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Linda Robinson

PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA?

As 1987 began, the United States was reeling from the revelations of the Iran-contra affair. A series of investigations consumed most of the year and much of the time and attention of the public and government alike. Despite the scandal, during most of the year the Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, continued to receive a \$100-million, congressionally approved aid package to escalate their war. The battle over whether to renew such aid promised to be the focal point of the region in 1987. Yet by August all five Central American countries had signed a regional peace plan in Guatemala City.

How did we get from investigations and guerrilla war to "give peace a chance" in just a few months? The surprise conclusion of the pact in Guatemala resulted from extensive maneuverings which took place out of the limelight of the Iran-contra investigations. The Iran-contra hearings starkly displayed how divided Congress and the Reagan Administration were over U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, and this division gave a crucial impetus to the diplomatic effort. But the hearings, while a prominent forum, did not resolve the debate over Nicaragua. They focused on finding out exactly what had been done in the name of the U.S. government by a few National Security Council officials, private citizens and some CIA personnel.

Public support for the contras surged briefly after the televised testimony of former NSC aide Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, but a month later substantially less than half of those surveyed favored continued aid. Public opinion seemed roughly unchanged by the endless testimony, but more Americans did come to know which side their government supported in Nicaragua.

At any rate, the scandal did not cause an immediate backlash against the contras. Congress did not take an opportunity to cut off funding to the rebels in March when it voted on the final installment of the \$100 million, for heavy artillery. The

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Senate vote was close (48–52), but votes on contra aid had been close even before the Democrats won control of the chamber in the November 1986 elections. The House did not vote on a strict cutoff measure, but rather voted (230–196) to withhold the last \$40 million until the Administration accounted for previous aid. It constituted less than a rejection of contra aid, although some said it was a warning that a future request would not pass.

These March votes revealed an ambivalence that even the Iran-contra scandal had failed to erase; Congress as a whole was not willing to make the resistance pay for the errors of its patrons. Moreover, Congress wanted to avoid the charge of abandoning the contras. This gave impetus to the search for an alternative that would mitigate that charge as well as avoid the perils of leaving the United States without a policy.

Suddenly, on August 4, the White House announced a peace proposal for Central America which had the backing of President Reagan and Speaker of the House Jim Wright (D-Tex.). Less than 72 hours later, the five Central American presidents, meeting in Guatemala, signed their own “procedure for establishing firm and lasting peace in Central America.” Wright immediately embraced the Central American plan, and said it supplanted his own proposal.

This confusing turnabout in both Administration and Central American positions was the product of seven months of backstage efforts in the United States and Central America to find a diplomatic escape from the war. The Administration only focused its full attention on the diplomatic track in the last weeks of July. Whether its interest in diplomacy was a tactical move to gain votes for contra aid or a genuine attempt to find an acceptable deal, others were several steps ahead. Many in the U.S. Congress had decided that they had to push for a solution in Central America; as the events of 1987 played out, the activities of some would skirt close to the Logan Act proscriptions against unauthorized diplomacy.

II

The central initiative, a carefully crafted Costa Rican plan, represented a break from the previous diplomacy of the Contadora group—Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela. Their efforts had been stymied since the Central Americans had declined to accept a draft treaty in mid-1986. In early 1987 the Contadora group and four supporting Latin Ameri-

can nations made two attempts to resuscitate their diplomacy, enlisting the help of the United Nations, the Organization of American States and the European Economic Community. But January and February meetings with the Central Americans made no progress.

While Contadora was trying but failing, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez felt his way toward a proposal of his own. In framing his plan, he received support and input from various quarters. Wright was not involved at this stage, but others in Congress were actively promoting a diplomatic gambit. In January Representative Jim Slattery (D-Kans.) and two aides met in Miami with the contra leadership, then comprising Alfonso Robelo, Adolfo Calero and Arturo Cruz, to sound out their views on an acceptable negotiating tack. In this meeting all three leaders agreed to the idea of a mediator, such as the internal opposition parties or the Nicaraguan cardinal, Miguel Obando y Bravo. One of Slattery's aides said that they saw the contras' support as the key to getting the Administration to agree. If the contras were amenable to negotiation, they reasoned, how could the Administration oppose it?

Slattery then visited Central America, where he talked with Costa Rican President Arias. About the same time U.S. officials, including Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams and Special Envoy Philip Habib, met in Miami with Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, where they reportedly expressed interest in the idea of a Central American-generated diplomatic effort. Then in early February the opposition political parties in Nicaragua proposed a peace initiative including several elements that surfaced in the Costa Rican proposal.

