territory, and "without further substantial reinforcement, Cuban and Angolan Government forces will be unable to neutralize antigovernment guerrillas."<sup>266</sup>

Resumption of a covert action program to support Savimbi was the subject of a March 2, 1978 meeting of the Special Coordinating Committee (SCC). The congressional prohibition was still in effect and Vance opposed such steps. The following exchange took place between Brzezinski, Vance, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Deputy National Security Advisor David Aaron, and CIA Director Stansfield Turner:<sup>267</sup>

**Brzezinski:** How about Cuban activities in Angola? [One line, evidently referring to covert action, redacted.]

**Vance:** What is the law?

**Brown:** It only applies to the 1976 act and the 1976 project. There is an open question as to whether the Tunney-Javits amendment reflects continuation of congressional limitation.

**Vance:** What do we know about the attitude of Congress?

**Brzezinski:** We have to consult.

**Aaron:** It is important not to put this thing only in the context of the Horn but to consider the situation in Southern Africa as well.

**Vance:** Suppose we start helping Savimbi and he takes back a few more towns. Are the Cubans not going to send more people in then? Doesn't this just drive them to do more?

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<sup>266</sup> Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, p. 198; CIA, Cuba's Angola Venture Stagnating, Strategic Intelligence Monthly Review, January 1978, C00498044, NSDA.

<sup>267</sup> Special Coordinating Committee Meeting on the Horn of Africa, White House Situation Room, March 2, 1978, NSDA.

Savimbi is doing quite well now. Why do anything that will increase the likelihood of more Cubans there?

**Brzezinski:** Only if it increases their casualties and the costs of their involvement. Consider the fact that they are offering 800 people to ZAPU [in Rhodesia]. If it does not cost them anything they are likely to do it.

[10-12 line redaction of an exchange among Cyrus Vance, DCI Stansfield Turner, and Aaron, evidently regarding covert action and UNITA.]

**Brzezinski:** Stan [Stansfield Turner], is it your judgment that aid to Savimbi would increase his capabilities?

**Vance:** I would like a better analysis of what the effect of these various steps is going to be.

**Brzezinski:** The issue is not whether we get more Cubans in Angola.

**Vance:** There are going to be as many there as is necessary to keep Neto in power.

**Brzezinski:** But why not make them increase their involvement in Angola? Let them be pinched by it. The Soviets and Cubans want not only to stimulate the conflict but to decide the outcome of the conflict.

**Vance:** Another alternative would be to open up some discussions with Neto. We should think of this. He has no place to turn but to the Soviets and Cubans. For the same reason that it is a good idea for us to have an ambassador in Ethiopia -- this is worth thinking about. We should think of all sides of these problems.

**Brzezinski:** State will help. Meanwhile we will stop advising friendly countries against aid to Savimbi. [Underlining in original.]

The first hint in public that the administration was considering aid to UNITA surfaced in Elizabeth Drew's May 1 *New Yorker* article on Brzezinski. An unnamed U.S. official told her that Brzezinski had been interested in finding a way to overcome the restriction for some time.<sup>268</sup> Even though the political atmosphere was terrible, the idea began to circulate that it was time for Congress to repeal the Clark Amendment. With criticism coming from both Republicans and conservative Democrats that Carter was soft on communism, the press continued to harp on

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<sup>268</sup> Drew, "Reporter at Large," pp. 111-12.

Carter's foreign policy weakness. The publication of former CIA officer John Stockwell's *In Search of Enemies* revived attention to the ill-fated 1975 Operation IAFEATURE, and Stockwell testified in Congress as a whistle-blower. Asked for his reaction to the tell-all book, former DCI Colby commented, "I wouldn't say he made up any of this."<sup>269</sup>

In early May, CIA Director Turner and Deputy National Security Advisor Aaron presented Senator Dick Clark with a written plan to resume shipping arms to UNITA through third countries. They asked Clark whether it would violate his amendment that barred U.S. "aid to private groups engaged in military or paramilitary operations in Angola." Clark had recently expressed concern over the Soviet presence in Africa, but he was not about to reverse himself on the signature issue he had championed in the Senate. After delaying his reply for a few days, he told Turner the plan was against the law and then accused the President in public of secretly trying "to reinvolve the United States in the Angola civil war."<sup>270</sup> A prominent op-ed warned: "Welcome to the Quagmire."<sup>271</sup>

Carter, who during the 1976 campaign had criticized Ford over Angola, in fact picked up where his predecessor left off. At a breakfast with Congressional leaders on May 15, during the heat of Shaba II, he made a pitch to resume assistance to the Angolan opposition. Carter complained that "Congress had tied our hands" and blamed it for causing the U.S. to "lose Africa to the communists."<sup>272</sup> Following up and seeking even broader latitude, he ordered the State Department to review all legislation and procedures that restricted "the ability of our

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<sup>269</sup> Albert Crenshaw, "Colby on Ex-CIA Agent," *WP*, May 15, 1978.

<sup>270</sup> Walter Pincus, "Carter Unaware on Angola," *WP*, May 24, 1978.

<sup>271</sup> John Goshko, "U.S. Seen as Powerless to Contain Cuba in 3<sup>rd</sup> World," *WP*, May 25, 1978; Tom Wicker, "Which Way to the Quagmire?" *NYT*, May 28, 1978.

<sup>272</sup> Murray Marder, "Pondering Covert Aid in Africa," *WP*, May 19, 1987.

government, without becoming involved in combat, to act promptly and decisively to help countries whose security is threatened by external forces.”<sup>273</sup>

The response from Congress, including from Democrats, was a blast of counter-criticism that kept up for the next two months. In the same press encounters that featured Carter’s credibility spat with Castro over Shaba II, the President dissembled:

I didn’t have any idea that the CIA Director had even talked to Senator Clark about it. My impression was ... that he went to see ... within the bounds of the law what involvement would be possible in Angola. But I have no knowledge of that, nor have I ever intended to send weapons to Angola, either directly nor indirectly.<sup>274</sup>

The administration made no headway. Congress kept the prohibition on aid to Angolan opposition groups in place. Carter’s term was hardly the hiatus on UNITA that is generally assumed. There was continuity as a matter of policy and sympathy, along with the allocation of minor resources.<sup>275</sup> Savimbi’s popularity also grew during this period, and not only with the conservative establishment. In 1979, the non-partisan Freedom House sponsored the first of five visits to the U.S. He met with Henry Kissinger and Reagan’s future Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Chester Crocker, as well as with several Democratic senators.<sup>276</sup>

### **UNITA and South Africa were double-edged Swords**

Following its defeat in 1975, UNITA faded deep into the Angolan bush, only to relaunch a second phase of the Angolan Civil War in 1977 that would endure for the remainder of the Cold War. Like other insurgencies, UNITA’s attributes included effective leadership under Jonas Savimbi; a competent political-military organization with a professional officer corps

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<sup>273</sup> Carter, Opening Statement, May 26, 1978.

<sup>274</sup> Jimmy Carter, “The President’s News Conference of June 26, 1978,” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1978 (GPO, 1979), pp. 1184-5.

<sup>275</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>276</sup> W. Martin James, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola: 1974-1990* (London, 1992), p. 148; Wright, *Destruction of a Nation*, p. 94

commanding 20,000 troops that operated on a dozen fronts; a unifying cause that grafted Maoist People's War to African tribalism and rallied Angola's largest tribal group, the Ovimbundu; sanctuary in the vast Angolan bush that the Portuguese had aptly termed "The Lands at the End of the Earth," as well as across neighboring borders; and sources of support that included China, the Safari Club, South Africa and, indirectly, the United States.<sup>277</sup>

During the first phase of the Angolan Civil War in 1975, the U.S. had mistakenly banked on the FNLA, while UNITA's status as "the longshot insurgent group" made them a secondary recipient of arms.<sup>278</sup> Now, Savimbi had gained a serious military reputation with Brzezinski and other supporters, even though to many his "reliance on Pretoria was so thorough that he was regarded as little more than an apartheid stooge."<sup>279</sup> UNITA's political character mattered little as long as it was damaging the MPLA government, the Cubans, and Soviets.

As useful as other sources of foreign support were to UNITA, after 1977 South Africa was indispensable, and the two served each other's needs as symbiotic allies. Support for the UNITA insurgency was a key element of South Africa's strategy to protect the apartheid state from the "total onslaught" of communist-backed aggression. UNITA operations were actually conducted as part of a sustained unconventional warfare campaign with two South African units,

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<sup>277</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 215-16; S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago, 1968); Burkhard Schnepel, "Max Weber's Theory of Charisma," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 18:1, 1987, pp. 26-48; John W. Turner, *Continent Ablaze: The Insurgency Wars in Africa 1960 to the Present* (London, 1998), pp. 108-109; William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (Johannesburg, 1994), pp. 188-9; Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 211; Richard Harwood, "Savimbi Defends Links with South Africans," *WP*, July 23, 1981, parts 1-7; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 68-9; Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi*, pp. 273-5; Steven F. Jackson, "China's Third World Foreign Policy: The Case of Angola and Mozambique, 1961-93," *The China Quarterly*, 142, June 1995, p. 397; DOD Input for PRM 36, Response to Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-36, Soviet/Cuban Presence in Africa, August 18, 1978, Annex X, Jimmy Carter Library; Editorial, "Pondering Covert Aid in Africa," *WP*, May 19, 1978.

<sup>278</sup> Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, p. 138.

<sup>279</sup> Jeremy Harding, "The Late Jonas Savimbi," *London Review of Books*, 24:6, March 21, 2002, pp. 34-5.

the Special Forces “Recces” and the 32 Battalion, both modeled on U.S. Special Forces. Savimbi needed South Africa, not only to grow UNITA’s military power, but to survive.<sup>280</sup>

### **Responding to the Soviet Military Challenge**

For the Carter administration, association with UNITA, Mobutu, and South Africa was a choice between the lesser of Cold War evils.<sup>281</sup> In the judgment of the Global Power NIE, the Soviets would proceed cautiously, with one exception. Where lack of American will left open opportunities in the Third World, citing Angola, it predicted the Soviet Union would not hesitate to exploit “the revolutionary purposefulness of both assertive and defensive actions.”<sup>282</sup>

It was with this perspective that the National Security Council met on August 15, 1978 to consider the NIE’s assessment of implications for Africa. DCI Turner set the tone:

The Soviets are more assertive...because their increasing military power gives them greater confidence. They are buoyed by their experience in Africa. Moreover, abroad the perception is one of change in the balance of power.<sup>283</sup>

In the succeeding discussion, the contradictions and confusion that attracted so much criticism of Carter’s foreign policy were fully in evidence. The group could not agree whether a net change in the global balance of power favoring the Soviet Union existed in fact, but it did accept that the Soviets were taking advantage of the United States. The President insisted, “Our reputation for weakness, vis-à-vis the Soviets, is not deserved;” he wanted “a careful public relations effort to show we are strong.”<sup>284</sup> Brzezinski pressed his view that:

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<sup>280</sup> Hamann, *Days of The Generals*, pp. 73-4; Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras*, pp. 88-9, 125-9; Miller, “Yes, Minister,” pp. 4-33; Leopold Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989* (Cape Town, 2013); Col. Jan Breyenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa’s 32 Battalion 1974-1993* (Johannesburg, 2004); Turner, *Continent Ablaze*., pp. 108-9.

<sup>281</sup> Soviet Goals and Expectations, p. v; Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 173.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>283</sup> Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, August 15, 1978, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. I, Document 94.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*.

[T]oday we face an ominous development in which the Soviets are compensating for the decline in their economic and ideological appeal with military pressure – massive arms, insertion of troops. It is a clear sign of their confidence in the military dimension of the balance that they moved to insert Cuban troops in Africa.<sup>285</sup>

He wanted to punish them. Secretary of Defense Brown, JCS Chairman Jones, and DCI Turner agreed. Secretary Vance provoked skepticism by again advocating normalization with Angola and conflict resolution elsewhere in Africa.<sup>286</sup> President Carter, steering away from a military response, said that any measures “should be in the spirit of peaceful competition with the Soviets.” An interagency Policy Review Committee (PRC) was tasked to come up with options. The urgency of once again taking up the cudgel against the Soviets and Cubans in Africa must have seemed familiar to those who recalled the similar exercise Kissinger had initiated after the debacle in Angola two years earlier.

The package, dated August 18, 1978, came in the form of a weighty 177-page analysis and recommendations paper.<sup>287</sup> PRM-36 had asked two key questions: What kind and level of Soviet/Cuban presence in Africa was “unacceptable”? And what should be done about it diplomatically, politically, economically, and militarily? The PRC answered the first question generically: “It is the use of large scale military efforts coupled with Soviet/Cuban political spoiling tactics that are ‘unacceptable’ to us as well as the Africans.”<sup>288</sup> Addressing the second question, it restated the obvious:

The U.S. has made it unmistakably clear to the Soviets and the Cubans that we view their willingness to exacerbate armed conflict in Africa as a matter of serious concern. Judging from the response, . . . the Soviet government may . . . have discounted the significance of our disapproval of their African adventurism . . . U.S. efforts to deal with Cuban military adventurism in Africa have not produced significant results so far.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> PRM/NSC-36, Soviet/Cuban Presence in Africa, May 23, 1978; Response to PRM-36, Jimmy Carter Library, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm36.pdf>.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, pp. 17-18.

PRM 36 had instructed that, “No course of action should automatically be excluded from consideration solely because it will present difficult political problems or would conflict with existing Administration policies.”<sup>290</sup> Instead, non-threatening incrementalism was the thrust of the military options. A detailed DOD Annex consisted of recommendations limited to marginal increases in ongoing security assistance, joint exercises, and support to peacekeeping. The U.S. could ask countries, such as Belgium, France, and the other Safari Club nations, to do more militarily. The single measure that would have a direct impact on Soviet and Cuban activities would be to encourage countries to deny overflight clearances to Soviet and Cuban planes on the way to Africa. Other indirect activities might include increasing surveillance, conducting reconnaissance flights over Cuba, and increasing U.S. military presence in Florida. However, the paper concluded that, “The value of demonstrating our displeasure against Soviets or Cubans in this fashion would be subject to debate.”<sup>291</sup> There was one exception to this anemic approach: indirect investment in warfighting through aid to African insurgents, specifically by supporting UNITA in Angola.

### **Reversion to the Cold War**

Despite the desire to support the Angolan insurgents, the U.S. was out of the ballgame there, and to a large extent of Africa as a whole. It was evident, by mid-1978 that Carter’s Wilsonian project in Africa had not survived. But Brzezinski had also failed to win approval for a tough U.S. reaction to Soviet and Cuban intervention in the Horn of Africa. His often-cited quote was, “SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden.”<sup>292</sup> The response to Shaba II was more muscular, but that was the highpoint of U.S. action.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 189; Louise P. Woodroffe, *Buried in the Sands of the Ogaden*:

As confused and reactive as it may have been, the Carter administration's reversion to the Cold War that began over Africa was nevertheless unmistakable. PRM-36 on response to the Soviet-Cuban presence in Africa, the NIE on the Soviets in the global power arena, and the President's Annapolis speech all meshed in the summer of 1978. Brzezinski pressed on, trying to prompt more aggressive action through two additional initiatives, Presidential Review Memoranda, PRM-42, "U.S. Strategy for Non-Military Competition with the Soviet Union," and PRM-43, "United States Global Presence," a review of the U.S. military posture around the world.<sup>293</sup> Here too, the results were slim. There proved to be little appetite outside of the NSC for major initiatives in Africa, much less robust military action. Gates observed, "The bureaucracy's nerves were shot."<sup>294</sup>

During 1979, as supporters of Carter's earlier idealism lamented, Cold War geopolitics entirely overtook progressive diplomacy in Africa.<sup>295</sup> This rightward shift gave Henry Kissinger an opportunity to lash out at the administration while vindicating his 1975 humiliation in Angola and the subsequent turn to diplomacy:

We run the risk of a verbal position that is radical, a practical position that is impotent, and a theory justifying Cuban and Soviet intervention whenever they judge it is time to heat up conditions again.<sup>296</sup>

In August, Andrew Young resigned (over an unauthorized meeting with the PLO), and the most outspoken Africanist in the administration was gone. In the one bright spot for diplomacy,

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*The United States, the Horn of Africa, and the Demise of Détente* (Ohio, 2013).

<sup>293</sup> PRM/NSC- 42, "U.S. Strategy for Non-Military Competition with the Soviet Union," August 24, 1978; and PRM/NSC-43, "United States Global Presence," August 24, 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/.phtml>.

<sup>294</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 76.

<sup>295</sup> David Ottaway, "Africa: U.S. Policy Eclipse," *Foreign Affairs*, 58:3, America and the World 1979, p. 638.

<sup>296</sup> John M. Goshko, "Kissinger Attacks Rhodesia Policy," WP, July 3, 1979.

majority rule was on the way in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, but this was a British initiative more than U.S. doing, purchased only through the support of South Africa.

All of the antagonists professed willingness to resolve their conflicts, but none actually had the will to do so. U.S. relations with South Africa remained acrimonious over apartheid, but the regime was under no effective pressure to halt the Border War. It blatantly defied the U.S.-led initiative under UN Security Council Resolution 435, which called for the independence of Namibia. South Africa was not prepared to cede Namibia as long as there was a possibility that SWAPO might come to power and align with communist Angola or as long as Cuba and the Soviet Union supported the ANC; Cuba and the Soviet Union were not going to abandon Angola as long as there was a threat from South Africa and UNITA.<sup>297</sup> Thus, the Carter administration ended its term with the conflict in Southern Africa “power locked” at local, regional, and global levels.<sup>298</sup>

### III. Reagan and Angola

Count Alexandre de Marenches, the devoutly anti-communist director of French intelligence and godfather of the Safari Club, told newly elected President Reagan he needed to meet two people: the dissident Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “one of history’s giants”, and UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.<sup>299</sup> Savimbi became a charter member of the “Freedom Fighters,” a term that Reagan appropriated from Carter.<sup>300</sup> Reagan’s policy on Southern Africa,

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<sup>297</sup> Robert S. Jaster, “The 1988 Peace Accords and the Future of South-Western Africa,” *Adelphi Papers: Africa Vol. 2*, IISS, pp. 229-31.

<sup>298</sup> Leo Slizard, “How to Live with the Bomb and Survive – The Possibility of a Pax Russo-Americana,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, XVI:2, February 1960, pp. 59-73; Osgood, *Limited War*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>299</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 6-7; Marenches, *The Evil Empire*, p. 81; “An Interview with Ronald Reagan,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 1980; Roger Faligot, Jean Guisnel, and Rémi Kauffer, *Histoire Politique des Services Secrets Français* (Paris, 2012), excerpt, <http://www.lopinion.fr/9-aout-2015/30-novembre-1977-alexandre-marenches-recoit-discretement-jonas-savimbi-sdece-1620-26946>, accessed June 15, 2015.

<sup>300</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 388.

termed “Constructive Engagement”, tied the withdrawal of South Africa from Namibia to the withdrawal of Cuba from Angola, and, with the exception of drawing closer to the apartheid government, was essentially the same as Carter’s.<sup>301</sup> After several attempts by the administration, Congress repealed the Clark Amendment in 1985, and U.S. aid to UNITA resumed under the so-called Reagan Doctrine.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Chester A. Crocker, “South Africa: A Strategy for Change,” *Foreign Affairs*, 59:2, Winter 1980/81, pp. 323-51; Memorandum, Haig to President, Strategy in Southern Africa, March 18, 1981, cited in Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, n. 40, p. 557; Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York, 1993); J.E. Davies, *Constructive Engagement?* (Ohio, 2007); Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa*, pp. 109-10; House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, *Possible Violation or Circumvention of the Clark Amendment*, Hearing Report, 100<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, July 1, 1987; Johnson, “The Unintended Consequences of Congressional Reform,” p. 241; L. Britt Snider, *The Agency & The Hill CIA's Relationship with Congress, 1946-2004* (CSI, 2004), pp. 281-82.

<sup>302</sup> Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi*; William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras*, pp. 151-55; Wright, *Destruction of a Nation*, pp. 104-20.

# Part Two: Central America

CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



## Chapter 3: Jimmy Carter in the Backyard

### I. The Central American Crossroads

When the Sandinistas rode into Managua on July 19, 1979, their long revolutionary struggle against the despised dictator Anastasio Somoza culminated in rapid and unexpected triumph. Their achievement was the first and only successful armed insurgency in Latin America since Cuba 20 years before, and it bore many similarities to the revolt that Fidel Castro led against Fulgenico Batista in 1959. The victory was a classic case of how the weak win. Through a combination of guile, determination, luck, and élan, the small leadership cadre of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) captured the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguan people who rose up in insurrection. They wooed moderates, both foreign and domestic, who normally would have had no sympathy for Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, and they managed an internationally supported offensive that compelled the collapse of the Nicaraguan National Guard, and with it the nearly 50 year-old Somoza dynasty. The critical factor in their success, however, was remarkable political incompetence on the part of the Carter Administration.

The Nicaraguan insurrection garnered the world's attention and received extensive coverage at the time; the story has been re-told in encyclopedic detail from multiple perspectives.<sup>303</sup> This section of the thesis discusses how U.S. intervention in Central America during the next decade had its origin in this event. Nicaragua, like Angola, represented an unprecedented extension of Soviet-Cuban power. Yet Somoza's overthrow in the heart of the U.S. sphere of interest was a direct and unanticipated consequence of Carter's idealism. To place

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<sup>303</sup> Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *La Epopeya de la Insurrección* (Managua, 2004); Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: Una Memoria de la Revolución Sandinista* (San José, 1999); Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York, 1996); LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*; Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Massachusetts, 1988).

the precipitating events in a larger context, contrary to collective memory and much of the literature, the Reagan administration was not responsible for making Central America into a fighting front and a political preoccupation for the United States during the final phase of the Cold War. Rather it was the contradictory actions and inaction of the Carter administration between 1978 and 1981, during the critical period of revolutionary transition in Nicaragua, with El Salvador threatening immediately to follow, which established the general direction that the United States would pursue for the next decade.

### **The Literature**

Among the voluminous literature that focuses on U.S. involvement in Central America during the politically intense latter phase of the Cold War, two first-hand accounts by former officials who were in the forefront of attempts to sustain President Carter's dedication to a foreign policy of principles are especially intriguing and of particular importance. *Not Condemned to Repetition* by Robert Pastor, who was Zbigniew Brzezinski's Latin America expert at the NSC, and *Somoza Falling* by Anthony Lake, who was director of Policy Planning at the State Department, used the authors' own participation and unreleased records to document how the fall of Somoza led to U.S. support for the contra insurgency in Nicaragua and counterinsurgency in El Salvador.<sup>304</sup>

Interestingly, Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski gave little attention to Nicaragua in their memoirs, perhaps because it represented such an outright failure of policy and performance. Nevertheless, it is evident from the record, as well as Pastor and Lake's accounts, that the U.S. leadership dedicated long hours to Central America, even as other international crises seemed to

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<sup>304</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, 1987); Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling* (New York, 1989).

overwhelm the administration. In his truncated commentary on Latin America in *Power and Principle*, Brzezinski complained that instability in Nicaragua was “crowding the agenda.” While he claimed he had perceived correctly that revolutionary forces were bringing fundamental transition to Central America, his true preoccupation was, “To develop an approach to the Central American problem that would combine genuine commitment to social reform” with impediments “to prevent the baton being passed from the United States to Cuba.”<sup>305</sup> Brzezinski commented that the challenges of revolution in Central America were, “...new and different from those of previous decades.”<sup>306</sup> What he did not seem to realize, or at least was unwilling to acknowledge, was that the new and different factor was the Carter administration’s own doing.

Brzezinski’s attitude that crisis in Central America was less important than threats elsewhere rested on a two-pronged strategic rationale. The United States could not exactly ignore internal security threats in its Central American backyard, but U.S.-aligned authoritarian military regimes throughout Latin America had successfully suppressed incipient Marxist-Leninist revolutions for two decades. Castro had shifted his attention to Africa for that reason. In addition, the Panama Canal had lost its importance as a strategic asset vital to nation defense.<sup>307</sup> It was this geostrategic downgrading that allowed Kissinger to consider turning the Canal over to Panama. Despite the protests of conservatives who opposed it as a sell-out, Carter faced no insurmountable obstacles when he made the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations his first foreign policy initiative in 1977.

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<sup>305</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 503.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>307</sup> George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990* (Stanford, 1994), pp. 410-11.

For his part, Secretary Vance wrote with pride that the Panama Canal Treaty was an “Indispensable part of the Carter administration’s strategy to forge a more constructive relationship with nations of the Western Hemisphere and the Third World.”<sup>308</sup> His perspective was true as far as it went. The critical assumption that proved incorrect was that the United States could promote change without cost or risk.

Carter’s personal engagement with Central America is reflected in multiple diary entries.<sup>309</sup> In them, he appeared to cling to a morally based approach that naively assumed the U.S. could act decisively as a principled honest broker, rather than as a great power pursuing its national interest in an area it had dominated for nearly a century. In search of a formula that would somehow “let the Nicaraguan people decide,” he explicitly limited U.S. action to non-coercive diplomacy when armed rebellion was rapidly overwhelming any notion of orderly political process.<sup>310</sup> Even as he scrupulously rejected intervention and insisted on multilateralism, he bred resentment by his tendency to dictate U.S. wishes to Latin Americans. The President’s principled restraint also frustrated his aides, such as Brzezinski and Assistant Secretary for Latin America Viron Vaky, who believed that strong and direct measures were needed to remove Somoza in advance of the burgeoning crisis.

The social, economic, and political conditions for revolution certainly existed in 1970s Nicaragua. Somoza regime offered no way out. Yet, in trying to replace the geopolitics of the Cold War with a progressive foreign policy that would place the U.S. on the right side of history, the actions and inaction of the Carter administration, whatever their intention, contributed unintentionally to Nicaragua’s destabilization. That the Sandinistas, Marxist-Leninists who

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<sup>308</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 156.

<sup>309</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 332-4, 340, 346, 363.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

identified with Fidel Castro's Cuba and had his backing, were organized, armed, and ready pursue the way out through revolution had everything to do with the way the Carter administration ultimately responded, and by extension the way a decade of warfare unfolded in Central America.

### **Central America Goes from Backwater to Front Burner**

When the uprising against President Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza first disturbed the Central American backwater in 1977, the Somoza dynasty had kept Nicaragua safe for the United States for 45 years. The regime's political character was irrelevant as long as it kept Nicaragua reliably anti-communist. Anastasio Somoza was, in Weber's definition, a "sultanistic" ruler.<sup>311</sup> His dictatorship was corrupt and paternalistic with narrow legitimacy that relied on the authority of his National Guard.<sup>312</sup>

The Panama Canal negotiations drew unprecedented attention to Central America in 1977, but Carter had also declared human rights a new centerpiece of U.S. policy, and that issue increasingly came to occupy senior levels of the administration responsible for Latin America. A de facto coalition of non-governmental organizations and liberal members of Congress, along with a core of advocates inside the State Department and White House, pushed for public attention to the region's repressive regimes, all of them traditional Cold War allies.<sup>313</sup> Somoza's particular dependence on the United States and his deplorable human rights record made him an easy target of official condemnation, while the apparent lack of security implications de-linked

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<sup>311</sup> H.E. Chehabi and Juan Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore, 1998).

<sup>312</sup> Alan Riding, "Somoza's Son Is Issue in Nicaraguan Crisis," *NYT*, February 19, 1978; Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Modern Nondemocratic Regimes in Problems of Democratic Transition & Consolidation* (Baltimore, 1996) pp. 51-54; Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>313</sup> Shannon Nix, "'Losing' Nicaragua: Human Rights Politics, U.S. Policy, and Revolutionary Change in Nicaragua" (Univ. of Virginia Ph.D. dissertation, 2015.)

Nicaragua from Cold War considerations, at least initially. The administration optimistically discarded power politics and began very publicly criticizing Somoza, pressing him to open the political system and respect the human rights of his citizens.

This morally grounded vision had its roots in the American experience of war, in Wilson's post-World War I vision and Roosevelt's inclusion of human rights into the global order following World War II. Carter's revival of human rights was essentially anti-war, derived not from U.S. victory, but from defeat in Vietnam.<sup>314</sup> Morgenthau objected to Carter's elevation of human rights on the grounds that they were one among many interests, impossible to enforce in, say, the USSR or China, and would place the U.S. in a "Quixotic position."<sup>315</sup>

Robert Pastor, a young political scientist and son-in-law of Vietnam era Defense Secretary Robert McNamara who became NSC Latin America Director, explained the logic:

The Carter Administration's human rights policy was based on both a moral and a national security premise. By supporting a dictator, the United States would alienate his nation and especially its youth, which would identify the United States as part of its national problem... There were risks, of course, in withdrawing support from dictators, but the Administration believed that the prospect of violent revolutions would be greater in the long run if peaceful change were precluded.<sup>316</sup>

As it turned out, what seemed progressive in the long-run did turn into Quixotic maneuvering in the short-run when U.S. pressure on Somoza opened the door to revolution.

Morgenthau's problems also applied to the bureaucratic politics of human rights. It was one thing to declare the policy and entirely another to put it into action. A Presidential Directive

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<sup>314</sup> Wilson, Fourteen Points, January 18, 1918; Kenneth Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *The Journal of American History*, 86:3, December 1999, pp. 1231-50; Schmitz and Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights," p. 118; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Harvard, 2010); and George Fujii, H-Diplo Essay on lecture by Sarah B. Snyder, "Human Rights and the Cold War: Did Anyone Care?," October 9, 2014, URL: <http://tiny.cc/E114>, accessed November 14, 2015; Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Harvard, 2014), p. 118.

<sup>315</sup> Morgenthau, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," 1979.

<sup>316</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 42.

on human rights appeared in February 1978, after nearly a year of deliberations.<sup>317</sup> Charged with implementation, the Interagency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance, chaired by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, became mired in wrangling among resistant U.S. agencies and found its formal authority confined to multilateral development bank financing.<sup>318</sup> Nicaragua was one of a very few countries subjected to sanctions, and even then Somoza's conservative supporters in Congress stalled action by holding up the Foreign Aid bill. Crusading Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Patricia Derian often complained to Secretary Vance that she was being excluded from decision making, including on Nicaragua.<sup>319</sup> Moral suasion proved to be the principal tool, and there was little resistance to harnessing human rights as an ideological weapon in the Cold War, where the emerging neo-conservatives first found a cause.<sup>320</sup>

## **Human Rights and Central America**

The administration assumed that traditional hegemony and the absence of countervailing interests would allow the United States to manage any tensions between morality and national security. Central America became a "testing ground for experimentation with human rights," but in the process of trying to do good it failed to do right.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> PRM/NSC-28: Human Rights (draft), July 7, 1977; PD/NSC-30, February 17, 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, [http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pres\\_directive.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pres_directive.phtml).

<sup>318</sup> Schmitz and Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights," pp. 113-43.

<sup>319</sup> Briefing Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Patricia Derian to Secretary of State Vance, Goals and Objectives for the Next Eighteen Months, , October 22, 1979, *FRUS* 1977-1980, Vol II, Doc. 194.

<sup>320</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 346; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, 1999); Col. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1995); Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (Yale, 2006).

<sup>321</sup> Richard R. Fagen, "The Carter Administration and Latin America: Business as Usual?" *Foreign Affairs*, 57:3, America and the World 1978, pp. 652-69; Wade Matthews, Director of the Office of Central American Affairs, Department of State, personal conversation; Morris H. Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 96.

In the late 1970s, Latin America was low on the scale of security concerns. Governments, both democratic and authoritarian, were aligned with the United States in the Cold War, even when they objected to its preponderance. There was plenty of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary activity, but effective repression had driven it underground. Lacking opportunity in his own hemisphere, Fidel Castro had shifted Cuba's attention to Africa. For its part, Moscow's commitment to Cuba remained firm and it opportunistically exploited U.S. backing for the 1973 Allende overthrow in Chile to burnish its credentials among leftists. Otherwise, the Soviet Union was more interested in pursuing trade ties with the larger Latin American states than it was in confronting the United States.<sup>322</sup>

The apparent absence of competition meant few were concerned early in 1977, when Carter and others in the administration began speaking publicly about conditioning security assistance on human rights performance, nor when eight Latin American nations, including Guatemala and El Salvador in Central America, refused further military aid.<sup>323</sup> Somoza did not have that luxury, and dependence exposed Nicaragua's vulnerability. The idea was that U.S. disapproval would be sufficient to convince Somoza to open the political system, and thus distant threats like the Sandinistas would not materialize. This assumption was wrong. Somoza refused to cooperate and remained obdurate as agitation for change developed within Nicaragua. The administration struggled in response, and as a result found itself consistently behind the curve of events.

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<sup>322</sup> Michelle Reeves, "The USSR & Chile after Allende," presentation to the UCSB/GWU/LSE International Graduate Student Conference on the Cold War, April 10, 2014; Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, 17-19.

<sup>323</sup> Associated Press, "Two Nations Refuse U.S. Military Aid," March 18, 1977; State Department, Office of the Historian, "Milestones: Central America, 1977-1980," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/central-america-carter>, accessed November 14, 2015.

By early 1978, the U.S. government appreciated that the alienation of Somoza was contributing to instability in Nicaragua. There was no intelligence failure such as occurred with the Iranian Revolution, which was developing almost simultaneously. Not until the summer, however, did increasing violence and Somoza's vulnerability first engage sustained high level attention, and not until revolutionary agitation broke into open insurrection in early 1979 did the U.S. leadership take developments in Central America seriously.<sup>324</sup>

Whether or not Nicaragua intruded on an over-loaded plate, the official record bears out the quantitative increase in attention. The full National Security Council met with the President presiding at least four times to discuss Central America between 1978 and 1980; the PRC principals met on Nicaragua 11 times between September 1978 and July 1979; at the most acute point of the crisis between the second half of May and July 1979, the Special Coordinating Committee headed by Brzezinski convened several times a week on Nicaragua, while a dedicated mini-SCC headed by either Brzezinski or NSC Deputy David Aaron met even more frequently.<sup>325</sup> This does not take into account other venues such as the President's Friday Breakfasts, where policy issues were often decided informally, ongoing second-level interagency deliberations, and meetings with foreign leaders.

In a long and prescient memorandum dated August 4, 1978, Richard Fienberg, the officer responsible for Latin America in the State Department Bureau of Policy Planning, analyzed the deteriorating situation in Nicaragua and reviewed U.S. policy options.<sup>326</sup> A recent trip to Nicaragua had convinced Fienberg that internal opposition voices and Latin American leaders, especially a friend of the U.S. and progressive democrat, Venezuela's Carlos Andres Perez, were

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<sup>324</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 126.

<sup>325</sup> *Nicaragua: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1978-1990*, electronic briefing books and document series, NSDA.

<sup>326</sup> Richard Fienberg, "Review of U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua," August 4, 1978, NSDA.

right: Somoza had lost his legitimacy. Fienberg outlined several options for a moderate transition aimed at removing Somoza from power one way or another. He warned in carefully couched language that failure to act was likely to have destabilizing consequences. Noting that significant elements of the private sector, the Catholic Church, student and worker organizations, and most political parties, as well as the leftist Sandinistas, were pressing for change, Fienberg observed, "The Somoza regime is confronted by a multiplicity of forces more powerful and determined than at any time in recent history." Somoza's only support came from the Liberal Party, which he controlled, and the 8,500-member National Guard, which functioned first as his internal security service and second as the national army. Referring to an unreleased CIA assessment, Fienberg asserted that because the Guard held a preponderance of force and could launch a coup, it was the key to what was likely to happen. By giving priority to principles of non-intervention and human rights, current U.S. policy had "opened the door to political change, including possible outcomes not to our liking." Despite Cuban "restraint" in supporting the FSLN to date, "deeper Cuban involvement cannot be ruled out should Castro sense an opportunity for success." Fienberg concluded, "A leftwing solution could be disruptive of U.S. interests in the region...The degree of damage...would heavily depend on our ability to accommodate to and to moderate the victorious regime." One year later, Fienberg's prediction proved highly accurate after the U.S. failed to prevent the Sandinistas from coming to power and attempted to accommodate belatedly to their success.

In early August 1978, however, there seemed to be time for political management. The challenge to policy at that point was not revolution, but rather, "one of transition from a spent regime that has largely lost legitimacy to a more stable representative system." Fienberg outlined five options, each one a variant of U.S. action to help achieve that smooth transition. Fienberg's

“best chance to break the stalemate” was for the U.S. to become an “active mediator.” His most aggressive option, which was actually quite moderate, would have the U.S. arbitrate an agreement between Somoza and moderates that would advance national elections from their distantly scheduled date in 1981. Fienberg did suggest that, “This option could entail a hardline position toward Somoza should he prove recalcitrant.” That hard line never materialized, until it was too late.

The principal official responsible for day-to-day policy was Assistant Secretary of State Viron Vaky, a career Foreign Service Officer with extensive experience in the region who had taken over the Latin America bureau that summer. In his previous post as Ambassador to Venezuela, he had listened to President Carlos Andres Perez, an avowed Somoza opponent. Vaky understood perfectly that the dictator needed to go and that it was going to take strong measures to get rid of him. He was representative of many in the foreign affairs bureaucracy, more or less sympathetic to Carter’s principles, but he was also a realist. He recognized that Nicaragua in 1978 had ceased to be primarily a human rights issue and had become a more serious political and strategic problem, where preventing the Cuban-aligned Sandinistas from coming to power needed to be the over-riding aim. In-house, Vaky counselled that the United States would need to coerce Somoza into relinquishing power.<sup>327</sup>

Now, countervailing influences, which had merely remained latent, emerged to complicate the impetus for decisive action. In Congress, while liberals favored adherence to human rights and non-intervention principles, Somoza’s supporters argued it was wrong to jettison an anti-communist, pro-U.S. dictator. Democratic Congressman Jack Murphy, who had

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<sup>327</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, pp. 113-15.

been Somoza's preparatory school and West Point room-mate, served on the Maritime and Transportation Committee where he could stall Panama Canal Treaty legislation. Relatively junior Congressman Charlie Wilson, a conservative Texas Democrat, had managed to get a seat on the powerful Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee. At critical periods in 1978 and 1979 he was able to hold the foreign aid bill hostage to keep U.S. support to Somoza alive. (It was only after Central America became "political poison" that Wilson switched his energies to the Afghan mujahedin in 1983.<sup>328</sup>) Attempts to tread a middle way with Congress led to vacillation at key points in Nicaragua and helped ensure the policy was a failure.

Inside the White House, Brzezinski favored direct U.S. action to replace Somoza in order to forestall the threat of a Cuban-backed takeover, but he did not push it with the President. Carter remained deeply wedded to multilateralism, non-intervention, and human rights. Sympathy for the principled position was also widespread among liberal internationalists. State Department Policy Planning Director Tony Lake mused about intervening against Somoza:

In my own mind was the experience of the American-approved coups in Saigon in late 1963 and early 1964, which had ushered in a period of severe instability while convincing many Vietnamese (inaccurately) that the American embassy was calling the shots in Vietnamese politics.<sup>329</sup>

Except that Vietnam was an imprecise comparator. A National Guard coup was an obvious expedient, but the administration would not consider it and took no action when a half-hearted plot materialized in August 1978.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil*, p. 40.

<sup>329</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 116.

<sup>330</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 59; Anastasio Somoza (as told to Jack Cox), *Nicaragua Betrayed* (Wisconsin, 1980), p. 220.

## The U.S. behind the Curve in Nicaragua

Throughout 1978, as the situation in Nicaragua deteriorated, the United States stayed reticent. The assassination of prominent opposition newspaper publisher Pedro Joaquin Chamorro on January 10, 1978 precipitated strikes, protests, small-scale guerrilla actions, and growing demands for change from political parties and civic organizations that would ebb and flow for the next several months. Somoza promised elections and made cosmetic accommodations to his opponents that fooled no one. National Guard repression escalated.

The U.S. continued as a restrained interlocutor. In June, Carter wrote an ill-advised letter of praise, telling Somoza, “The steps toward respecting human rights that you are considering are important and heartening signs.”<sup>331</sup> Meant as private encouragement, Somoza released the letter to demonstrate he still had U.S. support. Embarrassed, the administration had to scramble in response to public disappointment and confusion.

On August 22, while the Fienberg memo circulated, the Sandinistas broke onto the stage when two dozen commandos led by an unbridled revolutionary, Eden Pastora “Comandante Zero,” seized the National Palace where the legislature was in session, taking 1,500 hostages. To secure their release, Somoza allowed publication of an FSLN statement calling for him to step down, paid the Sandinistas \$500,000 in ransom, freed 59 political prisoners including several Sandinista leaders from jail, and allowed them free passage out of the country. The group’s ride to the Managua airport turned into a “victory parade” through streets lined with thousands of people who chanted anti-Somoza slogans.<sup>332</sup> They flew out in planes provided by the

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<sup>331</sup> Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, pp. 276-7.

<sup>332</sup> Tad Szulc, “Rocking Nicaragua: The Rebels’ Own Story,” *WP*, September 3, 1978; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, pp. 59-61.

governments of Panama and Venezuela, and landed not in Havana but in Panama City.

Suddenly, the Sandinistas were heroes.

By September 1978, the FSLN was driving developments in Nicaragua. It garnered increasing popular support and launched a coherent political-military campaign. Sandinista attacks in the countryside became larger and more effective than previously. The first armed uprisings of youths, the “Muchachos,” took place in several cities. The National Guard responded brutally, conducting dozens of summary executions and indiscriminate aerial bombings. Over 3,000 died before they regained control. Benefiting from insurgent arithmetic, for every victim of the National Guard the Sandinistas gained dozens of recruits.

In Washington, the realization that Somoza was irredeemable and the Sandinistas growing stronger sank in, prompting an effort to head off further destabilization. However, by turning against Somoza but at the same time being unwilling to break with him, the U.S. had entangled itself in a narrative of complicity. President Carter remained adamant that he would not act unilaterally and would not use force. The Special Coordinating Committee, usually led by Deputy National Security Advisor David Aaron or Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, began meeting frequently to decide, within those limits, what to do. Thus, beginning in the first half of September 1978, the U.S. resolved to change its role from “restrained interlocutor” to “active mediator.” Exactly what that mediation would consist of was never precisely defined, beyond its bottom line, which was to prevent the Sandinistas from coming to power.

Six months of improvised diplomacy to find a workable political formula ensued. This phase of activism would last until February 1979. The framework revolved around proposals for a truce, a human rights investigation, and mediation to convince Somoza and the Nicaraguan

opposition to agree to a plebiscite. The kaleidoscopic opposition had consolidated itself into a Broad Opposition Front (FAO) led by “El Grupo de Doce” (the Group of Twelve), in which the Sandinistas disguised their participation. First, the U.S. tried backing a Central American initiative led by Costa Rica. When that sputtered out, an OAS mission, which notionally included the idea of a peacekeeping operation, also failed.

The administration had two problems: First, Somoza remained intransigent. He would not be talked out of power, insisting he would remain in office pending elections at the end of his presidential term in 1981.<sup>333</sup> Second, military action increasingly determined the course of events, and diplomacy carried on as if in a separate realm. By ruling out both unilateral action and coercive diplomacy in advance, the administration committed the United States to action, but at the same time ensured that those actions would be insufficient. Inevitably, others with greater determination filled the resulting vacuum.

At that moment, decisiveness from the Americans was exactly what Nicaraguans in the opposition and leaders in the Western Hemisphere expected, and all but the Sandinistas and the Cubans wanted. Assistant Secretary Vaky and others within the administration recognized that Somoza was a lost cause, that he needed to resign, and that only the U.S. could make him do it. Between Somoza’s intransigence and American reticence, Nicaraguan opposition leaders had little confidence in mediation. Early on, FAO and Grupo de Doce member Alfonso Robelo, perhaps the most prominent moderate following the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, denounced the effort as “a charade.”<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> “Interview with Anastasio Somoza,” MacNeil/Lehrer Report, PBS Network September 19, 1978.

<sup>334</sup> Interview with Grupo de Doce member Alfonso Robelo, *The Washington Star*, September 25, 1978.

The principal regional actors urged the U.S. to use a strong hand. Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez had written to Carter, spoken out publicly, and was in regular contact with Vaky, seeking U.S. action. Costa Rican President Carrazo, who was hosting the Nicaraguan opposition, became insistent after the Nicaraguan National Guard bombed and strafed Sandinista insurgents under Pastora's command in Costa Rican territory on September 12.

Carter's closest relationship was with Panamanian President Rafael Torrijos, whom he called on September 22 to insist on "coordinated efforts among all peace-loving nations in the area, and a commitment to nonintervention."<sup>335</sup> Torrijos replied:

President Carter, you have a great deal of prestige on this continent; there is nothing you can't solve if you work on it...It is a simple problem: A mentally deranged man with an army of criminals is attacking a defenseless population... This is not a problem for the OAS; what we need is a psychiatrist.<sup>336</sup>

Without firm U.S. determination to remove Somoza or prevent Cuban interference, other Latin American nations questioned which was worse, Somoza or the Sandinistas? Left free to pursue their own interests, they allied with Castro, instead of following U.S. leadership to contain a Cuban-backed revolution.<sup>337</sup> Mexico, always eager to show independence from its overbearing neighbor and distract its domestic left, was quick to make common cause with the Sandinistas. Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica, all U.S. allies, joined together to oust Somoza by helping arm and support the Sandinistas. Cuba combined weapons and advice to the FSLN with diplomatic outreach. U.S. prestige declined, just as it had a year earlier in Africa.