Representative Slattery got 110 of his colleagues, including some who had supported contra aid, to agree on a negotiating proposal. In late March they sent a letter to President Reagan, asking him to back a 90-day cease-fire in the region, a halt in U.S. aid to the contras and Soviet-bloc military aid to the Sandinista government, a restoration of freedoms in Nicaragua, and talks between the Sandinistas and the internal opposition, and between the Sandinistas and the United States. The Administration tried for several months to draft an answer to the Slattery proposal, but officials were unable to agree on its substance. The newly reorganized contra leadership issued a statement supporting the proposal, as well as the Arias plan,

which differed mainly in not requiring the Sandinistas to forgo Soviet-bloc aid.

The Arias plan, unveiled February 15, called for a national dialogue with domestic opposition, amnesties, cease-fires, democratization, free elections and renewal of arms reduction talks. While some of these measures did not have to be implemented immediately, the plan called for suspension of aid to armed insurgents, including the contras, upon signature of the document. At a February 15 meeting in San José, President Arias presented the plan to his Salvadoran, Honduran and Guatemalan counterparts. His idea was to get all four democracies to agree, and then approach Nicaragua.

The three other presidents had not helped draft the Arias plan, and so were not prepared to sign the proposal at that meeting. But they agreed to invite Nicaragua to a meeting within 90 days to discuss it. Nicaragua was miffed at being excluded from the first meeting, and at the obvious attempt to circumvent Contadora, but after sensing U.S. ambivalence about Arias' plan, it agreed to meet.

Despite squabbling over the date and venue, a preliminary meeting was set for July 31-August 1 in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. In June President Arias had visited President Reagan, who reportedly offered both support and criticism of the plan. Then Arias visited Central American officials during July to discuss differences over his proposal; former Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campíns also brought fellow Christian Democrats Salvadoran President José Napoleón Duarte and Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo together to resolve their differences.

Ambassador Habib testified before Congress on July 9, answering charges that the Administration was trying to torpedo the Costa Rican proposal: "What we were trying to do was to create an agenda for the meeting of the five in the summit which, if it were to produce an agreement based on this agenda, would be something which . . . we could all live with. . . . If our views and our objectives are not taken into account, why would we not oppose it?"

Habib listed the Administration's objectives as full democratization, "the resistance's involvement . . . in connection with arranging a cease-fire," and "at some stage the inclusion of the democratic resistance in the political dialogue." Further, U.S. "suspension of military aid to the resistance . . . would only occur upon the entry into force of an agreed cease-fire." He

urged a "clear definition of the verification and monitoring procedures," and noted the Arias plan lacked "any provision for limiting Soviet, Cuban, and other Communist bloc military presence in Nicaragua."¹

At the July 31 meeting of foreign ministers in Tegucigalpa, the Hondurans presented a proposal that included these elements. Some viewed the proposal as made in the United States, but Honduran interests actually paralleled U.S. interests more closely than those of any other Central American country. Honduras has a small army, a long border with Nicaragua, and—unlike Costa Rica—it fears being stuck with a huge contra presence if the Sandinistas are permitted to consolidate their power. Having returned to democracy only in 1981, with a shaky transition in 1985, Honduras is also more vulnerable to destabilization. Both the Sandinistas and the contras are potential threats to the country, although the military sees the former as the more pressing. As long as U.S. backing for the contras continues, Honduras can hope that the United States will contain any problem they pose. The Honduran proposal was rejected out of hand, partly because it was presented as an alternative rather than as amendments to the Arias plan. Also, the focus was shifting to gaining the Sandinistas' agreement. They would agree to a cease-fire only *after* aid to the contras stopped, and were reluctant to discuss "democratization."

The first substantive breakthrough came when Duarte's son, part of the Salvadoran delegation, proposed simultaneous implementation of three elements: cease-fires, amnesties and non-use of neighboring territory by insurgents. Although the Tegucigalpa meeting ended without agreement, participants later pointed to this concept as an important contribution. President Duarte was also warming up to the idea of a peace agreement, and simultaneity of implementation was a concept he could sell to his conservative military chiefs. A U.S. official who visited Duarte about this time sensed that he might "do something" at the upcoming August 7 presidents' summit in Guatemala.

III

In Washington, the Administration wanted to build bipartisan support on the Hill for its Nicaragua policy, and in July the

¹ "Recent Events Concerning the Arias Peace Proposal," Hearing and Markup before the Committee on Foreign Affairs and its Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, House of Representatives, July 9, 1987, pp. 6–8, 17, 19.

White House hired former Texas Congressman Tom Loeffler to do the job. He found fellow Texan Wright interested in a bipartisan negotiating proposal if the Administration was sincere. In the last week of July a small group set to work with Wright, including White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker, Secretary of State George Shultz and then National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci.

Concurrent with these discussions, Wright, who knew many of the Central American leaders, was also consulting with them. He spoke with President Arias' brother, with Costa Rican Ambassador Guido Fernández and Nicaraguan Ambassador Carlos Tünnermann, and revised the plan according to what they told him would be acceptable. Wright told them that this was "not a take it or leave it" proposal, in Fernández's words; that they should feel free to accept or reject aspects or all of it.

The Wright plan called for "democratization" in Nicaragua but also emphasized the need for ensuring that there would be no Soviet-bloc bases, no military threat to the hemisphere, and no staging ground for subversion from Nicaragua. In exchange for cutting off military aid to the contras upon implementation of a cease-fire, it called for Nicaragua to stop receiving Soviet-bloc military aid at the same time. It proposed a negotiated drawdown of foreign military advisers, and offered a U.S. suspension of combat maneuvers in Honduras. A regional agreement on security issues was to be negotiated with U.S. participation—though a dispute subsequently broke out over whether this meant bilateral or multilateral talks. Finally, the negotiating process was to be completed by September 30, when contra aid expired.

Previously the Administration had argued that military pressure would force the Sandinistas to negotiate significant concessions if not relinquish power. The Wright-Reagan plan, however, described in detail for the first time what the U.S. terms might be for a negotiated settlement. While this plan had President Reagan's imprimatur, it was hastily drawn up, without input from key officials with responsibility for Central America (e.g., Ambassador Habib). They did not know until President Reagan had already signed off, too late to make any major revisions. The State Department was told to have its ambassadors relay the proposal immediately to the Central American presidents, who were just about to leave for the summit in Guatemala. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who apparently had also been in the dark, proposed that several

caveats be added, but Wright resisted. The contra leaders were not forewarned either but gamely suppressed their surprise.

The negotiations on the Wright plan had obviously been restricted so that hard-liners would not scuttle the proposal. But the effect was also to give Wright a leading role in shaping its substance. It is possible that no agreement would have been reached if the initiative had been fully vetted within the executive branch, as had happened with Representative Slattery's proposal. But putting out a proposal with the president's approval effectively signaled that the Administration was shifting from a military to a diplomatic track—an important step even if the intent was merely to secure more contra aid. It could be and was used to prevent the Administration from seeking more military aid. Further, the Sandinistas promptly proposed direct talks with the United States on the plan.

The other Central Americans were somewhat perplexed. The American embassies, themselves surprised by the proposal, had minimal instructions on how to present it. The proposal began by stating U.S. views on basic elements "that need to be included in a peace plan"—wording that sounded peremptory to many of the Central Americans. The five presidents decided simply to put the Wright plan aside and consider only the Arias plan, a decision probably encouraged by Wright's earlier remarks. The Nicaraguans suggested that the Wright plan be seen as a U.S. offer to negotiate directly with Nicaragua and that therefore the Central Americans could continue with their own plan, without addressing U.S. concerns. In any case, the Arias proposal focused on questions of democracy rather than security. The Hondurans, who had no advance notice of the Wright plan, thought that it could somehow be taken up in tandem with the Arias plan or after it had been completed.

U.S. diplomats in the region readily understood the irritation the eleventh-hour proposal caused; as one put it: "it almost guaranteed that the Central Americans would feel that the United States was trying to push them around one more time." But the Central Americans' decision to sign the Arias plan was more than a fit of pique. Each country made an assessment of its own concerns and vulnerabilities.

IV

Although President Duarte has been a close ally of the United States, he has rarely refrained from doing what he felt was best for his country or for himself politically. The accord

could be seen as both. Duarte had already held unsuccessful negotiations with the Salvadoran guerrillas; the accord asked no more than that he try again. Since the security provisions were not spelled out, he did not have to reduce either his U.S. advisers or military aid, the latter essential if the Salvadoran war continued. Equally important, the accord forbade the Sandinistas from supporting the Salvadoran guerrillas and legitimized Duarte's government.