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<sup>335</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, pp. 138-40; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition* p. 71-74.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid (Pastor).

<sup>337</sup> Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Harvard, 2010), p. 182.

## II. Somoza and the Rise of the Sandinistas

For the Foreign Service Officers involved in the diplomatic initiative, the mediation was “like trying to build a bridge that could not reach the other side.”<sup>338</sup> Vaky’s deputy William Bowdler was with the Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, trying to minimize Sandinista influence, while negotiating between Somoza’s obduracy and the FAO demand that he resign. By December 1978, it was clear they were getting nowhere. To pressure Somoza, the administration cut military aid and suspended economic assistance. It delivered private ultimatums and leaked them to the press, but stopped short of calling publicly for Somoza to step down.<sup>339</sup> It took no behind the scenes measures, no drawing up lists of replacements, much less encouraging coup plotting or talk of intervention.

The most serious signaling the U.S. engaged in was to send the head of U.S. Southern Command, General Dennis McAuliffe, with Bowdler to talk to Somoza. On December 21, McAuliffe told Somoza, who secretly taped the meeting, “Peace will not come to Nicaragua until you have removed yourself from the presidency and the scene.”<sup>340</sup> In fact, the U.S. military had been very little used. Cutting off security assistance had had the contrary effect of reducing U.S. influence exactly at the moment when it was needed most, and, fearful of coup plotting, Somoza had astutely restricted the access of the U.S. Defense Attaché and Military Assistance Group to his National Guard commanders.<sup>341</sup> Somoza was a tough customer determined to remain in power; diplomacy simply did not work. On February 8, 1979, the administration marked the failure of mediation by imposing modest sanctions on the Somoza regime. These included

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<sup>338</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 158.

<sup>339</sup> Karen De Young, “Washington Warns Somoza Mediation Rebuff May Affect Relations,” *WP*, December 28, 1978.

<sup>340</sup> Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, p. 329; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 91.

<sup>341</sup> Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, p. 227.

suspending future economic aid, withdrawing the Military Assistance Group, reducing the rest of the Embassy staff by half, and recalling Ambassador Mauricio Solaun. Somoza merely kept up his defiant stance, snidely remarking that under the new sanctions he did “not lose anything else but a few nice gentlemen who are living in Managua.”<sup>342</sup> Pastor regretted that the entire exercise had proved to be little more than “a resting place on the road to revolution.”<sup>343</sup>

Somoza had no political strategy and was relying exclusively on force to maintain authority. By refusing all efforts at reform, he had alienated his moderate opponents; the FAO cast their lot with the FSLN. Armed with dogmatic anti-communism and his National Guard, Somoza viewed the internal conflict primarily in terms of external aggression. For him, molded by the Cold War, the Sandinistas were nothing more than agents of Soviet and Cuban-backed terrorism. He had a strong grip on the Guard and they were determined to kill their way out of revolution. As armed opposition spread, their reaction was utterly conventional: use firepower to clean out insurgents wherever they appeared in the cities or countryside and to defend Nicaragua’s borders. The Guard had weathered the latest phase of the insurrection between August and December 1978, had come out in some ways stronger, and did not splinter as the civil war descended into a struggle for survival during the first half of 1979.

The problem, and as Somoza saw it the only one, was ammunition. The U.S. arms embargo, however justified it may have been on human rights grounds, had cut Nicaragua off from its source of materiel. Without a green light from the U.S., Nicaragua’s fellow Central American dictatorships in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras largely turned their backs on Somoza’s appeals for collective assistance. Nevertheless, using foreign exchange reserves to pay

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<sup>342</sup> Karen De Young, “Somoza Jogs as U.S. Tries to Set Pace,” *WP*, January 14, 1979; Mauricio Solaun, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua* (Nebraska, 2005).

<sup>343</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 99.

cash for arms shipments from Guatemala, Argentina, and Israel, Somoza remained confident that he would be able to hold on, as long the National Guard did not run out of ammunition.

### **The Sandinistas on the Offensive**

Frustrated in its efforts to prod Somoza to resign or to mediate political resolution with his opposition, and unwilling to take stronger measures, the administration effectively yielded the initiative. After February 1979, as State Department Policy Planning Director Tony Lake put it, “the Nicaraguan whale was sounding again.”<sup>344</sup> That left the field to others who were far more determined.

The White House would not pay much attention to Nicaragua again for several months, and when it plunged in again as crisis began to peak during June, it was too late. The results of this reactive approach were well understood at the time. As Robert Tucker observed:

The triumph of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua cannot be seen other than as a defeat for the United States, and this because it represented an outcome the American government had not wanted and had sought without success to prevent.<sup>345</sup>

The insider narratives by Pastor, Lake, Brzezinski, Vance, and Carter all reflect sincerity of intent and portray failure as the result of accident. But those accidents were more rightly errors of omission and commission. The outcome, Tucker continued, “might have been avoided, or at least mitigated, by the clear repudiation of the Somoza regime well in advance of intimations of victory by the rebel forces.”<sup>346</sup>

In contrast to Somoza and his American patrons, the Sandinistas and their allies pursued a coherent political-military strategy to mobilize the population, defeat the National Guard,

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<sup>344</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 166.

<sup>345</sup> Tucker, “American in Decline,” p. 454.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

overthrow Somoza, and install a new revolutionary order.<sup>347</sup> By turning away from the challenge of revolution and minimizing what Clausewitz termed “the value of the object”, the United States enabled revolution in Nicaragua. This negative role was comparable to Angola, Vietnam, and China.

### **The FSLN Insurgency**

The Sandinistas’ pedigree derived from Augusto Sandino who fought against the U.S. Marines in 1929-33. As Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, they belonged to a global network linked to national liberation struggles across the Third World. Cuba was their long-standing inspiration, refuge, and source of support. The Sandinistas had waged guerrilla war against the repressive National Guard unsuccessfully since the early 1960s. Their expectations of violent death and martyrdom made them a “cult of the dead.”<sup>348</sup> Typical of other insurgent organizations, the FSLN was divided into three rival factions, of which the “Terceristas,” under the leadership of Daniel and Humberto Ortega, predominated and was the most sophisticated. By July 1979, the guerrilla army had grown to 5,000. The Muchachos joined the insurrection by the thousands, so many that there was neither time nor arms to accommodate them all.

In December, with brokering from Castro and a team of Cuban advisors, the Sandinistas agreed to form a nine-member FSLN directorate that included three leaders from each faction.

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<sup>347</sup> Humberto Ortega, interview with Marta Harnecker, “La Estrategia de la Victoria,” *Bohemia*, December 1979, pp. 4-19; Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Marxist Internet Archive, pp., 224-5, <https://www.marxists.org/>, accessed November 14, 2015; Donald E. Davis and Walter S.G. Kohn, “‘Lenin’s’ Notebook on Clausewitz,” in David R. Jones (ed.), *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual* (Florida, 1977), pp., 188-229; Michael Handel, *Masters of War*, pp. 30-8.

<sup>348</sup> Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, p. 46.

Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama collaborated in arming the Sandinistas, while Costa Rica served as the principal base for launching the campaign against Somoza.<sup>349</sup>

The Nicaraguan revolution replayed Castro's overthrow of the Batista dictatorship in 1959, ended a 20-year drought of failed revolutions in Latin America, and was a cause for celebration among Marxist-Leninists from Hanoi to Luanda, as well as in Moscow. Castro and the Americas Department of the Dirección General De Inteligencia (DGI) became enthusiastic patrons in early 1979, once they recognized the insurrection was viable. To avoid provoking U.S. counter-reaction, the FSLN maintained tactical alliances with the moderate Nicaraguan opposition, while Cuba kept its role covert. A dozen Cuban Special Forces and intelligence officers with combat experience in Angola and Ethiopia supported Humberto Ortega's command group in Costa Rica where they prepared the plan to defeat the National Guard and march on Managua in a "Final Offensive."<sup>350</sup>

### **The Sandinistas Leave the U.S. behind the curve**

A final round of hard fighting began in April 1979. Arriving at Mao's third phase of revolution, the guerrilla army began attacking the National Guard directly, while the cities, including Managua, seethed with revolt. The Guard fought back, with the Air Force bombing the population, and casualties would reach 25,000 in a population of just 2 million. As the Sandinistas outclassed and increasingly out-gunned the National Guard, Somoza's repression and intransigent politics destroyed the last chance to salvage the situation.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> EPICA Task Force, *Nicaragua: A People's Revolution* (Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 57-8; Ortega, *Epopéya*, pp. 388-99; Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention* (Connecticut, 2008), pp. 52-4.

<sup>350</sup> CIA Report, "Cuban Support for Central American Guerrilla Groups," May 2, 1979, *Congressional Record*, May 19, 1980, pp. 11653-5; Ortega, *La Epopeya*, pp. 394-6; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, p. 118.

<sup>351</sup> Ortega, *La Epopeya*, pp. 390-95; NSDA, Chronology: Nicaragua: the making of U.S. policy, 1979-1990. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/publications/nicaragua/nicaragua.html>.

The United States had a good picture of these developments, yet seemed to remain out of touch.<sup>352</sup> The CIA thoroughly documented Cuban support to the Sandinistas in association with Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica, but continued to forecast that Somoza would hang on.<sup>353</sup> Recently appointed envoy Lawrence Pezzullo recalled a meeting of U.S. Ambassadors from the region in May where the report on Nicaragua focused on elections in 1981, without “a whisper about impending civil war.”<sup>354</sup>

It was another month before the American whale surfaced again to undertake what would amount to a belated, last-ditch effort to halt the revolution. The State Department Latin America Bureau had launched an inter-agency review of Central American policy in February, but it was not until May 4 that the NSC issued a formal Policy Review Memorandum, and the Policy Review Committee did not discuss it until early June.<sup>355</sup> With this stretched-out timeline, poor intelligence analysis and wishful thinking reinforced each other. By then, the CIA and military acknowledged that Nicaragua was in a stalemate, but still concluded that the National Guard, now operating under a state of siege, was reacting adequately and Somoza would survive the next round of fighting.<sup>356</sup>

In mid-May, the Sandinistas announced their carefully planned final offensive on rebel Radio Sandino. At that moment, they were struggling to ride the tiger they had uncaged, as spontaneous rebellions broke out across the country and their ranks swelled with youthful volunteers. The guerrilla army took control of several more cities, enjoyed increasing freedom of

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<sup>352</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 80; “Cuban Support for Central American Guerrilla Groups,” pp. 1163-5.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> ADST, Oral History: Lawrence Pezzullo; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, pp. 212.

<sup>355</sup> PRM 46, Review of U.S. Policies toward Central America, May 4, 1979, Carter Library, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm46.pdf>; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 209; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>356</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 143.

movement, and was attacking the Guard openly in regular columns, now organized into six fronts that stretched across the country.<sup>357</sup> On June 10, the Embassy in Managua reported, “Managua explodes in a popular uprising with unusually heavy firefights.”<sup>358</sup> In an Alert Memorandum distributed on June 11, the CIA abruptly reversed itself to predict that Somoza had only a short time left.<sup>359</sup>

That day, the Policy Review Committee finally met, with President Carter presiding, to once again take up the problem of alternatives to Somoza.<sup>360</sup> This time, urgency replaced complacency and the goal was clear. As Gates observed, “The circumstances of the Sandinista takeover and the future Sandinista-Cuba strategy were identified from the beginning. But what to do?”<sup>361</sup>

The situation had in fact developed much as Assistant Secretary Vaky had predicted. The administration had missed the speeding advance of military developments and now overestimated its ability to shape events. The reaction was an unequivocal reversion to containment, but the distance between desire and possibility had only increased.

Brzezinski asserted himself, focusing on military measures to salvage the situation. He proposed the formation of an OAS Peacekeeping Force and restructuring of the National Guard. The President formally approved his proposal on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and an intense exercise to control the transition in Nicaragua unfolded. Ambassador Pezzullo arrived in Managua with instructions to get Somoza to resign, find new leadership for the Guard, and enlist moderates to join the

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<sup>357</sup> Ortega, *Epopya*, p. 406.

<sup>358</sup> Department State, “Nicaragua Situation Report No. 2 - 11:00 a.m., 6/10/79,” NSDA.

<sup>359</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>360</sup> Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, pp. 92-4; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, pp. 220-1; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, pp. 109-11.

<sup>361</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 128.

transition government. Bowdler returned to Costa Rica to negotiate the expansion of non-Sandinista representation on the new Government of National Reconstruction in exile. The U.S. also called for an OAS Meeting of Foreign Ministers where it would propose an inter-American military force.

### **III. Ushering Out the Dictator as the Sandinistas Rush In**

Other than orchestrating Somoza's departure, the remainder of the U.S. exercise would prove futile. That did not dissuade those involved in decision-making and implementation from proceeding under the mistaken assumption that, by virtue of being the regional great power, the United States retained its traditional ability to control events. They failed to appreciate how far the Cuban-assisted Sandinista military strategy had already advanced on the ground and that the status quo was beyond political repair. Pastor commented, "The U.S. thought it had stepped into the role of arbiter, but was the arbiter of nothing."<sup>362</sup>

The June 21 OAS meeting of foreign ministers at its headquarters in Washington, DC turned into an unprecedented humiliation for the United States. Vaky told Secretary Vance the idea of a peacekeeping force was a non-starter, but Brzezinski had already gotten the President's approval. Vance reluctantly presented it to the OAS. The political alignment could not have been worse. Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Panama had already broken off relations with Nicaragua and recognized the FSLN as belligerents; the Andean nations had publicly called for Somoza to resign. The OAS by a large majority rejected the peacekeeping proposal and joined the call for Somoza to resign. Only Argentina supported the U.S. The next day, Brzezinski urged unilateral military intervention. He argued that the U.S. needed to maintain credibility with the

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<sup>362</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 135.

Soviets and, with the Shah having fallen under very similar circumstances in February, he worried, “We’re risking another Iran but closer to home.”<sup>363</sup> The President refused to consider it.<sup>364</sup>

The Somoza dynasty ended as it had begun, with an American usher. On June 28, straight-talking Ambassador Pezzullo met with Somoza for the first time in his Managua bunker. To Pezzullo’s surprise, wordless at the dictator’s side was his closest remaining American defender, Representative John Murphy. Somoza finally agreed to step down. Pezzullo’s cable reporting the dramatic three-hour meeting, Somoza painted himself as a victim and blamed “the Carter administration...that had done the most to do me in.”<sup>365</sup> Pezzullo demurred, but Somoza’s version held a strong element of truth.

For the next three weeks, with a mixture of myopia, pragmatism, and desperation, the U.S. ran up against the limits to power. Washington was still in a world.<sup>366</sup> Pezzullo spent his time orchestrating Somoza’s exit in excruciating detail. Instead of hastening his departure, however, he received instructions to delay while the futile search for a caretaker government that would marginalize the Sandinistas continued. The Ambassador labored to recruit moderate opposition figures who would “play this hero role.”<sup>367</sup> He found none willing to trust the U.S. and warned that Sandinista victory was inevitable.

Meanwhile, Deputy Assistant Secretary Bowdler remained in Costa Rica, meeting regularly with the Nicaraguan opposition where the Sandinistas had de facto leadership of the

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid, p. 77, 132.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid, p. 121; Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 226, Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, p. 95.

<sup>365</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 2857, Somoza – The First Visit, June 28, 1979, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsm&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsm:article:CNI00833](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsm&rft_dat=xri:dnsm:article:CNI00833), accessed November 14, 2015.

<sup>366</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 241.

<sup>367</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 2919, Meeting the Nicaraguan Opposition, Jun 30, 1979, NSDA.

five-member Directorate of the Government of National Reconstruction. In Washington, the Special Coordinating Committee finally accepted it would need to work with the Sandinistas, and Bowdler held the first significant U.S. encounter with them during the last week of June.<sup>368</sup> The conclusion of the U.S. effort was an exercise in fantasy. On July 10, Bowdler proposed a reconfigured Government of National Reconstruction that would have marginalized the Sandinistas. He presented it as an ultimatum, warning that the U.S. would consider “other alternatives” if they did not accept, even though he knew no serious alternatives were in the offing.<sup>369</sup> The Directorate disregarded the bluff, informing him it already had a government and did not intend to form a different one.

The last line of U.S. action was an amateurish attempt to preserve the National Guard. Even with Somoza’s departure a foregone conclusion and the National Guard “locked in a death with the FSLN,” officials were still fantasizing, “We can preserve a reorganized and reconstituted GN...until it becomes the security force of a Government of National Reconstruction.”<sup>370</sup>

Having always proclaimed himself a loyal servant of American interests, Somoza had also taken measures to ensure he would not become the victim of U.S. duplicity. He had sealed the National Guard off from interactions with U.S. military officers by managing security assistance directly and requiring that he or those personally designated by him authorize all contacts. When attachés set out to identify possible replacement leaders, their knowledge was thin and their access limited. On July 13, Pezzullo presented a list of possible replacements and

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<sup>368</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 128

<sup>369</sup> Lake, *Somoza Falling*, p. 249.

<sup>370</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 2914, “Restructuring the GN,” June 30, 1979, NSDA; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 143.

asked Somoza to choose one who would then negotiate with the FSLN. The Sandinistas were on the verge of victory, and the only thing that interested them was the National Guard's surrender.<sup>371</sup> Events were moving so fast that they were outside U.S. ability to follow, let alone control.

The dynamics of the battle for Nicaragua had shifted during the second half of June. The Sandinistas were on the offensive while the Guard was on the defensive, concentrating on keeping control of Managua, remaining in the field in the south to slow guerrilla forces crossing from Costa Rica, but otherwise restricting operations to repelling attacks on bases and protecting their own forces. Now the Guard truly was starved of ammunition. The contradictory effect of the U.S. appeal for all sides to halt the flow of arms was to cut off supplies only to the government.<sup>372</sup> Upset that Panama and Costa Rica were dissembling about their collusion with Cuba to arm the Sandinistas, Carter called Torrijos to Washington. The Panamanian President, resentful at being lectured "like a schoolboy," lied to Carter and assured him he would spearhead a multi-lateral initiative to follow the U.S. lead.<sup>373</sup>

In the early morning of July 17, two days before the Sandinistas swept into power, Somoza finally flew to Miami, taking his cabinet and the high command of the National Guard with him. Somoza's fate as former dictator became an undignified saga. Refused a U.S. visa, Somoza left on a boat for the Bahamas.

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<sup>371</sup> Ortega, *Epopya*, pp. 427-8.

<sup>372</sup> SecState, telegram 151956, "Alleged Israeli Arms Shipment to Nicaragua," June 13, 1979, NSDA; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, p. 239.

<sup>373</sup> Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 85, 97; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, pp. 132-5.

## Aftermath in Nicaragua

As reflected in the official record and their own accounts, members of the Carter Administration, from the President down, seemed sincerely perplexed that they had “lost” Nicaragua. No doubt, Somoza’s personalistic rule made himself vulnerable to revolution. But by turning against him without initial regard for the consequences and then failing to take stronger measures sooner, his American patron turned itself into an unwitting enabler. Assistant Secretary for Latin America Vaky had shown good foresight in July 1978, when he urged decisive action to remove Somoza before the crisis escalated. However, as the crisis accelerated, most policy makers underestimated the degree to which force of arms was driving events and continued to seek diplomatic solutions.

Brzezinski was at the other extreme. Despite his claim of prescience about the need for a moderate political transition, when he finally reengaged in June 1979 he advocated multilateral peacekeeping. When that failed and the Sandinistas were on the verge of winning he wanted to intervene unilaterally. His preoccupation was:

At stake is not just the formula for Nicaragua, but a more basic matter, namely whether in the wake of our own decision not to intervene in Latin American politics, there will not develop a vacuum, which would be filled by Castro and others. In other words, we have to demonstrate that we are still the decisive force in determining the political outcomes in Central America and that we will not permit others to intervene.<sup>374</sup>

Conceptually, Brzezinski sought a Cold War update of the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which declared a U.S. right to internal intervention in the Western Hemisphere. But his president’s non-interventionism boxed him in. However, military

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<sup>374</sup> Brzezinski diary, cited in Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 131.

intervention at such a late stage – even if successful in preempting a Sandinista victory – would almost certainly have provoked internal quagmire and massive regional opposition.<sup>375</sup>

The Carter administration faced in Nicaragua a perennial problem for the status quo power confronted with revolution: regime change when an ally becomes a liability. In this case, the Carter administration combined political incompetence with strategic incoherence and poor timing to fail on all counts. First, it failed to anticipate the destabilizing consequences of targeting the Somoza regime with a human rights campaign. As a result, there was no prudential effort to implement an alternative before crisis erupted in the summer of 1978. Finally, when opposition to Somoza burgeoned into sustained rebellion, the U.S.’s self-restrained dedication to principles limited its action to diplomatic measures that might have been effective earlier, but by then were too late.

Henry Kissinger, in his July 1979 interview with the *Washington Post* editorial staff, blasted Carter on Nicaragua as well as on African policy. He had no trouble identifying the problem and the solution:

My impression is we did enough to unsettle the existing government but not enough to put over a moderate alternative...I could have understood a decisive move to replace Somoza with a moderate element. But this would have required the kind of covert action so much decried today.<sup>376</sup>

It is hard to improve on Hans Morgenthau’s deeper insight. He recognized that in confronting the challenge of revolution, the U.S. at once represented democratic ideals in the emerging world order, yet at times it needed to take contradictory measures to defend that new order and its

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<sup>375</sup> Lawrence Yates, "Power Pack: U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic 1965-1966," Lawrence Papers No. 15, U.S. Army Command and Staff College, 1988; Piero Gleijeses, "Hope Denied: The US Defeat of the 1965 Revolt in the Dominican Republic," CWIHP Working Paper # 72, 2014.

<sup>376</sup> John M. Goshko, "Kissinger Attacks Rhodesia Policy," *WP*, July 3, 1979.

status as a great power in competition with the Soviet Union.<sup>377</sup> When the question was “to intervene or not to intervene?” it boiled down to a matter of judgment. He argued, “There is nothing new either in the contemporary doctrine opposing intervention or in the pragmatic use of intervention on behalf of the interests of individual nations.”<sup>378</sup>

The Sandinista success in 1979 was a rare revolutionary victory, and, like all wars, a dynamic event. For the U.S., in large measure the reversal was self-inflicted. The FSLN was dedicated to a cause, and possessed Clausewitz’s essential qualities for victory: “Moral superiority, an extremely enterprising spirit, and inclination for serious risk.”<sup>379</sup> However, those attributes might have allowed them to persevere as no more than a cult of the dead if their allies – Cuba, Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica – had not granted them sanctuary and support. The Sandinistas’ success and Somoza’s failure, much more than an issue of ammunition, had resulted from a contest for legitimacy and authority.<sup>380</sup> As Somoza lost his internal and international legitimacy under the twin challenges of U.S. pressure and revolutionary action, his grip on authority slipped away. Correspondingly, the Sandinistas accumulated legitimacy and, as soon as Somoza fled, authority over Nicaragua transferred to them. In this sense, the FSLN victory, like those of the Angolan MPLA, the North Vietnamese, Castro’s guerrillas, and Mao’s communists before them, resulted from superior political and military competence.

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<sup>377</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 358-63; Morgenthau, “To Intervene or Not to Intervene,” *Foreign Affairs*, 45:3, April 1967, pp. 425-36.

<sup>378</sup> Morgenthau, “To Intervene or Not to Intervene,” p. 425; Morgenthau, “Human Rights and Foreign Policy.”

<sup>379</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 601.

<sup>380</sup> Chaim Kaufman, “Intervention in Ethnic and Ideological Civil Wars,” *Security Studies*, 6:1, Autumn 1996, pp. 62-103.

## U.S. Pivot to the Sandinistas

Having tried and failed to keep the Sandinistas out of power, once they were in power, the Carter administration pivoted by giving them the benefit of the doubt and hoping to draw them into moderation. The centerpiece was an offer of aid. In addition to the 25,000 dead, the war had temporarily displaced nearly 600,000 Nicaraguans, close to a quarter of the population, and the economy was in tatters. When the Government of National Reconstruction installed itself on July 19, 1979, the administration had already provided nearly \$14 million in emergency humanitarian assistance. It also resumed approving loans from the Inter-American Development Bank and other institutions. Now, it proposed a bilateral assistance package totaling \$75 million. For over a year, Ambassador Pezzullo would energetically woo the FSLN leadership with this promise of aid. The Embassy also organized a familiarization visit to the U.S. for the new junta members. FSLN military commanders toured U.S. bases, including the School of the Americas in Panama, where Army Special Forces trained anti-Communist militaries from the hemisphere. The Sandinista Peoples' Army (EPS) received a proposal to restore security assistance for training and non-lethal equipment suspended under Somoza.<sup>381</sup> Assistant Secretary Vaky explained the logic behind this approach in testimony to Congress by paraphrasing Morgenthau: "The real issue facing American foreign policy...is not how to preserve stability in the face of revolution, but how to create stability out of revolution."<sup>382</sup>

The search to find a stabilizing formula would continue through the rest of Carter's term, but trying to entice the Sandinistas proved an awkward dance between antagonistic partners. In

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<sup>381</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 5013, Introducing Nicaraguan Leaders to U.S. Dynamics and Institutions, October 17, 1979; AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 4966, Military Sales Request from Nicaragua, October 15, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>382</sup> Viron P. Vaky, "Central America at the Crossroads, Statement before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, House of Representatives, September 11, 1979," *Department of State Bulletin*, 80:2034, January 1980, pp. 58-65; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 38-43, 386; Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics*, p. 353.

Washington, suspicion that the Sandinistas were shallowly disguised communists ran high, and conservatives accused liberals and the White House – itself divided – of naiveté in thinking there could be middle ground. Even if the EPS had been interested in U.S. security assistance, which they were not, Congressional opposition took it off the table almost immediately. The Nicaragua aid package, formally introduced to Congress as a supplementary foreign assistance bill in November 1979, became the center of acrimonious debate before it finally won narrow approval in April 1980.<sup>383</sup> Congress continued efforts to prevent disbursement by requiring the President to certify that the Government of Nicaragua was not exporting revolution to other countries in Central America. Such politicization characterized U.S. policy involvement in Central America throughout the rest of the Cold War.

As it turned out, the assumption that the Sandinistas were pragmatists who would respond to American wishes on a transactional basis was a continuation of immoderate optimism and a case of group-think.<sup>384</sup> The Administration simply did not seem to realize with whom they were dealing. Sandinista leaders such as the Ortega brothers and Tomás Borge viscerally distrusted the U.S., the patron of the despised Somoza who had imprisoned and tortured them and killed their closest compatriots.

The FSLN also recognized the stick of U.S. power that implicitly accompanied the principled offer of carrots; in order to survive it would not do to over-provoke Uncle Sam in his own backyard. As Castro advised, at first they moderated their radicalism, avoided open confrontation with the Catholic Church and the private sector, and kept non-Sandinistas in the Government of National Reconstruction. Within a matter of months, however, once they had

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<sup>383</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>384</sup> Gail E. S. Yoshitani, *Reagan on War: A Reappraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980-1984* (Texas, 2012), pp. 35-6; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1993), pp. 231-8.

consolidated power, tensions between traditional sectors of society and revolutionaries became increasingly sharp. Non-Sandinistas in the GRN recognized they were serving primarily as a façade of moderation, and being sidelined they ran through successive resignations. Simply put, the Sandinistas, following the Cuban model, were determined to introduce the full Marxist-Leninist package to Nicaragua and to spread revolution beyond its borders.<sup>385</sup>

#### **IV. The Sandinista Victory Shifts the Regional Military Balance**

The Sandinistas wholeheartedly embraced the Eastern Bloc. The Nicaraguan revolution presented an opportunity for the Soviets to upset the U.S. in its own sphere of interest, but protecting Cuba and developing trade with the major Latin American countries remained priorities. The world seemed to be going Moscow's way in 1979, but already burdened with troublesome and costly clients in Vietnam, Cambodia, Yemen, Ethiopia, Angola, and Afghanistan, the Brezhnev regime became Nicaragua's ambivalent superpower patron.<sup>386</sup>

The upset of U.S. hegemony in Central America brought a shift in the regional military balance. The EPS modelled itself on the Cuban Armed Forces and Cuban advisors totaled around 3,500. A secret military protocol to a 1980 agreement with the Soviet Communist Party introduced coordinated support from the Eastern Bloc that included a 100-man Soviet security assistance group, East German support for the internal security service, and arms deliveries of over 25,000 metric tons that far outstripped anything the U.S. had provided to Somoza or might

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<sup>385</sup> "Analysis of the Situation and Tasks of the Sandinista People's Revolution," July 1979, published as the *The 72-hour Document: the Sandinista blueprint for constructing Communism in Nicaragua*, U.S. Department of State, Coordinator of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1986; Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, pp. 116-17.

<sup>386</sup> Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, pp. 215-35; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 130-1; Westad, *Global Cold War*, pp. 175-8.

have conceived of providing to the Sandinistas. The EPS grew to 80,000 troops and became by far the largest and best-equipped army in Central America.<sup>387</sup>

The Nicaraguan revolution fed President Carter's hardening towards the Soviet Union. Brzezinski, never in doubt about the primacy of East-West competition, promoted worry over dominoes falling to Cuban-Soviet expansion, which had now spread from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to the Western Hemisphere. In a memo to the President after the Carter-Brezhnev Vienna summit in June, he wrote:

I was struck by how intransigent Brezhnev was on regional issues. In spite of your forceful statements, the Soviets simply give us no reason to believe that they will desist from using the Cubans as their proxies....<sup>388</sup>

One week after the Sandinista victory, Brzezinski ordered a series of intelligence assessments and policy reviews on Soviet-Cuban military activities that would effectively supplant principles-based foreign policy.<sup>389</sup>

Responding quickly, the CIA buttressed the perception of increasing threat. On August 13, the Office of National Intelligence Officers (soon to be re-named the National Intelligence Council, NIC) responded to a request from Brzezinski for a comparison of Soviet, Cuban, and GDR interventions worldwide since 1977. To "provide a sharper focus on Brzezinski's interests" the analysis included a matrix that permitted "crisp, parsimonious treatment of the data in a way that would facilitate comparison."<sup>390</sup> Nicaragua was included along with Afghanistan, Angola,

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<sup>387</sup> Klaus Storkmann, "East German Military Aid to the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua, 1979-1990," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16: 2, Spring 2014, pp. 56-76; Maj. Noel Hidalgo, "Soviet Military Assistance to Latin America," Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM), June 1984, <http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Vol%207-2/Hidalgo.pdf>, accessed November 14, 2015; James Nelson Goodsell, "Soviet Aid to Nicaragua: Ideology, Tractors," *CSM*, April 16, 1982; Stephen Kinzer, "Soviet Help to Sandinistas: No Blank Check," *NYT*, March 28, 1984.

<sup>388</sup> Brzezinski note to Carter, July 6, 1979, cited in Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 127.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE, Top Secret Memorandum, Brzezinski Request for Communist Intervention Comparison, August 13, 1979, NSDA.

Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, South Yemen, and Vietnam.

Noting Cuba's role in helping the FSLN oust Somoza, the paper accurately assessed:

Following the Sandinista victory, some two dozen Cuban military advisors moved quickly into Nicaragua and a military communications network was establishing linking Havana with Managua. . . . The new government is likely to look to the Cubans to send additional military advisors to help transform the guerrilla forces into a conventional army. The Cubans can also be expected to begin using Nicaragua to support guerrillas from the Northern tier of Central America.<sup>391</sup>

There was a contrasting liberal internationalist perspective. For Lake, Pastor, and the Human Rights Bureau at State, supported by many outside Latin American experts, Nicaragua was not another Cuba and Carter's open-minded approach to the Sandinistas was a relative success. More broadly, the Panama Canal Treaty, human rights, and the rejection of intervention contributed to democratization and a healthy freeing from the dominance of the U.S. in the hemisphere.<sup>392</sup>

A test of the optimistic view came with the visit of a delegation from the Nicaraguan Government of National Reconstruction to Washington in September 1979. President Carter greeted the Nicaraguans in the White House on September 24. It was not exactly a meeting of minds. The U.S. agenda focused on economic aid and the Nicaraguans acknowledged their interest in receiving help to rebuild their economy. However, objecting that anti-American statements by Ortega and other Sandinistas made it difficult to establish good relations, Carter listed three expectations: non-intervention in the affairs of their neighbors, a truly non-aligned status, and commitments to human rights and democracy. Ortega, understanding these as conditional demands, responded sharply, "We are interested in obtaining frank and unconditional support from the United States."<sup>393</sup> After the President departed, Ortega complained at length of

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Alfred Stepan, "The United States and Latin America: Vital Interests and the Instruments of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 58:3, pp. 659-92; Fagen, "The Carter Administration and Latin America," pp. 657-58.

<sup>393</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Meeting with Members of the Nicaraguan Junta," White House Statement, "September 24, 1979, UCSB; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 170

“former Somocistas, who were organizing with ‘agents of the CIA’ to attack the country,” an early reference to the budding Nicaraguan insurgents who would become known as the Contras.<sup>394</sup> On September 28, Ortega returned to his preoccupation with counter-revolutionary threats in a vituperative address to the UN General Assembly in New York, claiming:

A macabre alliance against Sandinoism had made Nicaragua... a target for imperialist policy. The most aggressive circles of the United States and of Central America dream of restoring Somozaism to our country.<sup>395</sup>

From within the White House, Brzezinski had the opposite preoccupation, as did the core of the national security establishment. Their interest was not in whether the Sandinistas would evolve into principled moderates. Even as the Carter administration persisted in turning the other cheek to the Sandinistas, offering aid as a quid pro quo and putting an optimistic face on the Cold War reversal in Nicaragua, two firmer lines of action aimed at “hemming in” the consolidation and spread of Soviet and Cuban encroachment began to emerge. One was to adopt an anti-communist stance toward developments within Nicaragua; the other was to focus on preventing the spread of revolution that focused on neighboring El Salvador. These approaches, which first appeared in policy reviews conducted in August 1979, would evolve into complementary support for insurgency and counterinsurgency, constituting the core U.S. response to the challenge of revolution in Central America.<sup>396</sup>

## **V. Nicaragua and the Transition to Reagan**

Somoza lived and died an unrepentant product of the Cold War divide. One year after his fellow right wing dictator Alfredo Stroessner granted him refuge in Paraguay, a hit team from the

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid, p. 171.

<sup>395</sup> Address by Commander Daniel Ortega Saavedra before the Thirty-fourth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 28, 1979, distributed by The New York Committee on Nicaragua, 1979, pp. 1-4.

<sup>396</sup> Department of State, Strategy Memorandum prepared for PRC Meeting on Central America, August 1, 1979, S/S 7913687, NSDA; Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention*, p. 17.

Argentine People's Revolutionary Army, acting in solidarity with the FSLN, "brought him to justice."<sup>397</sup> Shortly before they assassinated him, Somoza recorded his bitter memoir, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, which the radical anti-communist John Birch Society published in 1980. In it, Somoza repeated his accusation that Jimmy Carter personally targeted him, thereby causing the only leftist revolution in Latin America since 1959. From his perspective, the new American moralism of human rights was neither enlightened policy nor the consequence of his own misgovernment, but the betrayal of his faithful allegiance in the Cold War. Somoza had the sympathy, if not the support, of the other right wing dictatorships that made up the majority of governments in Latin America at the time, and had ruled with the assurance that their own anti-communism was a sufficient criterion to qualify for U.S. support.

The charge that Carter caused Somoza to fall also had an impact on U.S. domestic politics. It began with publication of an article titled "Dictatorships and Double Standards," which became a manifesto of neoconservative ideology when it appeared in November 1979.<sup>398</sup> As a presidential candidate in 1980, Reagan brought its author, the political scientist Jeanne Kirkpatrick, into his inner circle. Her explicitly political article began by pointing to the failure of the Carter administration to counter the rise of Soviet military power and the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World. In her central criticism:

The United States has suffered two major blows – in Iran and Nicaragua – of large and strategic significance. In each country the Carter administration not only failed to prevent the undesired outcome, it actively collaborated in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Claribel Alegría and Darwin Flakoll, *Death of Somoza: The First Person Story of the Guerrillas Who Assassinated the Nicaraguan Dictator* (Connecticut, 1996).

<sup>398</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, 68:5, November 1979, pp. 34-45.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the specious characterization of Somoza and the Shah of Iran as “moderate autocrats,” her argument that non-communist dictatorships held out better prospects for liberalization than did totalitarian communist regimes rejected the principled version of Carter’s foreign policy. Nicaragua was an example of the folly in trying to manufacture democratic solutions where the conditions did not exist. Echoing Morgenthau, the practical problem was:

The conceivable contexts turn out to be mainly those in which non-Communist autocracies are under pressure from revolutionary guerrillas. Since Moscow is the aggressive, expansionist power today, it is more often than not insurgents, encouraged and armed by the Soviet Union, who challenge the status quo.<sup>400</sup>

This line of reasoning underpinned the strategy of reversing the tables on the Soviet Union by supporting anti-communist insurgents in the Third World, which became known as the Reagan Doctrine.

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

## Chapter 4: Origin Myths of the Nicaraguan Contras

### I. Carter and the Nicaraguan Resistance

“The transition from Carter to Reagan was the most dramatic changing of the guard of the Cold War era,” Robert Kagan wrote in his detailed history of the U.S. and Nicaragua from 1977 to 1990.<sup>401</sup> Dramatic it certainly was. When Ronald Reagan became president on January 20, 1981, the new administration made the bloody wars in Central America their first front in the Cold War. As a result, vaguely lodged in collective memory is the idea that Ronald Reagan reversed Jimmy Carter’s weakness by drawing the line against Soviet and Cuban advances in America’s backyard. This is a myth.

Rather, the policy basis for militarized containment in Central America took shape during the Carter presidency. While it is true that Carter had been reluctant and defensive in Central America, the Reagan administration built on key Carter decisions. The principal difference was to amplify them into a counter-offensive, particularly an ideological one, against Soviet and Cuban expansion.<sup>402</sup> By the late fall of 1979, less than six months after the Sandinista victory and a full year before Reagan’s election, firmer lines of action aimed to hem the Soviets in had already emerged under Carter.<sup>403</sup>

The notion that the Reagan administration created the Nicaraguan Contras is a related myth. Counter-revolutionaries, a by-product of all revolutions, appeared soon after the Sandinistas took power in July 1979. They were neither mercenaries nor proxies; they had their

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<sup>401</sup> Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, p. 167.

<sup>402</sup> PD/NSC-52, U.S. Policy to Cuba, October 4, 1979; PRM-46, Review of Policies toward Central America, May 4 (revised October 16), NSDA.

<sup>403</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Peace and National Security, Address to the Nation on Soviet Combat Troops in Cuba and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty,” October 1, 1979, UCSB; Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 151.

own motives for resisting the new revolutionary government, and they appeared spontaneously in several locations. Daniel Ortega was not being paranoid when he complained at the UN General Assembly about anti-regime elements, but in labeling them “Somocistas” and agents of imperial – meaning U.S. – policy, he was misleading. Invoking the reviled ex-dictator may have helped intimidate opponents and rally supporters. However, the scattered opposition groups that first appeared in the summer of 1979 had no desire to return Somoza to power or to recreate the old regime. Their cause was not *for* anything, but rather *against* the Sandinistas; from the beginning, they were “contrarevolucionarios” -- the Contras. The Carter Administration did not provide them with weapons, although presidential decisions, including the first covert action finding in August 1979, encouraged the development of political opposition to the FSLN and set the conditions for them to thrive. The early Contras had begun to form an army and they did have external supporters. They were just not from the United States.

### **Literature on the Early Contras**

Most of the literature notes the beginnings of the Contras in 1979, but leaves the role of the Carter Administration nebulous. The Contras’ formative period lasted until mid-1982 when the Reagan Administration assumed formal control, and from that point on they became more visible to the outside world. This is true of even the most detailed examinations, such as Kagan’s *Twilight Struggle*, and the official documentation is limited.<sup>404</sup>

Intriguing insights about this early phase do come from accounts by two journalists, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* by Chris Dickey of *The Washington Post*, and

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<sup>404</sup> Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 148-54; U.S. Congress (Rep. Lee H. Hamilton and Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, Chairmen), *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, House Report. No. 100-433 and Senate Report. No. 100-216 (GPO, 1987); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*, United States Court of Appeals, August 4, 1993.

*Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels* by Sam Dillon of *The Miami Herald*.<sup>405</sup>

Both make multiple references to the shadowy presence of Americans with elements of the National Guard during Somoza's last days and immediately after his fall. These suggest, at minimum, U.S. awareness of early efforts to rally counter-revolutionaries.

From the beginning, Central America was a political lightning rod. Most sources and much of the literature reflect political biases, and therefore requires an unusual amount of refraction. This is the case for journalism, contemporary commentary, even official documents and reporting. Most but not all of the scholarship bears implicit liberal sympathies and norms. To cite just three examples, William LeoGrande's *Our Own Backyard* and Cynthia Arnson's *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America 1976-1993* lean to the liberal side of the house, while Kagan's *Twilight Struggle* tends to reflect neo-conservative sympathies.<sup>406</sup>

This chapter fills in the picture of what was going on with the United States and the Nicaraguan opposition during its formative period, beginning in the summer of 1979 through the remainder of the Carter administration as it hardened haphazardly to the Cold War. This is largely a matter of reassembling a little-known story and establishing the context. Some important operational details are still missing and unlikely to see the light of day soon. Most importantly, documents for the FRUS volumes on Central and South America from the 1977-1980 series are currently in declassification review, with publication several years out. However, enough information is available to shed some light on this intriguing corner of Cold War history.

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<sup>405</sup> Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* (New York, 1985); Sam Dillon, *Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels* (New York, 1991).

<sup>406</sup> Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America 1976-1993* (Pennsylvania, 1993).

## **The Sandinistas as Midwives to the Contras**

Among the most important protagonists in the creation of the Contras were the Sandinistas themselves. Employing exceptional political and military competence, the FSLN had built an international coalition and ridden popular insurrection to power in July 1979. But it was one thing to break Somoza's sultanistic state with its weak links to the Nicaraguan people; it was entirely different to consolidate a new order, and it was something the Sandinistas never fully accomplished. With the world turned upside down, status quo institutions challenged the new revolutionary government and opponents sprang up as if automatically. Political opposition and armed counter-revolutionaries appeared in increasing variety and numbers, and the Sandinistas found themselves compelled to pivot almost instantly from being insurgents to being counter-insurgents.

The Sandinistas were their own worst antagonists. It did not take them long to reveal an arrogance of both attitude and policy by indulging in formulaic pursuit of Marxist-Leninist revolution. They established FSLN party control over all aspects of government, issued decrees restricting press and political freedoms, announced economic controls, delayed promised elections, and declared a state of emergency. They expropriated farms and controlled agricultural prices to favor urban consumers, which prejudiced the rural population. They introduced a police state. Eastern European, Russian, and especially Cuban advisors turned up in large numbers, and the Sandinistas publically aligned Nicaragua with the Soviet bloc. Although they retained considerable popular support, the result was tension and alienation among moderate politicians, the private sector, the Catholic Church, and critically, much of the population in the countryside.

One of the first decrees of the FSLN Directorate was an order to the Dirección General Seguridad del Estado (General Directorate of State Security, DGSE) to apprehend every former

National Guardsman in Nicaragua for trial and possible execution. Hundreds of the 8,500 total at the end of the war fled across the border, most of them to Honduras. Those who remained were enlisted men and noncommissioned officers, with a few junior officers among them. The DGSE captured around 1,500 and executed a few dozen. Most of the rest never did stand trial. Many of those who had not been caught or managed to disguise themselves did their best to escape the country.

### **Who Were the Contras?**

The Contras reflected the nature of Nicaragua.<sup>407</sup> Geographically diverse and sparsely populated with only about two and a half million people, the country is at once large enough to be fragmented and small enough to be intimately connected. Nicaraguans also tend to be highly individualistic, and the story of the Contras is in large part a mosaic of biographies. They fit with an earlier history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of armed groups that competed for power, flavored with leaders, including Augusto Sandino and the Somozas, who vied for the presidency. The Contras, who would by the mid-1980s number 15,000 fighters, emerged from four basic groupings: rural peasants and farmers mostly from Northern Nicaragua, Miskito Indians of the Caribbean coast, moderate politicians including those who abandoned the Sandinistas after initially working with them, and former National Guard soldiers. None had the least desire to restore Somoza. Each enjoyed their own variant of cause, leadership and organization, sanctuary,

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<sup>407</sup> Dillon, *Commandos*; Dickey, *With the Contras*; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*; Glen Garvin, *Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA and the Contras* (Nebraska, 1992); Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Oklahoma, 2001); Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (Massachusetts, 2007); William R. Meara, *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989* (Annapolis, 2006).

and support. Two things unified them: opposition to the Sandinistas and dependence on support from the United States, but that only later.<sup>408</sup>

### **The Remnants of the National Guard Reborn**

The National Guard had fought hard until Somoza fled to Miami on July 17, 1979, when it collapsed, leaving the Sandinistas to take Managua two days later without a final battle. Most of the 8,500 soldiers shed their uniforms and tried to fold back into society. Perhaps one thousand fled across the northern border for sanctuary in Honduras. Several hundred more from the Southern Front commandeered boats on the Pacific coast and retreated north to El Salvador. The Salvadoran Army provided them with weapons and transportation to Honduras. In Tegucigalpa on July 22, 141 ex-National Guard members, led by Colonel Pablo Salazar, “Comandante Bravo,” announced their intent, “To establish the first organization designed to wage war against the Sandinistas.”<sup>409</sup> Bravo and several officers who had fled to Miami traveled to Washington, DC where they met with Somoza supporter, Congressman John Murphy, and held a little-noticed press conference on August 1 to raise the alarm about the new Communist government in Managua.<sup>410</sup> In October, FSLN Interior Minister Tomás Borge and Chief of State Security Lenín Cerna personally directed Bravo’s assassination in Tegucigalpa.<sup>411</sup> Colonel Enrique Bermúdez, a CIA asset who had been Nicaragua’s military attaché, replaced him and would remain the Contra’s principal military commander. His group formed the first Contra organization, the 15<sup>th</sup> of September Legion, in Guatemala City, with the backing of the Guatemalan Army, and then expanded in several iterations to become the Fuerza Democrático

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<sup>408</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, pp. 3-8; Dillon, *Comandos*, pp. 58-64.