Those aspects which made the accord acceptable to Duarte made it easier on the Sandinistas. For example, Duarte would not have signed an agreement that required him to hold new elections, as the U.S. Administration wanted the Sandinistas to do. Duarte may have also wanted more commitments from the Sandinistas, but he was not prepared to reciprocate in his own country. As it was, the commitments he undertook were probably the maximum tolerable to the Salvadoran military and conservatives. Duarte was further motivated to sign the accord as a popular peacemaking effort. He had not fulfilled his campaign promise to end the war, and by mid-1987 was facing serious economic and political troubles at home.

The Hondurans, in the view of one U.S. official, had little idea of what they were getting into when they signed the accord. Honduras had a tremendous task, to be sure, if it were to comply with the plan's provision that the contras not use its territory. The government, when it acknowledged the contra presence, said that it did not have the ability to patrol its jungle border with Nicaragua. The Hondurans clearly wished more demands to be made of Nicaragua; their army is much smaller than the Sandinistas' or the Salvadorans', their traditional enemy. But they chose to stress that their compliance would depend on a Nicaraguan cease-fire, which they obviously thought would not be reached. Honduras, though anti-Sandinista, had become increasingly unhappy hosting an estimated 200,000 refugees, many of them Nicaraguan, and thousands of contras, and fearful of trusting its security to their future success.

Perhaps most surprising was the Nicaraguan decision to sign the Arias plan, which demanded far more internal opening than the Contadora draft treaty. Most Central American officials thought that the dire state of the Nicaraguan economy had forced the Sandinistas to take a chance. Inflation exceeded 1,000 percent for 1987, and its per capita foreign debt is the highest in Latin America, having grown to \$7 billion from \$1.5

billion when the Sandinistas took power. In this view, the Sandinistas hoped the accord would encourage international donors; nevertheless Soviet-bloc aid will probably continue.

But the main prize was a cutoff in contra aid. And, as U.S. officials were quick to point out, many of the required steps could be reversed once the contra threat had been defused. Former Ambassador to Costa Rica Francis McNeil noted that the Sandinistas displayed a tactical flexibility that some conservatives erroneously thought impossible for doctrinaire Marxist-Leninists; McNeil was one of the few who considered agreement to be a live possibility, as he testified in early July to Congress. In the event, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega gambled that minimum compliance by the Sandinistas would ensure a cutoff of contra aid by Congress. The chances also seemed fair that the Administration would derail the accord, in which case it, and not the Sandinistas, would be blamed. Finally, Ortega announced on his return to Nicaragua from Guatemala that the accord did not in any way affect the revolution, saying "in Nicaragua, when we speak of democratization, we are not speaking of anything new."²

Yet success in Guatemala was far from a foregone conclusion. According to Costa Rican Ambassador Fernández, a key factor was that the presidents met alone and stayed in the room until they reached agreement. At the outset Arias confronted Ortega, telling him that unless he was prepared to make concessions they might as well go home; the latter replied that he would be flexible.

Another key moment followed an angry exchange between Duarte and Ortega, in which they traded accusations of aiding each other's insurgencies; Duarte asked Ortega three times if he would keep his word. With the other presidents as witnesses, the two shook hands. The Guatemalan president, Vinicio Cerezo, was from the beginning more amenable to signing. Thus Duarte's decision was probably the turning point. That left Honduran President José Azcona to incur sole blame if he refused to sign; the four-to-one lineup was too much for him. The presidents' meeting broke up in the early hours of August 7 with an agreement in principle, and the foreign ministers spent the night drafting it. The next morning the Honduran foreign minister left the group and returned with reservations,

² Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Latin America*, Aug. 11, 1987, p. 1-4.

according to one official, but the others overruled his desire to pull back.

In sum, the presidents decided that the costs of war in Nicaragua and El Salvador and the attendant risks were more threatening than the hazards of a conciliatory peace process.

The August 7 accord called for signatory governments to hold talks with unarmed opposition groups, to issue amnesties, to form national reconciliation commissions including opposition and church representatives, to "take all the necessary actions in order to achieve an effective cease-fire," for democratization (including complete freedom for television, radio and the press; full political party freedom to organize, move and proselytize; the lifting of states of emergency and the guarantee of constitutional liberties), for free elections according to established constitutional timetables and elections in 1988 to a new Central American parliament. The accord requested all governments to cease open or covert military, logistical and financial aid to insurgent groups; and all the signatories were to deny use of their territory to insurgents. Finally, the signatories agreed to resume the Contadora negotiations on security issues, but set no timetable for them.

In 90 days, by November 5, the amnesty, cease-fire and democratization measures were to be implemented simultaneously with the end to use of territory and aid to insurgents. An International Verification Commission would analyze progress in compliance after 120 days; it included the Central American foreign ministers and representatives of Contadora, its support group, and the O.A.S. and U.N. secretaries-general. After 150 days (later changed to January 15, 1988) the presidents were to meet and take the "pertinent decisions."