<sup>409</sup> René De La Pedraja, *Wars of Latin America, 1982-2013: The Path to Peace* (North Carolina, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>410</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 178.

<sup>411</sup> Brown, *The Real Contra War*, p. 73; Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, pp. 385-6.

Nicaragüense (FDN) in 1981. The FDN was the principal political-military resistance organization, but multiple opposition groups never did consolidate into a unified force, and the Miami-based FDN political leadership grafted onto the Contra paramilitary organization never acquired legitimacy, despite (or because of) the efforts of its U.S. controllers.<sup>412</sup>

### **U.S. Incoherence in Nicaragua**

Nowhere did Robert Tucker's accusation that the Carter Administration's policies lacked strategic coherence apply more than in relation to Nicaragua.<sup>413</sup> Just as there had been two minds before Somoza's fall, two minds and two voices persisted after the FSLN victory. The struggle to accommodate the Sandinistas in the hopes of moderating them was at odds with hostility toward the challenge of revolution and further Cuban-Soviet expansion into Central America.

Inexorably, even though the administration remained a house divided, containment became the driver of policy in Central America.<sup>414</sup> Brzezinski, whose hostile disposition toward Moscow never wavered, was the principal agent, while members of his professional staff, particularly military assistant Brigadier General William Odom and CIA liaison Robert Gates, served as trusted links to the similarly disposed national security apparatus. NSC requests for intelligence on Soviet and Cuban collaboration worldwide were a primary means of purveying the threat.<sup>415</sup> Brzezinski included references to them in the constant flow of his memos to the

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<sup>412</sup> Enrique Bermúdez, "Nicaragua's Valley Forge: How I View the Nicaragua Crisis," *Policy Review*, Summer 1988, pp. 56-63; Department of State, *Nicaraguan Biographies: A Resource Book*, 1988, pp. 39-42; Brown, *The Real Contra War*, pp. 73-6; Dillon, *Commandos*, pp. 59-65.

<sup>413</sup> Tucker, "American in Decline," p. 450.

<sup>414</sup> Amb. Thomas Pickering and Gen. William Odom, 1995 Conference of Former Decision-Makers, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 402; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp.126-7.

<sup>415</sup> CIA National Foreign Assessment Center, Nicaragua: Export of the Revolution – the First Six Months, January 11, 1980; CIA/NFAC, Cuba: Capabilities for Military Intervention in Nicaragua, October 28, 1980; Memorandum for the President from Brzezinski, Nicaragua's External Policy, (undated, early 1980), NSDA.

President urging stronger action. The State Department instructed Embassies to raise concerns with host governments and leaks to the press occurred with some regularity.<sup>416</sup>

In March 1979, Brzezinski had signed a directive drafted by Odom to have the CIA re-evaluate intelligence on the Soviet presence in Cuba.<sup>417</sup> The full report, issued in July 1979 just before the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, detailed a major increase in Soviet arms transfers to the Third World, with Cuba at the center.<sup>418</sup> In 1975 Soviet arms deliveries to Cuba had reached around 20,000 tons; they more than doubled again in 1979; by 1982 they reached approximately 68,000 tons. Most of these deliveries were offsets for direct transfers to Grenada and Nicaragua, or for use in Africa. The size of Cuban Armed Forces approached 180,000, making it the second largest Latin American military after Brazil, with a population 20 times larger than Cuba's. There were over 40,000 Soviet-backed Cuban troops in Africa, most of them in Angola and Ethiopia. Another 2-3,000 Cubans were in Nicaragua. Cuba's weapons inventory embraced F-class diesel attack submarines, T-62 tanks, surface-to-air missiles, multiple rocket launchers, and over 200 jet fighters including advanced Soviet MIG-23s.

Accompanying this menacing data was a widespread perception that the Carter Administration had been unable to do anything effective to counter Soviet advances. With an election year coming up, the charge from Republican conservatives that Carter's weakness on foreign policy had eroded national security became a strong motive for the White House, along with Democrats in Congress running for reelection, to show greater determination in the Cold War. An opportunity appeared when the leak of a reference in the July CIA report to a "new"

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<sup>416</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Soviet Escalation in the Caribbean," *WP*, August 15, 1979.

<sup>417</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 346; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 833, n. 12.

<sup>418</sup> Edward Gonzalez, "Cuba, the Third World, and the Soviet Union," in Andrzej Korbonski and Francis Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and the Third World: The Last Three Decades* (New York, 1987), pp. 1123-47; Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, pp. 91-126; U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power* (GPO, 1981).

Soviet combat brigade in Cuba turned into a highly public cause to demonstrate resolve.<sup>419</sup> From August until October, the Soviet brigade crisis became a high-level superpower confrontation far beyond any possible strategic significance. The administration boxed itself into an embarrassing replay of U.S.-Soviet friction that had occurred over Angola and Shaba II in 1978, when the U.S. demanded that the Soviets remove their troops from Cuba and the Soviets flatly refused.<sup>420</sup> It proved that the brigade had been present as a symbolic force along with the Soviet security assistance mission since 1962. Laboring to put an end to the manufactured crisis, Carter gave a televised speech to the nation on October 1 in which he backed down while reiterating a Cold War version of the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>421</sup>

### **The War over Central America in Washington**

A significant hardening followed in Central America and the Caribbean. Concrete steps announced in Carter's October 1 address included increased surveillance and intelligence collection on Soviet and Cuban military activities around the world, establishment of a

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<sup>419</sup> NIO, "Brzezinski Request for Communist Intervention Comparison," August 13, 1979, NSDA; Summary of Conclusions of a Mini-Special Coordination Committee Meeting, August 29, 1979, *FRUS* 1977–1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union, Doc. 216; Memorandum From Secretary of State Vance, Secretary of Defense Brown, and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, U.S. Strategy to Cuba, (undated, early August 1979), *FRUS*, Vol. VI, Doc. 225.

<sup>420</sup> Secstate to AmEmbassy Moscow, telegram 227407, Soviet Brigade in Cuba, August 29, 1979, *FRUS*, Vol. VI, Doc. 217; SecState to All American Republic Posts, telegram 236643, Soviet Ground Forces Unit in Cuba, September 9, 1979, *FRUS*, Vol. VI, Doc. 220; Department of State, "Secretary of State Vance Press Conference: Soviet Troops in Cuba," *Current Policy*, No. 85, September 5, 1979, p. 12; "President Carter's remarks of September 7," *Department of State Bulletin*, October 1979, pp. 63–4; Department of State, "Background on the Question of Soviet Troops in Cuba," *Current Policy*, No. 93, October 1, 1979, p. 3; Don Oberdorfer, "U.S. Probes Soviet Unit's Role in Cuba," *WP*, September 13, 1979.

<sup>421</sup> Notes on Meeting of Senate SALT Working Group, September 25, 1979, National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/declassification/iscap/pdf/2011-064-doc52.pdf>; Jimmy Carter, "Address to the Nation on Soviet Combat Troops in Cuba"; Martin Schram, "Carter, as Meetings End: 'Fine-- Now I'm Satisfied'", *WP*, October 2, 1979; Ray Cline, "History Repeated as Farce," *WP*, October 15, 1979; McGeorge Bundy, "The Brigade's My Fault," *NYT*, October 23, 1979; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 828-42; Gloria Duffy, "Crisis Mangling and the Cuban Brigade," *International Security*, 8:1, Summer 1983, pp. 67-87; David Newsom, *The Soviet Brigade in Cuba: A Study in Political Diplomacy* (Indiana, 1987); Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 155-61; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 346-52; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, interview with Fidel Castro, May 21, 2005, *Back Channel to Cuba*, p. 210.

Caribbean Joint Task Force headquartered in Key West, Florida to monitor and respond to any attempted military encroachment in the region, and regular U.S. military maneuvers in the region. A political and economic strategy pledged to “increase our economic assistance to alleviate the unmet economic and human needs in the Caribbean region and further to ensure the ability of troubled peoples to resist social turmoil and possible Communist domination.”<sup>422</sup> Of the \$90 million in foreign aid, \$75 million was the package for Nicaragua intended, with wild optimism at this point, to win over the Sandinistas.

Three days after Carter’s speech, Brzezinski signed Presidential Directive 52: U.S. Policy to Cuba. Combined with the measures announced in the October 1 speech, PD-52 signaled a significant realignment. Whereas normalizing relations with Cuba had been a top priority in 1977, now the principal goal was, “To seek to contain Cuba as a source of violent revolutionary change.”<sup>423</sup> Specific objectives included to reduce and eventually remove Cuban military forces stationed abroad, to undercut Cuba’s drive for Third World leadership, and to inhibit the Soviet build-up of Cuba’s armed forces. In addition to increasing the U.S. military presence in the region, the U.S. would “engage with like-minded Latin American governments to compete with the Cubans in the Caribbean and Central America and increase the prospects for peaceful and democratic change.” Along with new economic aid, security assistance would increase “to governments in the region that respect human rights and democratic values, and also resist Cuban influence.” References to intelligence support are redacted from the declassified PD-52, but a draft version states:

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<sup>422</sup> Carter, “Address on Soviet Combat Troops in Cuba.”

<sup>423</sup> Presidential Directive/NSC-52, U.S. Policy to Cuba, October 4, 1979, NSDA.

With key Western allies and with selected governments in Latin America and the Third World, we will share intelligence information on the Soviet buildup in Cuba and on Cuban intelligence, political and military activities abroad.<sup>424</sup>

The shift to the Cold War was a clear victory for Brzezinski. By winning over the President in the fall of 1979, he won the internal war for policy he had begun fighting over Africa in 1977. In his extensive post mortem of the Soviet brigade crisis, Brzezinski recounted a sharp exchange with Carter:

For the first time since World War II, the United States told the Russians on several different occasions that we take great exception to what they are doing, that there will be negative consequences if they persist in their acts...and then we did nothing about it. The President looked quite furious, and told me he had no intention of going to war over the Soviet brigade in Cuba.<sup>425</sup>

True, the U.S. was not going to risk war over the brigade. The problem was how and where exactly to draw the line against Soviet and Cuban expansion. Linkage to ratification of the SALT II arms control agreement would have damaged a national security goal that the U.S. wanted as much as the Soviets. The U.S. simply had little direct leverage over the Soviet Union and Cuba short of limited war. The answer was an exercise in restrictive deterrence -- action to show strategic resolve and protect interests, but at the lowest possible risk and cost. It did mean war, but of a different, indirect order. In the fall of 1979, as serious attention focused on the Soviet and Cuban threat, Central America emerged from backwater status to the center of national security concerns.

The administration had neither the inclination nor the political latitude to make a complete U-turn. The bureaucracy, for the most part, would not regret loosening restrictions on security assistance and covert action, or trading off human rights for a return to containment. Carter, even as he toughened up on the Soviet Union and Cuba, maintained his commitment to

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 353.

principles. He was following Congress on restrictions to power and human rights in any case. Among its measures, the 1973 War Powers Resolution was intended to check the President's ability to conduct war, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act had established the basis for Congressional oversight of intelligence activities, and Section 502B of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act prohibited security assistance to "any country, the government of which engages in a consistent pattern of violations of internationally recognized human rights."<sup>426</sup> By 1979, Congress had voted to cut off security assistance in Latin America to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, as well as to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Liberal Democrats especially were not simply going to agree to lift those restrictions. Carter became a conflicted Cold Warrior. In his view, Soviet and Cuban behavior kept compelling him to respond to their aggression and upsetting his benign vision of the U.S. in the world.<sup>427</sup> Carter's entry for October 19, 1979 on Central America is revealing:

We (my advisors and I) met on the Caribbean and Central America, and I was disgusted with the proposals, recommending military action, gunboats, intelligence activities, how we can manipulate elections, et cetera. My judgment is all of this is counterproductive, and we ought to let the people know that we want to be their friend and their best interests are a major factor in our decisions. We need to replace the neocolonialist attitude and also reach outside of government to universities, business, labor, governors, churches, farmers, medical people – and take the onus off us [as] an intervening power.<sup>428</sup>

## II. Carter and Covert Action in Central America

The record of the October meeting to which the President referred does not appear to have been declassified, but this passage clearly indicated that militarized containment, including

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<sup>426</sup> The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Section 502B(a)(2), PL 87-195.

<sup>427</sup> Lloyd Cutler, White House Counsel, Interview, *Jimmy Carter Oral Histories*, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 2003, <http://millercenter.org/president/carter/oralhistory>, accessed November 14, 2015.

<sup>428</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, 363; *The Daily Diary of President Jimmy Carter, Meeting to Discuss Central America and the Caribbean, October 19, 1979*, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/diary/>.

a covert action proposal for Central America, was discussed. There was precedent in previously signed findings that continued propaganda aimed at Eastern Europe; Carter may have authorized DCI Turner to explore resuming assistance to UNITA with Congress in 1978; and Congress blocked an administration covert action proposal for Grenada, but it had approved paramilitary support to the Afghan mujahedin in July 1979.<sup>429</sup>

In contrast to the microscopic investigation of the Reagan administration's support for the Contras, covert action in Central America during the Carter administration has received little examination. None of the principals – Carter, Brzezinski, Vance – mention it, nor do Pastor or Lake. Texts of findings have not been released, but Gates specified that the President signed a first finding on Nicaragua and El Salvador in late-July 1979, and followed up with a second on November 24 that provided “support to democratic elements to counter Soviet and Cuban influence throughout Latin America.”<sup>430</sup> The Iran-Contra Investigation Report and an official CIA history also refer to findings signed in fall 1979. Kagan and others mention early 1980. The CIA history notes that a finding signed in fall 1980 doubled funding for Nicaragua to \$1 million (possibly an understatement) and set up a Central American Task Force (CATF) to carry out the program.<sup>431</sup> This sequence is consistent with the increased fear of Soviet-Cuban expansion in Central America and the Caribbean in reaction to the Sandinista victory in July 1979. Carter's

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<sup>429</sup> William J. Daughtery, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Kentucky, 2004), pp. 190-1; Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (New Jersey, 2000), p. 55; Richard A. Best, *Covert Action: An Effective Instrument of U. S. Foreign Policy?*, CRS, October 21, 1996; Peter Kornbluh, “Test Case for the Reagan Doctrine: The Covert Contra War,” *Third World Quarterly*, 9:4, 1987, pp. 1118-28.

<sup>430</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 150-1.

<sup>431</sup> *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra*, p. 27; Snider, *The Agency & The Hill*, p. 287.

covert action findings on Nicaragua were restricted to political action and propaganda, and he stopped short of arming the Nicaraguan resistance.

Carter never did find a balance between principles and pragmatism, and the line that he drew was anything but firm. The Administration continued to court the Sandinistas, even as their hostility increased and their alignment with the Eastern Bloc strengthened. The \$75 million aid bill, introduced in November 1979, did not pass Congress until May 1980, by a narrow margin after tortuous debate. By then El Salvador had become the preoccupation and Congress required the President to certify that the Government of Nicaragua was not supporting the export of revolution. Carter certified in September, but withheld the bulk of the badly needed aid package as leverage in the hope of restraining the Sandinistas from supporting the Salvadoran guerrillas. It was a weak hand.

When the prospect of an anti-Sandinista coup arose in October 1980, it brought to the surface the tension between the course of moderation that Carter preferred and the pull of intervention as the U.S. Presidential election approached.<sup>432</sup> Ambassador Pezzullo had reported from Managua that Jorge Salazar, the prominent and charismatic leader of the Union of Agricultural Producers (UPANIC), was plotting with dissidents in the Sandinista Peoples' Army to overthrow the FSLN Directorate. He cautioned that Salazar was possibly being drawn into a ruse. Covert action money was flowing to members of the Nicaraguan opposition and Salazar had been in Washington, DC to drum up support, but there is no indication of U.S. involvement in the plotting. On November 13, the Special Coordinating Committee met with Brzezinski chairing.<sup>433</sup> The group considered how to support the coup if one should develop, including what

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<sup>432</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, pp. 181-3; Dickey, *With the Contras*, pp. 76-82; Shirley Christian, *Revolution in the Family* (New York, 1985), pp. 170-185.

<sup>433</sup> SCC Meeting Notes, November 13, 1980, cited in Glad, *Outsider in the White House*, p. 244.

signals to send to Havana and Moscow, and whether to respond militarily should Cuba send troops to help suppress it. Brzezinski said the worst outcome would be to warn Cuba and then fail to back it up. This put into perspective the previously cited October 28 CIA report on Cuban airlift capabilities for intervention in Nicaragua.<sup>434</sup> Army Chief of Staff General Edward “Shy” Meyer, who would be instrumental in developing Central America strategy during the Reagan administration, said he could have a battalion on the ground in 24 hours and a division in Nicaragua within a week. The Forrestal carrier strike force was ordered to the Caribbean. On November 16, Nicaraguan State Security issued its own signal when it lured Salazar to a rendezvous and publicly assassinated him.<sup>435</sup> The U.S. denounced his murder, but took no further action.

Left to put the best possible face on moderation, Carter told the OAS General Assembly on November 19, 1980:

In Nicaragua many of us have been working together to help the country heal its wounds. It's in the interest of all who care about freedom to help the Nicaraguan people chart a pluralistic course that ends bloodshed, respects human rights, and furthers democracy.<sup>436</sup>

By then, Ronald Reagan had defeated Carter in the presidential election, and the Republicans had won a majority in the Senate. The campaign had featured blistering attacks over Central America. Kirkpatrick's 1979 “Dictatorships and Double Standards” provided the key theme: Carter's policies had undermined U.S. allies and caused the U.S. to suffer a Cold War loss close to home. Candidate Reagan's frequent references to Central America and the Caribbean

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<sup>434</sup> CIA/NFAC, “Cuba: Capabilities for Military Intervention.”

<sup>435</sup> Christopher Dickey, “Nicaragua Shaken by Violent Death of Businessman,” *WP*, November 23, 1980.

<sup>436</sup> Remarks by President Carter before the Tenth Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States, Washington, DC, November 19, 1980.

followed a line of argument that was entirely consistent with his own long-held views on the Cold War as a global and ideological struggle for power:

Must we let Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, all become additional ‘Cubas,’ new outposts for Soviet combat brigades? Will the next push of the Moscow-Havana axis be northward to Guatemala, and thence to Mexico, and south to Costa Rica and Panama?<sup>437</sup>

Shaping the campaign and the early thinking of the new Administration on Central America was a group from the so-called New Right that belonged to the Council on Inter-American Security. The Council was associated with the World Anti-Communist League (WACL), the organization founded in 1954 as the Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League by Taiwan’s President Chiang Kai-shek and South Korea’s President Syngman Rhee.<sup>438</sup> Unlike the Safari Club, the WACL was primarily a public relations platform that linked government officials, military officers, and intelligence agents to conservative activists and church leaders – including fringe elements ranging from former Nazis to Korean Moonies – in a network dedicated to resisting communist expansion around the world.

Calling themselves the Committee of Santa Fe, the Council on Inter-American Security group issued a report in 1980 titled *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*. Describing Central America as “the soft underbelly of the United States...on the front line of World War III,” it called for enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine, by direct U.S. intervention if necessary.<sup>439</sup> Its advocacy of support for resistance to communist revolution in Nicaragua found its way into

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<sup>437</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Peace and Security in the 1980’s,” speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, March 17, 1980.

<sup>438</sup> Luc van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin, and Giles Scott-Smith (eds.), *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, and Networks* (London, 2014); Scott Anderson and Jon Lee Anderson, *Inside the League: The Shocking Expose of How Terrorists, Nazis, and Latin American Death Squads Have Infiltrated the World Anti-Communist League* (New York, 1986); “A proposal for the creation an Anti-Communist Union of the Peoples of Asia,” Document B-389-060, 1954, Syngman Rhee Institute, CWIHP.

<sup>439</sup> L. Francis Bouchev, et al, *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*, Council for Inter-American Security, p. 15.

the Republican Party platform in a line stating, “We will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government.”<sup>440</sup> Three of its principal drafters received second tier appointments in the Reagan Administration.

### **Revolutionary Fervor and Counter-Revolutionary Conspiracies**

In the months prior to the U.S. election, moderates and hardliners in the FSLN Directorate had debated how to respond to the Carter Administration’s entreaties. Adhering to Castro’s advice, they had even shown some restraint. However, after the election, the prospect of an impending roll-back under Reagan galvanized the Sandinistas into a revolutionary fervor of fear and opportunism. The Salazar assassination was part of a campaign to suppress the moderate opposition. The FSLN embraced Cuba more tightly, opened up the arms tap to the Salvadoran guerrillas, launched a propaganda barrage, held mass rallies, and formed a National Militia. The U.S. Embassy in Managua portrayed the prevailing mood as “war psychosis.”<sup>441</sup> Sandinista leaders denounced internal threats to the revolution and called on the Nicaraguan people to defend themselves against a coming invasion by U.S. Marines. In a Castro-like speech delivered in Managua’s central plaza, FSLN Political Committee Chairman Bayardo Arce declared, “If Nicaragua was prepared to give 50,000 lives to overthrow Somoza, it will give 500,000 to defend the revolution!”<sup>442</sup> In one of its first public acknowledgements of counter-revolutionary activity, the FSLN Directorate issued a statement, “Admitting that activities of armed bands are on the rise...and implying that current problems with bringing the harvest are the work of reactionary forces.”<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Republican National Convention Platform, July 15, 1980, in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1980*, 82-B.

<sup>441</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 0432, FSLN Stirs War Psychosis, January 28, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

With the Reagan foreign policy team not yet in place, Pezzullo carried on the commitment to old instructions, still working to build a bridge to the Sandinistas. Now, however, he shifted his efforts from the carrot of the \$75 million aid package to the imminent stick of President Reagan. In a January 31 meeting with Defense Minister Humberto Ortega and Military Intelligence Chief Julio Ramos, Pezzullo warned that the U.S. needed to see concrete moves to cut support to the Salvadoran guerrillas.<sup>444</sup> Ortega dissembled with denials and promises of collaboration. In turn, he asked the U.S. to do something about the counter-revolutionaries. Ortega told Pezzullo, “We have lost more than 100 soldiers over the last several months...and yet attacks on us emanating from ex-National Guard groups operating in Honduras do not seem to concern the U.S.”<sup>445</sup> With torturous logic, Pezzullo appealed to Washington:

It would be helpful if we could make some overtures to the GOH [Government of Honduras] on the use of its territory by anti-Nicaraguan forces. We have known for some time that small conspiratorial groups are operating there, as well as in Costa Rica, and that a lot of the conspiring is done in Guatemala, and, unfortunately, in the Miami area as well. Anything I can pass along indicating any actions we have taken will help still some of the fears, albeit exaggerated, the GRN/FSLN exhibit. Helping still their fears may help in our principal objective of cutting off further supplies to the Salvadoran guerrillas, and lower the level of violence in the region.<sup>446</sup>

By January 1981, this request to show good faith found few sympathetic ears in Washington, DC.

### **III. Enter the Argentines**

Carter’s break with the Cold War provoked estrangement from Latin American states instead of admiration.<sup>447</sup> When Somoza’s fall brought a communist-backed revolution to

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<sup>444</sup> AmEmbassy Managua, telegram 0487, Meeting with Defense Minister on Guerrilla Support, January 31, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Memorandum from Robert Gates, CIA Center for Policy Support, to Acting DCI Knoche, Deputy Director for Intelligence (Stevens), and Deputy Director for Operations (Wells), Brzezinski Meeting on Human Rights, February 3, 1977, *FRUS* 1977-80, Vol. II, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Doc. 7.

Nicaragua, one country stepped forward to pick up the slack, Argentina. Argentina's extension far from its own territory between 1978 and 1982 was virtually unique for a non-major power, surpassed only by Cuba's Soviet-subsidized foreign commitments, and shaped the next decade of war in Central America. Exporting the virulent anti-Communist ideology and methods of their own "Dirty War", they began to organize former Nicaraguan National Guardsmen into a Contra army and transferred techniques to suppress internal subversion to the security forces of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Argentines and Central Americans were additionally linked in the loose anti-Communist network that stretched globally from Washington, DC to France, to Taiwan.

This thesis reveals the extent of the collaboration between the U.S. and Argentina during the critical period from Somoza's fall in July 1979 to the end of Carter's term in January 1981. Most of the current literature reduces the Argentines to a subset of state terror in Latin America as a whole or a prelude to the story of the U.S. and the Contras, and says very little about their involvement in Central America before the U.S. took over the Contra program in 1982. Some caution is needed in relying on the two academic authors and human rights investigators who have made dedicated efforts to track down the story, because of interpretive bias regarding U.S. culpability.<sup>448</sup> The Argentine role is also covered in accounts by journalists, as well as in Bob Woodward's book on Reagan's CIA Director Bill Casey, and the memoir by Dewey Clarridge, who became Casey's Central American Task Force Director in 1981.<sup>449</sup> Official documentation has appeared recently with several investigations and trials of former South and Central

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<sup>448</sup> Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, The United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, Latin America Series, No. 26, 1997; J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (New York, 2005).

<sup>449</sup> Alan Riding, "The Central American Quagmire," *Foreign Affairs*, 61:3. America and the World 1982, pp. 641-59; Dickey, *With the Contras*, pp. 54-5, 89-91; Dillon, *Comandos*, pp. 64-95; Bob Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 151-7, 168-70, 194-5; Duane R. Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons: My Life in the CIA* (New York, 1997), pp. 200-2, 219-21.

American military commanders, along with U.S. Congressional investigations and Obama administration releases.<sup>450</sup>

### **Cold War Connections in Latin America**

Ideological compatibility and connections between the United States, Central America, and Argentina were integral to the Cold War in Latin America. Standard histories emphasize U.S. interventions and the shift from external collective defense to combatting internal subversion that followed the 1959 Cuban revolution. However, the tendency to portray U.S. relations with Latin America as a hegemonic extension of the Monroe Doctrine is an over-interpretation.<sup>451</sup> The U.S. did not impose the Cold War on Latin America, where anti-communism was a deeply held conviction within military, intelligence, and political institutions.

### **Argentina's Central American Adventure**

The Armed Forces wielded great power in Argentina's bureaucratic-authoritarian state.<sup>452</sup> Their National Security Doctrine reflected the influence of a group of rightist French Army officers that de Gaulle had exiled to Argentina in 1961.<sup>453</sup> The Doctrine aligned Argentina with the U.S. and resonated with the links between military governments throughout the hemisphere in the global Cold War. After the Armed Forces took power in 1976, they justified the extreme

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<sup>450</sup> Archivo Nacional de la Memoria, <http://www.jus.gob.ar/derechoshumanos/anm>, accessed November 14, 2015; Diana Jean Schemo, "Files in Paraguay Detail Atrocities of U.S. Allies," *NYT*, August 11, 1999.

<sup>451</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Chile and the Monroe Doctrine," *The Outlook*, March 21, 1914, pp. 631-7; Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 1050-5; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 335-6; Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*; Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, p. 416; Rosenberg, "America and the World," *A Century of American Historiography*, pp. 34-5; Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 143; Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (New York, 2011), pp. ix-x; Sexton, *Monroe Doctrine*, p. 12..

<sup>452</sup> Paul H. Lewis, "Was Perón a Fascist? An Inquiry into the Nature of Fascism," *The Journal of Politics*, 42:1, February 1980, 242-56; Guillermo O'Donnell, *Democracy, Agency, and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent* (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>453</sup> Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 199; Armony, *Argentina, the U.S. and the Anti-Communist Crusade*, p. 193 n. 43; Robin Marie-Monique, *Escadrons de la mort, l'école française* (Paris, 2008).

methods of the Argentine “Dirty War” as a “holy war” to eliminate subversive “terrorists” in a permanent state of conflict with international communism, with the right and even necessity to intervene across national boundaries. For them this war defined Argentina’s mission in Central America.<sup>454</sup>

The origin of Argentina’s Dirty War can be traced to a far-rightist death squad backed by the military, the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (AAA or Triple A). Later, at the core of the Dirty War was Intelligence Battalion 601, a specially created agency under the nominal command of Army Intelligence whose principal adversaries were the leftist guerrillas of the Montoneros and Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). Operating clandestinely and using unrestricted means, its methods included urban counter-insurgency, psychological operations, assassinations, exercise of extra-judicial police powers, covert arrest, detention, and interrogation accompanied by severe torture, followed by summary elimination and secret disposal of remains.<sup>455</sup> By late-1978, revolutionary activity in Argentina had virtually ended, and Argentina exported its methods to Central America.

### **The U.S. – Argentine Connection**

The Cold War infrastructure the United States built in Latin America was extensive. The FBI had maintained a presence as a legacy of its responsibility for the Western Hemisphere during World War II. U.S. military engagement with the armed forces under the Rio Treaty was widespread, with the principal base of operations in the Panama Canal Zone, the site of Southern

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<sup>454</sup> “Armies Gird Loins for Struggle against Subversion,” *Latin American Weekly Report*, WR-79-03, November 16, 1979.

<sup>455</sup> Pablo Mendelovich, “El Debut del Terror: La Triple A,” *La Nación* (Argentina), November 23, 2003; Poder Ejecutivo Nacional, *Terrorismo en Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1980); Donald C. Hodges, *Argentina's "Dirty War": An Intellectual Biography* (Texas, 1991); H.C., “Jorge Rafael Videla: Death of a ‘Dirty War’ Criminal,” *The Economist*, May 23, 2013.

Command headquarters. U.S. Army Fort Gulick, also in the Canal Zone, housed the School of the Americas, which trained tens of thousands of military officers from throughout Latin America under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. The Cuban revolution prompted the Alliance for Progress, which saw a major increase in economic assistance and its security component for police training, the Public Safety Program. A new emphasis on counterinsurgency also saw the creation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group dedicated to Latin America. On the intelligence side, the CIA wielded wide influence, supporting military governments and, through the Overseas Internal Security Program, training secret police, military, and paramilitary officers. These strong security relationships, supplemented with occasional covert action, helped emplace and keep anti-communist governments in power without resorting to force. It was success, not lack of revolutionary activity, that kept U.S. intervention limited prior to Central America in the 1980's.

### **The Argentine-Cuban Bridge to Central America**

The key early supporter of the Contras was Argentina. There is a misperception that Argentina first went to Central America to serve as a U.S. proxy.<sup>456</sup> Rather, the first Argentines went to Nicaragua in 1977 to track down Argentine guerrillas and to fill the gap Jimmy Carter had left in the fight against Communism by assisting Somoza's National Guard. After Somoza's overthrow, they formed a special Battalion 601 unit, the Grupo de Tareas Exteriores (the External Task Group, GTE), and relocated to Guatemala.

The Argentine presence in Central America was an outgrowth of Operation Condor, an arrangement to fight Communist subversion internationally among the intelligence organizations

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<sup>456</sup> Russell Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 289.

of Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil. Argentina was also a charter member of the World Anti-Communist League (WACL) and its Latin American chapter, the Confederación Anticomunista Latinoamericana (CAL).<sup>457</sup>

The U.S. Government was well aware of Operation Condor and Battalion 601, and the CIA in particular maintained close ties to Argentina's rulers.<sup>458</sup> To the extent there was collaboration, it appears to have been conducted largely at arm's length, although this is a judgment subject to further evidence. Condor did have use of a secure CIA communications network based at Ft. Gulick in Panama, and the GTE had an office in Miami from which it coordinated its activities in Central America. Southern Florida was, along with Panama, a logical base for U.S. operations in Latin America, where the CIA maintained its only full station on American soil in Miami. Many Cuban exiles who congregated there formed a ready pool of recruits for the military and the CIA, beginning with the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in 1961. While law enforcement turned a blind eye to anti-Castro activities in the U.S., Cubans became part of the global anti-communist nexus, fighting on behalf of the U.S. in the Congo, Vietnam, and Central America, and forming autonomous anti-Castro organizations.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Aaron Coy Moulton, "Building their own Cold War in their own backyard: the transnational, international conflicts in the greater Caribbean basin," *Cold War History*, 15:2, 2015, pp. 135-54; Luis Herran Avila, "Transnational Cold Warriors: The World Anticommunist League and Counter Revolution in the Americas," presentation to the 127th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, New Orleans, LA, Jan 6, 2013.

<sup>458</sup> Memorandum from Assistant Secretary for Latin America Harry Shlaudeman to Secretary Kissinger, The Third World War and South America, August 3, 1976; CIA, A Brief Look at Operation Condor, memo prepared for Ambassador to Chile George Landau, August 22, 1978, NSA Electronic Briefing Book No. 416; CIA, "CIA Activities in Chile," September 18, 2000, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/>, accessed November 14, 2015; J. Patrice McSherry, "Tracking the Origins of a State Terror Network: Operation Condor," *Latin American Perspectives*, 122:29, January 2002, pp. 38-60; John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism To Three Continents* (New York, 2004); Woodward, *Veil*, p. 152.

<sup>459</sup> Steve Hach, *Cold War in South Florida, Historic Resource Study*, Cultural Resources Division, U.S. National Park Service, 2004; Program of Covert Action against the Castro Regime, March 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, VI, Cuba, Doc. 481; AmEmbassy Asuncion, Roger Channel telegram 4451 (intelligence-related), Second Meeting with Chief of Staff Re Letelier Case, October 13, 1978, NSDA; U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Testimony of Former Battalion 601 Member Leandro Sanchez Reisse before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and

The connections between Cubans, Central Americans, and Argentines emerged from this milieu.<sup>460</sup> One of the best known Cubans was Félix Rodríguez, a Bay of Pigs veteran famous as the leader of the CIA group that helped hunt down Che Guevara in the Bolivian jungle in 1967. Rodríguez escorted the Argentine First Army Corps commander while serving with the CIA in Vietnam, later served as a CIA counter-insurgency advisor in Buenos Aires, and in Florida helped link the Cuban-exile movement to the Argentines in the GTE.<sup>461</sup>

### **Henry Kissinger's Influence**

When Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State and National Security Advisor during the Nixon and Ford Administrations, Central America rested in its accustomed backwater status and had yet to become a source of concern. Yet his deep involvement in other aspects of Latin American affairs were important preludes to both Carter's experience there and the Argentine episode. The Panama Canal negotiations were Kissinger's initiative, and led to the treaty that former Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker completed in 1976, and which gave Carter his first foreign policy success the following year.<sup>462</sup> Kissinger was anathema in the eyes of the New Right because of his pursuit of détente and his abandonment of the fight in Vietnam. His appointment by President Reagan as head of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America in 1983 was a rehabilitation.<sup>463</sup>

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International Operations, July 23, 1987, pp. 14-17, 26-7; Jeff Stein, "U.S. Officials to Cuban Exile Groups: Stop Violence Here," *CSM*, October 30, 1981.

<sup>460</sup> Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Crusade in Central America*, pp. 149-52.

<sup>461</sup> Félix I. Rodríguez and John Weisman, *Shadow Warrior* (New York, 1989); William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, 1989); Ted Shackley with Richard A. Finney, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA* (Washington, DC, 2006).

<sup>462</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Milestones 1977-1980: The Panama Canal and the Torrijos-Carter Treaties," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/panama-canal>, accessed November 14, 2015.

<sup>463</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Kissinger on Central America: A Call for U.S. Firmness," *NYT*, July 19, 1983; United States National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (New York, 1984).

Kissinger influenced Central America through his unqualified defense of Cold War containment and the status quo, which reinforced U.S. alignment with right wing military regimes throughout the hemisphere.<sup>464</sup> The prospect of another Cuba on the South American mainland led Nixon and Kissinger to authorize covert action against Salvador Allende, Latin America's first elected socialist president. Although multiple investigations have yielded no evidence of collusion in the military coup that overthrew him on September 11, 1973, the U.S. quietly backed the resulting rightist government of General Augusto Pinochet and its vicious repression of Communist and non-Communist opposition. In Santiago for a June 1976 meeting of the OAS General Assembly, Kissinger publicly supported human rights, but privately told Pinochet he "did a great service to the West in overthrowing Allende." He spoke at length about Angola as an example of how difficult Congress had made U.S. support for necessary military action against communist subversion.<sup>465</sup>

Two days later Kissinger told Argentina's Foreign Minister, Admiral Cesar Augusto Guzzetti, in a secret meeting: "We want you to succeed...If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly."<sup>466</sup> On his return to Buenos Aires, Guzzetti enthusiastically reported to President Videla that the United States had given Argentina "a green light" for its Dirty War,

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<sup>464</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 754; "Chilean president Salvador Allende committed suicide, autopsy confirms," *Associated Press*, July 19, 2011; Lubna Z. Qureshi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and Allende: U.S. Involvement in the 1973 Coup in Chile* (Maryland, 2009); Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, 1992), pp. 285-315; Staff Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Covert Action in Chile 1963-1973*, Committee Print, United States Senate, p. 51; Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, pp. 317-19; CIA, *CIA Activities in Chile*, September 18, 2000, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/>.

<sup>465</sup> Henry Kissinger, "Human Rights and the Western Hemisphere," Speech before the 6<sup>th</sup> Regular General Assembly of the Organization of American States, Santiago, Chile, June 8, 1976, *Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs*, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0204/7368359.pdf>; Kissinger-Pinochet MemCon, "U.S.-Chile Relations," Santiago, Chile, June 8, 1976, NSA Electronic Briefing Book No. 437, Doc. 10; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 758.

<sup>466</sup> MemCon between Secretary Kissinger and Admiral Guzzetti, June 10, 1976 (incorrectly dated June 6), Santiago, Chile, NSA Electronic Briefing Book No. 133; Schlaudeman to Kissinger Memorandum, The Third World War and South America; Transcript of State Department Senior Staff Meeting, July 9, 1976, NSDA.

which had begun two months earlier. Back in the U.S. Kissinger received a briefing that filled him in further on the inner workings Argentina's "mafia warfare" and Operation Condor.<sup>467</sup>

### **Argentina Fills the Breach**

In February 1977, less than a month after the inauguration, the Carter administration turned the light red by making Argentina the first target of its human rights campaign. The impact was exactly the opposite of what Carter intended. The Videla regime reacted with defiance, violence increased, and human rights worsened. In Nicaragua, the same U.S. approach to Somoza resulted in destabilization and the prospect of a successful Cuban adventure.

Argentina did not rush to fill the breach in Central America, but instead set aside friction over human rights and practically begged the U.S. to lead the way. When Secretary of State Vance reluctantly proposed an OAS Peacekeeping Force for Nicaragua in June 1979, Argentina was alone in voting with the U.S. and declared it was ready to send troops. On July 16, just three days before the Sandinista victory, President Viola called the U.S. Ambassador to a late-night meeting to explain that the junta and top military commanders were distraught. They were frustrated that, "The new government was now a fait accompli...and Castro...had once again prevailed."<sup>468</sup> Viola urged last minute intervention. The Ambassador reported, "They have no choice...the GOA [Government of Argentina] is itching and ready to be part of the peace force ASAP."<sup>469</sup> Shortly after, believing the U.S. had abdicated its Cold War responsibilities, Argentina expanded its anti-Communist crusade to Central America.

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<sup>467</sup> Telcon, Assistant Secretary for Latin America William Rogers and Secretary Kissinger, June 16, 1976, NSDA.

<sup>468</sup> AmEmbassy Buenos Aires, telegram 1534, Human Rights and Peace Force for Nicaragua, July 17, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

It was well-placed to do so. Officers from Argentina and Central America had long-standing associations; many had attended U.S.-sponsored conferences or courses at the U.S. School of the Americas together, and a number of Central Americans, including a few Nicaraguans, had received military training and education in Argentina. In 1977, junta members General Roberto Viola and Admiral Emilio Massera secretly committed themselves to help Somoza at a Conference of American Armies in Managua.<sup>470</sup> By the time Carter formally suspended all military assistance in February 1978, Somoza was already buying arms from Argentina. Two groups of Argentines were in Nicaragua, both supported by the GTE in Florida. One trained the National Guard, working alongside Cuban-Americans and former U.S. and South Vietnamese Special Forces in the elite counterinsurgency school that Somoza's son established in 1977, after he returned from Special Forces training in the U.S.<sup>471</sup> The other group, headed by a former AAA member, worked with Somoza's secret police, the Oficina de Seguridad Nacional (OSN), to hunt the two dozen ERP and Montanero guerrillas who had fled Argentina and joined the Sandinistas.<sup>472</sup>

These Argentines were not able to help save the regime, but after Somoza's fall they quickly regrouped in Guatemala, where another Battalion 601 team was advising the Army. The Argentine concept of the wars in Central America as a front in an anti-communist war without frontiers was more than an ideological invention. Small teams of Argentines operated in all of the Central American countries, except Nicaragua, and large numbers of security forces from throughout Central America trained in Argentina. For the next three years, Argentines helped ex-Nicaraguan National Guardsmen form the Contras, expanded their methods to Honduras and

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<sup>470</sup> Eduardo Luis Duhalde, *El Estado Terrorista Argentino* (Barcelona, 1983), p. 118.

<sup>471</sup> Oscar Mendieta, "La EEBI y Michael Enchanis," *Monimbo, Nueva Nicaragua*, Edición 569, April 11, 2010.

<sup>472</sup> Ortega, *La Epopeya de la Insurrección*, p. 398.

El Salvador, and conducted operations in Costa Rica and Panama. Although it barely registers in the official U.S. record, this “transnational counterrevolutionary project” fundamentally shaped the wars in Central America.<sup>473</sup>

The Central Americans and Argentines enjoyed multiple personal connections. For example, the commander of the Honduran Police and Army, General Gustavo Álvarez, who became the principal host for the Contras, was a graduate of the Argentine Military Academy. Roberto D’Aubuisson, leader of El Salvador’s Death Squads and the rightist ARENA party, was intelligence liaison with Battalion 601 as an Army Major and later arranged for Argentine counterinsurgency support to El Salvador.<sup>474</sup>

In September 1980, members of the WACL from around the world gathered in Buenos Aires for the Fourth Congress of the Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation (CAL). The Congress became a celebrated event in conservative U.S. circles as a call to unify the continent in an aggressive war without frontiers against communism. Central America was very much on the agenda. Prominent among the observers in attendance was a group of congressional staffers, including aides to arch-conservative Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who became Roberto D’Aubuisson’s champion in the United States.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Armony, *Argentina, the U.S. and the Anti-Communist Crusade*, p. 83; Dickey, *With the Contras*, p. 115.

<sup>474</sup> Interview with MLN co-founder and public relations director Leonel Sisniega Otero, 1980, cited in Anderson and Anderson, *Inside the League*, p. 162; Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York, 1982), pp. 249-55; Craig Pyes, “Salvadoran Rightists: The Deadly Patriots,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 18-22, 1983; CIA cable, The 316<sup>th</sup> Military Battalion February 22, 1995, CIA FOIA; Stephen Kinzer, “Our Man in Honduras,” *New York Review of Books*, September 20, 2001, pp. 48; Armony, *Argentina and the United States*, pp. 94-101.

<sup>475</sup> “Argentina Redraws the Ideological Map of South America,” *Latin America Weekly Report*, September 19, 1980; Anderson and Anderson, *Inside the League*, pp. 147-8, 206; Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America*, pp. 160-3, 258, n. 91; Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua*, pp. 77-84.

#### **IV. Documenting the Gray Area - What can be said about the U.S. connection?**

The Argentines' extreme methods and devout anti-communism were in synch with the Central Americans. They provided intelligence and urban counterinsurgency expertise to Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans. Rural guerrilla warfare proved not to be their strong suit with the Contras, but they were a critical organizational and ideological catalyst. Argentina's stamp is readily observable in the 15th of September Legion's journal, *El Legionario*, published in Coconut Grove, Florida, where articles such as "Sun Tzu's Art of War" and "Principles of Strategy" repeated Argentine counter-insurgency doctrine.<sup>476</sup> About 150 Argentines were on the ground in Honduras when the U.S. first mobilized to support the Contras there in 1981, and they served formally as intermediaries until the CIA took over completely in 1982. Even after the U.S. broke with Argentina in the Falklands War, they remained, working in the Contra camps in Honduras and training Nicaraguans in Argentina, until 1983 when the newly elected civilian government replaced the military junta and pulled the last Argentine agents out of Central America. The question that remains is: what exactly was going on between Argentina and the United States in Central America before then during the Carter administration? What did others in the foreign policy and national security agencies, including the NSC, know and do? More specifically, did CIA officers actively collaborate with Argentine agents in that gray area between clandestine operations and covert action?

Showing toughness in the Cold War became a major issue in the 1980 presidential campaign, and as conservatives consolidated around Ronald Reagan, Carter was well into his own hardening. The administration, though, was still a house divided. In May, Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Pat Derian went public with her dismay that the Administration had

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<sup>476</sup> September 15<sup>th</sup> Legion, *El Legionario*, 1:3, June 1981.

reversed itself and was trying to improve relations with Argentina.<sup>477</sup> Derian had made Argentina the first on the list of human rights targets in 1977, managing, despite lack of specific authorities, to block U.S. interactions with the dictatorship, ranging from exports to cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation. Now, the change of heart came from the realization that Argentina's anti-communism had not prevented it from selling grain to the Soviet Union, which neutralized the U.S. embargo imposed over the invasion of Afghanistan. In justifying the policy change, Brzezinski claimed that U.S. pressure on Argentina had improved human rights conditions, citing the reduction in disappearances and killings between 1977 and 1980 as evidence.<sup>478</sup> The assertion also found its way into the new U.S. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, despite the lack of evidence that U.S. policy had any role in the reduction.<sup>479</sup> By 1980, the Videla regime had successfully prosecuted its Dirty War.<sup>480</sup> The institutional infrastructure for state repression, including Battalion 601, remained intact, and facing only a residual domestic threat, the fight against Marxist-Leninist revolution had shifted to Central America.

The dearth of information on U.S. cooperation with Argentina in Central America in 1979 and 1980 stands in contrast to the thorough documentation of how the Argentines became the bridge to the Contras after Reagan came to office in January 1981.<sup>481</sup> Nevertheless, much of the literature asserts that the CIA not only was aware of Argentina's operations in Central America, but was already facilitating early support for the Contras. That judgment may be well-

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<sup>477</sup> Ann Crittenden, "Human Rights And Mrs. Derian: A Change in Policy Life After Government Hackles Were Raised," *NYT*, May 31, 1980; Memorandum from Secretary of State Muskie to the President, U.S. Policy Toward Argentina, October 18, 1980, CIA Covert Operations: From Carter to Obama, 1977-2010, Doc. 10, NSDA.

<sup>478</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 433.

<sup>479</sup> Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 1980*, 1981, pp. 331-8.

<sup>480</sup> AmEmbassy Buenos Aires, telegram 7161, Argentine Government's Report on the Dirty War, April 29, 1983, NSDA.

<sup>481</sup> Max Guderzo, "Carter's New Look: US Foreign Policy in Latin America, 1977-80," in Max Guderzo and Bruna Bagnato (eds.), *The Globalisation of the Cold War: Diplomacy and Local Confrontation, 1975-85* (London, 2010), pp. 9-37.

founded, but requires further corroboration. A focus on human rights violations makes interpretive bias an issue, as do circular references which rely exclusively on two primary sources, both of them potentially compromised.

In congressional testimony given in 1987, GTE intelligence officer Leandro Sanchez Reisse stated he and his superior Raúl Guglielminetti had received CIA training in 1976. He alleged that while assigned to Florida, beginning in 1980, he laundered drug money and purchased weapons in support of Battalion 601 operations in Central America, with authorization from the CIA. He was testifying in closed door session to the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, chaired by then-Senator John Kerry. The hearings were an outgrowth of the Iran-Contra investigation in which the committee was trying to establish the extent of related involvement in narcotics trafficking and illegal banking activities. At the time of his testimony, Sanchez Reisse was in federal custody and had a strong motive to assert he had acted with U.S. government approval. The FBI had arrested him in New York on an INTERPOL warrant after he escaped from jail in Switzerland while awaiting extradition to Argentina to be tried for kidnap and extortion.

The second widely cited source was Edgar Chamorro, a Nicaraguan who also had motives for implicating the United States. Since 1980, Chamorro had been a member of the Unión Democrática Nicaragüense (UDN), a moderate anti-Sandinista group based in Costa Rica that was also opposed to association with former members of the National Guard. In 1981, the CIA brokered a union between the UDN and the 15<sup>th</sup> of September Legion, creating the main Contra organization, the FDN. Chamorro became the FDN spokesman, but after being ousted in 1984, he defected to the Sandinistas. He wrote an often-cited book critical of the CIA and gave an affidavit to the International Court of Justice in the 1986 case that Nicaragua brought against

the U.S. for mining its harbors.<sup>482</sup> According to Chamorro, the CIA was directly involved in organizing the nascent Contras in 1980, including the September 15<sup>th</sup> Legion with Argentine support. Some publications cite as evidence Chamorro's reference to a 1980 visit to Argentina by General Vernon Walters, a fluent Spanish speaker who had a long intelligence career and served as CIA Deputy Director under Nixon and Ford. This is an error. Retired General Andrew Goodpaster did visit Argentina in 1980 on behalf of the Carter Administration's initiative to improve relations. Walters, who held no official U.S. position in 1980, traveled to Argentina in the spring of 1981, when he helped broker the arrangement to collaborate in supporting the Contras. At that time, he was Special Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Latin America, and the Reagan Administration had recently asked Congress to lift restrictions on security assistance to Argentina. (Walters later replaced Jeanne Kirkpatrick as Reagan's UN Ambassador.) The publisher of Chamorro's book, *Packaging the Contras: A Case in CIA Disinformation*, was the now defunct Institute for Media Analysis. Among its other publications was the *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, founded by renegade CIA officer Phillip Agee, which publicized the names of clandestine CIA officers until the practice was prohibited by law in 1982.

Several other accounts refer to early CIA interest in the Contras. In his memoir, former State Department liaison to the Contras Tim Brown referred to unnamed contacts who told him they "were surprised that I was surprised" to learn that American involvement "began with President Carter, not President Reagan."<sup>483</sup> Other "witnesses" claimed that sometime in mid-1980 Americans and Argentines accompanied ex-National Guard Colonel Enrique Bermúdez to

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<sup>482</sup> Edgar Chamorro, *Packaging the Contras: A Case in CIA Disinformation* (New York, 1987); International Court of Justice, Case Concerning Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua V. United States of America), United Nations Publications, January 1, 2000.

<sup>483</sup> Brown, *The Real Contras*, p. 84.

assess camps where rural Contras had settled in Southern Honduras. When Brown interviewed Adolfo Calero, who became FDN political leader in 1983, Calero insisted that “the Argentines were never more than a front for the CIA.”<sup>484</sup> These accounts amount to hearsay; at best they were relating what they believed to be the truth.

Christopher Dickey and Sam Dillion, the two professional journalists who wrote previously cited books that focus on the origin of the Contras, refer credibly to some degree of American interest in the evolving Nicaraguan resistance during 1979 and 1980. They do not propose that this interest extended to conspiracy by providing arms or using the Argentines as cutouts. The most plausible depiction comes in Dillion’s account of how Enrique Bermúdez came to work for the CIA and became commander of the Contras.<sup>485</sup> According to Dillon, Bermúdez began meeting with U.S. officials to discuss the Nicaraguan opposition shortly after the Sandinista victory in 1979 and came onto the payroll in mid-1980. He circulated among former National Guard members, traveling to Florida and to Guatemala, where he worked with the Argentines and became the ranking officer in the September 15<sup>th</sup> Legion. Later in the year, he visited Argentina where he received support funds directly from the junta. This leaves open the question of whether Bermúdez became commander of the Contras in the first place because he was the CIA’s candidate.

What matters in establishing the facts is the gray area between intelligence activities and covert action. At a minimum, this sequence was consistent with Carter Administration deliberations on containing the spread of revolution and Cuban-Soviet influence in Central America that began around the time of the Sandinista victory in July. It places in context Carter’s

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Dillion, *Comandos*, pp. 61-5.

diary entry on Central America of October 19, 1979, recording his “disgust” at hearing of proposals for “military action, gunboats, intelligence activities, how we can manipulate elections, et cetera.”<sup>486</sup> The covert action findings that Carter signed, which have not been released, in principle provided wide scope for working with anyone who could have been considered “democratic Nicaraguan opposition.” At a minimum, the CIA was well-informed enough in early 1981 for Dewey Clarridge, recently appointed as Director of the Central American Task Force, to write:

My proposal to [CIA Director] Casey that we take the offensive in Nicaragua was based on intelligence that a force of about five hundred men was already in place in Honduras. It was primarily composed of remnants of the Nicaraguan National Guard...trained, advised, and equipped by a small group of Argentines from the Argentine Military Intelligence Directorate.<sup>487</sup>

Central America led the agenda of the first meeting of the National Security Council, with President Reagan presiding, on February 6, 1981, just two weeks into the new Administration. The tenor of the discussion was grim; the theme: “How to rescue a besieged region close to home by taking offensive action to check Soviet-backed Cuban aggression?”<sup>488</sup> It was not until nearly a year later, on December 1, 1981, that Reagan signed the first finding that provided \$19 million “to support and conduct paramilitary operations of the Nicaraguan resistance.”<sup>489</sup> Well before then, Clarridge, under Casey’s immediate direction, had begun working on an agreement under which the United States would provide covert support to the Contras through the Argentines, with Honduras acting as host. Called “La Tripartita,” the arrangement lasted until late in 1982, when the CIA took over the operation directly. The transition from political action to paramilitary support was a significant development in the

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<sup>486</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, 363.

<sup>487</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons*, 200.

<sup>488</sup> Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, February 6, 1981, Jason Saltoun-Ebin (ed.), *The Reagan Files: Inside the National Security Council, Vol. 2* (California, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>489</sup> Presidential Finding on Covert Operations against Nicaragua, NSC/ICS 333140, December 1, 1981, NSDA.

Contra war. But as dramatic as the changing of the guard from the Carter to the Reagan Administration was, it was also relatively seamless.

## **Chapter 5: El Salvador: Reform with Repression**

### **I. The Origins of U.S. Counterinsurgency in El Salvador**

During 1979, violent instability rocked El Salvador, inflamed by the insurrection in neighboring Nicaragua. Determined to avoid another fumbling reversal, the Carter administration responded proactively to prevent the spread of Soviet- and Cuban-backed revolution to another Central American country. The result was a bloody 12-year civil war in which the United States actively supported the Government of El Salvador, until the war ended with the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords between the Government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) on January 16, 1992. This commitment to El Salvador was the only major U.S. involvement in counter-insurgency between Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was integral to a strategy of regional containment that complemented support for the Contra insurgency in Nicaragua, and, along with Angola and Afghanistan, was the fourth fighting front of the global Cold War.

Because the intervention required support for the government, counter-insurgency in El Salvador was of a different nature and involved a greater degree of U.S. responsibility and range of action compared to support for insurgencies. Initially, the decision to intervene in an internal conflict so soon after Vietnam and to associate the United States with an extremely repressive regime notorious for its “Death Squads” caused enormous domestic controversy. When costs remained relatively low, with a light footprint that kept U.S. combat forces out, and democracy took hold, the controversy eventually died down. As a result, counter-insurgency was an open-ended contingency operation in which success came in the form of stalemate, not victory, sufficient to halt the spread of revolution in Central America. At the same time, it is impossible

to say how long the war would have continued or whether the U.S.-backed government would have prevailed if the Cold War itself had not come to an end when it did.

### **Biased Literature**

Much of the literature on El Salvador is problematic. The facts are generally not in dispute, but interpretations tend to reflect the deep politicization that carried over from Vietnam to Central America. Many accounts, including purportedly objective social science research, while not overtly ideological, convey a norm-based belief in the futility of force.<sup>490</sup> This bias leads to analyses that characterize the Salvadoran civil war as a revolutionary conflict between the people and the state, emphasizing issues of social justice and human rights while de-emphasizing its insurgency and counter-insurgency character, as well as the ideological motives of its protagonists. One result of this focus on the internal drivers of the war is to discount the efficacy of U.S. policy. The influence of this inherent bias is surprisingly widespread, and in its extreme form results in rejecting or ignoring facts while incorporating false information. For example, in November 1980 a “Dissent Paper” surfaced which allegedly represented the collective opinion of officials from several U.S. agencies sent through the State Department Dissent Channel, an officially sanctioned route for objecting to established policy. The so-called Dissent Paper was highly critical of U.S. support for the Salvadoran government and advocated negotiations with the FMLN guerrillas. Despite the fact that no officials claimed authorship and

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<sup>490</sup> Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York, 1984); Andrew J. Rotter, “Culture, the Cold War, and the Third World,” in Robert J. McMahon (ed.), *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 135-66; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, 2003); Cynthia McClintock, *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador’s FMLN and Peru’s Shining Path* (USIP, 2003); Brands, *Latin America’s Cold War*, pp. 197-206.

the State Department disavowed the document as a fabrication, the El Salvador Dissent Paper received widespread attention at the time and has persisted as a reference in current literature.<sup>491</sup>

Deeply embedded skepticism regarding U.S. policy distorts interpretations even in sophisticated publications. For example, William Stanley's *The Protection Racket State* and Mark Peceny's *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets* both argue that Reagan's support for democracy and human rights in El Salvador resulted primarily from congressional pressure, a viewpoint at odds with the reformist logic that actually drove policy and downplays the crucial formative actions of the Carter administration.<sup>492</sup> Westad goes further astray with the claim that, "While the brutality of the El Salvadorean civil war surpassed anything seen in the recent history of Latin America, US efforts at imposing change...had little effect."<sup>493</sup>

From the opposite perspective, an influential counter-stream of interpretation in the strategic studies literature and the neo-conservative canon has contributed to something of a myth that El Salvador was a U.S. counter-insurgency success.<sup>494</sup> This too requires qualification. The application of a unified political-military strategy without involving U.S. combat troops was an important precedent. However, more than a decade of indirect intervention was sufficient only to achieve a negotiated settlement, not victory, and resulted in a low quality democracy.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Anonymous, "Dissent Paper on El Salvador and Central America, DOS 11/06/80," *The Harvard Crimson*, January 23, 1981; SecState, telegram 298212, Bogus "Dissent Paper" on El Salvador and Central America, November 8, 1980, NSDA; Flora Lewis, "Foreign Affairs: Spreading Brushfire To the South," *NYT*, March 6, 1981; Michael Chanan, "Reporting from El Salvador: A Case Study in Participant Observation," *Journal of Intelligence History*, 9:1-2, 2009, pp. 53-73.

<sup>492</sup> William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State* (Pennsylvania, 1996); Peceny, *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets*, pp. 115-148.

<sup>493</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 347.

<sup>494</sup> Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York, 2002); Anthony James Joes, *Saving Democracies: U.S. Intervention in Threatened Democratic States* (Yale, 1999); John A. Lynn, "Patterns of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, July-August 2005, pp. 22-28.

<sup>495</sup> Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (eds.), *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (Maryland, 2005), pp. x-xxxiv; Benjamin C. Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency and Doctrine in El Salvador: The Frustrations of*

## Revolution in El Salvador

El Salvador was always a violent place. The political point of reference was “La Matanza” (The Massacre) of January 1932, when the Army reacted to a mass, communist-inspired rebellion by executing in the order of 30,000 Salvadorans, most of them indigenous peasants.<sup>496</sup> The oligarchy and military drew three enduring lessons from this traumatic event: reforms were the path to disorder, opposition equaled communism, and repression worked. Latin America’s smallest and most densely populated nation, in the 1970s El Salvador had one of the world’s highest murder rates and an archaic political system based on a pact between the Armed Forces and the elite, and was ripe for revolution.

With the advent of the Cold War, this authoritarian and deeply anti-communist system dovetailed with the United States and for decades benefitted from its support. At the same time, Salvadorans were proud that, unlike neighboring Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, their country had no history of direct U.S. intervention or political dependence. When the Carter administration began showing opprobrium over human rights in 1977, the Salvadoran government defiantly joined other Latin American militaries in rejecting further U.S. assistance.

In the summer of 1979, the situation changed abruptly for both El Salvador and the United States when the Sandinista-led insurrection next door in Nicaragua placed the Salvadoran Marxist-Leninist opposition confidently on the same road to revolution. The roots of revolution were deeper and more widespread in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, encompassing several small

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*Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (RAND, 1991); David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC, 2009).

<sup>496</sup> Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza* (Connecticut, 1971); Stanley, *The Protection Racket State*, pp. 54-7; Kenneth J. Grieb, “The United States and the Rise of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 3:02, November 1971, pp. 151-72.

leftist political parties, popular fronts across labor, professional, agricultural, and student groups, Catholic priests influenced by liberation theology, and five separate guerrilla organizations. A revolutionary movement, both public and clandestine, had been developing for years in San Salvador and throughout the countryside, with the exception of the western departments where the 1932 rebellion and La Matanza had been concentrated. As protests, strikes, and guerrilla attacks blossomed, the only response from the government, with the full support of the extremely conservative but not yet politically organized oligarchy and private sector, was to increase repression.

The Salvadoran Armed Forces had watched Somoza warily as he tottered and then fell, and the Sandinistas swept into power in July. The effects of the Communist onslaught reached their shores as hundreds of routed Nicaraguan National Guardsmen straggled by boat into the port of La Union.<sup>497</sup> Shocked, they increased counter-revolutionary violence further. But the momentum only grew, and between the second half of 1979 and late 1981, El Salvador descended into what one author compared to the Terror of the French Revolution, called the “*tiempos de locura*” (the crazy times).<sup>498</sup>

### **The U.S. Gets ahead of the Curve in El Salvador**

The disintegration in El Salvador at first received little attention while the Carter administration concentrated on forestalling the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. From San Salvador, the Embassy had been reporting nervously on the growth of left-wing agitation, but it remained sanguine about General Carlos Humberto Romero, who became President after a stolen

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<sup>497</sup> AmEmbassy San Salvador, telegram 4176, Nicaraguan Refugees in El Salvador, July 26, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>498</sup> Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, *Tiempos de Locura: El Salvador 1979-1981* (San Salvador, 2005), pp. 1-4.

election in 1977. Assistant Secretary Vaky was less sure. Determined to prevent a repeat embarrassment, he and his chief of policy planning, Luigi Einaudi, made a sounding trip to El Salvador at the end of July, one week after the Sandinistas rode into Managua.<sup>499</sup> They found a situation that was polarized and utterly grim. Seized with “revolutionary euphoria,” the radical Left was building an insurrection on the Nicaraguan model and had the initiative. The “bankrupt” Romero government was bereft of legitimacy and imagination, fixated on repression and locked in unproductive and mutually suspicious dialogue with the moderate political parties. The hope of the important Christian Democrat Party (PDC) was that “the U.S. will somehow move in and save them from the Marxists.” Einaudi and Vaky quickly reached the conclusion that Romero was “neither competent nor purposeful enough to warrant unconditional support.”<sup>500</sup>

Back in Washington, they made a single incremental recommendation to Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, as head of the Human Rights Coordinating Group, to reverse the U.S. prohibition on security assistance by authorizing the sale of tear gas so the Armed Forces would not have to continue “controlling demonstrations ... with machine guns.”<sup>501</sup> Actually, Vaky, with Einaudi as the principal architect, already had in mind a more ambitious, strategy to get ahead of the insurrectional curve. Rather than trying to reform a failing dictatorship as had occurred in Nicaragua, this time the United States would “build the center” by supporting political moderates against the extremes of both the right and the left. At the same time, the U.S. would advocate reforms of the constitution, the economy, and land tenure, in order to “quitar banderas” (steal flags) from the revolutionary left, while maintaining

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<sup>499</sup> AmEmbassy Tegucigalpa, telegram 4063, El Salvador: A First Step, July 26, 1979, NSDA; Luigi Einaudi, Roundtable on Central America, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington, DC, October 24, 2008.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

respect for human rights. Security assistance would bolster the Armed Forces, while providing breathing space for them to reform and improve performance. When Vaky testified to Congress in September that the issue challenging the U.S. in Nicaragua was to create stability out of revolution. In El Salvador, it was the contrary, to preserve stability by preempting revolution.

The problem was how to go about achieving it. The State Department led an interagency planning effort.<sup>502</sup> DOD assembled a proposal for resuming strictly non-lethal security assistance – trucks, radios, and riot gear, but anticipating meeting the Salvadoran Armed Forces’ urgent requirements for arms, ammunition, helicopters, and training. The Agency for International Development (USAID) prepared a quick disbursing economic assistance program. Deputy Assistant Secretary Bowdler travelled to El Salvador in August to offer a quid pro quo: The U.S. would provide assistance if Romero called for elections.<sup>503</sup> Romero refused, leaving the budding initiative in a stall.

## **II. El Salvador’s Most Announced Coup**

On October 15, 1979, an organization of junior military officers, the Juventud Militar, deposed President Romero in a well-orchestrated and almost bloodless coup.<sup>504</sup> They had elected as their leaders Colonel Adolfo Majano, the most senior liberal officer, and Colonel Jaime Abdul Gutierrez, an engineer identified with the senior leadership and the United States. Gutierrez was not particularly prominent, but his participation guaranteed that conservatives, who made up the

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<sup>502</sup> NSC Memorandum for Brzezinski from Robert Pastor, El Salvador, August 3, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>503</sup> Memorandum to the Acting Secretary from Assistant Secretary Vaky, Ambassador Bowdler’s Talking Points for El Salvador, August 21, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>504</sup> Menjívar, *Tiempos de Locura*, p. 80; State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research memorandum for ARA Assistant Secretary Vaky, Assessment of Outside Assistance to Salvadoran Rebels, October 5, 1979, NSDA.

bulk of senior officers, would not oppose the Juventud Militar, and the Americans would back them, which all agreed was essential for their survival.

All indications suggest that the Carter administration was not directly involved in the October 15 coup d'état, but it was intimately apprised in advance and reacted assertively to subsequent developments.<sup>505</sup> There is little doubt that Colonel Gutierrez was a paid CIA asset and the principal source for detailed reporting on the coup as it developed.<sup>506</sup> His claim to represent the U.S. seal of approval carried credibility with the officer corps, and his accession to the leadership was consistent with U.S. interests in preventing the new government from tilting too far leftward. The following guidance, dated October 17, from the CIA Latin American Division head Nestor Sanchez to the CIA station in San Salvador does not answer the question of direct involvement, but declassification of an operational channel message of this nature was unusual in its own right:

We would like to reinforce the need for precaution you have already taken not to involve [redacted] in a covert action role with the new government. At this time, we do not have a presidential finding which would allow us to engage in operations using agents of influence or other CA [covert action] activities regarding El Salvador. Thus, we must limit the Agency's role to serving as a channel for our policy makers.<sup>507</sup>

The message may well have been eyewash, an internal deception to mask that the station did exercise active influence in some form and was now being told to stand down. Carter promptly signed a covert action finding in November that authorized "training and other resources for moderate elements in El Salvador resisting ... guerrilla elements."<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> CIA Operational Report, Details of Coup D'Etat Against Government of Carlos Humberto, Which Is Scheduled for the Morning of 15, October 7, 1979, NSDA; ARA/CEN memorandum for Assistant Secretary Vaky, Military Coup in El Salvador – Contingencies, October 6, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>506</sup> Stanley, *Protection Racket State*, pp. 144-5.

<sup>507</sup> CIA Directorate of Operations, Central Intelligence Agency Reporting on Coup, October 17, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>508</sup> Snider, *The Agency & The Hill*, p. 288.

The Juventud Militar was authentically committed to reform. Three civilians joined the ruling Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno (JRG), which announced an “Emergency Program” to “stop the violence and corruption and guarantee the protection of human rights.”<sup>509</sup> They cashiered about 20 percent of the Armed Forces, both officers and enlisted men, and disbanded two security organizations, ANSESAL, the national intelligence office run out of the presidency, and the rural paramilitary auxiliary ORDEN. (Both had been created to combat communism in the 1960s, with assistance from the U.S. Special Forces and CIA.)

The coup was welcome news in the White House. President Carter noted on an El Salvador update in his Evening Reading of October 16, “We would ‘provide all assistance’ if they continued their support for human rights and democratic process.”<sup>510</sup> The U.S. recognized the JRG, promised aid, and deployed the first Mobile Training Team (MTT) to assess military requirements.<sup>511</sup> “The JRG continues to make progressive and moderate statements and its human rights posture appears excellent,” Pastor wrote in his initial assessment for Brzezinski on October 18, concluding, “All in all we could not have hoped for a better group.”<sup>512</sup> The Carter administration needed some good news in Central America, but Pastor was suffering from immoderate optimism. The Juventud Militar represented the fourth time that young military officers had attempted to reform El Salvador since the La Matanza in 1933. In each instance their initiatives collapsed in confrontation with obdurate superiors who had the backing of the private sector elite. The response of the conservative military leadership was equally reactionary this time, but with a significant difference. Bound up with U.S. intervention and the civil war that

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<sup>509</sup> Proclamation of the Armed Forces of El Salvador, October 15, 1979; AmEmbassy San Salvador telegram 5901, Second Coup Proclamation, October 16, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>510</sup> Robert Pastor, NSC memorandum, El Salvador talking points for Brzezinski, October 18, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>511</sup> SecState to AmEmbassy San Salvador, telegram 272443, Current U.S. Policy and Objectives in El Salvador, October 18, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>512</sup> Pastor, El Salvador talking points.

was in its first and bloodiest phase, reform of the system would proceed instead of fail, but only after a conservative correction.

### **Armed Forces Conservatives Kidnap the Coup**

As opposition to the leftward swing from within the Armed Forces and the political right emerged, members of the revolutionary organizations who had joined the new government departed, fearing for their lives. Colonel Guillermo Garcia became Defense Minister, placing members of his cohort in key positions, and in less than a year had sidelined Col. Majano and the Juventud Militar. For the next four years, Garcia presided over military politics; he was also the senior security interlocutor with the Salvadorans' American allies, and in that role proved very adept at stonewalling. The deteriorating political and security situation, including numerous kidnappings, had prompted many members of the elite so-called Fourteen Families to flee to Miami, but the private sector as a whole regrouped around the charismatic D'Aubuisson, who founded ARENA in April 1980.

The progressive supporters of the October 15 coup had expected to bring peace and reconciliation to El Salvador, but the result was the opposite. After a brief respite, repression resumed and a full-blown Dirty War confronted a well-developed revolutionary movement bent on launching a Nicaragua-style insurrection. State terror, symbolized by the feared Death Squads, continued virtually unchecked throughout 1980 and well into 1981.<sup>513</sup> Although it was impossible for the U.S. Embassy to track the full scope of violence, at least 10,000 people died in political violence during 1980, the highest single year total of the 75,000 killed during the entire

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<sup>513</sup> Pyes, "Salvadoran Rightists: The Deadly Patriots,"; Laurie Beckland, "Death Squads: Deadly Other 'War'," and "Death Squads: Members Tell Their Stories," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18-19, 1983; Editorial Jaguar, *Los Escaudrones de la Muerte en El Salvador* (San Salvador, 2004); Dickey, *With the Contras*, pp. 87-90; UN Security Council, *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, S/25500, 1993.

Civil War.<sup>514</sup> As in the Argentine model, intelligence-driven operations consisted of extra-legal arrest and clandestine detention, interrogation under torture, followed by execution. Victims included virtually the entire leadership of the non-clandestine left and Oscar Romero, the internationally admired Archbishop of San Salvador, shot by a sniper as he said mass.

As irrational and out of control as the violence seemed during El Salvador's "tiempos de locura," violence did serve political ends and the logic of war.<sup>515</sup> The combination of physical elimination and state terror removed the threat of overt communist victory, while a political arrangement between the Armed Forces and the Christian Democrat Party established the basis of the government's legitimacy and authority. The contest between the forces of revolution and counter-revolution would still be a close-run thing. However, the possibility of popular insurrection faded and evolved into protracted guerrilla warfare, while the alignment of the political center held. The developments, which took place between October 1979 and the first months of 1980, defined the character of the Salvadoran Civil War over the next 12 years.

The deep U.S. involvement after the October 15 coup as an indispensable political-military broker required a venture into El Salvador's heart of darkness. Instability engulfed the new JRG. Reformists and conservatives struggled for control of the government and Armed Forces, leftists quickly abandoned the Junta, the revolutionary movement burgeoned, and violence escalated. Between December and February, with the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as major preoccupations, there was little meaningful action out of

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<sup>514</sup> U.S. Congress, *Foreign Assistance and Related Programs for FY 1982: Hearings before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Foreign Operations*, 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, February 25, 1981; UN *Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*.

<sup>515</sup> Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out* (Cambridge, 1991) p. 163; Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action in El Salvador*, p. 47; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, pp. 155-7.

Washington on El Salvador. The White House had approved a \$50 million aid package and a modest counter-insurgency program built around non-lethal assistance.<sup>516</sup>

It was perhaps fortunate that a scarcity of high level attention gave Assistant Secretary Vaky considerable latitude. The decisive period occurred during about three weeks of intense political action on the ground in San Salvador between the second half of February and early March 1980. Carter had nominated Robert White to be the new ambassador, but conservatives critical of his outspoken advocacy of human rights in Paraguay were putting him through a difficult confirmation in the Senate. In the interim, Assistant Secretary Vaky recalled the weak Ambassador Devine and sent Deputy Assistant Secretary James Cheek to serve as chargé d'affaires.<sup>517</sup>

The situation in El Salvador was dire when Cheek arrived in mid-February. As Christian Democrat leader José Napoleón Duarte, who would soon join the Junta and become Cheek's principal interlocutor, described it, "After October 1979, there was a power vacuum... The only force holding back a Leftist revolution was the Army."<sup>518</sup> The CIA agreed. Director Stansfield Turner warned in a January Alert Memorandum to the NSC:

Leftist extremists continue to make important gains in military and political strength. Meanwhile, the governing junta is riven by divisions and its support among the politically active population is dwindling. Under these circumstances . . . the odds would favor an extreme left victory.<sup>519</sup>

Cheek's twin priorities were to ensure unity in the Armed Forces and ensure that moderates held the balance in government. There was also an expectation that the U.S. would somehow get

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<sup>516</sup> Minutes of NSC Special Coordination Committee Meeting, January 28, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>517</sup> Ambassador Frank J. Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy Under Attack* (New York, 1981).

<sup>518</sup> José Napoleón Duarte interviewed in Max Manwaring and Court Prisk (eds.), *El Salvador at War: An Oral History* (NDU, 1988), p. 36.

<sup>519</sup> DCIA Alert Memorandum, Threat of a Leftist Extremist Takeover in El Salvador, January 24, 1980, NSDA.

military violence under control. Cheek did not bring a blank check, but rather a conditional deal that promised aid in exchange for serious reform. His leverage was limited. Although eager for U.S. support, the military had reason to be deeply suspicious of the Carter administration. In their view, he had opened the Pandora's Box of chaos and revolution by abandoning Somoza and the Cold War in the first place.

Plus, the Salvadorans were not operating altogether alone. From the early 1960s until 1977, the United States had been El Salvador's principal source of advice, material assistance, and ideological formation. Now, it was rejoining a war already in progress. Members of the Cold War nexus that had long been aligned with the U.S. helped filled the gap: Taiwan where a number of Salvadoran officers, including Roberto D'Aubuisson, had received its special version of anti-communist training; Israel, which picked up some of the slack as an arms supplier; and Guatemala next door with its own brutal methods for countering subversion. Most importantly, Argentina was already on the scene in February when Cheek arrived. A team of Battalion 601 officers were providing intelligence support to the National Guard, and Salvadoran officers were receiving counter-guerrilla and urban counterinsurgency training in Buenos Aires.<sup>520</sup> The Salvadorans were already pursuing the Argentine method. Making the comparison to the Dirty War, a State Department analysis noted, "Over the past year the death toll per capita has been several times that of Argentina in 1975-78."<sup>521</sup>

These influences strengthened the extreme right within the military and the private sector. Cheek recognized that the threat to the project of building the center of a rightist putsch was as

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<sup>520</sup> AmEmbassy San Salvador, telegram 0809, Multilateralization of Military Assistance to El Salvador, February 5, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>521</sup> Department of State Memorandum for Brzezinski, El Salvador: Background Paper, December 11, 1980, NSDA.

dangerous as the challenge of Marxist-Leninist revolution. Not long after he arrived in February, he fended off a budding coup by signaling that the U.S. would walk away from El Salvador if the attempt went ahead.<sup>522</sup>

The indispensable priority was to consolidate military unity, the critical lesson that had come too late in Nicaragua. The contest for control of the Salvadoran Armed Forces persisted for much of 1980. Here, Cheek made it clear that the U.S. was siding neither with the extreme rightists such as Vice Minister Carranza or the left-leaning Juventud Militar, but with the conservative institutionalists in the High Command. The principal leaders were Junta member Gutierrez and Defense Minister Garcia, joined by National Guard Commander Eugenio Vides Casanova. All three soon promoted themselves to general officers, with Garcia emerging as the presiding commander. Although their sympathies were closer to the rightists, with the U.S. on their side, they acted to limit the right's challenge to their own power, while directly draining strength from the leftist reformers in the Juventud. They had some officers transferred to remote combat posts and placed others under commanders loyal to them. Several dissenters were assassinated and a few others, already identified as renegades, deserted to join the guerrillas.

Colonel Majano and the Juventud Military proved a double-edged sword. They were useful to the U.S. both as a source of pressure for reform and a counterweight to a coup. In May, Majano learned that Roberto D'Aubuisson was meeting secretly at a farm outside San Salvador with several active duty officers and FAN members to plot a second coup attempt. He sent loyal officers to detain them, although allies quickly had them released. The incident turned the political tide against the extreme right within the Armed Forces and was an important first step in

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<sup>522</sup> San Salvador, telegram 1336, Rightist Coup Imminent in El Salvador, February 22, 1980, NSDA; Alan Riding, "U.S. Said to Block Coup in El Salvador," *NYT*, February 25, 1980.

establishing civilian control of the government. Only one other coup threat materialized during the succeeding years.

On the other hand, Majano attempted to challenge the conservatives and reassert the power of the Juventud Militar in June and September 1980. Both times he had to back down when votes within the officer corps went against him. His days on the Junta were numbered. By December, the reformist movement was spent and the unity of the Armed Forces reasonably secure. When the High Command offered Majano exile as Ambassador to Spain, he instead denounced them, went into hiding, and ultimately exiled himself to obscurity in the United States.

Cheek's second task was to stabilize the government and move its political center of gravity toward the middle. After he arrived in February, he brokered a compromise that kept the High Command intact and placed Christian Democrats in government. Senior PDC leader Duarte was pro-U.S and had a political base. As the former mayor of San Salvador, he had won the 1972 presidential election, only to have the military take him prisoner, torture him, and expel him to Venezuela; he returned following the October 1979 coup as a national hero. Duarte did not control and could not challenge the military directly, and had to suffer the violence that saw dozens of lower-ranking PDC members assassinated. There was little trust, but the Armed Forces acquiesced as long as the party did not interfere with them. In April 1980, Duarte signed a series of reform decrees that nationalized the banks and agricultural exports, and launched the first of a planned three-phase agrarian reform. The reforms infuriated the right, which accused the PDC of being Communist and the U.S. of abetting them. But the government held. Duarte became provisional President in December, a position he would retain through the elections in 1982.

Duarte's election as President in 1984 marked El Salvador's successful transition to democracy, even though his government proved corrupt and only marginally competent.

### III. Grasping the Salvadoran Nettle

For the U.S., the shock of reversal in Nicaragua framed the Carter administration's determination to defend El Salvador. However, the continuing violence and human rights violations of the security forces made this a distasteful choice. The critical issue, however, became halting the spread of revolution. Anyone in Nicaragua following the FSLN victory who witnessed the comings and goings of Salvadoran revolutionaries, the solidarity committees, and the declarations of the government would have agreed with the CIA assessment that, "The Sandinistas have trained, advised, and probably armed revolutionaries," while "Havana continues to work to establish clandestine support mechanisms for insurgents in El Salvador."<sup>523</sup> Nevertheless, NSC Latin America staffer Bob Pastor, who was heavily committed to reaching accord with the Sandinistas and relatively more complacent on El Salvador, claimed it was not until more than a year later that a CIA report of January 6, 1981, "for the first time, in my opinion, provided conclusive proof that the Nicaraguan government was providing significant amounts of aid to the insurgency in El Salvador."<sup>524</sup>

Duarte's accession in March 1980 came with a U.S. promise to support "clean counterinsurgency" with \$5m in security assistance and \$50 million in economic aid.<sup>525</sup> The lethal vs. non-lethal distinction and respect for human rights were considered highly important in

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<sup>523</sup> NSC Weekly Report #111 from Brzezinski to the President, October 5, 1979, NSDA; CIA, Nicaragua: Export of the Revolution, January 11, 1980; Memorandum for the President from Brzezinski, Nicaragua's External Policy, undated, (January 1980), NSDA.

<sup>524</sup> Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, p. 185.

<sup>525</sup> Alan Riding, "U.S. Aid to Salvador: Bid to Bar Another Nicaragua," *NYT*, February 23, 1980.

the U.S., if not to the Salvadoran High Command. Actual deliveries were more hesitant and provided in fits and starts. Since January, some equipment such as riot gear, trucks, and radios had arrived, and technical teams had been assisting with logistics, vehicle maintenance, communications, medical services, and public relations. The U.S. had also delivered Six UH1H (Huey) helicopters from Vietnam inventories, with the strict condition that they not be armed.

The situation during 1980 was continuing to deteriorate when Defense Secretary Harold Brown wrote a memo to Brzezinski on October 8, attaching yet another CIA threat warning.<sup>526</sup> In it the Secretary urged more decisive action on security assistance to prevent military collapse. A subsequent series of SCC and other interagency meetings followed at which a more comprehensive strategy for El Salvador took shape. The recommendations included immediate provision of lethal equipment, four additional helicopters, \$5 million more in Foreign Military Sales, intelligence and special operations support for arms interdiction, a naval MTT, and four ground force MTTs, with professionalization of the Salvadoran Armed Forces a longer-term goal. The total added up to \$25-70 million in additional military requirements over the next 12-18 months, plus \$30-100 million in economic aid.<sup>527</sup>

### **The Joint Venture between El Salvador and the U.S.**

U.S. assistance to El Salvador always came with strings attached. The need to balance Cold War containment with human rights entangled policy management and domestic politics in serious and at times painful tension between power and principle. Proximity in America's backyard accentuated attention from Congress and the media, keeping El Salvador under a public

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<sup>526</sup> Memorandum for Brzezinski from Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Countering the Insurgency in El Salvador, October 8, 1980, NSDA; Memorandum for Brzezinski from Robert Pastor, Harold Brown's Memo on El Salvador, October 16, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>527</sup> Department of State, Summary NSC Paper on El Salvador, Undated (October 1980), NSDA.

microscope. Prominent Democratic representative from New York, Stephen Solarz, captured the dilemma: "We do not want to see a guerrilla victory, but we do not want to see the United States provide assistance to a government whose security forces remain responsible for the abduction and torture of thousands of people."<sup>528</sup>

The two objectives – supporting war in the name of containment and controlling violence in the name of human rights – were at odds with each other. Congress levied conditions on aid, but it would not take responsibility for cutting aid and thereby risk “losing” another country to communism. That placed the onus on the Executive. Carter set the pattern for managing the friction between these aims without having to choose one or the other. In the end, the Cold War justification for aiding El Salvador, bolstered by the promise of Duarte and the government reforms, prevailed over human rights concerns. The dynamic persisted when Reagan came into office and Congress formalized conditions on assistance in 1981 by requiring presidential certification every six months that the Government of El Salvador was “making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights.”<sup>529</sup>

As the commitment deepened to El Salvador during 1980, the Carter administration presumed that the promise of life-saving aid would serve as leverage over Defense Minister Garcia and the High Command. However, the Salvadoran Armed Forces were willing allies only to a point. They did acquiescence to the Christian Democrats and government reforms, but when it came to outside interference that threatened their autonomy and impunity, the military resisted. The problem was the same one Robert Komer had emphasized in his assessment on U.S.

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<sup>528</sup> Margot Hornblower, “Panel Votes most of El Salvador Aid,” *WP*, May 12, 1983.

<sup>529</sup> El Salvador Certification, Presidential Determination 82-4, January 28, 1982, pursuant to Section 728 (b), (d), and (e) of the International Security and Development Cooperation Action of 1981.

performance in Vietnam: “The deeper we got in the less leverage we had.”<sup>530</sup> It boiled down to a question of mutual dependence that placed the United States in a commitment trap.<sup>531</sup> If the Salvadoran regime required U.S. sponsorship for its survival, U.S would not risk destabilizing the military, much less sacrifice it to the communist onslaught by actually cutting off aid. Common portrayals – including in the White House – tended to assume the U.S. and El Salvador were in a patron-client relationship. In a more accurate characterization, it was a joint venture, in which each shared relative power and responsibilities along with risks and rewards.

### **Ambassador White as Human Rights Crusader**

In his tumultuous ten and a half months as ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White often seemed to be at cross purposes with the joint venture. He arrived on March 11, 1980, just after James Cheek had consolidated the pact between the High Command and the PDC. White quickly lived up to his reputation as a human rights crusader, and argued that the source of armed opposition in El Salvador was not external subversion, but the lack of equity and social justice. He staunchly defended the Christian Democrats and their reforms, while publically condemning both the extreme left and the right. He made no effort to establish rapport with Garcia or the other members of the High Command, and instead, terming them “Murder Incorporated,” he chastised them for failing to control their violence.<sup>532</sup> White applied leverage, for example, promising additional helicopters only if officers accused of human rights violations were cashiered or transferred. He delayed deployment of MTTs, instead having Salvadoran officers

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<sup>530</sup> Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, p. 30.

<sup>531</sup> Hilton L. Root, “Walking with the Devil: The Commitment Trap in U.S. Foreign Policy, *The National Interest*, 8, March–April 2007, pp. 42–5.

<sup>532</sup> Briefing Memorandum from John Bushnell, ARA Acting for the Secretary, Situation in El Salvador and MTTs, March 13, 1980, NSDA.

sent to Panama for a three-week internal defense and development course that emphasized human rights. White was a courageous and outspoken advocate of human rights in the midst of the “*tiempos de locura*.” However, his State Department bosses were often left frustrated and the net effect must be questioned. The extreme right rallied in enmity toward him personally. With trust entirely lacking, the Armed Forces increased their resistance, while death squad violence proceeded throughout the year undiminished.

### **Reform with Repression**

On the night of November 4, 1980, upper class neighborhoods of San Salvador erupted in gunfire. It was not a guerrilla assault, but rather a celebration of Election Day in the United States, which had resulted in Ronald Reagan’s defeat of Jimmy Carter. The Salvadoran right and the military were certain that they would now have a free hand to eliminate their adversaries. Reagan had promised to rid Central America of the communist menace, and any number of people associated with the campaign had given similar assurances that “help was on the way.”<sup>533</sup> It had appeared that the new team was prepared to focus exclusively on fighting the Cold War in El Salvador while letting support for human rights slip, but Reagan’s appetite for doing so, and his latitude were far less than many expected.

One month after the election, the tragic abduction, rape, and murders of four American churchwomen in El Salvador on December 2, 1980 was “a pivotal event in the history of U.S. interventions in Central America,” and decades later it continues to compel fascination and revulsion.<sup>534</sup> The killings were at once crimes and acts of war, callous and brutal even by the

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<sup>533</sup> Anderson and Anderson, *Inside the League*, p. 158; “Latin Unrest Called a Peril to the U.S.,” *NYT*, December 17, 1980.

<sup>534</sup> Raymond Bonner, “The Diplomat and the Killer,” *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2016.

standards of El Salvador, and the fact that the victims were not only U.S. citizens, but three missionary nuns and a lay worker from the Catholic Maryknoll order magnified the shock. The incident galvanized public awareness in the United States, thrusting El Salvador to the forefront of foreign policy issues in the final days of the Carter administration when the transition to Ronald Reagan was already underway. The official reaction exposed the tradeoff between human rights and containment like no other event, while putting the efficacy of leverage to a severe test.<sup>535</sup> The media depicted an enraged Ambassador Robert White and other stunned embassy officials standing by as the dead nuns were exhumed after discovery of their makeshift graves.<sup>536</sup> “Count 1,000 dead peasants for one dead, raped American nun,” Alexander Cockburn wrote in what became an iconic essay, offering the sardonic judgment that “El Salvador was a TFN (a Totally F\*\*\*\*d-up Nation).”<sup>537</sup> But for White, a Boston Catholic, the atrocity was deeply personal. The evening before the murders, two of the churchwomen had dined with him and his wife and stayed as guests at the official residence. They left the next morning to pick up two sister nuns who were arriving on a flight from Managua, where they worked with Christian Base Communities closely identified with the Sandinista revolution. The four women were intercepted in their vehicle as they on the road back to San Salvador from the international airport. Most observers, including White, considered the circumstances sufficient evidence to conclude that the forces were responsible.

In reaction, President Carter immediately suspended all assistance to the country. He dispatched a Presidential Delegation consisting of Assistant Secretary for Latin America William

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<sup>535</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, pp. 60-4; Arns, *Crossroads*, pp. 61-4.

<sup>536</sup> CBS News clip, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-11-11/how-justice-slain-americans-took-backseat-cold-war-politics>, accessed January 10, 2016.

<sup>537</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Blood and Ink: Keeping Score in El Salvador,” *Harpers*, February 1, 1981, pp. 80-3.

Bowdler, who had replaced Vaky in late-1979, along with William D. Rodgers, who had served as Henry Kissinger's Assistant Secretary during the Ford administration.<sup>538</sup> They were charged with pressing the military to mount a credible investigation while reforming itself and getting violence under control. If anything, the situation worsened. Given the promise of laxer treatment from the incoming Reagan team, the High Command was not much disposed to bow to pressure from the outgoing Carter administration. Just before Bowdler and Rodgers traveled to San Salvador, Reagan's State Department transition team undercut them by leaking a report recommending the removal of White, Robert Pastor, James Cheek, and several other "social reformers" who worked on Latin America.<sup>539</sup> In San Salvador, Duarte took over as interim President, and with the government suffering a critical foreign exchange shortage, the administration released economic but not military assistance. The Salvadoran High Command opted to stonewall. Killings continued unabated, surpassing 10,000, which would make 1980 the most violent year of the war.

Liberal and conservative Catholics were sharply divided in the United States, and the political-religious dimension of the murders was exceptionally important, with ramifications for that would persist throughout the Reagan years.<sup>540</sup> Liberal Catholic members of Congress such as Tip O'Neill, the speaker of the House of Representatives, were deeply opposed to U.S. policy in Central America. In the opposing camp were prominent conservative Catholics on Reagan's new leadership team, who, in alignment with Polish Pope John Paul II, considered communism and the Soviet Union the source of spiritual evil. Among them were CIA Director William

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<sup>538</sup> Juan de Onis, "U.S. Suspends New Aid to Salvador Till Deaths Are Clarified," *NYT*, December 5, 1980.

<sup>539</sup> Juan de Onis, "Reagan's State Dept. Latin America Team Asks Curbs on 'Social Reformers,'" *NYT*, December 4, 1980.

<sup>540</sup> Margaret Healy, "A Lost Opportunity for Nicaragua – and for Us," *Newsday*, March 19, 1980; Theresa Kelly, "Reagan's Real Catholics vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras," *Diplomatic History*, Advance Access, July 13, 2015, doi:10.1093/dh/dhv033.

Casey, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, and UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick.. In December 1980 Kirkpatrick told an interviewer that, “The nuns were not just nuns...The nuns were also political activists on behalf of the Frente [FDR-FMLN].”<sup>541</sup> A couple of months later, Secretary of State Haig told Congress in credibility-damaging testimony that the churchwomen “may have tried to run a roadblock” and “there may have been an exchange of gunfire.”<sup>542</sup> This commentary required ignoring the facts that they had been raped, that their hands were tied behind their backs, and that they had been executed with shots to the head. Efforts to claim they were misquoted or taken out of context did not erase the perception that the new Reagan administration would defend the worst abuses of the Salvadoran military.

Compounding the problem was the murder of two more American citizens on January 3, 1981, brazenly machine-gunned at close range as they dine with the chief of El Salvador’s Agrarian Reform Institute, the principal target. The U.S. victims had semi-official status as advisors from the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the anti-Communist arm of the AFL-CIO labor organization, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Dogged FBI agents and embassy officers eventually cracked both cases. The killers in both cases were associated with the military, and they, although no one at higher level were prosecuted at U.S. insistence. Well before that, the demands of war determined that Carter’s final decision on El Salvador again placed power ahead of principle.

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<sup>541</sup> John Hall, “Ambassador Kirkpatrick: Reagan-appointed Democrat Speaks Her Mind on World, Domestic Politics,” *Tampa Tribune*, December 25, 1980.

<sup>542</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, 97:1, *Foreign Assistance Legislation for FY 1982* (Part I, Hearings), March 1981, p. 163.

#### IV. The FMLN “Final Offensive”

On the afternoon of January 10, 1981, ten days before Ronald Reagan’s inauguration, gunfire again lit up the streets of San Salvador and other cities and towns throughout the country. This time it was not in celebration. The recently formed Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) had decided after the November 4 election that it not going to wait and see what Reagan was going to do in El Salvador, but would present the United States with a *fait accompli*. Broadcasting over the guerrilla radio station Radio Venceremos on January 10, the FMLN announced:

At 5:00 this afternoon the general offensive was launched. The enemy is lost; we have him surrounded; popular justice is at hand. . . People of El Salvador, we have begun the national liberation. The moment has come to take to the streets.<sup>543</sup>

This “Final Offensive” was intended to replay the Sandinista-led insurrection in Nicaragua a year and a half earlier. The Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutionaries had close associations, and Nicaragua was their sanctuary. As with the Sandinistas, their principal source of inspiration, guidance, and support was Cuba. Fidel Castro had long-standing relations with the older generation of Salvadoran revolutionary leaders, and hosted protracted talks to bring the five revolutionary factions together began during late-1979 in Havana under his direction. The America Department of the General Directorate of Intelligence was the principal sponsor, with the Directorate of Special Operations from the Ministry of Interior providing military assistance from the same Special Forces group that assisted the Sandinistas as well as the MPLA in Angola. They drove the same bargain with them they had with Sandinistas: unity before arms.<sup>544</sup> On

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<sup>543</sup> FMLN, “Declaration of General Offensive,” *Uno Mas Uno*, Mexico City, January 11, 1981.

<sup>544</sup> CIA National Foreign Assessment Center, *Nicaragua: Export of the Revolution – The First Six Months*, January 11, 1980, NSDA; Rex A. Hudson, “Castro’s America Department: Coordinating Cuba’s Support for Marxist-Leninist Violence in the Americas,” *The Cuban American National Foundation*, 1988, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/rex-hudson.htm>, accessed January 10, 2016; José Angel Moroni Bracamonte and David E. Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War*,

October 10, 1980, the five groups agreed to form the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, named like the FSLN after the martyred leader of their failed 1932 insurgency. By the time of the final offensive three months later, the CIA estimated the FMLN had covertly received 200 hundred tons of weapons from Cuba and Nicaragua.<sup>545</sup>

This time, though, it was the left, not the United States, that was behind the curve. There would not be a second Nicaragua. Instead of a revolutionary *fait accompli*, the final offensive was a failure. Assessments, including from the guerrillas themselves, were fairly uniform.<sup>546</sup> Guerrilla columns made serious incursions into San Salvador and several departmental capitals and occupied dozens of outlying towns. However, the FMLN suffered battlefield errors, lack of leadership, and lapses of coordination. The Armed Forces had seized arms caches and maintained cohesion, defending themselves against direct attacks and forcing the FMLN from population centers. With the exception of the garrison in the western city of Santa Ana, barracks rebellions by sympathizers from the remnants of the Juventud Militar also failed to materialize.

The final offensive met political and military misfortune, but the FMLN had not been trying to defeat the Armed Forces. Rather, its aim had been to spark an insurrection, and it had miscalculated badly. Although it mobilized upward of 10,000 armed supporters, the people at large simply did not respond to the FMLN's summons to national liberation. The political conditions did not exist. By the end of 1980, the death squads had eliminated most of the left's non-clandestine leaders, while security force violence had put an intimidating end to public

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*Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (Connecticut, 1995); Andrea Oñate, "The Red Affairs: FMLN-Cuban relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-1992," *Cold War History*, 11:2, May 2011, pp. 133-54.

<sup>545</sup> CIA, National Foreign Assessment Center Memorandum, Cuba: Looking to El Salvador, February 14, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>546</sup> James Nelson Goodsell, "Salvador Leftist Offensive Fizzles, Moderate Junta Bolstered by US Aid," *CSM*, January 19, 1981; Gabriel Zaid, "Enemy Colleagues: A Reading of the Salvadoran Tragedy," *Dissent*, Winter 1982, pp. 26-35; Menjívar, *Tiempos de Locura*, pp. 221-46; McClintock, *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America*, pp. 53-5; Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention*, pp. 89-95.

opposition and roused latent fears of communism and of La Matanza in 1932. A sufficient measure of political legitimacy balanced the military's extreme exercise in authority. In contrast to Nicaragua's vulnerability under the sultanistic Somoza, the strategy of building the political center combined with reforms, which included the promise of elections, to offer another way out.

Che Guevara himself had written the judgment:

Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted.<sup>547</sup>

The January 1981 final offensive was a strategic defeat for the FMLN. There was no battle for the capital city, no popular insurrection, no collapse of the Armed Forces, no Tet-like impact in the United States. Yet the FMLN was resilient, armed and united, and it adapted. Pivoting quickly, the forces of each faction withdrew to their respective rural bases where they enjoyed a measure of popular support. With an initial core strength of over 5,000 fighters, fully one-third the size of the Armed Forces at the time, the FMLN was able to control or contest about one-third of eastern and northern El Salvador. Nicaragua and Cuba continued to provide support and sanctuary. Attacking infrastructure and the economy, mounting urban operations, and taking on the Armed Forces in semi-conventional formations, in 1981 the FMLN adopted a strategy of protracted warfare and began its evolution into a tough and proficient guerrilla army.

### **Carter's Final Steps on El Salvador**

Reacting to the final offensive during his last week in office, Jimmy Carter made two decisions that deepened the U.S. commitment to El Salvador. Secretary of State Muskie had recommended on January 8, two days before the FMLN offensive began, that the President

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<sup>547</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York, 1960), p. 51.

restore military aid to El Salvador, arguing that investigations into the Nuns' and Sheraton cases were under way. On January 14, Carter lifted the suspension, authorizing the release of \$2.7 million in non-lethal military equipment, including helicopters.<sup>548</sup> On the 16th, he signed a Presidential Determination under Section 506(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which gave him authority to provide emergency assistance to the Salvadoran Armed Forces without requiring prior approval from Congress.<sup>549</sup> The \$5 million in additional aid included weapons and ammunition to restore stocks depleted during the final offensive, the first lethal equipment El Salvador had received since 1977. On the notification list were 2,000 M16 rifles, 6.5 million rounds of ammunition, hand grenades, and machine guns to arm helicopters, as well as the first of the long-delayed MTTs. According to the justification:

The Salvadoran need for this materiel is critical and we must respond rapidly to its legitimate security needs... El Salvador is now faced with a new and massive threat to its security, brought about by the supply of new and substantial amounts of arms and ammunition to the Marxist guerrillas from their foreign supporters.<sup>550</sup>

An Interagency Group was also at work on a detailed proposal for a further \$25 million in short-term security assistance.<sup>551</sup> From San Salvador, Ambassador White, who had reluctantly concurred with the emergency shipment but not the MTTs, objected strongly to this additional aid. He argued that no investigations into the murder of U.S. citizens were under way, and that approval would merely encourage the Armed Forces to continue ignoring U.S. human rights' concerns while pursuing their bloody practices.<sup>552</sup> It was a futile parting shot.

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<sup>548</sup> Memorandum for the President from Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, Security Assistance to El Salvador, January 8, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>549</sup> Presidential Determination No. 81-2, Immediate Military Assistance to El Salvador January 16, 1981, UCSB.

<sup>550</sup> Executive Office of the President, Justification for Presidential Determination to Authorize the Furnishing of Immediate Military Assistance to El Salvador, January 15, 1981; SecState 12319, Justification for Use of Sec. 506 Authority, January 17, 1981.

<sup>551</sup> Department of State Memorandum for Inter-Agency Distribution, NSC/IG-ARA Meeting on El Salvador, January 24, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>552</sup> AmEmbassy San Salvador, telegram 537, Sharp Shift in U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador?, January 22, 1981, NSDA.

In the broader picture, these final decisions on El Salvador were consistent with other shifts that marked Carter's late-term militarization of the Cold War. These also encompassed increasing the defense budget, stationing naval forces in the Persian Gulf, and supporting the mujahedin insurgency in Afghanistan. In El Salvador, the precedence given to human rights gave way to national security priorities. The fine distinction between lethal and non-lethal assistance disappeared. Investigations into the murders of American citizens, attention to human rights, and contending with the extreme right would remain important, but no longer stood as outright conditions on aid. It was also a more nuanced approach in which the goal of securing political legitimacy while supporting violent military authority – of reform with repression, became the basis for a more complete and enduring counter-insurgency strategy.

The United States provided \$48.9 million in military aid to El Salvador in 1981 and \$82.5 million in 1982, based on Carter administration plans. When Army Special Forces Brigadier General Fred Woerner presented his comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy in November 1981, most of his recommendations were already under way or in preparation.<sup>553</sup> The Reagan administration's allegedly all-new commitment to El Salvador was built entirely on Carter.

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<sup>553</sup> Brigadier Fred Woerner, Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team (draft), November 16, 1981 author's files.

## Chapter 6: Ronald Reagan Draws the Line

### I. Making America Great Again ... in Central America

A sense of decline still gripped the United States when Ronald Reagan assumed office on January 20, 1981. The belief that Carter's presidency had failed was widespread. The country had not entirely recovered from Watergate and Vietnam. An oil crisis and inflation roiled the economy. The end of the year-long Iran hostage crisis brought relief without victory. The Cold War had revived as U.S.-Soviet relations descended to a new low. For Reagan, the sunny conservative, "Make America Great Again" was more than a campaign slogan. Declinism was most of all a problem of attitude, and his first goal was to revive national confidence.<sup>554</sup>

At the top of the agenda was standing up to the Soviet Union. Its military power was growing, and further advances threatened in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Where to draw the line? By default rather than design that place became Central America, most immediately in the smallest Latin American nation, El Salvador. The more difficult issue was, how exactly to draw that line? It would take nearly a year for the new Reagan team to decide formally what the United States would do in Central America, but they were at work well before the inauguration. Most of them thought they were striking off in a completely new direction and were simply unaware they were building entirely on the direction set under Jimmy Carter.<sup>555</sup> As Robert Osgood put it:

The Reagan Administration is repeating the first beat of a familiar rhythm of American political life....The continuities of American foreign policy are always greater than the political claims to innovation would have one believe.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, pp. 152-4, pp. 193-94; Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 743.

<sup>555</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 242-4.

<sup>556</sup> Robert E. Osgood, "The Revitalization of Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, 60:3, December 1981, p. 465.

Most of the literature acknowledges that the Reagan administration picked up in Central America where the Carter administration left off, but the tendency is to emphasize the differences between the two.<sup>557</sup> Politically and ideologically those differences were great, but as matters of policy and strategy they represented an evolution rather than a distinct break. Reagan had referred to Central America often during the election campaign. He gave voice to the arguments of Jeanne Kirkpatrick and the Santa Fe Report, that Soviet-Cuban subversion in Central America threatened U.S. national security and it was a mistake to abandon U.S. allies. The solution required a return to containment. The Cold War strategy, to exclude hostile external powers and intervene in the Western Hemisphere, was also a return to the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary.

President Reagan, like Carter, led with moral conviction. But where Carter had wrestled and never quite resolved the contradictions of principle and power, Reagan carried a deeply grounded sense of America's purpose and dealt with the world as it was. If there was a major difference between Carter and Reagan, it might best be described as strategic passion. Where Carter had been reactive and defensive, Reagan embraced Central America as a place to take the offensive in the global Cold War. Domestically, the politicization of Central America and the fear of another Vietnam-like quagmire critically constrained Reagan's freedom of action. The strategic problem was how to achieve U.S. aims in the region through war while limiting the actual use of force?

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<sup>557</sup> Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, pp. 156-62; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 186; Yoshitani, *Reagan at War*, pp. 46-56; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 170-6; Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 86-7, Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, pp. 233-7.

Insiders and observers alike shared the impression that the Reagan Administration floundered from crisis to crisis in Central America during its first year.<sup>558</sup> The one thing that saved them was the fact that Carter had left a basic policy in place. Reagan and his new foreign policy team shared a consensus that Cuban and Soviet penetration was the source of instability in Central America and the Caribbean and a threat to American security. Crisis in the region was also an opportunity to demonstrate American determination in the Cold War. But that was as far as agreement went. Competing proposals abounded. Within the bureaucracy, the Inter-agency Core Group met frequently, and its members kept busy, circulating intelligence reports and strategy documents up the chain to the new leaders of their respective agencies. UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick continued to advocate that the U.S. needed to make its stand in Central America regardless of whether its allies were autocrats or democrats. Bill Casey at CIA had much the same idea and began taking action as soon as he took over as Director in January. During the transition, he had ordered reports on Central America, began building the case for more covert action in Nicaragua, and held meetings on El Salvador.

### **El Salvador is The Urgent Case**

In early 1981, El Salvador was the urgent case. The government was shaky, the right wing threatened, death squads filled the streets with bodies, and even though the final offensive had failed, guerrilla forces had the initiative. The desire to do something about it was compelling, but to many deeper U.S. involvement was risky. In addition, there was the question of how El Salvador and Central America ranked with other priorities, a point captured in Robert Tucker's comment that, "The eagle that kills the deer in Central America will not frighten the bear in the

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<sup>558</sup> Robert S. Leiken, "Eastern Winds in Latin America," *Foreign Policy*, Number 42, Spring 1981, pp. 94-113.

Middle East.”<sup>559</sup> Reagan’s political advisors certainly would have preferred to keep Central America on the back burner. Led by what was termed “the Troika,” consisting of Chief of Staff James Baker, Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, and Counselor Edwin Meese, they feared that Central America would prove a distraction and complicate bipartisan support needed in Congress for Reagan’s top priorities: his economic recovery plan and rebuilding the Armed Forces. Critically, First Lady Nancy Reagan, the guardian of her husband’s legacy, was not about to let him go to war over Central America.<sup>560</sup>

At great pains to demonstrate it was striking off in a new direction, the first thing the Reagan administration did was fire the career State Department personnel who had carried out Carter’s policies in Central America. As anticipated in the leaked transition report, the dismissals included Ambassador Robert White, who had symbolized the human rights crusade, and Assistant Secretary Bowdler, both of whom retired, along with Deputy Assistant Secretary James Cheek, unceremoniously exiled to Kathmandu. Significantly, Latin America Policy Planning chief Luigi Einaudi, who was more than any other single individual responsible for the strategy of building the center in El Salvador, remained in place.

### **Going to the Source in Cuba**

The chief drummer for stronger action in the region throughout 1981 and until he resigned in June 1982 was Secretary of State Al Haig. He began in the first gathering of Reagan’s new national security team at Blair House shortly before the inauguration. Haig, who was the only one Reagan did not know well, surprised the group with a passionate argument that

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<sup>559</sup> Robert W. Tucker, “The Purposes of American Power,” p. 272.

<sup>560</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, pp. 154-5; Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 298.

confronting the Soviets over Central America should be their top foreign policy priority.

Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger wrote that Haig further shocked them by proposing, “We would have to invade Cuba and, one way or another, put an end to the Castro regime.”<sup>561</sup>

Al Haig was no wild-eyed conservative like the ideologues who positioned themselves as Reagan’s true supporters. Only Vice President Bush possessed comparable international, military, and White House experience. An Army four-star general, decorated in Vietnam, Haig had served in the Nixon and Ford White House as Military Assistant to Henry Kissinger and played a critical role as chief of staff during Nixon’s resignation. He was serving as NATO commander (SACEUR) when Reagan tapped him for Secretary of State. Haig is generally portrayed as a Nixon-Kissinger realist and a Reagan moderate, but he drew the hardest of hard lines on the Cold War in Central America and Cuba. In his assessment, the critical lessons of the wars in Korea and Vietnam did not concern the primacy of ensuring public support or the dangers of protracted conflict and escalation, but rather that half-measures led to quagmire and the failure of national will. In Central America, he wrote, “To start small, to show hesitation,...to localize our response was to Vietnamize our situation.”<sup>562</sup> Because Cuban adventurism and Soviet ambition lay behind revolution, “I believed our policy should carry the consequences of this directly to Moscow and Havana...to commit ourselves at a high level of intensity from the beginning.”<sup>563</sup> By meeting what the challenge with a military response, the President:

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<sup>561</sup> Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace* (New York, 1990), pp. 26-31.

<sup>562</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 118.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

Would create a momentum that would help to bring about the strengthening of an international order based on peaceful change under the rule of law. But if . . . he reproduced the miscalculations of the past, then it seemed to me that the brutality and the rapacity that had marked international life in recent years must continue, with results that could not be calculated.<sup>564</sup>

Haig persisted in talking brashly about bombing Cuba. In February, the press attributed to him threats that the United States was preparing to “go to the source” to halt arms trafficking to guerrillas in El Salvador.<sup>565</sup> Rather than intimidating the Soviets and Cubans, Haig wounded himself. According to White House Counselor Michael Deaver, who was among those closest to the President, when Haig once said, “Give me the word and I’ll turn that island into a fucking parking lot,” the remark “scared the shit out of Ronald Reagan.”<sup>566</sup>

### **El Salvador is the Place for Victory**

The Reagan administration paid a great deal of attention to Central America from the beginning. It was the principal topic of discussion at the first formal meeting of the National Security Council on February 6, 1981, two weeks after the inauguration, and it was on the agenda at successive meetings on February 11, 18, and 27. Between February 6 and November 16, when the President confirmed major policy decisions on Central America, the NSC convened a total of 26 times, and it was an agenda item in fully half of those meetings.<sup>567</sup> Arguably, there were more important matters, for example arms control, the first stirrings against the Soviet Union in Poland, and the war in Afghanistan, but no other single issue received this same degree of attention. Reagan participated in all of these meetings, except for two he missed during April while he was recovering from the assassination attempt by John Hinckley on March 30. A

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Don Oberdorfer and John M. Goshko, “U.S. Gives Warning on Cuba-Salvador Arms Flow,” *WP*, February 22, 1981.

<sup>566</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 163.

<sup>567</sup> Brookings Institution, National Security Council Meetings, NSC Project: Ronald W. Reagan, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Projects/nsc/Ronald\\_W\\_Reagan.PDF](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Projects/nsc/Ronald_W_Reagan.PDF), accessed January 10, 2016.

smaller National Security Planning Group (NSPG) also normally met with the President prior to formal meetings of the NSC.

The subsequent citations are taken from the minutes of the first NSC meeting on February 6.<sup>568</sup> The group was well informed on Central America and shared a desire to do something about it, but seemed to assume naïvely that winning public support for their view of the threat to the U.S. from Central America was merely a matter of making the case. Cuba and the Soviet Union featured in the discussion as might have been expected, but so did Vietnam, and surprisingly Angola. The competition among his advisors that would harden into dysfunctional fractures on Central America more than on any other issue was also apparent in this first meeting.

President Reagan opened the session by explaining at some length his conviction that Soviet and Cuban meddling was the problem in Central America. In the future, it would not be Reagan's usual practice to speak at such length, unless it was to tell a story.

Speaking next, National Security Advisor Richard Allen promised to have a policy for the Central America that would cope with the Cuban problem within four months. The task would actually take double that time. Allen, the first of Reagan's six National Security Advisors, would resign soon after.

As the discussion proper got under way, Secretary Haig, positioning himself as the "vicar" of foreign policy, took the lead to make his case:

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<sup>568</sup> National Security Council Meeting, Caribbean Basin and Poland, February 6, 1981, Brookings.

This area is our third border. . . these countries could manage if it were not for Cuba...Cuba exploits internal difficulty in these states by exporting arms and subversion. . . The Salvadorans have captured arms left behind in Vietnam. Not even the Cubans are capable of orchestrating such complicated arms transactions alone. . . I saw [Soviet] Ambassador Dobrynin last night. . . I told Dobrynin that the first order of business was to establish an acceptable code of international behavior. . . The U.S. would not stand by and permit the Cubans to draw us into another Vietnam. We would get to the source of the problem.

Dobrynin had known Haig for years and found him extremely contentious. Characterizing him as a poor choice as Reagan's Secretary of State, Cuba obsessed, and a "typical bully," Dobrynin reported that he told Haig his "anti-Sovietism was worse than Carter's moralizing and his militarism fed the hardliners in the Politburo."<sup>569</sup>

Haig continued his presentation to the NSC on Central America:

Secretary Weinberger and I have work underway on Caribbean contingencies. We will have to deal with Nicaragua, El Salvador, and, most especially with Cuba. Our interagency group is active...highly sensitive contingency planning continues.

Haig did have contingency planning under way, but the reference to cooperation with Defense Secretary Weinberger, another contentious adversary, was spurious. Weinberger said he agreed with Haig on Central America to the extent that "the problem stems from Cuba." But he opposed both direct military action and rushing to deal directly with the Soviets on Central America, Afghanistan, or arms control because, "We don't want to appear too eager since this weakens our position." For him, public support was the priority:

There is no doubt we face a tough situation in Nicaragua and El Salvador...with some covert aid we could disrupt Cuban activities...I am not sure that most Americans understand the situation there...We need to explain to the people that this is a dangerous situation for the US, and we may have to move strongly.

The President responded:

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<sup>569</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 482.

My own feeling...is that we are way behind, perhaps decades, in establishing relations [between] the two Americas. We must change the attitude of our diplomatic corps so that we don't bring down governments in the name of human rights. None of them is as guilty of human rights violations as are Cuba and the USSR...I want to see that stopped.

Reagan did not directly address the dispute over escalation that Haig and Weinberger had opened. He had limited knowledge of covert action, and when he mentioned it, it was by introducing Angola into the discussion:

In Angola, for example, Savimbi holds a large chunk of Angolan territory. With some aid, he could reverse the situation.

General David Jones, who had been Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since 1978 and was Air Force Chief of Staff during the Ford Administration, picked up on the President's reference:

In 1975, President Ford agreed we needed to put the Cubans on notice for their activities in Angola. The Clark Amendment stopped us. Even if we can't always stop the Cubans, it is important that we make them pay the price of admission.

CIA Director Casey agreed, and weighed in with his own recommendation:

The most effective way to put pressure on Cuba would be through Angola. We should seek a repeal of the Clark Amendment and consider aid to Savimbi.

Haig said, "It's under consideration, but we don't want to lose." (When the administration tried in March, Congress refused.<sup>570</sup>)

Deliberation returned to Central America. Reagan did not address, much less endorse, Haig's proposal to attack Cuba. Instead, he said, "El Salvador is a good starting point. A victory there could set an example."

Jones responded:

To stop the Cubans and help others stop them we need better intelligence, a psychological warfare program, and an ability to impede guerrilla activities. In El Salvador, we probably bought about two months' time. We also need to work with the Honduran and Guatemalan governments.

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<sup>570</sup> UPI, "The administration will seek repeal of the amendment barring aid to UNITA," March 20, 1981.

Referring back to the Nicaraguan promise to cut arms to the Salvadoran guerrillas, Casey said with some exaggeration:

There have been over 100 planeloads of arms from Cuba over the past 90 days. The Nicaraguans can't be ignorant of that.

The President asked: "How can we intercept these weapons? What can we do to help?" The next 30 lines of exchange between Reagan and Casey are redacted. They would almost certainly have concerned the expansion of covert action to interdict weapons for the Salvadoran guerillas, possibly including mention of the Nicaraguan resistance. The meeting wound down. The President concluded: "We can't afford a defeat. El Salvador is the place for victory."

Immediately following the first NSC meeting on February 6, Reagan made key decisions on El Salvador. They built entirely on the Interagency Group proposal presented in January, at the end of the Carter administration. The pact with the Christian Democrats, support for constituent assembly elections in early 1982, support for the agrarian and other reforms, economic and military assistance, and human rights concerns all remained in effect. Reagan signed a Presidential Determination for an additional \$20 million in emergency military assistance using the same 560(a) authority as Carter's determination of January 16. An economic aid package included urgently needed balance of payments support and quick-disbursing funds to create 10,000 jobs. These were the principal measures of the counter-insurgency contingency operation the United States would sustain in its joint counter-insurgency venture with the government of El Salvador through 1992.

## **II. Reagan's House, Flawed by Design**

If Carter's foreign policy house was divided, Reagan's house was positively chaotic. Neither President handled conflict among the strongly committed individuals who surrounded them with particular competence or to good purpose. While Carter micromanaged and ultimately

succumbed to Brzezinski's hard line, Reagan more often left his advisors largely on their own to battle over what they thought his wishes should be. In practice Reagan's leadership was, according to his biographer Lou Cannon, that of "an enigmatic monarch who reigned rather than ruled."<sup>571</sup> As a result, the traditional competition among cabinet members, advisors, and the executive agencies -- the NSC, DOD, Department of State, the CIA -- remained under Reagan perpetually unmanaged and at times fiercely at cross purposes.

Faced with comparable difficulties, every president beginning with Truman had sought ways to increase his control over foreign policy in a system of divided authorities institutionally "flawed by design."<sup>572</sup> In the three administrations that preceded Reagan, the Presidents' strong National Security Advisors, Kissinger under Nixon and Ford and Brzezinski under Carter, fought to bring the system under their own authority. They came to the conclusion that on crises and sensitive issues -- covert action in particular -- the solution was to concentrate power by bringing operations into the National Security Council. However, the NSC, created under the National Security Act of 1947, was neither intended nor structured to exercise operational functions and lacks the statutory authorities that reside in the executive agencies. Rather its role as White House coordinator of national security and foreign policy flows from the personal relationship between the National Security Advisor and the President. This structure had great impact on the management of U.S. policy in Central America.

Because Reagan did not exercise his authority as the chief executive and commander in chief effectively, his National Security Council often performed poorly. Uninterested in governance and by character unwilling to resolve conflicts, he left senior officials throughout the

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<sup>571</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 144.

<sup>572</sup> Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, pp. 79-80.

U.S. government to pursue their own definitions of his wishes. The number of Advisors, six in total, three during the first term and three during the second, was too high. The NSC was a relatively weak coordinator during Richard Allen's one-year tenure as Reagan's first National Security Advisor; Allen even lacked direct access to the President, instead reporting through Counselor Ed Meese. When Judge William Clark took over in January 1982, the NSC immediately became more powerful and assertive, but although "Judge" Clark was a close California friend, Reagan did not invest any particular trust in him. A conservative hardliner, he had been immersed in Central America as Haig's Deputy Secretary of State. The same was true for Clark's successor Robert McFarlane, who had handled Cuba contingency planning as Haig's Counselor before he moved to the NSC in 1983. (The Iran-Contra scandal that resulted from this succession lies outside the scope of this thesis.)

Haig too was unmanaged as Secretary of State. When he resigned and George Shultz replaced him in June 1982, discord eased. But Shultz too found himself caught in agonizing feuds over Central America. His conclusion:

The NSC system seemed to work on many issues. Why not on Central America? The effort to answer that question and to come up with a solution was, and would continue to be, a central source of tension and frustration for me. More important were the real costs of a flawed NSC system: damage to the President and damage to policy... Central America policy was a swamp.<sup>573</sup>

Reagan's success as a leader but failure as a manager was a core feature of his presidency, and nowhere more so than in Central America. In an NSC system flawed by design, conduct on Central America suffered an odd disjunction between coherent Cold War grand strategy and squabbling that was "Consumed by division, acrimony, confusion, and occasional

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<sup>573</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 322.

outbreaks of criminal malfeasance.”<sup>574</sup> On one side of the Central America divide, the ideological hardliners acted as expressive warriors interested primarily in imposing costs on Cuba and the Soviet Union. On the other, the pragmatists sought to use support for the Contra insurgency and counter-insurgency in El Salvador to achieve concrete political arrangements that would guarantee U.S. predominance in the region.<sup>575</sup>

As with all categories of analysis, exactly who belonged to which group could get fuzzy when subjected to close scrutiny. For example, Secretary of State Haig is usually portrayed as a moderate, but when it came to Cuba he was a blustering and bellicose Cold Warrior. In contrast, CIA Director Bill Casey was reasoned, even cautious when it came to covert action in Afghanistan and Angola, as well as Poland, Lebanon, Cambodia, and Ethiopia. But, as Robert Gates put it, “For reasons I never comprehended, Bill Casey became obsessed with Central America.”<sup>576</sup>

### **Reagan as Commander in Chief**

As Commander in Chief, Reagan presided over the revival of American military strength that Carter had begun, and he symbolized U.S. resurgence in the long-term competition with the Soviet Union. Yet, while he had the reputation of being a war-monger, he used force sparingly. The outcomes of his direct interventions were less than impressive: barely averting disaster in Lebanon in 1982 and invading the tiny island of Grenada in 1983.<sup>577</sup> In Central America, support for insurgency through covert action in Nicaragua and counter-insurgency with the lightest of

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<sup>574</sup> William Inboden, “Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles: The Paradox and Lessons of the Reagan NSC,” in Hal Brands and Jeremy Suri (eds.), *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Brookings, 2015), p. 151.

<sup>575</sup> Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine*, pp. 25-7; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 167-77.

<sup>576</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 242.

<sup>577</sup> John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint* (Chicago, 2006), pp. 113-16.

footprints in El Salvador complemented region-wide use of military power that remained strictly in supporting, non-combat roles.

At the same time, from the earliest days of the election campaign right through his second term, Reagan adopted the ideologues' positions on Central America, because they reflected his own convictions. He may not have managed his government, but he was the owner of his Central American policy and put serious political capital at stake in the uphill struggle to leverage Congressional support and win over public opinion. He was an old-fashioned patriot, Wilsonian in his belief in democracy.<sup>578</sup> For him, the struggle against communism was fundamental; the Salvadoran civil war was a battle for democracy and the Nicaraguan insurgents truly were "Freedom Fighters," in spite of their contrary behavior. Once he accepted the Contras in this way, his conviction was complete. Using very shaky analogies, he likened them to the "boys of the American Brigade in the Spanish Civil War" and "the equivalent of the Founding Fathers."<sup>579</sup> When the occasion called for it, he declared, "If opposing communism makes them Contras, I guess it makes me a contra too."<sup>580</sup>

Reagan's strong beliefs but restrained action in Central America matched his performance in the larger Cold War. He knew how destructive and costly war was, how the public had turned against Truman over the Korean War just as Vietnam had ruined Johnson, and understood that it was impossible to commit U.S. troops to a protracted war that lacked the support of the American people.<sup>581</sup> By common-sense implication, Central America was a good

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<sup>578</sup> Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 257.

<sup>579</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan*, pp. 337-8.

<sup>580</sup> Ronald Reagan, Remarks to Elected Officials During a White House Briefing on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Resistance, March 14, 1986, *Papers of Ronald Reagan*, UCSB.

<sup>581</sup> Lou Cannon, Jack Matlow (former Ambassador to USSR, now at Princeton), and General (ret.) Paul Gorman, Conference on "The Enduring Legacy: Leadership and National Security Affairs during the Ronald Reagan Era," VMI, November 3-4, 2014.

place to draw the line against the Soviets, as long as it the U.S. commitment remained at the lowest possible cost and risk. Although it was hardly clear at the time, least of all to the direct participants, Reagan was perhaps much more the master than the instrument of those who surrounded him. Despite mishaps and controversy, the United States did achieve its aims in Central America and avoided larger misfortune. Some this success was due to the President's pragmatism and moderation.

### **Will Central America be Another Vietnam?**

From the time Reagan took office, and throughout his two terms, the wars in Central America were front page news. His first extended television interview took place on March 3, 1981, with Walter Cronkite of CBS News, who was at the time unique in his national prominence and credibility. The interview began with the following question and answer on El Salvador:

**Mr. Cronkite:** Mr. President, with your administration barely 6 weeks old, you're involved now in, perhaps, the first foreign policy crisis—if it can be called a crisis yet; probably cannot be, but it is being much discussed, of course—much concern about El Salvador and our commitment there. Do you see any parallel in our committing advisers and military assistance to El Salvador and the early stages of our involvement in Vietnam?

**The President:** No, Walter, I don't. I know that that parallel is being drawn by many people. But the difference is so profound. What we're actually doing is, at the request of a government in one of our neighboring countries, offering some help against the import or the export into the Western Hemisphere of terrorism, of disruption. And it isn't just El Salvador. That happens to be the target at the moment. Our problem is this whole hemisphere and keeping this sort of thing out.<sup>582</sup>

Central America took up much of the rest of the interview. Cronkite treated the President respectfully, but continued to press him with questions on the parallels with Vietnam.<sup>583</sup> While

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<sup>582</sup> Excerpts from an Interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News, March 3, 1981, UCSB.

<sup>583</sup> Milton J. Bates, et al. (compilers), *Reporting Vietnam: Part One: American Journalism 1959-1969* (New York, 1998), pp. 581-2.

responding that trouble in Central America resulted from Cuban and Soviet interference, the President denied the parallels between El Salvador and Vietnam even though those parallels seemed evident, right down to the Central American dominoes. Drawing the Cold War line in Central America also required drawing the line against American intervention.

Confronted with the charge that he was “moving toward... a risky and reckless war” in El Salvador during his second press conference three days later on March 6, the President was emphatic: “We do not foresee the need of American troops.”<sup>584</sup> Yet, the President did not entirely reassure and drawing the line in El Salvador seemed a dubious proposition. Death squads were rampant, and the insurgency had the initiative and was for many the more attractive cause. Moreover, Secretary of State Haig’s bellicosity contradicted the President’s wish to calm the Vietnam jitters.<sup>585</sup>

### **Was Central America Truly Central or Merely a Side Show?**

Some argue that Central America really didn’t matter to the Reagan Administration, that it was nothing more than a side show. This view is not baseless. Politicization at times made Central America seem more of a domestic morality play than a serious foreign policy issue, let alone an actual war. For the left, one reason the United States could commit “criminal imperialism” in Central America was precisely because it did not matter.<sup>586</sup> White House advisors certainly wanted to play it down, concerned that weak public support would detract from the President’s other priorities. Regardless of the high ideological value attributed to

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<sup>584</sup> Ronald Reagan: "The President's News Conference," March 6, 1981, UCSB.

<sup>585</sup> Karen DeYoung, “El Salvador: A Symbol of World Crisis: How Tiny El Salvador Became U.S. Policy Symbol,” *WP*, March 8-9, 1981.

<sup>586</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston, 1986); Greg Granadin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York, 2006).

Central America, its strategic importance was lower than that of Europe, Asia or the Middle East. Beyond demonstrating U.S. determination to defend its traditional sphere of interest, it was difficult to discern any direct impact on the larger Cold War.

However, the truth was that Central America, far from being peripheral within the Reagan Administration, was a central preoccupation from the very earliest days, as the frequency of NSC meetings during the first year demonstrated. The most compelling exhibit was the President himself. He spoke about Central America frequently in public, mentioning it in most of his state of the union addresses and dedicating three major speeches to it during his first term. A diligent diarist, Reagan made over one hundred entries on Central America. As a Californian, he respectfully referred to the region south of the border as “America’s front yard,” not its backyard, and was sensitive to Latin American resentment of “the colossus of the North.”<sup>587</sup> Far from endorsing the Third World War ideology of the Santa Fe Report and the mischaracterizations of him as “a gun slinging cowboy,” his entries on Central America show him guided by political common sense and aversion to using force.<sup>588</sup> After his September 17, 1981 meeting with Mexican President José Lopez Portillo, Reagan wrote:

José & I had a real set to about El Salvador. He evidently believed that we were on the verge of sending in the Marines. His whole demeanor changed when I told him we’d never entertained such a thought.<sup>589</sup>

### **III. Central American Roads Not Taken**

Reagan’s approach to the presidency may have included a notorious lack of interest in complexities, especially if briefings and discussion took place after lunch. Disputes among his senior leaders pained him, and although he was hardly oblivious to them, he avoided using his

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<sup>587</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, pp. 35, 112.

<sup>588</sup> Lou Cannon, “What Happened to Reagan The Gunslinger? Now His Problem Is Convincing Skeptics He Isn’t a Pussycat,” *WP*, July 7, 1985.

<sup>589</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 39.

authority to resolve them. As a result, from the early days and throughout the 1980s, hardliners and pragmatists persisted in constant friction. Despite Cold War consensus on Central America, the fundamental problem was, as Gates wrote in a memo to Casey, that “There was no agreement within the administration...on our real objectives.”<sup>590</sup>

The Reagan administration lacked unity as it followed Carter’s path in Central America during 1981, causing it to sound and behave incoherently at times. Three undertakings in that first year absorbed enormous time, attention, and energy, yet they failed to prosper. The first was a public diplomacy effort intended to rally American support by exposing Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan interference in El Salvador. The second was a diplomatic initiative to find accommodation with the Sandinistas. The third was Secretary Haig’s plan to attack Cuba. All three became enmeshed in the political difficulties of managing Central America and brought out the worst in the U.S. national security and foreign policy system. These roads not taken were highly consequential, because of the ways they shaped the limits of what the U.S. would actually do in the region for the next decade.

### **The El Salvador White Paper on Communist Interference**

Despite lingering reticence about Haig’s enthusiasm for making Central America the first front in a Cold War offensive, the administration quickly put its prestige on the line in presenting its case to the public. The centerpiece was a White Paper titled *Communist Interference in El Salvador*. After White House domestic advisors had insisted on a two-week delay while the President’s requests for tax cuts and increased military appropriations won approval in Congress, the State Department released the report with great fanfare on February 23. It began:

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<sup>590</sup> Robert M. Gates, Memorandum for DCI William Casey, Nicaragua, December 14, 1984, NSDA.

This special report presents definitive evidence of the clandestine military support given by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their Communist allies to Marxist-Leninist guerrillas now fighting to overthrow the established government of El Salvador.<sup>591</sup>

The White Paper used the logic of the Truman Doctrine to argue that the U.S. was acting in legitimate defense of El Salvador's sovereign government. Portraying President Duarte and the Christian Democrats as struggling heroically against the extremes of both right and left, the report's central purpose was to demonstrate that "El Salvador has been progressively transformed into a textbook case of indirect armed aggression by Communist powers through Cuba."<sup>592</sup>

That case rested on U.S. intelligence and captured documents that clearly demonstrated extensive collaboration on behalf of the Salvadoran revolutionaries between Nicaraguans, Cubans, and other members of the Eastern Bloc, with explicit Soviet approval. The White Paper was intended to win public and international support for a strong U.S. response to Soviet and Cuban aggression in Central America. However, evidence yielded to perception, and it did not quite work out that way.

On a swing through Europe armed with the El Salvador White Paper, Assistant Secretary of State Larry Eagleburger put NATO allies on notice that support for the U.S. in Central America would be an early test of loyalty. Instead, in a Europe that longed for détente and suspicious of Reagan's warlike intentions, he confronted resentment and skepticism, sympathy for the Sandinistas, revulsion over the brutality of the Salvadoran security forces, and outright opposition from Social Democrats, who openly supported the FMLN's political front, the FDR. While not necessarily denying the White Paper's allegations, the Europeans for the most part

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<sup>591</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, Special Report No. 80, February 23, 1981.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

rejected the portrayal of East-West conflict in Central America as over-simplified. They publicly advocated negotiations.<sup>593</sup>

In Latin America, Mexico and Venezuela distanced themselves from the U.S. position in the White Paper and began what would become an enduring regional peace initiative. It was a different story when General Vernon Walters, the polyglot military intelligence officer and former Deputy Director of the CIA, visited right-wing military regimes in Latin America in his new capacity as ambassador-at-large. They needed no convincing. In Argentina, military commanders responsible for the Dirty War confirmed they were helping the Salvadorans, Hondurans, and former Nicaraguan National Guardsmen. Reporting back to Washington on what would quickly evolve into the Tripartite arrangement to support the Contras, Walters related that Army chief General Galtieri, soon to become President, was eager to work with the U.S. in Central America. "All we have to do is tell them what to do," Walters commented.<sup>594</sup>

In the United States, the White Paper won few converts, if any. Instead it became a lightning rod for skeptical members of Congress and the press. Heavy ideological language and some uncorroborated interpretations overshadowed the authenticity of the evidence, and prompted portrayals of the report as an artless propaganda exercise.<sup>595</sup> Communist Interference in El Salvador also inadvertently touched a sensitive nerve with its parallel to another White Paper, *Aggression from the North*, released in 1965 to make the case for U.S. intervention in

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<sup>593</sup> Richard Elder, "Europe and El Salvador," *NYT*, February 22, 1981; Alan Riding, "Social Democrats Offer to Act as Mediators on Salvador," *NYT*, March 3, 1981.

<sup>594</sup> AmEmbassy Santiago, telegrams 1135 and 1136, Argentina/El Salvador, February 26, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>595</sup> Jonathan Kwitny, "Tarnished Report? Apparent Errors Cloud U.S. 'White Paper,'" *Wall Street Journal*, June 8, 1981; Robert Hager, Jr., "Soviet Bloc Involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War: The US State Department's 1981 'White Paper' Reconsidered," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 28:4, December 1995, pp. 437-70.

Vietnam.<sup>596</sup> Attempts to deny the parallels between El Salvador and Vietnam merely seemed to beg the obvious. The poor reception to the White Paper set the tone for reaction to the extensive but ultimately futile efforts the administration made to win over domestic opinion. Throughout the decade, support for U.S. policies in Central America never passed 20 percent.<sup>597</sup>

### **Haig Wants to Go to the Source**

Secretary of State Haig persisted in swimming upstream on Central America and Cuba. Despite the antipathy the White Paper had generated, he kept raising El Salvador and threatening to go to the source. The White House troika, joined by Nancy Reagan, thought Haig a loose cannon, resented his overblown pretention to be the vicar of foreign policy, and worried he would tempt the President's anti-communist "dark side."<sup>598</sup> Haig dismissed them as "hambones," over-concerned about the President's popularity and the economy, when they should have been worrying about the Soviet threat.<sup>599</sup> Finally, with Reagan's approval, they managed to muzzle him in public.

On the inside, Haig kept promoting the idea of attacking Cuba, but he did no better than he had in February.<sup>600</sup> He had already scaled back from proposing major military action, acknowledging:

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<sup>596</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer the South*, Publication 7839, Far Eastern Series 130, February 1965; Don Oberdorfer, "Using El Salvador to Battle the Ghosts of Vietnam," *WP*, March 1, 1981.

<sup>597</sup> Department of State, Memorandum from INR-Frank McNeil to the Secretary, Cuba and Sandinista Aid to the Salvadoran Rebels, May 23, 1985, NSDA; Seweryn Bialer and Alfred Stepan, "Cuba, the United States, and the Central American Mess," *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 1982; Nick Witham, *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: U.S. Protest and the Central American Revolutions* (London, 2015); Lefeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 280.

<sup>598</sup> Interview with Deaver in Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 163.

<sup>599</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 130.

<sup>600</sup> National Security Council Meeting, Poland, Nicaragua/Central America, Southern Africa, March 26, 1981, NSDA.

I sent an options paper to the President, recommending that he lay down a marker on the question of Cuba. Reagan, despite some sentiment among his advisors to do otherwise, decided to abide strictly by the understandings on the status of Cuba reached by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis.<sup>601</sup>

In regarding Central America as a strategic problem to be addressed with military measures, he was thinking like a commanding general, but he was also following in the footsteps of every administration since Eisenhower, which had tried, or at least considered, using force against Cuba.

In the spring of 1981, he had his Counselor, Bud McFarlane, a retired Marine, assemble an interagency “band of brothers” to draw up military options.<sup>602</sup> Its other members were Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs Francis “Bing” West, Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lieutenant General Paul Gorman, and Latin America Division Chief at CIA Nestor Sanchez, who would soon take over the Latin America portfolio from West at DOD. The group quickly concluded that offensive military action against Cuba was a bad idea, just as the previous exercises had under Kissinger and Brzezinski. Attacking Cuba would draw on forces needed elsewhere in the world and was not worth the risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union or a second Vietnam in America’s backyard. Instead, the group recommended focusing on Central America, in line with options that the parallel Interagency Core Group was working on at the same time.

Haig rejected their recommendation and insisted on keeping military options for Cuba alive. McFarlane subsequently prepared a memorandum titled “Taking the War to Nicaragua.”<sup>603</sup> Following OPLAN 316-62, the memo listed a full range of options. The aggressive end of the

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<sup>601</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 98.

<sup>602</sup> Yoshitani, *Reagan at War*, pp. 167-169, n. 33.

<sup>603</sup> Robert C. Toth and Doyle McManus, “‘Cowboy’ in Control: Contras and CIA: A Plan Gone Awry,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1985.

scale included invasion, bombing, blockade, and quarantine of arms bound for Cuba. There were options for shooting down planes and interdicting boats en route from Cuba to Nicaragua, as well as action against Cuban forces in Africa. At the other end was increasing the size and frequency of naval exercises off the island. The options also included a proposal for covert action against the Sandinistas, which McFarlane had first circulated in February. Haig thought both covert action and counter-insurgency were insufficient and continued to press for direct action.

When the Sandinistas mobilized several mass demonstrations against the United States after Reagan took office, no one wanted a replay of the Iran hostage crisis in Managua. Haig argued for a permanent increase in the regional U.S. military presence, but DOD limited action to preparing for Embassy evacuation and rescue operations.<sup>604</sup>

In his first months as Secretary of State, Haig proved to be highly disruptive and out of synch with the White House. His desire to draw the line in Central America by attacking Cuba took up enormous time and energy. He had no intention of giving up, and there was still one more round to go.

### **Force vs. Diplomacy in Central America**

Within the bureaucracy, the Core Group developed Central America planning throughout the summer and into the fall of 1981. The point man was new Assistant Secretary for Latin America Tom Enders, who from August to October attempted to reach a security arrangement with the Sandinista government. After the initiative ended, the *Washington Post* carried a detailed report, to which subsequent accounts have added little.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> National Security Planning Group Agenda, March 24, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>605</sup> Don Oberdorfer, "U.S., in Secret Dialogue, Sought Rapprochement with Nicaragua," *WP*, December 10, 1981; Kagan, *Twilight Struggle*, pp. 190-9; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, pp. 118-24; Robert P. Hager, Jr. and Robert S.

Secret diplomacy played out in part as public spectacle. Enders offered a preview in a July 16 speech to the World Affairs Council.<sup>606</sup> Under his proposal, if the Sandinistas would halt support for the Salvadoran guerrillas and cut their reliance on Soviet and Cuban arms, the United States would provide economic assistance and accommodate the Nicaraguan revolution. Picking up where Ambassador Pezzullo had left off, Enders added a coercive dimension by threatening that Nicaragua would pay a price for exporting revolution. He gained credibility from reports that the U.S. was moving to support the Nicaraguan Resistance and considering whether to invade. Enders held firm on U.S. support for democracy and counter-insurgency in El Salvador, rejecting power sharing negotiations with the FMLN.

Enders's plan pragmatically harnessed force and diplomacy. However, internal opposition from administration hardliners proved impossible to smooth over. Enders aroused personal suspicion and, more fundamentally, hardliners who believed they represented the President's true wishes feared Enders was prepared to let the Sandinistas and Cubans off the hook. They labeled the negotiations as appeasement. Even his boss, Secretary of State Haig, dismissed the idea of a deal as not worth the effort.

Operating under strict White House instructions, Enders must have known that the terms he offered to the Sandinistas amounted to a list of impossible demands. Nicaragua was to cut off all support to the Salvadoran FMLN, reduce the Sandinista Peoples' Army to 8,000, below the level of its neighbors, halt the import of heavy weapons, return Soviet tanks and other arms that were not already in Central American inventories, and internally take steps toward democracy.

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Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 17:2, Spring 2015, pp. 3–35.

<sup>606</sup> Thomas Enders, speech to the World Affairs Council, July 16, 1981, "El Salvador: The Search for Peace," *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, September 1981, pp. 70-3.

They responded that they were prepared to negotiate with the U.S., but not at the expense of their revolution. As Daniel Ortega told journalist Alan Riding, “The door to reconciliation was so small that in order to pass through we would have to do so on our knees.”<sup>607</sup> Defining themselves by opposing the United States and promoting revolution in Central America, they defiantly cast their lot with Moscow and Havana. Talks would drag on through the fall but, after seeking Fidel Castro’s counsel, they rejected a deal.<sup>608</sup>

Not surprisingly, pragmatism lost out to maximalist goals. With each side seeking to blame the other, the initiative foundered. The hardliners pushed Enders out in 1982. The talks would set the tone for U.S. diplomacy on Central America, which did little more than maintain a façade of diplomacy throughout the Reagan administration.<sup>609</sup>

Far less militant about the East-West struggle than the United States, Latin American countries, with support from Europe, developed an independent diplomatic track on Central America beginning in 1981.<sup>610</sup> As the Cold War ended, the Contadora process and a peace framework formulated by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias led to 1990 elections in Nicaragua in which the Sandinistas were defeated, the Chapultepec Peace Accord that ended the Salvadoran civil war in 1992, and helped consolidate a wave of democracy throughout the region.

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<sup>607</sup> Alan Riding, “Central Americans Anxious over Effects of Reagan Policy,” *NYT*, December 13, 1981.

<sup>608</sup> Arturo Cruz, Jr., *Memoirs of a Counter-Revolutionary* (New York, 1989), p. 126.

<sup>609</sup> Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981-1987* (New York, 1988); Robert P. Hager, Jr. and Robert S. Snyder, “The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 17:2 (Spring 2015), pp. 3-35.

<sup>610</sup> Ambassador Jorge Montañaño (Mexico) Interviewed by Jean Krasno, Yale-UN Oral History Interview, October 1, 1999, United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/11176/89658>, access January 10, 2016; Susan Kaufmann Purcell, “Demystifying Contadora,” *Foreign Affairs*, 64:1, Fall 1985, pp. 74-95.

#### IV. Limited War by Constraint

Lack of public support, combined with lack of enthusiasm internally for both military escalation and diplomacy, limited the aims and means of the Reagan administration in Central America. The deliberations that began in early 1981 were more concerned with constraining the use of force than exercising it. In consequence, the principal lines of U.S. action fell within the scope of Low Intensity Conflict. These consisted of support for insurgency in Nicaragua and counter-insurgency in El Salvador, supplemented in 1982 by rotating U.S. ground force units in what amounted to a permanent force in being in Honduras.

At the domestic heart of the problem was a dispute over the value of the object. Alongside the friction between hardliners and pragmatists within the administration, the dispute took the form of a political-legal struggle between the executive and Congress. In Congress, the presence of large conservative and moderate wings among both Democrats and Republicans had permitted cross-party majorities on Cold War foreign policy, but that consensus broke over Vietnam.<sup>611</sup> As Ronald Reagan began his first term determined to make Central America a battlefield of the Cold War, a significant portion of Congress, particularly liberal Democrats, was equally opposed.<sup>612</sup> Their first set of concerns was moral and ethical, regarding human rights, the association of the United States with reprehensible allies, and covert action against a sovereign government. A second issue was the efficacy of means – whether, after Vietnam, U.S. military involvement in the Third World was a formula for quagmire or served any purpose at all. The result was a political contest that lasted throughout the 1980s between the power of the executive

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<sup>611</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America* (New York, 1963); Patterson, *Restless Giant*, pp. 81-2; Kim Phillips-Fein, “The Uncertain Future of American Politics, 1973 to the Present,” in Foner and McGrirr, eds., *American History Now*, pp. 186-91.

<sup>612</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (New York, 2011).

branch to make war and the power of the legislature to restrain it. In fact, so consuming were the travails that the wars in Central America themselves became backdrops to blow-by-blow controversy between Congress and the President in Washington, DC.<sup>613</sup>

In his first decision on Central America, in February 1981, Reagan used the same emergency authority that Carter had employed one month earlier to demonstrate support to El Salvador by providing a second tranche of military assistance. The difference was Reagan did so with none of Carter's ambivalence. But the additional \$20 million was a one-time measure and aiding El Salvador required a sustainable solution.<sup>614</sup> A request to reprogram \$5 million from other countries went to Congress for approval at the same time. Criticism in Congress was not strong enough to block support to El Salvador outright. Instead, Congress conditioned future aid, most importantly by requiring the President to certify twice a year that the El Salvador government was "making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights" and "achieving substantial control over all elements of its own armed forces."<sup>615</sup> When Reagan signed the first certification in February 1982 and administration officials testified in special hearings, they struggled to support the claim. They stretched the thinnest of veils, not only over the thousands of death squad killings, but over the December 1981 massacre of nearly 1,000 noncombatants in the village of El Mozote by the elite Atlacatl Rapid Reaction Battalion, trained and equipped by the United States.<sup>616</sup> Assisting El Salvador was bound to be complicated and messy; certification provided a semblance of accountability.

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<sup>613</sup> Aronson, *Crossroads*, pp. 1-22.

<sup>614</sup> Memorandum for the President from Alexander Haig, El Salvador, January 26, 1981, NSDA.

<sup>615</sup> Fiscal 1982 Foreign Aid Authorization Bill (PL 97-113), International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1981, Section 728, Restrictions on Military Assistance and Sales to El Salvador.

<sup>616</sup> U.S. Congress, Presidential Certification on El Salvador: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, second session, February 2, 23, 25, and March 2, 1982; Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York, 1994).

Once the President certified and the funds were appropriated, the initiative remained with the executive. To overturn the decision, Congress would have had to mobilize a majority and enact new legislation, and it was not about to risk taking responsibility for losing another country to communism.

The most sensitive aspect of military assistance to El Salvador was the disposition of U.S. troops within the country. As small Special Forces Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) began to deploy in 1981, the shadow of Vietnam loomed prohibitively over the prospect of even a single casualty. The administration had to decide so much whether to subject American soldiers to combat, but whether to risk combat with Congress. In February 1981, using an interagency determination that the 1973 War Powers Act did not apply to U.S. troops in El Salvador, the administration managed to avoid confrontation with Congress by applying exceptional constraints: explicitly identified as trainers, not advisors, U.S. military personnel in El Salvador, most of them Army Special Forces, were limited to a maximum of 55 in-country at any one time, carried no weapons other than side arms, were confined to brigade level headquarters or higher, and were prohibited from accompanying Salvadoran forces in combat.<sup>617</sup> Similar restrictions applied to U.S. forces in Honduras. Most of these self-imposed constraints remained in place for the next decade.

### **War in El Salvador and the Information Revolution**

Vietnam was the first television war; El Salvador was the first TV war by satellite. Instant transmission magnified controversy. In mid-February 1982, a Cable Network News (CNN) crew was out looking for “bang-bang” when they videotaped three officers from the U.S. Military

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<sup>617</sup> NSC Paper on El Salvador, “War Powers Implications of the Deployment of Additional Training Teams (MTTs) to El Salvador,” Department of State, Tab B, (undated, February 1981), NSDA.

Group inspecting a bridge. They were carrying M16s. The images played as breaking news and their photos were on the front pages of the next day's newspapers. Two senior Democratic Senators, Claiborne Pell and Patrick Leahy, happened to be in El Salvador on the same day. Both were deeply skeptical of U.S. support for the Salvadoran government. Following a "rough meeting" with Salvadoran military commanders, they took full advantage of a press opportunity to advocate negotiations with the FMLN guerrillas and declared, "Continued U.S. aid to this country is being seriously questioned by Americans gravely concerned about the prospect of an ever-escalating war."<sup>618</sup> With support for U.S. involvement in El Salvador so weak, their threat to cut aid had to be taken seriously.

In the outcry, two of the officers received reprimands and the Lieutenant Colonel in command was removed from the country. He had stated matter-of-factly to the press that they were carrying weapons for personal protection and merely being prudent.<sup>619</sup> In what otherwise would have been a non-incident, professional soldiers were punished for using military judgment, and failing to act with media and political sensitivity. Eighteen years later, the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps would term this the phenomenon of the "strategic corporal."<sup>620</sup>

### **No Quick Victory**

El Salvador had become the first place in which the US drew the line in the Cold War by happenstance, but the President's hope it would be the place for a quick victory proved over-optimistic. A unified political-military strategy would take shape in El Salvador during 1981, but

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<sup>618</sup> Christopher Dickey, "U.S. Colonel Filmed with M16 Ordered to Leave El Salvador," *WP*, February 14, 1982.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>620</sup> Gen. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marine Corps Gazette*, 83:1, January 1999, pp. 18-22.

it was still a close-run thing and would remain so for at least two more years. A National Intelligence Estimate issued in September confirmed that it would take several years for U.S. assistance to take effect and forecast a protracted war.<sup>621</sup> Brigadier General Fred Woerner, tasked with preparing a counter-insurgency strategy, confirmed the assessment that El Salvador was going to be a long haul.<sup>622</sup>

By 1982, it was still a far from clear what success might even look like. In his famous “Westminster Speech” to the British Parliament on June 10, President Reagan asserted that the commitment to El Salvador was part of global U.S. opposition to the Soviet Union, placing the March 28 Constituent Assembly elections there alongside the aspirations of Solidarity in Poland and declaring that, “The march of freedom and democracy... will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.”<sup>623</sup> But Reagan did not go into messy complexities: FMLN insurgents held the initiative and were contesting territory in one-third of the country; the extreme rightist party ARENA had won the most votes in the elections and only intervention by the United States had blocked its leader Roberto D’Aubuisson from becoming president; he had certified to Congress that El Salvador was making progress on human rights in the face of contrary evidence; state terror and the death squads continued, with support from Argentina – whose soldiers were then fighting the British in the Falklands, while at the same time helping the CIA organize the Nicaraguan Contras. The war remained stalemated, but after the 1982 elections, intense controversy over El Salvador eased. Intense attention to Central America did not disappear, but shifted to Nicaragua.

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<sup>621</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Estimate, *Insurgency and Instability in Central America*, September 1981, NSDA.

<sup>622</sup> Woerner, Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team, November 1981.

<sup>623</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” June 8, 1982, UCSB.

## V. The Covert Way in Nicaragua

Bill Casey's "obsession" with Central America fitted with his experience as an OSS officer in World War II, his personal mission to revive the CIA, and his enthusiasm for covert action as an element of long-term competition against the Soviet Union. A historian in his own right, Casey had written how the arrival of SOE and OSS teams in France was enough to inspire partisan uprisings and "were among the most brilliant and successful operations of the war."<sup>624</sup> Even though Casey had a buccaneering style that was out of step with politico-bureaucratic norms, he did not exaggerate the strategic value of unconventional warfare, but rather understood its cumulative effect. Attuned to the constraints of military force in the late-Cold War, he found his cause in Central America.<sup>625</sup> Armed with a mandate from the President, he put the CIA Directorate of Operations and its International Activities Division back into the battle against the Soviet Union. Enthused by the program in Afghanistan where the CIA had been supporting the mujahedin fighting against Soviet troops for nearly two years, Casey proposed to revive operations in Angola and start new ones in Cambodia, Laos, Libya, and Iran. But Central America came first.

As was the case with the Carter administration, the chronology of U.S. involvement with the Nicaraguan Resistance during the first Reagan year does not quite align and key portions of the record remain classified. Extensive detail resulting from the Iran-Contra investigations begins in January 1982 when the Contra program formally got underway.<sup>626</sup> Even Iran-Contra left

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<sup>624</sup> William J. Casey, *Where and How the War Was Fought: An Armchair Tour of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976); Casey, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>625</sup> William Casey, Director, Central Intelligence, Address to the Washington Conference of the World Business Council, CIA Headquarters, May 20, 1981, CIA FOIA.

<sup>626</sup> *Iran-Contra Report*, Vol. 1, p. 27; Alfonso Chardy and Juan Tamayo, "'New' CIA Deepens U.S. Involvement," *Miami Herald*, June 5, 1983; Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, p. 158; Dickey, *With the Contras*, pp. 108-9; Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons*, pp. 197-210.

questions unanswered: most importantly, what exactly was the extent of President Reagan's knowledge?

One judgment that can be considered sufficiently established is that the program to build the Contra army unfolded directly from the Carter administration and was effectively in place by the time President Reagan formally approved it at the end of 1981. The first finding Carter signed in July 1979 initiated political action to support the Salvadoran government and Nicaraguan opposition; the second signed in early 1980 expanded the program and opposed Cuba more broadly in Latin America. At the time of Reagan's election in November, the CIA Central America Task Force (CATF) was up and running with a budget of \$19.5 million. Even without weapons, the program provided the latitude to work with early Resistance members who were already armed and working with their Argentine sponsors. As DCI-designate, Casey surely was informed on CIA activities in Central America before the January 20, 1981 inauguration.

When Vernon Walters went to Argentina in February to brief the regime on the El Salvador White Paper, the Argentines must have discussed their presence in Central America since they asked him what else the U.S. wanted them to do. President Reagan's first Central America finding, signed on March 9, consisted of a few paragraphs that continued the Carter program at the same level. The finding added a vaguely worded reference to interdicting arms destined for El Salvador and \$2.5 million for Guatemala where, at the time, the Argentines and the Contras had their base. CIA officers began augmenting Central America stations shortly after. Honduran National Police commander General Gustavo Alvarez had already become the Contras' principal host when he met with Casey in Washington, DC in April. Alvarez proposed the U.S. join Honduras to support the Resistance in a tripartite arrangement with Argentina – the

“Tripartita.” It is likely that funds started flowing through the Argentines around that time, almost certainly by June when Walters traveled for a second time to Buenos Aires. CIA officers were sufficiently involved to broker the merger between the former National Guardsmen in the September 15<sup>th</sup> Legion and the non-Guard UDN, which resulted in the main Contra organization, the FDN, in August.

That month, the Central American Task Force gained an aggressive leader when Casey hand-picked Dewey Clarridge, who had been station chief in Rome, to head the Latin America Division. Clarridge explained:

My plan was simple:

1. Take the war to Nicaragua.
2. Start killing Cubans.<sup>627</sup>

Clarridge traveled to Honduras shortly after, where he finalized the Tripartita with Alvarez and the Argentines. Initially, the Hondurans, Argentines, and Contras wanted U.S. backing for a Bay of Pigs style invasion to overthrow the Sandinistas. The CATF rejected that option as over-ambitious, and instead drew up a detailed plan to recruit 7,000 guerrilla fighters and add them to the existing 500-man Contra force, with Argentina as the covert intermediary. The Core Group incorporated the proposal into the Central America strategy it was preparing for approval by the National Security Council. Assistant Secretary Enders, after vetting it with Vice President George H.W. Bush (who had been DCI under President Ford), presented the covert action plan to the NSC formally on November 16. Shortly after, Clarridge made a trip to Buenos Aires, and Argentine Chief of Staff Galtieri (soon to become President) followed with a visit to Washington, DC where he met Casey and completed the Tripartite Agreement. Reagan had

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<sup>627</sup> Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons*, p. 197.

initially been unenthusiastic, but he became a convert and signed the finding to arm the Contras on December 1. With preparations already well-advanced, the program got underway in January 1982. The Contras might have dreamed of rolling back the Sandinistas, but for Clarridge and Casey it was enough to help them “start killing Cubans” and make Nicaragua a fighting front of expressive warriors for whom violence against communists was its own end in the larger Cold War.<sup>628</sup>

### **The Bureaucratic Politics of Central America**

Casey was one of the few people who saw eye-to-eye with Secretary of State Haig. The two Cold Warriors were actually friends. Haig was just aiming higher, at Cuba. He thought the Contra program an insufficient half-measure; he also correctly predicted it was bound quickly to become public in any case.<sup>629</sup> But Casey was a more astute reader of political reality, sure that a secret Contra war could be kept low on the radar and was closer to the President’s wishes. A covert action program also had the advantage that he would be in charge. However, as a legacy of Vietnam, and as in Angola, the dysfunctional institutional dynamics of U.S. covert action limited the probabilities of success and resulted in a gap between policy and performance in Central America.<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 175-6; Ranelagh, *The Rise & Decline of the CIA*, pp. 659-61; Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons*, pp. 195-205.

<sup>629</sup> Toth and McManus, “Contras and CIA,” *LA Times*; Woodward, *Veil*, p. 151.

<sup>630</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, p. 354; Department of Defense, Vietnam Task Force, *United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, January 15, 1969, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/>; Howard Friel and Richard Falk, *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports Foreign Policy* (London, 2004), pp. 226-50; Department of Defense, Vietnam Task Force, *United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, January 15, 1969, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/>; J. Edward Lee, *Nixon, Ford, and the Abandonment of South Vietnam* (North Carolina, 2002); Louis A. Fanning, *Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 1976); Patterson, *Restless Giant*, pp. 98-102, 200; Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads* (Connecticut, 2006), p. 18; John Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, (New York, 2008), pp. 85-86, 126, 133.

And yet, the system worked. As the RIG went about building decisions on exactly what to do in Central America, Ronald Reagan did not need advisors to remind him that his prime imperative in Central America, and elsewhere, was to keep the costs of war as low as possible. Reagan's reservoir of personal support was strong, but on Central America his government's credibility was weak, and the press and the public skeptical. Democrats in Congress, at the height of their post-Vietnam and post-Watergate assertiveness, were eager from the outset to constrain the White House in Central America.

### **Covert Action and Controversy**

In principle, covert paramilitary programs lowered the costs of war by minimizing the visibility of U.S. involvement. With the Nicaraguan Contras, however, politics had the opposite effect, and in consequence made their effectiveness as an instrument of strategy and policy questionable. The tension between secrecy and democracy is an enduring institutional problem. As a 1997 CIA article complained:

Congressional oversight has been intrusive, meddling, short-sighted, and counterproductive; has involved micromanagement on a grand scale; and has served to drag the IC [Intelligence Community] into the political cockpit of partisan politics from which it had previously been immune.<sup>631</sup>

Accountability on covert action had steadily built with the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment, the 1975 Church-Pike investigations, and the establishment of the Senate and House Select Committees on Intelligence in 1976 and 1977. Given the politicization and unpopularity of U.S. intervention in Central America, it is difficult in retrospect to see the Contra program as headed for anything but disaster from the moment the President signed the first finding to arm them in December 1981.

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<sup>631</sup> James S. Van Wagenen, "A Review of Congressional Oversight: Critics and Defenders," *Studies in Intelligence*, 1997, CSI.

Thenceforth the Contras were an on-again-off-again problem and required major expenditures of White House political capital. In 1981, Congress was reluctant to oppose the will of a popular new President, but it was equally reluctant to support an unpopular cause. Liberal Democrats were not the only ones with concerns. Even conservative, anti-communist, Republican stalwart, and Reagan supporter Barry Goldwater, who chaired the Senate Intelligence Committee, thought “a covert operation was the lesser of two evils because it avoided sending U.S. troops.”<sup>632</sup> His counterpart on the HPSCI, Edward Boland, a senior Democrat, did not initially have the votes to block the program, but he was determined to restrain it. He had strong support from the House leadership, including his Washington, DC roommate Speaker of the House Tip O’Neil, already aggrieved by the nuns’ case in El Salvador. The Salvadoran Armed Forces may have been unsavory allies, but the goals of democratic reform and defensive containment made choosing sides in El Salvador relatively more straightforward. This made protecting El Salvador by interdicting weapons destined for the FMLN a convenient justification for Contra funding, except that it was a thinly disguised fiction. The Contras never took action against weapons trafficking and dedicated themselves exclusively to fighting the Sandinistas within Nicaragua – their real purpose. This obfuscation, politically expedient as it may have been, ultimately added to the difficulties of conducting an unpopular protracted war.

In September 1982, when the administration requested \$19 million in new funding, Boland inserted a prohibition in the Defense Appropriations bill for 1983 that outlawed U.S. assistance for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. In an unmistakable signal of lack of

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<sup>632</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, p. 191.

enthusiasm for the Contras in Congress, the Boland Amendment passed in a Joint House Resolution unanimously, 411–0.

Multiple tensions over the conduct of secret war had existed since the days of the OSS. These fed into the post-Vietnam contest for authority between the executive and legislature.<sup>633</sup> The administration made its own situation worse. There was a solid reservoir of backing for Reagan’s revival of American strength in the Cold War. But from the first inklings of opposition to the Contras, the administration adopted an attitude of disdain toward Congress. Casey was a principal antagonist.<sup>634</sup> His notorious mumbling and evasive testimony reinforced the collusion in secrecy, evasion, and deception that were among the CIA’s core competences and spread them throughout the executive on Central America.

## **VI. Flawed Central America Strategy**

The Central America strategy that the Core Group assembled in the fall of 1981 arose from an unusual degree of interagency consensus and coherence. However, true to the classic model of bureaucratic politics, personal and institutional friction from the beginning tended to overshadow agreement on basic national interest.<sup>635</sup> Most accounts dismiss the Group’s inclusion of military options against Cuba as a sop to Secretary Haig. This minimizes the extent to which determining where and how to draw the line over Central America was a policy and strategy matter of the first order. Moreover, Haig was trying to use the issue to assert his dominance over foreign policy in the face of stiff internal opposition, a power struggle that turned cabinet

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<sup>633</sup> Treverton, *Covert Action*, p. 32; Joseph E. Persico, *Roosevelt’s Secret War: FDR and World War II Espionage* (New York, 2001), p. 112.

<sup>634</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, p. 69.

<sup>635</sup> Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 51–62.

government into a team of rivals.<sup>636</sup> Add divisiveness with Congress and managing Central America became an internal problem like no other.

As deliberations on Central America in Washington approached decision in the fall of 1981, the Reagan administration's intentions became a focus of public attention. Throughout 1981, the guerrilla war in El Salvador was regular prime time news, as were the "secret" Enders negotiations with the Sandinistas, and the first reports had surfaced of covert support to Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries in Honduras. In October, renewed anti-U.S. demonstrations in Nicaragua over Halcon Vista (Falcon View), a small exercise between the U.S. Navy and Honduras, awoke fresh jitters over U.S. military intervention.<sup>637</sup>

Journalists covered the highly classified discussions on Central America through anonymous sources and leaks. *The New York Times* reported on November 5 that Al Haig was again pressing for military action against Cuba; anonymous White House hardliners chimed in.<sup>638</sup> The Defense Department made known its continuing opposition to committing American forces to combat anywhere in Central America or the Caribbean. According to an unnamed official who spoke on behalf of Defense Secretary Weinberger:

Almost all of the possible military actions are not likely to be successful; it is highly doubtful the American public and Congress would support military intervention, and the Soviet Union could respond against West Berlin or the Persian Gulf without there being much of an American response.<sup>639</sup>

There may have been plenty of desire within the Reagan administration to be rid of Castro, but taking action against Cuba was a huge jump from the declared objective of halting arms shipments to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

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<sup>636</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2005.)

<sup>637</sup> Dial Torgerson, "U.S. Embassy in Managua Wary of Mob," *Miami Herald*, October 24, 1981.

<sup>638</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, "Haig is Said to Press for Military Operations for Salvador Action," *NYT*, November 5, 1981.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*

## **The November 10 NSC Meeting on Central America**

More than two dozen cabinet-level meetings and countless interagency discussions on Central America culminated toward the end of the year in a series of five meetings in which Reagan and his team finally ratified the course the United States would pursue there for the rest of the decade. On November 5, the NSPG met for preliminary discussions of the Core Group's proposal. The full NSC then reviewed it three times, taking initial decisions on November 10, receiving a formal briefing from Enders on November 16, and confirming decisions on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, which appeared two months later as National Security Decision Document (NSDD) 17.<sup>640</sup> At the final December 1 meeting, the NSPG cleared a draft of the covert action finding that authorized paramilitary support to the Contras, which the President signed later in the day.

The gist of these sessions is now widely cited in the literature from interviews and memoirs. NSDD 17 and the December 1 finding have been declassified, and the principal options paper leaked. However, reports of the meetings have not been released, with one exception – the November 10 NSC meeting. The agenda item was “Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America.”<sup>641</sup> (Subsequent citations are from this document and the record of the meeting.)

This session is worth substantial commentary. First, the exchanges revealed the fractured bureaucratic politics on Central America, including differences on policy and strategy that would divide agencies and senior leaders for the rest of the decade, even as individual personalities changed. Second, the meeting discussed contingency planning for action against Cuba: it revealed the logic that would, in the end, restrict the use of U.S. forces, and so lead way from

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<sup>640</sup> NSDD 17, National Security Decision Directive on Cuba and Central America, January 4, 1982, NSDA.

<sup>641</sup> National Security Council Meeting, Strategy toward Cuba and Central America, November 10, 1981, TRF.

limited war over Central America. Third, it made evident that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were not fully engaged with each other during the Administration's first year. Fourth, the November 10 discussion showed the origins of actions that figured later in the conflict, including the deployment of U.S. troops to Honduras and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Finally, President Reagan demonstrated with his own plain thinking that, despite all of the confusion and second-guessing, in the end he was the boss.

Key administration political and foreign policy figures were present in the cabinet room on November 10, including several deputy secretaries and advisors who would later play key roles on Central America. National Security Advisor Allen opened the meeting by outlining the Core Group strategy document, which covered the range of political, economic, intelligence, information, and military options for inclusion in NSDD 17. (The group also received a separate DOD position paper, but it arrived too late for consideration.<sup>642</sup>) The strategy was divided into Phase One, which included actions the U.S. could take without committing the Armed Forces directly, and Phase Two which included options for military escalation that would require U.S. forces. When the options paper leaked in March 1982, the press focused on covert action in Nicaragua but not on the critical distinction between Phases One and Two.<sup>643</sup>

### **Haig Tries Again**

Following Allen's introduction, Secretary of State Haig made his case for action against Cuba. "The situation in Central America was deteriorating," he said, "if we wait much longer to act, then the price will be much higher." Acknowledging "real problems between State, DOD, and CIA," Phase One was not enough. "The purpose of the entire plan was to stop Cuban

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<sup>642</sup> CIA, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, from Chief, Interdepartmental Affairs Staff, OPP, NSPG Meeting on TNF and the Caribbean, November 4, 1981, CIA FOIA.

<sup>643</sup> Special to NYT, "C.I.A.'s Nicaragua Role: A Proposal or a Reality?" *NYT*, Mar 17, 1982.

adventures,” the Secretary insisted, to show that the U.S. “was willing to use any kind of pressures to succeed.” Haig claimed his public statements:

. . . Had the Cubans worried. They had made countless overtures to talk. The message we must get to them is: We mean business. If we don’t do that, then we should not do anything.

He stated categorically:

The threshold on Cuba meanwhile is very clear: it is the 1962 accords, the promise not to invade is the line. Invasion is the trigger for a serious Soviet response. Up to that point there is a free play area.

Haig’s notion of a “free play area” was a chimera. Certainly, the dictates of prudence and precedent contradicted any such assumption. In several meetings with Ambassador Dobrynin, Haig had warned that U.S.-Soviet relations, including progress on arms control, would be on hold until Moscow got “Cuba’s imperialism in Africa and Latin America under control.”<sup>644</sup>

According to Haig, Dobrynin’s response:

Convinced me that Cuban activities in the Western Hemisphere were a matter between the United States and Cuba. . . . Castro had fallen between two superpowers.<sup>645</sup>

However, in his memoir, Dobrynin wrote that he had rejected Haig’s Cuba-obsessed pressure and in reply “asked him straight out if his words meant the Reagan administration was not interested in any constructive dialogue with us at all.”<sup>646</sup>

The most sustained U.S.-Soviet exchange during 1981 took place during fruitless meetings Haig held with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko in New York during the UN General Assembly on September 23 and 28. Their conversation was laced with hostility, with Haig at one point in their private session incensing Gromyko by telling him, “The Soviet Union should

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<sup>644</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 131; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 83.

<sup>645</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 133.

<sup>646</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 487.

renounce its foreign policy.”<sup>647</sup> Their primary topic was arms control, but the two sparred intensely on Cuba at several points during their nine hours of talks. The record shows no hint of a Soviet threshold. Rather, if there was a signal from Gromyko it had come immediately before, in his September 22 address to the General Assembly, when he had demanded that the U.S. halt its "hostile, criminal intrigues against Cuba."<sup>648</sup> Moscow backed up its seriousness by delivering 63,000 tons of military assistance to Cuba in 1981, double the previous year and the highest total since 1962.<sup>649</sup>

Phase Two of the strategy paper contained options for direct U.S. military action against Cuba and Nicaragua. Both the Core Group and McFarlane’s contingency planning group had recommended against exercising any of them in favor of sticking to Phase One measures, confined to indirect action in Central America. Similar views prevailed in the intelligence community. For example, a National Intelligence Estimate assessed that in Central America, “[T]he Soviets would be likely to adopt more circumspect tactics to exploit opportunities in the region if the United States seemed ready to exercise its political and military advantages.” In contrast, it warned, “Moscow is likely to see any US military threat to the Castro regime as a major crisis in US-Soviet relations.”<sup>650</sup>

Speaking after Haig at the November 10 meeting, Defense Secretary Weinberger concurred with Phase One. He agreed with the nature and seriousness of the problem in Central America, but made it clear: “DOD cannot accept the decision to use unilateral force now.” He

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<sup>647</sup> Memoranda of Conversation, Secretary Haig and Foreign Minister Gromyko, September 23 and 28, 1981, *TRF*; Don Oberdorfer, “Superpowers Reported Still Far Apart After Haig-Gromyko Conversations,” *WP*, October 1, 1981.

<sup>648</sup> Andrei Gromyko, “Safeguarding Peace is the Main Task,” speech at the 36th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Novosti Press Agency, September 22 1981.

<sup>649</sup> Hildago, *Soviet Military Assistance to Latin America*, p. 98; Special National Intelligence Estimate, Soviet Policies and Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, SNIE 11/80/90-82, June 25, 1982, CIA FOIA.

<sup>650</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Estimate: Cuban Policy toward Latin America, July 1981, CIA FOIA.

did not rule out Phase Two use of force altogether, but insisted, “We must prepare public opinion, and we must work on getting a coalition of Latin American countries to work with us.”

JCS Chairman Jones followed Weinberger. He provided a concise vision of U.S. strategy. He said the first priority was El Salvador. The primary object was political, and constituent elections slated for March 1982 would be the critical next step in the transition to democracy. Reporting that Brigadier General Woerner was at that moment working on his counter-insurgency strategy, Jones said, “If we do nothing, the junta is doomed to slow defeat. We can, however, stabilize the situation indefinitely if our economic and security assistance is increased.” Jones was correct. Despite the declared aim of defeating the FMLN, stabilization would be the maximum U.S. support to counter-insurgency would achieve in El Salvador. General Jones then defined the criteria for moving from Phase One to Phase Two: “We need to put pressure on Nicaragua that does not require a quarantine [or] the landing of U.S. forces. Of course, if the Cubans move in troops, then we are forced to do more.”

Weinberger, Jones, Kirkpatrick, Allen and Casey all spoke in favor of proceeding with Phase One measures. Kirkpatrick said that stabilizing El Salvador was the urgent priority, without time to build a coalition. Casey said the first target was Nicaragua. Haig responded that he was “against creating an insurgency in Nicaragua unless you are willing to go all the way... We cannot start another Vietnam in our hemisphere.” Kirkpatrick disagreed with the comparison, because, “The Vietnam War did not involve direct national security issues. Central America does.” Meese interjected to summarize, “The key element is whether U.S. land forces and naval actions are to be contemplated. Would we use them?”

It was clear by the time of the November 10 meeting that war with Moscow over Cuba was the last thing Reagan was seeking.<sup>651</sup> The President spoke his mind:

Should everyone – Americans, Cubans, Nicaraguans – feel the U.S. will commit its forces? If the people won't support the leader and the cause, then there will be a failure... The press would like to accuse us of getting into another Vietnam. How can we solve this problem with Congress and public opinion being what they are? We are talking about an impossible option. Are there other things we can do? Can covert actions be traced back to us? How do we deal with the image in Latin America of the Yankee colossus?

Allen suggested the President make a statement to build consensus. Kirkpatrick agreed. In his only interjection, White House Chief of Staff Baker, guarding domestic priorities, objected, "Warnings have already been given." The President said, "Then what? People will want to know. What are you going to do?"

Meese weighed in to sum up agreement: "We can do those things listed to help El Salvador. As for Nicaragua, we can do political, military, propaganda, covert actions that do not require U.S. forces."

Apparently consulting the list of options, Vice President Bush asked, "Could we mine Nicaraguan east coast ports?"

**Allen:** "Yes, but other shipping is involved... There are short-term demonstration steps to show our seriousness aside from mining."

**Weinberger:** "Everything Mr. Meese outlined can be done without a prior commitment to use force."

**Meese:** "The dividing line is the use of naval forces to interdict Nicaragua."

**Haig:** "The dividing line is whether any plan will succeed."

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<sup>651</sup> Simon Miles, "Researching through the Back Door: Field Notes from East of the Iron Curtain," *Passport: SHAFR Review*, 47:1, April 2016, pp. 39-41; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 487-89; Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, pp. 13-15; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 349-55; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, pp. 331-34; Cannon, *President Reagan*, pp. 256-58.

The next NSC meeting was scheduled to consider the full Central America proposal on November 16. Meese proposed preparation of estimates of what it would take to implement each action “short of the ultimatum to Nicaragua and the employment of U.S. forces against Nicaragua.”

The President said that in that case he wanted to hear more about various alternatives, including mining. “What other covert actions could be taken that would be truly disabling and not just flea bites? I don’t want to back down. I don’t want to accept defeat.” He asked about training exercises: “Can we introduce a few battalions into Panama or Honduras? Have we ever done that?”

The last word belonged to Lieutenant General Gorman, Jones’ assistant on the JCS: “No, we have never done that.”

### **The November 16 NSC Meeting on Central America**

Following nearly a year of deliberations, at the NSC meeting on November 16 Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America Enders briefed the Central America plan as head of the Core Group (renamed the Restricted Inter-Agency Group or RIG in 1983). In a case of strategy-making in reverse, President Reagan endorsed all of the measures, most of which built on his predecessor’s actions and were already under way. NSDD 17 on Cuba and Central America was issued January 4, 1982. Prefaced with a declaration of support for democracy, freedom, peace, and stability, the policy was purely strategic:

[T]o assist in defeating the insurgency in El Salvador, and to oppose actions by Cuba, Nicaragua, or others to introduce into Central America heavy weapons, troops from outside the region, trained subversives, or arms and military supplies for insurgents.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>652</sup> NSDD 17.

It listed eleven presidential decisions that employed the range of U.S. instruments of power -- political, diplomatic, economic, military, intelligence, and information.

NSDD 17 would serve as the basis of U.S. policy and strategy in Central America without significant modification throughout the remainder of the Cold War. Rather than marking a departure, Reagan's early decisions on Central America were extensions of the previous administration's policy. When it came to the underlying perception of the Soviet-Cuban threat to national security, there is little to distinguish NSDD 17 of January 1982 from PD 52 of October 1979 on U.S. policy toward Cuba.

Following the adoption of NSDD 17, a major interagency propaganda effort, housed in the State Department Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, got underway. The central public relations problem would be: how to discuss the Cold War problem in Central America "without making it sound like war?"<sup>653</sup> Attention turned to a Presidential address intended to overcome opposition among the American public, in Congress, and internationally. Reagan's first speech about Central America, delivered on February 24, 1982 to the OAS, announced the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which focused on regional economic assistance rather than security.<sup>654</sup> This would be the first of more than 20 addresses dedicated to or highlighting Central America that Reagan would give as President.

### **Reagan's First Year and Central America**

U.S. aims in Central America were of the highest order, a grand strategy to defend the U.S. sphere of interest, maintain a favorable regional balance of power, contain the spread of

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<sup>653</sup> National Security Council Meeting, The Caribbean Basin, February 10, 1982, *TRF*.

<sup>654</sup> Ronald Reagan, Remarks on the Caribbean Basin Initiative to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States, February 24, 1982.

Marxist-Leninist revolution, commit national prestige and show determination to compete with the Soviet Union in the Global Cold War. As strategy, however, these measures were of a significantly lower order, restricted to open-ended contingency operations, with actual fighting limited to support for insurgency and counter-insurgency within Central America, no more.

Even if everything else about Central America was complex, the reasons why were simple. The President did have an offensive mindset and he did not want “flea bites.” But he could not afford the “impossible option” of going to war in Central America without the support of the American people or becoming the menacing American colossus. Military action against Cuba would have brought even greater risk, of confrontation with the Soviet Union. To avoid quagmire on the one hand and escalation on the other, it was necessary to keep the costs of containment and deterrence at the lowest possible level.

Like light footprint counter-insurgency in El Salvador, supporting Nicaraguan insurgents fitted this imperative. They were the “low ball option,” intended not to roll the Sandinistas back but “to waste them,” as Enders put it in his November 16 briefing to the NSC.<sup>655</sup> Once Reagan converted to Casey’s cause, he became so dedicated to the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters that, when Congress moved to cut off their funding in 1984, he enjoined National Security Advisor Bud McFarland “to help them hold body and soul together.”<sup>656</sup> The personal cost to him was considerable. As Cannon concluded in the two chapters he dedicated to the Iran-Contra affair,

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<sup>655</sup> Woodward, *Veil*, p. 173, Cannon, *President Reagan*, pp. 309-11.

<sup>656</sup> UPI, “Reagan Had Greater Role – McFarlane,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1987; U.S. Congress, Testimony of Robert C. McFarlane, Joint Hearings Before the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions With Iran and Senate Select Committee On Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, 100:1, May 11, 1987.

“The clandestine foreign policy initiative would overshadow much of his second term and tarnish the credibility he had preserved as an actor and politician.”<sup>657</sup>

Haig did get one chance to go to the source, diplomatically. Following the November 16 NSC meeting, at the President’s direction, Haig travelled with some reluctance to Mexico City for a secret meeting with Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. It proved fruitless.<sup>658</sup> By early 1982, it was fully evident that there would be no direct force against Nicaragua, no naval interdiction, and no coercive military action against Cuba.<sup>659</sup>

When the President asked on November 10 about sending “a few battalions to Panama or Honduras” and Lieutenant General Gorman replied “we have never done that,” Gorman was implying not yet. To use the terms adopted in the Defense lexicon at the time, Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) proved effective elements of U.S. containment and deterrence strategy in Central America.<sup>660</sup> The initial move, under the direction of U.S. Southern Command in Panama, was already under way in 1981 with the arrival of a small U.S. military unit headquartered at Pamerola (Soto Cano) Air Base 60 miles west of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Joint Task Force-Bravo became a key dimension of Central America strategy by deploying U.S. troops to Honduras, where they built an airfield to handle strategic airlift, trained Central

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<sup>657</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan*, pp. 521-662.

<sup>658</sup>“Transcript of Meeting between Secretary of State Haig and Cuban Vice Premier Rodríguez,” Mexico City, November 23, 1981, *CWIHP Bulletin*, Nos. 8-9, (Winter 1996-1997), pp. 217-19; Alfonso Chardy, “Cuba’s Canny Old Communist,” *Miami Herald*, December 18, 1983; Haig, *Caveat*, pp. 133-136. LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Backchannel to Cuba*, pp. 225-33.

<sup>659</sup> Don Oberdorfer, “More U.S. Effort Yields Less Result: Haig Finds Quick Solutions in Central America Slip from Grip,” *WP*, March 4, 1982.

<sup>660</sup> *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*, Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Publication 3-07, 1995.

American militaries, developed infrastructure, supported Contra logistics, secured the border, and conducted exercises that involved repelling an invasion by Nicaragua.<sup>661</sup>

The Soviets and other Eastern Bloc countries advised and armed the Sandinista Peoples' Army (EPS), which grew to 80,000, by far the largest army in the region. Arms continued flowing to the Salvadoran guerrillas. There were T-55 tanks to defend Managua and Hind helicopters to counter the Contra insurgency, but not to invade Honduras. Over 10,000 Cubans were in Nicaragua supporting the revolution, about 5,000 of them military advisors. But Cuba did not send combat troops. Despite the Sandinistas' strong desire and Castro's urging, the Soviets declined to extend their commitment to defend Cuba to Nicaragua.<sup>662</sup>

A specific tripwire appeared in June 1982. Several dozen EPS pilots had trained to fly MIGs, and when intelligence reported that the Soviets were preparing to ship some of the fighters to Nicaragua, Secretary of State George Shultz, who had just replaced Haig, leveled an explicit warning. To the Sandinistas' chagrin, the Soviets never followed through.

By the end of 1981, the pieces of the Reagan administration's strategy for Central America were in place. Taken as a whole, counter-insurgency in El Salvador, support for the Nicaraguan Contras, along with associated operations other than war, constituted multi-faceted, open-ended, and low cost contingency operations. They met the imperatives of restrictive deterrence by remaining below a threshold that would provoke public rejection or risk escalation to limited war. One year after Reagan came into office, the situation in Central America had not

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<sup>661</sup> LTC Russell J. Hall, "Joint Task Force-Bravo: A Case Study in Military Operations Other Than War," U.S. Army War College Strategy Research Project, 1988.

<sup>662</sup> Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, pp. 201, 216.

improved much and there was still nearly a decade to go. In the entry to his diary for February 4, 1982, he wrote:

Day filled with meetings, N.S.C. etc. We have problems with El Salvador – the rebels seem to be winning. Guatemala could go any day & of course Nicaragua is another Cuba. Lot of opinions but no decisions. Mid afternoon I could hardly keep my eyes open – in fact I didn't. – Tonite early to bed.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 67.



## **Chapter 7: Soviet Intervention, American Reaction, Cold War Watershed**

### **I. U.S. - Soviet Contention over Afghanistan**

This chapter unwinds the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars that emerged from the Carter administration's reaction to the December 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Colliding beliefs, miscalculations, and misconceptions produced this psychological and strategic watershed, which marked the beginning of the final phase of the Cold War. Both superpowers were motivated by fears that the other had a strategic design to upset the regional balance of power, but beneath their considerations of national interest and rational calculus lay an overriding will to contend.

Moscow's decision to send its troops into Afghanistan proved a strategic error that the United States exploited effectively at high cost to the Soviets. In some respects, the Carter administration initially over-reacted to the Soviet intervention. Why was this reaction so extreme? The decisions the Carter administration took in association with supporting the mujahedin, and which the Reagan administration upheld, had enduring impact. The consequences that continue to this day are profound.

As in Angola and Central America, the Afghan war became a war within the Cold War, and U.S. involvement there was entirely an extension of global competition with the Soviet Union. Unlike those two other conflicts, U.S. support for insurgency in Afghanistan was dedicated to killing Russian soldiers and it was not a source of domestic political controversy. Although the fighting was confined to Afghanistan, the war had at once global, regional, and national, as well ideological dimensions. The mujahedin arose as a spontaneous resistance movement powerfully motivated to carry out Islamic jihad against their modernizing communist Afghan opponents, then against the Soviet occupiers. U.S. involvement was concerned

exclusively with exploiting the opportunity to combat the Soviets. True to the warfighting origins of covert action in World War II, the character of the insurgents themselves, the ethnic and religious aspects, as well as the motives of the two other main protagonists, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, were matters of secondary importance.

### **Synopsis of Afghanistan Historiography (1978-1981)**

No general discussion of the last decade of the Cold War skips Afghanistan. There are a number of thorough accounts of the events that led the Soviet Union to attempt to control Afghanistan through military force in 1979, and of the initial U.S. response. The literature specifically covering the early period, roughly from 1978 through 1981 is thorough and comparable to that on Central America and Angola. The Soviet intervention was a huge international story. Journalists covering it from the U.S. had access to the usual harvest of leaks and anonymous sources, as well as to abundant official reaction. Understandably, reporting from Moscow and Afghanistan itself tended to be scantier. The documentary record is substantial, in some respects more complete on the Soviet than it is on the U.S. side. Disputes over events and facts are minor, but each interpretation of the Afghan elephant provides something of a blind man's version that leaves the full portrait incomplete.

There are several American memoirs. Brzezinski's long account of his involvement with Afghanistan is a required source. Carter and Vance also gave it major attention in their memoirs. Robert Gates had a front row seat, first as Brzezinski's assistant at the NSC until late 1979, thereafter as DCI Turner's executive secretary and then as National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union. Among lesser-known accounts, Peter Rodman offers unique insight on Afghanistan early in the Reagan administration when the greater preoccupation was Central America. Declassified reports by U.S. officials, notably Bruce Amstutz, who became U.S.

Chargé in Kabul following the assassination of Ambassador Dubs in February 1979, provide a highly astute on-the-ground perspective, as does Amstutz's memoir published in 1986.<sup>664</sup> In his 2011 history of the war, former U.S. Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance Peter Tomsen fills in key details, especially on the roles of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>665</sup>

Steve Coll's 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning *Ghost Wars* is regarded as the definitive history from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001, but he did not dwell on origins in great detail. The first thorough narrative of the initial period came out in 1983 (updated in 2001), by Henry Bradsher, an American journalist with experience in Kabul and Moscow who had good access to U.S. documents and officials.<sup>666</sup> Raymond Garthoff provides a detailed and nuanced analysis of the Soviet occupation and the U.S. reaction that made extensive use of primary sources, including interviews with unusually frank Soviet officials and shredded U.S. communications that Islamist revolutionaries recovered from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979.<sup>667</sup> *Afghansty* by former British Ambassador to Moscow Rodric Braithwaite is another recent volume dedicated to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.<sup>668</sup>

Westad's extensive work on Afghanistan in *The Global Cold War* and elsewhere stands out for its attention to conflicting Soviet and American perspectives. His detailed documentation of the run-up to the Soviet intervention draws on interviews with participants and pioneering research in Russian archives.<sup>669</sup> Westad's central conclusion, that the actions of both

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<sup>664</sup> J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (NDU, 1986).

<sup>665</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York, 2004); Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan* (New York, 2011).

<sup>666</sup> Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (North Carolina, 1983).

<sup>667</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 887-1008.

<sup>668</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghansty* (London, 2011).

<sup>669</sup> Odd Arne Westad, "Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists," *International History Review*, 16:1, February 1994, pp. 49-69; Westad and David Welch (eds.), "The Intervention in Afghanistan: Record of an Oral History Conference," The Carter Brezhnev Project and Norwegian Nobel Institute, Lysebu, September 17-20, 1995.

superpowers were “ordained by perceptions, personalities, and ideology far more than interests and strategies,” carries considerable weight.<sup>670</sup>

There are many Russian memoirs that deal with Afghanistan, although none from the senior Moscow leadership. Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin’s long chapter on the impact of Afghanistan on U.S.-Soviet relations relates how he circulated between Washington and Moscow in the months after the invasion like something of a superpower psychiatrist, trying to bridge mutual misapprehension as the bilateral relationship descended to a dangerous low point. Dobrynin, although unquestionably a Russian patriot, provided equally penetrating assessments of both sides, calling Afghanistan a “gross miscalculation” by the Politburo and an “emotional over-reaction” by Carter.<sup>671</sup> Three other authoritative Russian sources include a history of the KGB in Afghanistan by Soviet defector Vasili Mitrokhin, a critical study of Soviet military performance by the Russian General Staff, which is the third volume on the Soviet-Afghan war translated and edited by Lester Grau of the U.S. Army Command and Staff College, and the military history of the intervention by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy, former deputy of the Soviet Afghan Working Group.<sup>672</sup>

The Wilson Center and the National Security Archive have extensive digital archives of U.S. and translated Russian documents. Both archives are presented with thorough explanatory essays and bulletins that bring together the work of multiple scholars and institutions, along with the proceedings of several conferences with direct participants as well as academics. The

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<sup>670</sup> Odd Arne Westad, “Concerning the situation in “A”: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8/9, Winter 1996-1997, p. 129.

<sup>671</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 442.

<sup>672</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York, 1999); Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (trans. and eds.), *The Russian General Staff, The Soviet-Afghan War* (Kansas, 2002); Aleksandr Antonovich Lyakhovskiy, *Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, trans. Gary Goldberg and Artemy Kalinovsky, CWIHP Working Paper #51, January 2007.

holdings also assemble multiple Russian language volumes, for example the English version of a 25-year joint investigation into Moscow's involvement in Afghanistan by a Russian journalist and a former KGB Colonel.<sup>673</sup> The FRUS volume of U.S. documents on the Soviet Union during the Carter administration is available, but volumes on Afghanistan for the Carter and Reagan administrations are under declassification review and some years off from release.

Fortunately, for anyone attempting to write about Afghanistan there is *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* by the anthropologist Thomas Barfield.<sup>674</sup> Something like a Tocqueville for Afghanistan, Barfield's grasp of Afghan character and history is unique. His book contains valuable keys to understanding how this marginal and idiosyncratic nation-state with fiercely competing political clans, recurrent Islamic jihad, resistance to modernization, and a seemingly perpetual condition of war have attracted foreign occupiers for millennia, only to lead them astray.

### **Graveyard Myths**

The myth that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires contains a core of truth.<sup>675</sup> As the story goes, a remote land of difficult geography and little intrinsic interest is inhabited by a contentious and unruly people who sustain a minimum of order on their own with great difficulty, but nevertheless rises up in arms to resist and defeat any foreign power foolish enough intervene on their soil. In pre-modern times, the ungoverned spaces of Afghanistan were known

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<sup>673</sup> Wilson Center Digital Archive, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, CWIHP; "New Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8/9, Winter 1996-1997, pp. 128-84; National Security Archive, *The September 11th Sourcebooks, Vol. II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*, NSDA; Vladimir Snegirev and Valery Samunin, *Virus A: How We Got Infected by the Invasion of Afghanistan*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 396; Steve Galster, *Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990*, NSDA.

<sup>674</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, 2010).

<sup>675</sup> Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs*, 80:6, November/December 2001, pp. 17-30; Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York, 2009).

visitors and occupiers as Yagistan, wild country.<sup>676</sup> More completely understood, for millennia, Afghanistan's geographic position gave it importance on the periphery of competing empires and as an intersection on the Silk Road.<sup>677</sup> Founded as a state in 1747, Afghanistan resulted from a fractious merger of regionalism, ethnicity, tribalism, and Islam, yet it has evolved a strong and enduring national identity. In the modern era, Afghanistan has remained a contest between order and disorder. That contest has in turn has been both cause and consequence of intervention in three phases: first as the object of the Great Game between Great Britain and Russia, then of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the final phase of the Cold War, and for the United States and its coalition partners following September 2001. In each case, the powers have serially underestimated Afghanistan's intractable and resilient nature, and encountered implacable insurgents fueled by Islamic jihad.

Even if maintaining order was always a challenge, Afghanistan was not perpetually volatile, and the origin of its modern descent into chaos can be precisely determined. Relative stability prevailed under King Zahir Shah from 1933 until 1973, when Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan overthrew him and declared a modernizing republic. Pakistani Prime Minister Ali Bhutto secretly began promoting resistance by Islamic conservatives at that time. In April 1978, the ultra-leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew Daoud and launched the Saur Revolution. The PDPA's attempts to impose communism and suppress Islam alienated much of the population. By early 1979, armed resistance had spread across the country, abetted by Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

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<sup>676</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 69.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid, pp. 67-78; Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 9-13.

## Afghanistan and the Cold War

Afghanistan was not initially a serious object of the Cold War. Unlike Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan had long been closer to the Soviet orbit; its economic aid and 3,000 military advisors far outweighed the American presence. The Soviets had been content enough with Daoud, who endeavored to balance himself between the East and West. As a CIA analyst wrote, "Daoud was happiest when he could light his American cigarettes with Soviet matches."<sup>678</sup>

Prior to 1979, the U.S. had competed rather complacently with the Soviet Union in the contemporary Great Game. Daoud's balancing gestures also contented Kissinger during the Nixon and Ford years, in which Iran and Pakistan's pro-U.S. alignment bracketed the Soviet predominance in Afghanistan.<sup>679</sup> The Islamic Revolution which overthrew the Shah of Iran on January 1979 upset that regional balance. Although the US had recognized the communist government after the Sauer Revolution in 1978, relations soured after the assassination of Ambassador Adolph Dubs on February 14, 1979 during a botched KGB-supervised attempt to rescue him from terrorist kidnappers. Shocked, the U.S. downgraded relations and cut off all except humanitarian aid. Suspicion and hostility toward the chaotic PDPA regime and the Soviet role increased from there.<sup>680</sup>

Casting about for ways to harden the U.S. position, and with the anti-communist resistance burgeoning, the Special Coordinating Committee first considered CIA options for covert action on March 5. In that meeting, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter

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<sup>678</sup> CIA, Mohammad Daud: President of Afghanistan, Biographic Profile, August 13, 1973, NSDA.

<sup>679</sup> Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, p. 200-1.

<sup>680</sup> U.S. Department of State, The Kidnapping and Death of Ambassador Dubs, Summary of Report of Investigation, February 5, 1980; Oral History: Political Officer Bruce Flatin, The Assassination of Ambassador Spike Dubs — Kabul, 1979, ADST; Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, pp. 125-6.

Slocombe asked, “Would it be worth sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire?”<sup>681</sup> Instead, the U.S. merely warned the Soviets that its deepening involvement in Afghanistan violated the spirit of détente and would affect relations. It was not until July 3 that the President approved the first covert action finding. It provided \$500,000 for propaganda and a small amount of non-lethal equipment for the mujahedin, organized in cooperation with Pakistan. One of the reasons for hesitation and the insubstantial amount was concern that a large program would provoke a Soviet reaction.<sup>682</sup>

## II. Afghanistan’s Descent into Chaos

According to the man who introduced Mikhail Gorbachev to Margaret Thatcher, Oxford Russia expert Archie Brown, “If 1979 was a bad year for the Carter administration, it was, if anything, worse for the Brezhnev regime.”<sup>683</sup> The Soviets continued to project military power and their system had yet to reveal its fatal decay. But discontent was emerging as a serious challenge in Poland, a few in the Politburo knew the economy was critically ill, and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev was obviously debilitated. It could hardly have seemed to Moscow that the Third World was going its way. Cuba and Vietnam had become expensive allies, while newer revolutionary clients in Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua were headaches – unstable, embroiled in wars, with demanding and obstreperous leaders.

Then, there was Afghanistan. Moscow did not play a role in the April 1978 coup, but it welcomed the new communist rulers. However, violence and extremism quickly became the

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<sup>681</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 144-6.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid.

<sup>683</sup> Archie Brown, “Gorbachev, Perestroika, and the End of the Cold War,” conference presentation, National Security Affairs during the Ronald Reagan Era, VMI, November 4, 2014.

hallmarks of the Saur Revolution. In addition to provoking hostility from conservative Muslims, the PDPA regime was split into two factions and became consumed with internal purges that saw over half of the party's original 30,000 members killed or imprisoned.

Moscow's decision to send in combat forces, although ill-considered, was neither rash nor hasty.<sup>684</sup> Instead, during nearly a year of creeping intervention, the Soviets attempted to prevent Afghanistan from spiraling out of control by stepping up military assistance, discreetly increasing the number of troops, taking a direct role in governing, and using political intrigue to insert less lethal and more malleable leadership. Like the U.S. in Vietnam, they found the more committed to propping up the government they became, they more enmeshed they became in a game they could neither control nor win.<sup>685</sup>

A rude shock came on March 15, 1979, when Herat, the largest city in Western Afghanistan, erupted in rebellion under the influence of Islamists. The 17<sup>th</sup> Army Division mutinied and well-armed rebels took control of the city, hunting down hundreds of hated communists and murdering over 100 Russian advisors and family members.<sup>686</sup> The Herat uprising demonstrated the strength of the insurgency and exposed the weakness of the PDPA government. Panicked Afghan leaders begged the Soviets to send combat forces in disguise. "No

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<sup>684</sup> Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan from Intervention to Withdrawal," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 11:4, Fall 2009, pp. 46–73; Vasiliy Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan*, CWIHP Working Paper #40, July 2011; Konstantin Chernenko, "Concerning the Situation in 'A'," December 12, 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin* 4, Fall 1994, p. 76; Alexander Lyakhovsky, "Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan," from *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 109-12, NSDA; Westad and Welch, "Intervention in Afghanistan" Lysebu Oral History Conference, CWIHP.

<sup>685</sup> Mitrokhin, *KGB in Afghanistan*, pp. 54-5. "Extract from Protocol No. 168 of the CPSU CC Politburo Session," September 15, 1979; and "Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC," October 29, 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, pp. 154-58; Karen Brutents, *Thirty Years on Staryaya Ploshad*, cited from Russian in Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, p. 156.

<sup>686</sup> Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 100-3; Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 86–92; Selig Harrison and Diego Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 36–7; Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London, 2009), p. 64.

one will recognize them. We want you to send them,” President Taraki pleaded with Prime Minister Alexi Kosygin.<sup>687</sup> The Politburo declined. But six months later, with the situation worsening, KGB Chief Yuri Andropov, Defense Minister Dimitry Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko convinced Brezhnev that the United States had designs on Afghanistan and they needed to act to keep Afghanistan within the Soviet orbit.<sup>688</sup> Dismissing authoritative objections and the opposition of several senior leaders, the Politburo secretly ratified the decision to intervene on December 12 by signing a handwritten note that remained locked in a Central Committee safe until after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>689</sup>

On December 25, Soviet troops began crossing the Amu Darya River into Afghanistan, while airborne forces secured the main airports, and Special forces eliminated the leadership. Afghanistan’s new hand-picked rulers invoked the 1978 Treaty of Friendship to request Soviet assistance, thus technically the intervention was not an invasion.<sup>690</sup> Termed the 40<sup>th</sup> Army Limited Contingent, Soviet forces never exceeded 110,000 (compared to 17 divisions sent to Hungary in 1956 and 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops that occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968.) Moscow initially expected to stabilize Afghanistan and withdraw in six months. But forces

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<sup>687</sup> Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and Afghan Prime Minister [sic] Nur Mohammed Taraki, 17 or 18 March 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, p. 146.

<sup>688</sup> Lyakhovsky, *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*, p. 109 and at Lysebu Conference, cited in Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 319; Personal Memorandum, Andropov to Brezhnev, December 2, 1979, Report by Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev, January 1980, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, pp. 157, 163-65; “Replies of L.I. Brezhnev to Questions of a Correspondent,” *Pravda*, January 13, 1980; Mitrokhin, “The KGB in Afghanistan,” *CWIHP Working Paper*, Number 40; Karen Brutents, presentation to the Lysebu Conference, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, p. 130; Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan,” p. 49; Michael Fenzel, “No Retreat: The Failure of Soviet Decision-Making in the Afghan War, 1979-1989” (Naval Postgraduate School dissertation, 2013).

<sup>689</sup> Lyakhovsky, “Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan”; Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, p. 744, n. 47; Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan, March 17-19, 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8-9, 136-45.

<sup>690</sup> CIA, Intelligence Appraisal: Indications of Continued Disintegration in Afghanistan, January 20, 1980, FOIA; Department of State/Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Intelligence Summary: Deteriorating Afghan Situation Brings in Soviet Troops, December 4, 1979, NSDA; Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan*; Grau and Gress (eds.), *The Soviet Afghan War*, pp. 35, 73-4.

quickly became bogged down in combat operations and a full counter-insurgency campaign against an estimated 60,000 mujahedin.<sup>691</sup> The Soviets were already looking for a way out in March 1980 when Fidel Castro made the first negotiating proposal in his capacity as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, with the United States to participate as a guarantor. It was under the same formulation that the UN would begin mediation efforts two years later and the Soviets would finally withdraw in 1989.<sup>692</sup>

The Soviets perceived their action in Afghanistan as defensive, fixed on preventing a troubled regime in their own sphere of interest from collapsing into self-consuming anarchy. Moscow loudly denounced U.S. interference, but leaders felt no need to fear the U.S. reaction.<sup>693</sup> After all, the West had acquiesced when the USSR used force in Hungary and Czechoslovakia; the U.S. had failed in Vietnam and Cuba remained inviolate; Soviet support for revolutionary regimes in Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua faced no effective opposition from the Carter administration; U.S. warnings against military action in Afghanistan in March and again in June 1979 carried no threat; and the Cuba brigade incident in September merely left the Soviets irritated and puzzled. Nor had Moscow much to lose: détente was virtually moribund, with U.S.-Soviet relations at their lowest point since 1962.

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<sup>692</sup> Documents related to the "Proposal by Fidel Castro to Mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan," March-June 1980, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, pp. 167-74; James Nelson Goodsell, "Afghan Invasion Puts Cuba in Third World Hot Seat," *CSM*, January 9, 1980.

<sup>693</sup> Amstutz interview in Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 48; Westad, "Prelude to Invasion," *International History Review*, pp. 49-69; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 60-9, 100-03; Amstutz, *Afghanistan*, p. 44.

When the United States reacted so aggressively to the Soviet intervention, some in the Politburo believed that President Carter was emotionally destabilized by the influence of a Rasputin-like Brzezinski. With deeper understanding, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin counseled that the United States Government was reverting to containment.<sup>694</sup> A familiar Cold War security dilemma took hold as the more determined the U.S. became to oppose the Soviets in Afghanistan, the more determined the Soviets became to sustain their commitment.

### **Afghanistan's Descent into Chaos**

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<sup>701</sup> Lyakhovskiy, "Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan"; Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, p. 744, n. 47; Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan, March 17-19, 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8-9, 136-45.

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against an estimated 60,000 mujahedin.<sup>703</sup> The Soviets were already looking for a way out in March 1980 when Fidel Castro made the first negotiating proposal in his capacity as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, with the United States to participate as a guarantor. It was under the same formulation that the UN would begin mediation efforts two years later and the Soviets would finally withdraw in 1989.<sup>704</sup>

The Soviets perceived their action in Afghanistan as defensive, fixed on preventing a troubled regime in their own sphere of interest from collapsing into self-consuming anarchy. Moscow loudly denounced U.S. interference, but leaders felt no need to fear the U.S. reaction.<sup>705</sup> After all, the West had acquiesced when the USSR used force in Hungary and Czechoslovakia; the U.S. had failed in Vietnam and Cuba remained inviolate. The Soviets were supporting revolutionary regimes in Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua without effective opposition from the Carter administration, and the U.S. had taken no action to back up its warnings against military action in Afghanistan in March and again in June 1979. The Cuba brigade incident in September merely left the Soviets irritated and puzzled. Nor had Moscow much to lose; détente was virtually moribund and U.S.-Soviet relations were at their lowest point since 1962.

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<sup>703</sup> "Resolution of the CC of the CPSU," June 23, 1980, *Kommunist*, Number 10, July 1980, p. 10; Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan," pp. 57-8; Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye* (Harvard, 2011); Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford, 1995); Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 170-2; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 929, n. 121; Westad, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, p. 128.

<sup>704</sup> Documents related to the "Proposal by Fidel Castro to Mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan," March-June 1980, *CWIHP Bulletin* 8-9, pp. 167-74; James Nelson Goodsell, "Afghan Invasion Puts Cuba in Third World Hot Seat," *CSM*, January 9, 1980.

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When the United States reacted so aggressively to the Soviet intervention, some in the Politburo believed that President Carter was emotionally destabilized by the influence of a Rasputin-like Brzezinski. Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin counseled that the United States Government was reverting to its policy of containment.<sup>706</sup> The more determined the U.S. became to oppose the Soviets in Afghanistan the more determined they became to sustain their commitment and the familiar Cold War security dilemma took hold.

### **III. The U.S. Reacts**

The Carter administration assumed that signaling unspecified costs to détente and arms control would somehow deter military action in Afghanistan. Interaction was already so highly contentious, there was no basis for serious dialogue, let alone understanding. The single summit between Carter and Brezhnev on June 15-18, 1979 in Vienna was barren. Carter objected petulantly and at length to Brezhnev about Soviet expansion in the Third World and its backing for Cuba's military activities. When Carter raised Afghanistan, he thought Brezhnev had responded with a firm promise of non-intervention. Actually, Brezhnev merely denied they had any intention of intervening, which was true enough at the time.<sup>707</sup>

Brzezinski speculated that with greater determination the U.S. could have headed off the Soviets, claiming that he had constantly urged the State Department to take a stronger stance. However, when he delivered the first U.S. public expression of concern in a speech on August 2, the message was ambiguous.<sup>708</sup> As late as December 15, Washington's instructions to

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<sup>706</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 452.

<sup>707</sup> MemCon between President Carter and President Brezhnev at the Vienna Summit, International Issues, June 17, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>708</sup> Hedrick Smith, "U.S. Is Indirectly Pressing Russians to Halt Afghanistan Intervention," *NYT*, August 3, 1979; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response,

Ambassador Watson in Moscow amounted to seeking an explanation in the most diplomatic of tones, “so that conflict situations will not arise which would serve to increase international tensions.”<sup>709</sup>

In an exchange with Secretary of State Vance during a Policy Review Committee meeting shortly after the intervention, Brzezinski assumed the Politburo should have read the protest signals more astutely:

**Brzezinski:** Maybe the Soviets haven’t thought all this through. There is an ageing leadership and they may not have drawn all of the conclusions.

**Vance:** We should make fewer protests to the Soviets. We protest too many things too often.<sup>710</sup>

Vance put his finger on the issue: the Soviets found nothing in prior U.S. statements or actions that might have deterred them.

### **The U.S. Was Well-Informed**

The Carter administration reacted to the Soviet entry into Afghanistan with shock. This did not mean it was a surprise. A constant stream of Embassy telegrams and intelligence reports had kept officials well-informed about the creeping intervention from the time it began in 1978, and warning notices reached the White House as soon as Soviet forces starting massing, weeks before they crossed the border. Subsequent controversy over a supposed U.S. intelligence failure to predict the intervention was off the mark. In the first place, the small group in the Politburo did not make their decision until shortly before they ordered the troops in. To the extent that there was a failure to anticipate the intervention, it also arose from the virtually universal

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1978–1980,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>, accessed January 10, 2016; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 432.

<sup>709</sup> SecState to Embassy Moscow, telegram 323556, Soviet Military Deployments, December 15, 1979, *FRUS*, Vol. VI, Document 239.

<sup>710</sup> NSC Note, Policy Review Committee Meeting, January 4, 1980, NSDA.

assumption within the U.S. government that Moscow would consider the costs too high to actually do it.<sup>711</sup>

The U.S. portrayal of the Soviet action as an offensive invasion was in diametric contrast to the Soviet's perception that they were acting defensively. This divergence ensured that Afghanistan became a Cold War watershed. The policy and strategy framework can be seen taking shape in a three-page memorandum that Zbigniew Brzezinski sent to President Carter on December 26 1979, the day after troops began entering in force. In it, Brzezinski characterized the intervention as the result of strategic design: "If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan...the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled."<sup>712</sup> This notion of aggressive geopolitical intent would drive the U.S. reaction, just as Soviet fear that the U.S. would take advantage of a reversal in Afghanistan drove them to intervene in the first place.

Brzezinski was also attuned to the possibilities for exploiting the situation. In a section of the December 26 memo labeled "What is to be Done?" he outlined a strategy to contain, delegitimize, and punish the Soviets for their action in Afghanistan. He raised the possibility of delivering the Soviets their own Vietnam. It became evident soon enough that the USSR had blundered into its own quagmire.<sup>713</sup>

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<sup>711</sup> Department of State/Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Intelligence Summary: Deteriorating Afghan Situation Brings in Soviet Troops, December 4, 1979, NSDA; Douglas MacEachin, "Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record," CIA CSI, June 28, 2008; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 143-49.

<sup>712</sup> Brzezinski Memorandum for the President, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan, December 26, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>713</sup> CIA, Intelligence Appraisal: Indications of Continued Disintegration in Afghanistan, January 20, 1980; White House Situation Room Noon Note for Brzezinski, September 29, 1980, NSDA.

The full National Security Council met on December 28 to consider the U.S. response. A cumulative list included a range of over 40 military, economic, intelligence, and information options. With equal haste and determination, the NSC approved nearly all of them on the spot. No one pushed harder for punitive measures than the President. He did set one limit: that the U.S. response must remain “one major step short of war.”<sup>714</sup>

One of the first actions on Afghanistan was a harsh exchange of hotline messages with Brezhnev. The psychology of honor rose immediately to the surface. Carter felt that Brezhnev had misled him about Afghanistan in Vienna six months earlier. Now he threatened the General Secretary: “Unless you withdraw from this course of action, this will inevitably jeopardize the course of United States-Soviet relations throughout the world.”<sup>715</sup> Brezhnev rebuffed him, replying that the Soviet Union had sent their troops at the request of the Afghan government. Carter and Brzezinski called Brezhnev “devious” and “mendacious”; Brezhnev responded in kind.<sup>716</sup>

Public interaction between the U.S. and the Soviet Union descended into angry recriminations that spread beyond Afghanistan. The President set the tone and substance as he abandoned references to détente and arms control in favor of the full Cold War narrative. U.S. actions became a moral crusade that sought “to indict the Soviets for causing massive human suffering” and “to defend the weak against the strong.”<sup>717</sup> Carter’s refrain became that “Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War,” a blatant

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<sup>714</sup> Morton Kondracke, “Kennedy, Take Two,” *The New Republic*, February 8, 1980, <https://newrepublic.com/article/68725/kennedy-take-two>, accessed January 10, 2016; Westad, *Global Cold War*, p. 328; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 597.

<sup>715</sup> Editorial Note 248, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union.

<sup>716</sup> Kevin Kloze, “Brezhnev,” *WP*, January 13, 1980; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 472; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 429; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 445.

<sup>717</sup> President Jimmy Carter Press Conference, February 13, 1980, *Presidential Documents*, Vol. 16, February 18, 1980, p. 309; State Department Special Report No. 70, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, April 1980.

overstatement compared to Korea and the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>718</sup> In a New Year's eve television interview the President called Brezhnev a liar, but opened himself to an embarrassing charge of naïveté when he said in an unscripted gaffe, "My opinion of the Russians has changed most [more] drastically in the last week than even the previous two and one-half years before that."<sup>719</sup>

The package of initial presidential decisions on Afghanistan included support for regional allies, economic sanctions, and a freeze on bilateral relations, even cancelling cultural exchanges.<sup>720</sup> The U.S. successfully mobilized international condemnation, garnering a powerful rebuke of the Soviet Union in the UN General Assembly by a vote of 104 to 18 (the Soviets vetoed a Security Council resolution.) Several of the measures were more controversial: an embargo on grain exports to Russia, withdrawal of the U.S. from the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics, and resumption of registration for the draft. Popular support for such a strong U.S. response proved temporary. Many commentators at the time judged it an emotional over-reaction that caused the administration, "to go overboard in tossing everything moveable onto the sacrificial bonfire of sanctions."<sup>721</sup>

On January 4, a dour and moralizing President Carter addressed the nation:

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<sup>718</sup> Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress," January 23, 1980.

<sup>719</sup> Frank Reynolds interview with President Carter, ABC Television, December 31, 1979, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>, accessed January 10, 2016; Editorial Note 133, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy.

<sup>720</sup> Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Tarnoff) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), U.S. Soviet Relations and Afghanistan, December 31, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union, Doc. 249; Brzezinski Memorandum for the Secretary of State, Presidential Decisions on Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, January 2, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>721</sup> Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, pp. 956-61.

Massive Soviet military forces have invaded the small nonaligned, sovereign nation of Afghanistan, which had hitherto not been an occupied satellite of the Soviet Union... This invasion is an extremely serious threat to peace because of the threat of further Soviet expansion into neighboring countries in Southwest Asia... It is a deliberate effort of a powerful atheistic government to subjugate a fiercely independent Islamic people... and a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world's oil supplies.<sup>722</sup>

To illustrate the alleged threat, the screen displayed a regional map. No matter that far from invading a freedom-loving country, the Soviets had intervened to replace a bloody and dysfunctional communist regime with one less radical, or that its ground troops would have had to overcome rampant internal disorder and a determined insurgency in Afghanistan before they could begin to traverse hundreds of miles of hostile territory in Pakistan or Iran to reach the Arabian Sea.

### **Brzezinski (Mis)uses History**

One of the explanations why Carter and his administration appeared to flail in foreign policy and national security is that they were “markedly ahistorical.”<sup>723</sup> This is not quite right. By December 1979 Carter had become history’s prisoner, and Zbigniew Brzezinski served as Jimmy Carter’s historian in chief. Certainly the President used his words in invoking Munich during his January 4 television address: “History teaches, perhaps, very few clear lessons. But surely one such lesson learned by the world at great cost is that aggression, unopposed, becomes a contagious disease.”<sup>724</sup> It was a fallacious analogy to justify placing peripheral Afghanistan at the center of global security. Alarmed that “the Soviet Union was malevolently seeking advantage” in Africa and Central America, by the time Iran fell to Islamic revolution in January 1979 and the security of the Middle East lost its center of gravity Brzezinski was warning of an

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<sup>722</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,” January 4, 1980, The Miller Center, UCSB.

<sup>723</sup> Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, pp. xiv, 66-74, 92-6.

<sup>724</sup> *Ibid.*

“arc of crisis” in “a region of vital importance to us threatened with fragmentation.”<sup>725</sup> He may not have been a Rasputin, and Carter constantly asserted his own brand of leadership, but the National Security Advisor had long been urging the President, as he did in a September 1979 memo, “*to toughen both the tone and the substance of our foreign policy.*”<sup>726</sup> (Italics in original.)

Afghanistan became the turning point. Brzezinski wrote, as they “stood by the fireplace in the Oval Office and ruminated sadly about the Soviet move,” he told Carter, “Before you are a President Wilson you have to be for a few years a president Truman.”<sup>727</sup> This historical counsel was too late, but finally the President was heeding the advice. Whether the reaction to Afghanistan was extreme or not, it would serve the strategic purpose of reviving American power.

The record of high level attention in Washington to Afghanistan contains little consideration of Soviet motives. It is not that understanding lay outside official grasp. Even in the absence of precise intelligence on what was being said within the Politburo, informed assessments were available. The State Department perspective in advance of the intervention placed Russian interest in Afghanistan in historical Great Game terms; reporting from the Embassy in Moscow, as well as Kabul, was detailed and fairly consistent.<sup>728</sup> A finished intelligence analysis that DCI Turner sent to the President included the following inference:

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<sup>725</sup> “Iran: The Crescent of Crisis,” *Time Magazine*, January 15, 1979.

<sup>726</sup> Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, Opinion—Acquiescence vs. Assertiveness, NSC Weekly Report #109, September 13, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, Doc. 126.

<sup>727</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 432.

<sup>728</sup> AmEmbassy Moscow 615, Rumored Soviet Miscalculation on Afghan Intervention, January 12, 1980, NSDA; Under Secretary of State David Newsom, “South Asia: Superpowers and Regional Alliances,” Address to the Council on Foreign Relations, October 18, 1978, *Department of State Bulletin*, 78:2021, December 1978, pp. 52-4.

It is highly unlikely that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan constitutes the preplanned first step of a highly articulated grand design for the rapid establishment of hegemonic control over all of Southwest Asia. Rather than a...strategic offensive, the occupation may have been a reluctantly authorized response to what was perceived by the Kremlin as an imminent and otherwise irreversible deterioration of its already established position in a country which fell well within the Soviet Union's legitimate sphere of influence.<sup>729</sup>

As accurate as the assessment may have been, it was not relevant to the public narrative of condemnation, the pivot to containment, or to re-equating U.S. national security with world order in the global Cold War.<sup>730</sup> That the Soviet intervention was not technically an invasion or that it did not portend geopolitical expansion mattered no more to the U.S. than it did to the mujahedin. Nor did it matter that the measures adopted "short of war" were insufficient to achieve the declared aim of compelling the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan – at least not in the short-term.

While there is no evidence to support the claim that Brzezinski played Machiavelli by luring the Russians into intervening, he recognized Kissinger-like that, "The issue was not what might have been Brezhnev's subjective motives in going into Afghanistan but the objective consequences of a Soviet military presence so much closer to the Persian Gulf."<sup>731</sup> The myth of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan provided an ideal pretext for larger ambition. From this watershed came a new focus on geopolitics and a justification for rebuilding U.S. military strength: In January, Defense Secretary Brown made a major trip to Beijing to raise the profile of U.S.-Chinese security cooperation as an explicit balance of power challenge to the USSR. An ambitious initiative got under way to establish a regional strategic framework stretching from West Asia, across the Middle East, to Eastern Africa. In his State of the Union Address on

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<sup>729</sup> Memorandum for the President from DCIA Turner, Soviet Union and Southwest Asia, January 15, 1980, NSDA.

<sup>730</sup> State Department, *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 443; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 954.

<sup>731</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 428.

January 23, the President declared under the Carter Doctrine: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>732</sup> Codified in PD/NSC-63, The Carter Doctrine was the most significant new commitment the United States would make through the end of the Cold War.<sup>733</sup>

U.S. leaders did weigh possible consequences, at least to some extent. Domestic politics came first. With the 1980 presidential elections less than a year away, Carter needed to counter the perception that he had been irresolute on foreign policy; his new stance as a Cold Warrior rallied American patriots, at least at first, but he was also criticized by both left and right.<sup>734</sup> Vice President Mondale correctly predicted that reinstating registration for the draft and the grain embargo would cost votes in November. Secretary of State Vance uncharacteristically supported the strong U.S. reaction, but he was dismayed to be dismantling cooperation with Moscow and worried about a “potential serious divergence between the United States and its European partners over what constituted a balanced policy toward the Soviet Union.”<sup>735</sup> Brzezinski welcomed the opportunity to seize the initiative in the Cold War, but the prospect of jettisoning relations with the Soviet Union altogether sobered even him. When he suggested softening some of the sanctions, the President criticized him for pulling his punches.<sup>736</sup>

The State Department, DOD, and CIA did consider some possible consequences of their Afghan recommendations , but for the most part the national security bureaucracy coalesced

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<sup>732</sup> Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980.

<sup>733</sup> PD/NSC-63: Persian Gulf Security Framework, January 15, 1981, FAS, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd63.pdf>, accessed January 10, 2016.

<sup>734</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, p. 123.

<sup>735</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 393.

<sup>736</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 430-1; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 476; Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 386-88; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 453-4; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 959.

around the reversion to their Cold War *raison d'être*.<sup>737</sup> One of the few outright objections came from the Department of Agriculture, which accurately predicted that the grain embargo would disrupt agricultural sales to the largest U.S. overseas market, but would not penalize the Soviet Union, because other countries, especially Argentina, would quickly compensate.<sup>738</sup> In a hastily arranged visit, General Goodpaster tried to convince the Argentines to go along with the embargo, but the Junta flatly refused unless the U.S. lifted human rights sanctions and resumed military sales (see p. 172-175).<sup>739</sup> After Secretary of Agriculture Bergland feuded with Brzezinski, Carter went along with the embargo, only to find that USDA had been correct. Instead of teaching the Soviets a lesson, the embargo revealed the unwieldiness of sanctions and, more broadly, the limits to U.S. power.<sup>740</sup> Robert Tucker commented on Carter's attempt to redeem a failed foreign policy using Afghanistan:

Once again we have reached a major turning point in American foreign policy.... Was the apparent drift in policy due to the absence of a strategic rationale, or was it rather due to a rationale that did not work?... In this familiar world, the overall stakes of superpower rivalry remained largely unchanged from a generation ago.<sup>741</sup>

#### **IV. The Decision to Support the Mujahedin and Its Consequences**

Brzezinski took advantage of the intervention in Afghanistan to marshal support for a strategic revival of American competition with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The measures he envisioned would have major regional and global impact. But he was also determined to make Afghanistan the Soviet Vietnam. In his December 26 memo, he advised the President, "It is

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<sup>737</sup> Memorandum From the Executive Secretary, U.S.-Soviet Relations and Afghanistan, December 31, 1979, Tab 3, NSDA.

<sup>738</sup> USDA/Economic Research Service, "Embargoes, Surplus Disposal, and U.S. Agriculture," *Agriculture Information Bulletin*, Number 503, November 1986.

<sup>739</sup> Charles A. Krause, "U.S. General Asks Argentine Aid on Embargo," *WP*, January 25, 1980.

<sup>740</sup> Clifton B. Luttrell, "The Russian Grain Embargo: Dubious Success," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, August/September 1980, pp. 2-8; Robert L. Paarlberg, "Lessons of the Grain Embargo," *Foreign Affairs*, 59:1, Fall 1980, pp. 144-62.

<sup>741</sup> Tucker, "The Purposes of American Power," p. 245.

essential that the Afghanistani [sic] resistance continues.”<sup>742</sup> Four of the six recommendations in the section labeled “What is to be Done?” concerned that aim.

The President’s prescription to keep U.S. actions “short of war” did not apply to indirect war. Carter signed a covert action finding on January 29 that authorized paramilitary assistance to the mujahedin through Pakistan, now named Operation Cyclone. The program grew from \$500,000 to \$50 million, then \$60 million per year and remained at that level for the next four years.<sup>743</sup> The U.S. mobilized equally important additional support. Although the Chinese declined explicit security cooperation, soon after Defense Secretary Brown’s visit to Beijing they independently also began supplying the mujahedin with weapons through Pakistan. In early February, Brzezinski led a U.S. delegation to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It was on this trip that he famously appeared in a news photo at a Pakistani Frontier Corps observation post on the Khyber Pass aiming a rifle toward Afghanistan. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher told Afghan tribal chieftains assembled for the occasion, “The American people admire your fight for freedom and believe in the long run you will persevere.”<sup>744</sup> Christopher did not need to mention that the U.S. had already begun to assist them covertly or that the purpose of their visit to Pakistan was to make arrangements to expand that program. On the delegation’s subsequent stop in Saudi Arabia, the Saudis agreed to participate by matching U.S. funding dollar-for-dollar. In the first public acknowledgement of the covert action program, Egyptian President Sadat revealed during a 1981 television interview that he had opened his stores to the U.S. the moment Soviet forces moved into Afghanistan.<sup>745</sup>

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<sup>742</sup> Brzezinski memorandum, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan.

<sup>743</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 58; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 148-9; Riedel, *What We Won*, p.103.

<sup>744</sup> Stuart Auerbach, “‘Zbig’ Holds His Fire at Khyber Pass,” *WP*, February 4, 1980.

<sup>745</sup> NBC Evening News, John Chancellor Interview with President Anwar Sadat, September 22, 1981, <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/program.pl?ID=519253>, accessed January 10, 2016.

Covert action in Afghanistan was a low-ball option that restricted costs and risks by delegating armed rivalry with the Soviet Union to the mujahedin. Unlike Angola and Central America, the significant difference was the absence of apparent downsides. There is no indication that anyone in the United States government, including members of the congressional intelligence committees, objected seriously, proposed alternatives, or considered consequences. Why should they? With the injection of outside support, the Afghan resistance became an effective instrument of punishment and the deliverers of quagmire. Geographic remoteness combined with the fact that highly motivated local guerrillas were fighting directly against Soviet forces rationalized the means and ends of U.S. involvement. These factors insulated Afghanistan from the congressional restrictions, domestic political controversy, human rights concerns, and the other political constraints that ended covert action in Angola and encumbered Central America. The Afghanistan program surpassed those operations in size without evoking serious expressions of concern. This remained the case for a decade, even though the American-backed war provoked a massive refugee crisis, while the mujahedin routinely engaged in terrorism and committed egregious atrocities, such as torturing and beheading their captives.

The consequences – local, regional, and global – were enduring and fateful. That the United States, as the prevailing Great Power, was directly complicit or at minimum an indirect accessory to them is now generally understood and accepted. This is not to propose that American leaders should have prudently anticipated and therefore prevented the misfortunes that resulted. The origin of those consequences lay in four decisions related to supporting the Afghan resistance which the Carter administration took in December 1979:

***First:*** the decision to channel U.S. assistance to the Afghan resistance via the Government of Pakistan. Expediency was the driving motive, along with geography. In 1979, the

mujahedin were already under the aegis of the ISI and Pakistani territory served as their sanctuary. The CIA regarded direct management as infeasible and never seriously considered it, although it did recruit a few unilateral assets and, along with other U.S. Embassy officials, exercised some direct monitoring.

The arrangement was an extension of the complex and often duplicitous bilateral US-Pakistan relationship, which blew hot and cold but inevitably served U.S. strategic requirements. Since the early 1960's, U-2s had launched surveillance flights of the USSR from Pakistan's Peshawar Airport; from 1970 to 1972, Pakistan served as Henry Kissinger's secret bridge to China; and in 1979, the U.S. had begun considering Pakistan as a replacement site for the key intelligence listening post lost to the revolution in Iran, as well as the Southwest Asian bulwark for Brzezinski's initiative to establish a regional security framework for the Middle East and Indian Ocean.<sup>746</sup>

These interests notwithstanding, U.S.-Pakistan relations were at a low point prior to the Soviet entry into Afghanistan. Pakistan was under human rights and nuclear proliferation sanctions, and President Carter had personally criticized General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who had seized power in a 1977 coup, especially after he had his civilian predecessor, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, hanged in January 1979. To make matters worse, on November 21, 1979 a mob, enraged at a false report that the United States had bombed the Grand Mosque in Mecca, burned the American Embassy to the ground with the loss of four lives. Despite urgent requests for protection, Pakistani security forces delayed their response for over five hours, arriving only

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<sup>746</sup> Robert Ames, NIO for Near East and South Asia, Memorandum for the DCIA, SCC Meeting of 15 July 1980 – 'Security Framework,' July 16, 1980, NSDA; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 444.

after the crowd had dispersed. It later proved that Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party that enjoyed Zia's sponsorship, had provoked the attack.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan prompted Pakistan and the U.S. back into Cold War alignment, but the relationship remained a limited and often difficult one, hardly an alliance. Pakistan's range of interests diverged deeply from the United States. Zia was himself an Islamist with an ambitious vision that involved achieving "strategic depth" through influence over Afghanistan and designed to culminate in an Islamic confederation with Pakistan. Through a combination of Muslim holy warriors, Saudi oil money, conventional military forces, and nuclear weapons, Pakistan would help extend an Islamic coalition into the Middle East. Through this growth in its power, Pakistan would neutralize its arch-rival India.<sup>747</sup>

As the U.S. responded to the Soviet move into Afghanistan by supporting the mujahedin, reinforcing Pakistan became an indispensable component of its policy. During the course of his administration, Carter made no greater about-face from principle to power. As it had been in the past, the interaction was largely transactional. Zia set his price, a security guarantee and a blank check from the United States. Otherwise, Pakistan "could not risk Soviet wrath."<sup>748</sup> He never did quite receive either, but over the course of the next decade in excess of \$20 billion flowed to Pakistan in the form of military assistance (with the sale of F-16 fighters as the highly controversial centerpiece), economic aid, funding for millions of Afghan refugees, and support to the mujahedin.<sup>749</sup>

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<sup>747</sup> Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, p. 243.

<sup>748</sup> White House MemCon: President Carter, NSA Brzezinski, and President of Pakistan Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, October 3, 1980, NSDA; CIA Memorandum with cover note from DCIA Turner, Soviet Union and Southwest Asia, January 15, 1980, NSDA; Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 144.

<sup>749</sup> Brzezinski Memorandum for State, Defense, and OMB, Assistance for Pakistan, January 9, 1980, NSDA; Timothy J. Lynch (ed.), "Cold War (1945-1991): External Course," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Military and Diplomatic History* (Oxford, January 2013), p. 219.

Rather than seeking to unify the fractious Afghan opposition, the ISI kept them under control throughout the war by channeling assistance to seven chosen mujahedin groups, with the most extreme among them receiving the bulk of aid. U.S.-Pakistan relations reverted to another low point after the Soviets left in 1989. The ISI continued to hold the mujahedin close, and when the Taliban emerged as the most devout among them and seized power to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996, it was with crucial backing from Pakistan. The attacks of September 11, 2001 provoked the U.S. to lead the overthrow of the Taliban government and occupy Afghanistan. Pakistan again became indispensable to the US, this time in the so-called war on terror. Between 2001 and 2016, Pakistan has received in the order of \$33 billion in United States assistance, about half in the form of military reimbursements.<sup>750</sup> At the same time, Pakistan began to ride its own rising Islamist tiger, while the ISI continued to sponsor the Afghan Taliban against the United States and its coalition partners.<sup>751</sup>

**Second:** the decision to suspend the application of U.S. non-proliferation policy against Pakistan's drive to acquire nuclear weapons. The euphemistic formulation adopted was, "We will...urge the Pakistanis to put the problem aside for solution later while we deal with the Soviet-Afghan problem."<sup>752</sup> Following its rival India, Pakistan began seeking the bomb in 1972; it did not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The issue received intense consideration during the Carter administration's deliberations on reaction to the Soviets in Afghanistan. The one thing the U.S. could have done to preempt Pakistan would have been a security guarantee vis à vis India, something it was unwilling to do. Instead, the principal concerns were the President's reluctance

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<sup>750</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Direct Overt U.S. Aid Appropriations for and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan," FY2002-FY2017," February 24, 2016, FAS, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/pakaid.pdf>, accessed May 5, 2016.

<sup>751</sup> Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (New York, 2010); Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 44-60; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 150-2.

<sup>752</sup> Brzezinski Memorandum, Presidential Decisions on Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India.

to abandon his non-proliferation goal, which he overcame, and how to get Congress to go along with a national security waiver to the Symington Amendment, the first of three measures that restricted U.S. assistance to Pakistan on non-proliferation grounds and was in effect at the time.<sup>753</sup> Legislative exceptions remained in place from 1979 to 1990. In addition, federal authorities were lax in their prosecution of several smuggling cases involving nuclear components, and the U.S. signaled weak support for IAEA regulation and other UN measures concerning Pakistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, concerns over stability in South Asia and the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program again came to the fore. In 1990, President Bush declined to certify that Pakistan did not have nuclear weapons, leading to a suspension of aid and yet another downturn in bilateral relations. It is now a matter of record that, during the Afghan war, Pakistan became a nuclear weapons state. Subsequently, A.Q. Khan, the "Father" of Pakistan's nuclear program, proliferated nuclear technology to Iran, North Korea, and Libya.

**Third:** the decision to "to concert with Islamic countries on a covert action campaign to help the rebels."<sup>754</sup> Crucial to that campaign, along with Pakistan's role as executive agent and provider of sanctuary, was Saudi Arabia's financial contribution, secured during Brzezinski's February 1980 visit. But Saudi Arabia did much more than sponsor Holy War against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Independently, in association with other Gulf States and private Islamic charities, the royal House of Saud, through its alliance with the Wahhabi clerical establishment,

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<sup>753</sup> Special Coordinating Committee Meeting, Summary of Conclusions, January 27, 1980, CWIHP; Brzezinski, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan; Leonard S. Spector, "Pakistani Smuggling Riles Congress," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 43:8, October 1987, p. 3; Rodman, *More Precious than Peace*, pp. 353-4; Timothy D. Hoyt, "Pakistani Nuclear Doctrine and The Dangers of Strategic Myopia," *Asian Survey*, 41:6, November/December 2001, pp. 956-77; Paul K. Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitson, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report RL34248, February 12, 2016.

<sup>754</sup> Brzezinski, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan.

spent as much as \$4 billion a year to finance mosques and madrassas in the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier region as part of a worldwide campaign. Those religious centers became critical bases that sustained the Afghan jihad by gathering recruits, sustaining fighters and their families, and indoctrinating religious learning with the weaponization of Islam. In addition, thousands of Muslims from Saudi Arabia and other countries also received generous subsidies that enabled them to travel to Pakistan and there participate in jihad as the “Afghan Arabs.”<sup>755</sup> These activities were entirely in synch with Zia’s messianic Islamism and conducted with the cooperation of the ISI.

Saudi leaders were not acting at the behest of their important American ally or out of anti-communist conviction, but had their own compelling motives. First, Saudi Arabia promoted itself as the champion of Sunni Islam through Holy War in Afghanistan. The revolution that had overthrown the Shah of Iran less than a year earlier placed Ayatollah Khomeini’s Shiism in the vanguard of a new and competing form of political Islam. Even more immediately threatening, on November 21, 1979, Saudi religious radicals seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, the holiest site in Islam. They declared their intent to purify and restore true Islamic rule by seizing power from the corrupt House of Saud that was in the service of infidels. Sworn to protect Mecca, the insurgents struck at the authority and legitimacy of the Saudi regime, especially when the recovery of the Mosque took over a week and required aid from French commandos. The incendiary reach of the insurgents’ message could be seen literally in the burning of the American Embassy in Islamabad during the uprising, fueled by the false rumor of U.S. responsibility for the Mecca uprising . When Soviet combat troops entered Afghanistan a few

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<sup>755</sup> Anthony Cordesman, “Saudi Arabia: Opposition, Islamic Extremism, and Terrorism,” *Gulfwire Perspectives*, December 1, 2002; Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, pp. 197-9.

weeks later, the Saudis recognized an opportunity to deflect jihad away from Mecca, and themselves.<sup>756</sup>

The Saudi-sponsored madrassas and channeling of Arabs to Afghanistan were separate from, but ran parallel to, the CIA program, which served as the principal source of weapons and logistic support. ISI was the operational connection as host and intermediary for both. The purposes of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States overlapped in jihad against an atheistic foreign invader and the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This intersection brought the most radicalized Islamists among the Afghan mujahedin, such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Jalaluddin Haqqani, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Pakistan's favored commander, into association with the Afghan Arabs, including Osama bin Laden.<sup>757</sup> The CIA was not concerned, in fact the opposite. According to Robert Gates, on learning of the number of Arabs traveling to fight against the Soviets, "We examined ways to increase their participation, perhaps in the form of some sort of 'internationalist brigade,' but nothing came of it."<sup>758</sup>

There was, in any case, no need. Al Qaeda and the Taliban formed an alliance in the crucible of the Afghan jihad. Once they were in power, the Taliban made Afghanistan a haven for international terrorists. Those terrorists found in the defeat of one superpower inspiration to attack the other. The United States was simply unaware at the time that, by fighting the Cold War in Afghanistan, Operation Cyclone was sowing the dragon's teeth (vis the myth of Cadmus.)<sup>759</sup>

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<sup>756</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 88-9, Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, pp. 180-1.

<sup>757</sup> Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London, 2015); Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 71-88.

<sup>758</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 349.

<sup>759</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The United States did not 'create' Osama bin Laden," May 1, 2009, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2009/05/20090505134735atlahtnevel0.5280725.html#axzz4BZizY>

**Fourth:** the decision to engage in protracted war by sponsoring the Afghan mujahedin as an offensive instrument against the Soviet Union. Something less than a strategy given its punitive aim, the open-ended commitment to indirect warfare was integral to the U.S. rationale from the start. As a State Department paper issued in April 1980 stated, “Given the determination of the resistance forces, this portends a long, bloody struggle.”<sup>760</sup> CIA officer Howard Hart who headed Operation Cyclone from Pakistan was more explicit about the opportunity, and passionate: “I was the first Chief of Station ever sent abroad with this wonderful order: ‘Go kill Soviet soldiers.’ Imagine! I loved it.”<sup>761</sup>

This emphasis on military means that subsumed political ends was fundamental to what the U.S. actually did in Afghanistan. Despite readily claiming the high moral ground, the United States’ drive to make the Soviets suffer the punishment and humiliation it had suffered in Vietnam was never far from the surface. When U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski learned that Soviet forces had crossed the Afghan border, he allegedly shot his fist into the air and exclaimed triumphantly “They have taken the bait!”<sup>762</sup> In cautioning the President not to be too sanguine about Afghanistan becoming a Soviet Vietnam in his December 26 “Reflections” memo, Brzezinski pointed out that the Afghan resistance was not the North Vietnamese Army and the Red Army was not likely to be as constrained as American forces had been in Vietnam. The point was merely to get arms into the hands of the mujahedin and keep them fighting.<sup>763</sup>

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QZ, accessed May 15, 2016; Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York, 2006); <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cadmus>, accessed September 25, 2016.

<sup>760</sup> State Department, *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 2.

<sup>761</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 384.

<sup>762</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (Yale, 2011), pp. 326, 472, n. 217.

<sup>763</sup> Brzezinski, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan.

The two declared U.S. aims were Soviet withdrawal and the establishment of an independent and neutral Afghanistan. Given the scope of the Soviets' military commitment and the prestige they had at stake, the U.S. stance made withdrawal less likely, not more.<sup>764</sup> The means the United States adopted were insufficient to compel those outcomes decisively, and a greater effort might well have implied limited war. Moscow did seek an exit on its terms almost as soon as they went in, and began negotiations under UN auspices in 1982. But they were caught in a bear trap, as the media sometimes referred to it. Neither the mujahedin nor the United States had a farther-reaching aim to pursue than open-ended, protracted war.

The United States, President Carter moralized in early 1980, sought “to indict the Soviets for causing massive human suffering.”<sup>765</sup> After nearly a decade of war, that would prove a shared responsibility. As Soviet forces prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan, the consequences of were evident: one million dead, six million displaced persons and refugees, economic ruin, political shambles.

Three U.S. administrations – Carter, Reagan, and Bush – had found it relatively easy to invest in secret war; war termination was a different matter. Bad faith lubricated the UN Agreements that stipulated the Soviet departure. When the United States, Pakistan, the USSR, and Afghanistan signed the accord for Soviet withdrawal in Geneva on April 14, 1988, they had never actually met face-to-face before the ceremony.<sup>766</sup> Soviet client President Najibullah remained in Kabul and in command of the well-equipped Afghan Armed Forces. The mujahedin, excluded from the talks, denounced the agreements and pledged to continue fighting, and did so

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<sup>764</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 956, 963.

<sup>765</sup> Carter Press Conference, February 13, 1980.

<sup>766</sup> United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNGOMAP), Agreements on the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan, April 14, 1988.

with backing from the U.S. and Pakistan. On March 5, 1989, less than three weeks after the last Soviet troops departed, the Afghan resistance attempted to transition from guerrilla warfare and launched an offensive to force the regime from power. Confidently declaring a belligerent government led by ISI favorite Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, 10,000 mujahedin, including a contingent of Afghan Arabs, captured the major city of Jalalabad near the Pakistan border. However, government forces rallied and defeated the mujahedin in the only decisive conventional battle of the war.

In a striking parallel to South Vietnam, Najibullah defied predictions by lasting for nearly three more years.<sup>767</sup> Once his subsidies ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, the Army disintegrated and the mujahedin killed him after overrunning Kabul in 1992. Subsequently, American, and therefore international, interest in the outcome waned. The disputatious mujahedin factions never managed a stable power-sharing arrangement. U.S. Special Representative Tomsen, who recognized their extremism, complained about lackluster backing from Washington and called international mediation efforts “tilting at windmills.”<sup>768</sup> In the absence of *jus post bellum*, Afghanistan disintegrated into four more years of civil war. With critical assistance from the Pakistani ISI, the Taliban completed an arduous campaign to take power and declared the Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996. Their legitimacy rested on a claim that they had banished “fitna” (disorder), an Islamic equivalent of Hobbes’ logic that any government is preferable to anarchy.<sup>769</sup> By overthrowing the Taliban in December 2001 and establishing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the U.S.-led coalition inadvertently revived another protracted

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<sup>767</sup> CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, USSR: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, SNIE 11/37-88, March 1988, CSI.

<sup>768</sup> Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan*, p. 345.

<sup>769</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, pp. 73-4.

insurgency-counterinsurgency war. Even though roles shuffled, most of the participants remained the same. Fighting has not ended, and Afghanistan has now been in a state of fitna for 38 years.

## **V. Afghanistan and the Reagan Doctrine Wars**

Afghanistan was the catalyst that brought together multiple pieces of a revived strategy of containment, deterrence, and competition with the Soviet Union during Carter's final year in office. Some measures denied opportunities for Soviet expansion – balance of power cooperation with China, support for regional allies, especially Pakistan, new basing rights and naval deployments under the Carter Doctrine in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere. Others imposed costs – international condemnation, sanctions, support for the mujahedin. This hardening brought with it a new challenge in superpower relations, or rather revived an old one that détente seemed temporarily to have overcome. Edmund Muskie, who filled in as Secretary of State after Vance resigned in April 1980, explained the problem in a major foreign policy address:

The effect of Afghanistan, of course, is to escalate the possibility of confrontation between our two countries, and in that kind of environment, the limitation of arms, especially nuclear arms, is an important objective for each country. The difficulty is how do we achieve it? ... No one to my knowledge has come up with a solution to that problem.<sup>770</sup>

The challenge lay not only in Afghanistan but, Muskie continued, “in Nicaragua, in El Salvador, and in many other places where the Soviets are prepared to expand their power and limit Western influence.”<sup>771</sup> The solution was to increase competition while keeping the possibilities of

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<sup>770</sup> Edmund S. Muskie, “The Costs of Leadership,” Address before the Foreign Policy Association, July 7, 1980, *Department of State Bulletin*, 80:2041, August 1980, pp. 28-30.

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid.*

escalation to limited war, and the associated fear of quagmire, to a minimum. The same method and purpose applied to Afghanistan, as well as to Angola and Central America.

Afghanistan did give rise to new, if inconclusive, motion on Angola and Cuba. The proposed unconditional diplomatic recognition of Angola, despite the presence of Cuban troops, which Secretary of State Vance and UN Ambassador Donald McHenry had promoted, came off the table and remained off for the next decade. Meanwhile, rebel UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi had done a good job of cultivating his American contacts following the aid cut-off in 1975, and he received further consideration after the Soviets went into Afghanistan. He had asked for U.S. recognition and support in a November 9, 1979 meeting with an NSC staffer.<sup>772</sup> In January, NSC Africa Director William Griffith forwarded a CIA analysis to Brzezinski that showed UNITA was gaining against the Cuba- and Soviet-backed government. The consequences of the invasion of Afghanistan, Griffith argued, “objectively outmode” the idea of recognition and instead “require...U.S. arms aid to Savimbi.”<sup>773</sup> He recommended an SCC meeting to consider the proposal. However, Brzezinski had to decline, noting on the memo, “The trouble is that it is against the law.” The congressional prohibition on aid to Angolan insurgents would remain in place until 1985.

Afghanistan was also the background for one of the on-and-off secret talks between the U.S. and Cuba, the second during the Carter administration. The flap over the Soviet Brigade in Cuba three months prior to the Soviet move into Afghanistan had brewed superpower acrimony and left the U.S. angered. After the intervention, though, Afghanistan had proved a net setback

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<sup>772</sup> National Security Council Staff Report, Soviet Military Personnel in Afghanistan; NATO on Cuba; Meeting with Jonas Savimbi, November 10, 1979, NSDA.

<sup>773</sup> NSC Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from William E. Griffith, Afghanistan and Angola, January 18, 1980, NSDA.

for Cuba, and Fidel Castro was suffering as a bystander, a reprise of his role during the 1962 Missile Crisis. Cuba was one of only 18 countries to vote against condemnation of the Soviet Union in the UN General Assembly, lost its bid for a seat on the Security Council, and tarnished its leadership of the NAM, while Castro's proposal to mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan went nowhere. Brzezinski denigrated "the whole business of Castro as a piddling affair," but he thought it was worth exploring whether there might be a crack between the Soviets and Cubans to exploit.<sup>774</sup> In Havana on January 16, 1980 NSC Latin America Director Robert Pastor and Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff met with Castro for 10 hours. Castro defended Cuba's support for revolutionaries in Central America and its troops in Angola and Ethiopia. Pastor and Tarnoff, under specific orders from Carter, suggested that Castro criticize the Soviet Union on Afghanistan. He demurred, but admitted he did not understand why his patron had done it and complained that they had not bothered to brief him.

### **Reagan and Afghanistan**

President-elect Ronald Reagan received an intelligence briefing on U.S. support for the mujahedin before his inauguration in January 1981, and his new national security team included Afghanistan on their long list of places where the Soviet Union was causing "a worldwide climate of uncertainty."<sup>775</sup> However, when the Reagan administration took over, the obsession was no longer Afghanistan. Instead it was Secretary of State Al Haig's, "fires of insurrection, fed by the Soviets and fanned by their surrogates, the Cubans, spread unchecked in Central America."<sup>776</sup> As if to demonstrate their distance from Carter, rather than the specter of the Red

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<sup>774</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 391; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 967; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 133-5; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Backchannel to Cuba*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>775</sup> Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 27; Woodward, *Veil*, p. 56

<sup>776</sup> Haig, *Caveat*, p. 30.

Army on the march from Kabul to the Persian Gulf, Reagan officials invoked Sandinista tanks driving from Nicaragua to Harlingen, Texas, the closest town in America's backyard. They believed that in Central America they could win.

After an NSC meeting on March 8, Defense Secretary Weinberger suggested in an interview that the U.S. might send arms to the Afghan resistance, but would not tolerate Soviet arms supplies to rebels in El Salvador on the grounds that it violated the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>777</sup> Picking up on the issue, a television interviewer asked Reagan the next day how he thought the Soviets might react to the double standard. The President replied, "I don't know that they could really have an objection to that, but I'm answering this now without having sat down with the Secretary and others and looked at all the ramifications."<sup>778</sup> By that date, the NSC had met multiple times on Central America, but Afghanistan had received far less attention; Reagan had also replied to extensive questioning on El Salvador from Walter Cronkite and other members of the press corps, but Afghanistan had barely come up. In the *New York Times* interview, Reagan quickly turned the conversation back to El Salvador, repeating his denial of any intention to intervene there with U.S. troops. But he did take the time to make a correction: "You've used the term 'Afghan rebels' and sometimes I think the Soviet Union has been successful in their propaganda with getting us to use terms that semantically are incorrect... Those are freedom fighters."<sup>779</sup> Reagan in fact borrowed the label from Carter, who had often referred to the mujahedin as freedom fighters, and had used it in his one-on-one Oval Office meeting with the President-elect in November.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>777</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1052, n. 89; Woodward, *Veil*, p. 76.

<sup>778</sup> Howell, Raines, "Reagan Hinting at Arms for Afghan Rebels," *NYT*, March 10, 1981.

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>780</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 388.

Even though the freedom fighters whom Reagan, Haig, and CIA Director Casey truly cared about were the Nicaraguan Contras, the new administration kept the Afghan program in place, along with its Pakistani and Saudi components. Nor did the administration alter the purpose: keeping the Soviets in a quagmire, bleeding its forces, and stymying Soviet efforts to negotiate their way out while maintaining the declared U.S. goal of achieving their withdrawal. When Casey saw how effective the mujahedin were in Afghanistan, he immediately set out to do the same for the Contras. The Nicaragua program was controversial when the mujahedin first came to public prominence in February 1983. Invited to the White House, six tribal leaders appeared in an Oval Office photograph, bearded and turbaned warriors, accompanied by their CIA Afghan task force chief Gust Avrakotos, seated incongruously with the President.<sup>781</sup>

A few months later, former Somoza champion, Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson, acting on his own, adopted the mujahedin as his new anti-communist crusade. Using his position on the Defense Appropriations Committee, he added \$90 million from the DOD black program to Operation Cyclone's \$60 million in the budget for 1984. When Casey asked him to transfer 10 percent of the Afghan funding to the Nicaragua program, Wilson turned Casey down, telling him the Contras were a lost cause in Congress. Wilson kept adding money for the Afghan resistance until the program peaked at \$630 million in 1987, the same year the administration became mired in the Iran-Contra scandal. The Saudis kept matching the U.S. dollar-for-dollar, while the Chinese, British, and others continued their contributions.<sup>782</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> President Reagan meeting with Afghan Freedom Fighters to discuss Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan, February 2, 1983, photograph C12820-32, Reagan Library, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/photographs/atwork.html>.

<sup>782</sup> CIA, *Oversight of Covert Action*, p. 284; Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 97; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 147, 251; Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 307-10; George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War* (New York, 2003) pp. 256, 263-6; Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.* (New York, 2001), p. 68.

## Conclusions about Origins and Afghanistan

Whether or not Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, it has more than its share of myths. If myths are a simplified form of collective memories, the most recent ones are myths by exclusion that forget key details about U.S. involvement and gloss over the chronology.<sup>783</sup> Writing in a 2010 op-ed, the former chief of the CIA Afghanistan Task Force claimed that by backing the mujahedin against the Soviet Union, “In the 80’s we essentially ended the Cold War with a well-funded and broadly supported covert action program.”<sup>784</sup> He was using this argument to make the case for using the same method to defeat terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan after 9-11. It is true that U.S. support enabled the Afghan insurgency to exhaust the Soviets. The humiliation of their withdrawal wracked a regime already in decline. However – again like the United States in Vietnam – that end came not with military defeat but in loss of will. The decision to get out came with regime change in 1985, when Gorbachev declared Afghanistan “a bleeding wound.”<sup>785</sup> To that extent, to judge by results, the method proved a success. However, it is not credible to claim that the United States accomplished more than that in Afghanistan, when the fundamental reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union were economic failure and political decay.

This returns to a larger issue regarding the original conception of using protracted warfare in Afghanistan, which is not to weigh whether its cost was worth ultimate victory in the Cold War. The point is that it is insufficient and misleading to glorify what support for the

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<sup>783</sup> Thomas Mahnken, “Containment, Myth and Metaphor,” in Brands and Suri (eds.), *The Power of the Past*, pp. 133-7.

<sup>784</sup> Jack Devine, “The CIA Solution for Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2010.

<sup>785</sup> MemCon between M. S. Gorbachev and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of DRA B. Karmal, 14 March 1985, NSDA; “Text of Gorbachev Statement Setting Forth Soviet Position on Afghan War,” *NYT*, February 9, 1988.

mujahedin accomplished while ignoring altogether the fateful and enduring consequences that continue to make this most peripheral of nations so central to the United States.

# Conclusion

## Origins: The Central Argument

The “Reagan Doctrine” Wars began with the July 1975 U.S. intervention in Angola, just four months after the fall of Saigon. The original phase ended in mid-1982, about one year and a half into Ronald Reagan’s first term, with the completion of a new National Security Strategy based on long-term U.S. competition with the Soviet Union.<sup>786</sup> The President signed the strategy on May 20, and National Security Advisor Bill “Judge” Clark outlined it publicly in a little-noticed speech the following day.<sup>787</sup> Clark highlighted how in the Third World:

The Soviet Union also complements its direct military capabilities with proxy forces and surrogates, with extensive arms sales and grants, by manipulation of terrorist and subversive organizations, and through support to a number of insurgencies and separatist movements by providing arms, advice, military training, and political backing.<sup>788</sup>

Calling these activities “threats to vital interests,” he explicitly linked the U.S. response to the new strategy. One month later, Secretary of State Haig resigned and George Shultz replaced his bluster with a more pragmatic temperament. The new strategy and the change in leadership did not end political battles with ideological hardliners within the administration or with liberals in Congress over the conduct of the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. Substantively, though, rough consensus on aims to impose costs on the Soviet Union and deny it further expansion in the Third World ultimately held. Although no one knew it at the time, the Reagan Doctrine Wars became the principal fighting fronts of the Cold War during its final decade.

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<sup>786</sup> NSDD 32 - U.S. National Security Strategy, May 20, 1982, The Reagan Library, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/NSDDs.html#.WO5rI6KVvBU>.

<sup>787</sup> William P. Clark, “National Security Strategy,” address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, May 21, 1982, *DISAM Journal*, 5:1, Fall 1982, pp. 59-65.

<sup>788</sup> *Ibid.*

U.S. strategic behavior in the gray zones between war and peace had emerged soon after World War II. Reinforced through the experience of limited wars in Korea and Vietnam, and despite political ups and downs, including Carter's effort to break from the mold, both intent and method proved consistent throughout all four decades of the Cold War.<sup>789</sup>

The interpretation I present in this thesis is an original contribution to the extensive literature on the Reagan Doctrine Wars. My focus was on how decision-making related to Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan in three U.S. administrations – Ford, Carter, and Reagan – interacted with domestic politics, Cold War adversaries and allies, and events on the ground between 1975 and 1982. Benefiting from recently released official documents, this is a diplomatic and military history, which, in the tradition of strategic studies, I have supplemented with models and concepts from political science and international relations. These concluding remarks review the principal points, making observations about the value of strategy and policy analysis, particularly the application of realism to these wars. The final section discusses the relationship between origins and consequences, pointing the way to a more comprehensive assessment of these wars.

This is a good point to restate the central argument. Most accounts treat Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan as discrete events, proxy wars on the periphery that happened chronologically to be underway at the end of the Cold War. Rather, I see the three Reagan Doctrine Wars as much more integral to the history of the Cold War. Each was complex and

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<sup>789</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, et al, *Protracted Conflict* (New York, 1959); Osgood, *Limited War*, p. 28; Leon Trotsky, *Lenin*, trans. David Walters (New York, 1925), Trotsky Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/lenin/04.htm>, accessed Nov. 14, 2013.

significant in different ways, but all three were extremely complex civil and regional wars within the global Cold War. They became the fighting fronts during the final phase of the Cold War for two reasons. First, for both the United States and the Soviet Union, avoiding direct confrontation, either nuclear or conventional, in the core areas became of over-riding importance. Leaders on both sides learned to rely on deterrence and took measures to lower the risks of escalation, because they perceived the potential costs as higher than the value of any possible gain. When crises over Soviet military action did erupt, the United States more often cautiously avoided using force. This was the case during the Berlin Blockade in 1948-49, the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, as well as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The subsequent occasions when policy-makers in all three administrations advocated military action against Cuba can be added to this list – an original contribution of this thesis. Second, in the two instances during the Cold War when the United States engaged in limited war the experience proved costly. As combat in Korea and Vietnam lengthened without achieving victory, the relative value of U.S. aims declined and negotiations to end the fighting resulted. Especially after Vietnam, aversion to losses made avoiding commitment of U.S. forces to Third World conflicts a domestic political imperative. In consequence, the Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations gave priority to avoiding the costs and risks of escalation without abandoning the strategy of containing Soviet expansion. As the Cold War entered its fourth decade, both the U.S. and the USSR remained in contention, but by practicing restrictive deterrence, they provoked and prolonged wars on the Third World periphery where it was more important to manage the level of fighting than it was to seek victory. These strategic dynamics defined the character of the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan.

## **Interpretation and Realism**

The framework for historical interpretation used here is anchored in classical realism, because that point of view fits best with what actually happened in the Reagan Doctrine Wars. The three realists I rely on most – Hans Morgenthau, Robert Osgood, and Robert Tucker – had historical minds. By citing figures such as Thucydides, Hobbes, and Wellington, they connected their views to enduring strategic themes and the wider human experience. Similarly in my assessment, the United States encountered the unchanging nature of war in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. For example, motivated by fear, honor, and interest, the United States and the Soviet Union through intervening made these peripheral conflicts central to their global Cold War. As long as the great powers sustained their will to contend, they helped to protract the sufferings these wars entailed, while the other protagonists in these regional and civil wars pursued their own interests and made the great powers subject to their conflicts and demands.

As contemporary commentators, the three realists also understood the character of the Reagan Doctrine Wars. Morgenthau regarded the Cold War as a classic struggle for power, but he recognized that the need to avoid, rather than seek decisive war, was a key change that made the Cold War different from great power conflict of the past. He foresaw the challenge of Marxist-Leninist revolution and the dilemmas of trying to maintain a foreign policy of principles for the United States as it competed with the Soviet Union for the balance of power. Osgood, writing about Korea in 1957 and subsequently about Vietnam, understood how deterrence prevented general war, but led to limited war, with its own problems for the U.S. as a democracy. Tucker was concerned about the match between U.S. policy and strategy. He questioned how intervention on the periphery and the ideological drivers of the Reagan Doctrine served the purposes of American power in the Cold War.

## Contribution to the Literature

Building on the realist perspective, the thesis begins by viewing the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars as a whole. The predecessors of U.S. involvement run from support to partisans in World War II, through the gray zone conflicts of the early Cold War, to the experience of limited wars in Korea and Vietnam. The domestic politics of these wars across three presidential administrations was exceptionally messy, from the post-Vietnam contest between Congress and the Executive that erupted over Angola in 1975, to Carter's attempt to break from the Cold War at the beginning of his term and extreme reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, to fear of another quagmire provoked by the choice of Central America as the place to draw the line against the Soviet Union early in the Reagan administration. Most importantly, the political swings that accompanied changes in administration should not obscure the fundamental continuity of U.S. strategic behavior throughout the Cold War.

Classic strategic principles aid this interpretation. In his dictum that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means,' Clausewitz used the German *Politik*, a word that can apply to war aims in terms of both foreign policy and domestic politics. The importance of those aims, the "value of the object," in turn determines effort and duration. U.S. decision-making in the Reagan Doctrine Wars conformed, but in a way that had little in common with the conventional American way of war. Rather than pursuing victory, strategic aims in these peripheral wars were to impose costs and contain the Soviet Union while managing the level of violence and minimizing the risks of escalation in response to the demands of the Cold War, a strategy of restrictive deterrence. Support for insurgents in Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, along with support for counterinsurgents and associated democratic reforms in El Salvador, as well as involvement with regional allies, served these purposes. Termed "low intensity conflict,"

these means fit Corbett's indirect strategy of war by limited contingent, in which economy of force operations kept the costs and risks of involvement in actual fighting low. The politics and policy were often confused, but these strategic principles make it possible to understand how U.S. participation in these peripheral wars fitted with long-term competition against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The thesis does not engage in counterfactual supposition over the Reagan Doctrine Wars. It does, however, attach importance to inaction and alternative courses of action by the United States in several instances. When Congress tied the Ford administration's hand by prohibiting aid to insurgents in Angola, the so-called Safari Club, led by French intelligence, took up the cause of anti-Communism in Africa. Similarly, Argentina exported its methods of Dirty War to fill the vacuum that resulted from what they viewed as Jimmy Carter's abandonment of the Cold War in Central America. Henry Kissinger during the Ford administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski during Carter's, and Alexander Haig under Reagan all pressed for military attacks on Cuba. In each instance, the bureaucracy prevented action by warning that a strong Soviet response was both unpredictable and likely. As a result, Cuba remained free to continue its unprecedented military deployments in support of revolution in Africa and Central America.

The interpretation of the Reagan Doctrine also says something new about the historical continuity of U.S. presidential doctrines. All doctrines are combined expressions of American military power and political purpose. As statements of policy and strategy, they reflect prevailing shifts in domestic politics and are likely to be inconsistently applied. Although each doctrine has a specific purpose in time and place, all doctrines declare an intent to exclude hostile foreign powers from areas that lie outside of U.S. territory as a means of defending national security, by use of force if necessary, while remaining imprecise about exactly how force will be used. The

tradition began with the desire to exclude European powers from the Western Hemisphere, as declared in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, complemented in 1904 with the Roosevelt Corollary which justified internal intervention for that purpose in Central America and the Caribbean. The Truman Doctrine globalized the principle in 1947 by declaring the intent to contain Communism, and particularly Soviet expansion into Greece and Turkey. The Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter Doctrines reiterated the general purpose of containment, with varying geographic and military specifications. Significantly, in the light of American withdrawal from Vietnam, in 1969 the Nixon Doctrine included explicit limitation on the direct use of U.S. forces to defend threatened nations. The Reagan Doctrine followed suit by relying on indirect means to meet the challenge of Marxist-Leninist revolutions and contain the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World. Sustained support for anti-Communist insurgents applied only to Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, and for counterinsurgency to El Salvador. As with previous presidential doctrines, political controversy accompanied those choices and other opportunities remained unexploited.

Collective beliefs in the form of conventional wisdom are meaningful, even when they are wrong, including two myths about the Reagan Doctrine. First, Ronald Reagan embraced the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan, but U.S. involvement in them had already begun under Ford and Carter. He even inherited his signature term “freedom fighters” from Jimmy Carter. Second, the Reagan Doctrine was never official. Rather it was an invention of the journalist Charles Krauthammer, which the administration tacitly accepted. The history of the Reagan Doctrine Wars also debunks the myth that the Cold War was a simpler time compared with the geopolitical competition, hybrid wars in gray zones, and Islamist revolutionaries that are today’s preoccupations.

## **The Reagan Doctrine Wars, Theory, and Applied Theory**

Nor is it necessary to wade deeply into the thickets of international relations, political science, and security studies to recognize that theories do not fare very well when held up against the Reagan Doctrine Wars. My focus has been on strategy and policy, but, as noted in the Introduction and even as those in the field readily admit, the social sciences have yet to achieve predictive value, much less usable overarching explanations of such complex and messy events.<sup>790</sup> The myriad problems of method begin perhaps with the limitations of using historical case studies to prove hypotheses that abuse parsimony by stripping out crucial factors. Another flaw lies in the assumption that decision-makers are rational actors who seek to optimize national interests. Cognitive research has made inroads into this foundation of political science, validating older understanding of the role of irrationality in human motivation. For evidence, one can look to the anger and wounded prestige over Angola that sparked Henry Kissinger's desire to "smash Cuba," Jimmy Carter's belief that Brezhnev had lied to him that fed his insecurity and led to his overreaction on Afghanistan, and CIA Director Bill Casey's obsession with Central America and his desire to wreak violence for its own sake in peripheral wars against the Soviet Union. Although indemonstrable, it may be that the Reagan Doctrine Wars channeled the aggressive passions and vengeful desires of expressive warriors, helping the cold logic of deterrence safely keep nuclear strategy in the realm of theory throughout the Cold War.

Implicitly or explicitly, theories guide understanding and action in a complex world. However, there is a danger that trying to match theory with reality obscures more than it explains. George Kennan proposed that the U.S. should pursue a strategy of containment while

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<sup>790</sup> Jack Levy, et al, H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable on Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*, IX:11, February 20, 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/9-11-11-chernoff>.

the Soviet Union followed its destiny to collapse. Yet, however brilliantly containment served as an organizing principle for the United States and eventually led the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion, grand strategy proved less useful in answering the specific challenges of limited war and revolution. Militarization and the domino theory led the United States astray in Vietnam, and exclusive concern with the Soviet Union certainly contributed to the muddles of U.S. behavior in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan between 1975 and 1982. In contrast, formal international relations theories tend to drive broad explanations down narrow tracks. Game theory, updated versions of realism divided between offensive and defensive branches, and structural realism or neo-realism, which emphasize the search for security as the key to international behavior, all suffer from this limitation.<sup>791</sup> A recent example directly relevant to the Reagan Doctrine Wars is Jeffrey Taliaferro's study of great power intervention on the periphery.<sup>792</sup> Taliaferro skillfully recounts several historical cases, including the United States in the Korean War, only to claim the single primary motive for intervention in each was the desire to avoid perceived losses, a theory he terms "negative balancing." Fear of losses featured in U.S. involvement in the Reagan Doctrine Wars, but this explanation is far too simplistic to account for the multiple, confused, and even contradictory sources of U.S. behavior.

Rather than pursuing a single strand of theory, classical realism is more an encompassing, historically grounded perspective on international power relationships. Attributes such as military strength, but also intangibles such as will, determine relative power among nations, groups of nations, or any sub-group for that matter. Accordingly, nations cooperate and compete,

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<sup>791</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Pennsylvania, 1979); Karl K. Schonberg, "Robert E. Osgood and the origins of social international relations theory," *International Journal*, 64:3, Summer 2011, pp. 811-23; H-Diplo Forum 59, "Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Neorealism," <https://issforum.org/articlereviews/59-waltz>; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 4-12.

<sup>792</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Cornell, 2004).

they behave defensively and offensively, and they can do these simultaneously. One avenue to understanding how they exercise their power is whether they perceive adversaries offensively or defensively, the core of the “security dilemma,” in international relations terms.<sup>793</sup>

In application, the strategic behavior and decision-making of the United States across three presidential administrations during the origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars revolved around perceptions of Soviet power. Kissinger’s brand of Machiavellian realism sought defensive balance, but regarded the Soviet Union as a fundamentally offensive power. Détente permitted the United States, in its moment of weakness following defeat in Vietnam, to reduce Cold War confrontation. At the same time, Kissinger shifted the balance of power against the Soviet Union through opening contact with the People’s Republic of China. The offensive-defensive balance came undone in Angola which proved that détente did not apply to competition in the Third World, and when Cuba acted as a revolutionary wild card, China refused to turn alignment with the U.S. against the Soviet Union into active alliance, and Congress curtailed executive authority over militarized containment on the periphery.

Jimmy Carter came to office with the entirely different intent of placing principles before power. Like Woodrow Wilson before him, Carter began his term infused with Christian morality, believing the United States could be a benign and progressive force fully invested in liberal ideals of prosperity, sovereignty, human rights, and democracy. Instead, power quickly overruled principles in aggressive contests with Cold War adversaries, as the Carter administration found itself defensively on the wrong side of a series of security dilemmas in Angola, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, before belatedly reversing the tide in El Salvador and Afghanistan. But Brzezinski’s

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<sup>793</sup> Richard Betts, *American Force* (New York, 2012), pp. 14-15.

advice to Carter in 1979 that he needed to be like Truman before he could be like Wilson came too late; those wars demonstrated the infeasibility of trying unilaterally to de-link the United States from the exercise of power. Even if an enduring liberal world order remains a valid goal, as Zanchetta and Carter's other proponents insist (see Chapter 2), his administration's performance revealed serious lapses in international cooperation and the propensity of the United States to intervene in non-democracies under the pressures of war.

Ronald Reagan was also a president of moral conviction, who practiced what Francis Fukuyama called "realistic Wilsonianism."<sup>794</sup> Ultimately, Reagan resolved the security dilemma by balancing ideology with pragmatism, and principles with power, embodied in the idea of peace through strength. While carrying out an offensive strategy of long-term competition with the Soviet Union, his administration also kept the risks of confrontation low by limiting involvement in direct military action. As a "forward strategy for freedom," the Reagan Doctrine Wars were a training ground for the neoconservatives, particularly through pursuing democracy at the point of bayonets in Central America (see Chapter 5).

### **Origins, Ends, and Consequences**

Writing a history of the Reagan Doctrine Wars, or any war, that considers only origins is insufficient without establishing some connection with their ends. The outline of consequences that flowed from the U.S. decision to support the mujahedin in Afghanistan in Chapter 7, Part IV is a down payment on that task.

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<sup>794</sup> Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, pp. 45-49.

Through its interventions in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan, and its associated regional and global activities, the United States, under three presidents, sustained its commitment to containing the Soviet Union. Often those involved between 1975 and 1982 seemed to muddle through. The cost was high in political controversy, in human lives and disaster, and in failures of diplomacy and international institutions. Presumably the purpose of strategy is to win, but that was never the purpose in the Reagan Doctrine Wars. Rather, it was to contain the Soviet Union and impose costs while keeping the risks of escalation low and above all, to make sure that others, not Americans, would do the fighting and dying.

The final act opened in 1986. Gorbachev had been in power for less than a year when he and Reagan held their first formal summit in Reykjavik that October and realized they shared a belief in the absurdity of threatening to destroy each other with nuclear weapons they could not use. What they termed regional conflicts was on the agenda, but even then negotiations did not prosper and the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan remained unremitting. Fought from the beginning as ‘forever wars’, they were power-locked. The antagonists remained the same; no allies changed sides. Battles mattered on occasion; none was terminally decisive. Neither side escalated; there were no balance of power reversals.

In 1986, rather than relaxing, each of the wars sharpened. Congress had lifted the ban on aid to UNITA, and Reagan welcomed Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi to the White House. South Africa launched a second invasion, and in the largest battles in Africa since World War II, 50,000 Cuban troops turned it back again. In Central America, domestic controversy receded as democracy took hold in El Salvador, while the U.S.-backed counter-insurgency war hardened and the FMLN thrived as the toughest guerrilla army in Latin America. In Nicaragua, Soviet-Cuban aid to the Sandinistas mushroomed as the Contras remained a potent force, despite erratic U.S.

funding and the Iran-Contra scandal that bedeviled the Reagan administration for more than a year. In Afghanistan, U.S. aid to the mujahedin reached new heights. With no prospect for an end to the “bleeding wound,” Gorbachev secretly declared his intention to withdraw Soviet troops, but he got no help from the United States. The conflicts continued much as they had begun.

“Wars transform the future [and] it is the way in which a war is brought to an end that has the most decisive impact,” wrote Fred Iklé in his short but insightful book on war termination.<sup>795</sup> Ironically, Iklé was one of the key architects of the Reagan Doctrine Wars, a hardliner who had no interest in ending these particular wars.

The beginning of the end of superpower involvement came in the same way that wars often end, with regime change. Gorbachev had signaled authentic willingness to lessen confrontation with the U.S. across the board, including on the periphery. But serious relaxation would not take place until 1989, when the Soviets began to lose their international grip in a dimly recognized prelude to collapse.

In Angola, only then did the negotiating formula to trade Cuban withdrawal from Angola for South African withdrawal from Namibia, first proposed during the Ford administration, take hold. However, the largest UN Peacekeeping mission up to that time failed when UNITA resumed fighting. The Angolan Civil War would not end until 2002, when the Army finally hunted down and killed Jonas Savimbi, after 27 years, with 1 million dead and more than one-third of the population displaced. In Central America, at least 125,000 would die. It was Latin Americans themselves who took charge of the peace process as the United States dragged its

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<sup>795</sup> Fred Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York, 1991), pp. vii.

feet. The Sandinistas opted for elections in 1990, and, after they lost, Cuba and the Eastern Bloc quickly left Nicaragua; the Contras disbanded into obscurity. Fighting ceased in El Salvador under a 1992 peace agreement. Despite continuing insecurity and low quality democracy, the Salvadoran civil war ended definitively. Soviet withdrawal in 1989 brought Afghanistan to a new phase of war. It may be that every war must end, but after 35 years the end of war in Afghanistan has yet to come.

As long as the United States and the Soviet Union sustained an open-ended will to compete they sponsored the wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan. Once regime change followed by collapse extinguished Soviet will, and with it the Cold War, the Reagan Doctrine Wars lost their purpose. In consequence, the value of the object declined. United States and Russia invested less in trying to end those wars than they had in perpetuating them as rival superpowers. In Central America, the most westernized of the three, revolution lost its relevance and war termination came through democratic means. In Angola and Afghanistan, where underlying causes remained inadequately addressed, protracted wars became intractable.

### **The Reagan Doctrine Wars and Long-Term Strategy: The Way Ahead**

Our present is built inescapably on the foundation of the past, however forgotten or misremembered it may be. In 1987, an expert U.S. Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy received a charter to conduct the first comprehensive study of lessons from four decades of Cold War, including the Third World. By the time its reports appeared in 1988, the Cold War was waning and they drew little attention.<sup>796</sup>

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<sup>796</sup> *Discriminate Deterrence*, Report of the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, January, 1988; *A U.S. Strategy for Third World Conflict*, Report by the Regional Conflict Working Group, May 5, 1988.

The Commission's findings nevertheless proved highly predictive. Sections, for example, on precision guided munitions, unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), and other technology then in its infancy, as well as on intelligence-driven operations and special operations forces, have become the face of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Such tactical and operational developments, in which weapons systems acquire greater precision and lethality, force employment becomes more efficient, and personnel receive greater protection from combat, are consistent with the changing character of wars throughout history. Where the Commission made observations on more fundamental issues of strategy, less evolution has taken place. While U.S. military proficiency has increased, national security institutions remain 'flawed by design.' The Commission observed that despite the appearance of new international norms and the decline of war between liberal states, competition among powers would persist and limited war would remain a possibility in the nuclear age. It warned of new challenges from terrorism and revolution, and cautioned against the direct involvement of U.S. combat forces in protracted wars on the periphery. These issues proved to be the sources of serious lapses that contributed to the lack of U.S. success in the wars that followed 9-11, in the misnamed Global War on Terror as well as in the interventions in Iraq and, again, Afghanistan. The consequences of the Reagan Doctrine Wars, including the work of the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, would be valuable topics for future research.

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