Surprise and skepticism greeted the August 7 accord; speculation immediately arose that the United States would try to foil its success, since it did not meet many U.S. concerns, particularly on security. But the plan, once signed, generated a momentum; each country sought to avoid blame for derailing the effort. Because the White House had given its blessing to the Wright proposal, it was under pressure to endorse the Guatemala accord. Although many believed President Reagan would never countenance a settlement leaving the Sandinistas in power, he issued a statement saying, "I welcome this commitment to peace and democracy by the five Central American presidents, and I hope it will lead to peace in Central America and democracy in Nicaragua."

On August 12 the president addressed the nation, mainly on the just-finished Iran-contra hearings but adding a comment on the Central American agreement: "We have always been willing to talk," he said; "we have never been willing to abandon those who were fighting for democracy and freedom." A few days later, however, the president went on vacation, leaving others to wonder what the next step would be.

V

Not surprisingly, it soon became clear that Congress would not renew contra aid as long as the peace process was continuing. Many U.S. officials feared that implementation of the accord would drag out, creating a gray area rather than clear compliance or noncompliance, thus leaving the Nicaraguan resistance without support. The Administration insisted it would go ahead with a \$270-million aid request, but then backed down in the face of congressional opposition.

On August 17 the U.S. chiefs of mission to all Central American countries conferred in Washington, and left with instructions to stress the three main objectives outlined in the Wright proposal: no Soviet military base in Nicaragua, no subversion of its neighbors, and full democracy. But the Administration's hands were tied. The Central Americans were not about to renegotiate the accord. Even the most stalwart of U.S. allies suggested that the United States resolve its concerns directly with Nicaragua or that they be resolved later in the Contadora framework.

But the United States signaled that it did not intend to open negotiations any time soon. The State Department announced on August 14 that Ambassador Habib was returning to private life. He is an experienced diplomat who might have been able to resolve those matters left unaddressed in the Arias plan. Secretary Shultz reportedly raised this possibility but was rebuffed by others in the Administration, leading Habib to resign.

The Administration had apparently decided to wait and see whether the accord would fall apart, and there was certainly a good possibility that it would. In September, the White House secured \$3.5 million in "nonlethal" aid to bridge the gap between the end of aid on September 30 and the November 5 deadline in the Arias plan. The contras proposed that military aid be approved and held in escrow, but to no avail. From the

right a chorus of criticism began that the United States was abandoning the contras, but the Administration could do little that would not jeopardize the contras' cause in Congress.

On August 15, the opposition staged a rally in the Nicaraguan capital; the Sandinistas broke it up with dogs and electric batons, and arrested two Nicaraguans, sentencing them on the spot to 30 days in jail. Several experienced U.S. diplomats doubted that the Sandinistas could live up to their democratization promises, much less agree to a full amnesty or negotiated cease-fire, which would legitimize the rebels. But by the end of September the Costa Rican foreign minister had persuaded the Sandinistas to allow the opposition paper *La Prensa* to reopen without censorship. The Sandinistas also formed a National Reconciliation Commission, and boldly named their most prominent critic, Cardinal Obando y Bravo, its head.

When the Central American foreign ministers met in Costa Rica a week before the November 5 deadline, they redefined it as the date by which compliance should begin, not be completed. This was because no cease-fire had been arranged. The Sandinistas had declared a limited unilateral cease-fire, but refused to negotiate with the resistance. In September President Reagan had said that the Guatemala plan "falls short of the safeguards for democracy and our national security," and warned that the Sandinista moves could turn out to be "Potemkin reforms."

Arias' ability to pressure all parties was boosted greatly on October 13, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He immediately put his increased stature to use, insisting that a negotiated cease-fire was "indispensable" and urging the Sandinistas to accept Cardinal Obando as mediator. The Nicaraguan bishops not only endorsed a negotiated cease-fire; since 1984 they had held that "Nicaraguans who are in armed rebellion . . . should also participate in the dialogue [with the government and the opposition parties]. If this were not the case, there would be no possibility of a solution."³

Although November 5 was no longer a deadline, it was still a day of reckoning. President Ortega announced that he would conduct indirect talks with the contras on a cease-fire but not political matters. Some 980 political prisoners would be re-

³ Conference of Bishops of Nicaragua, Pastoral Letter, Sept. 17, 1987.

leased,⁴ but granting full amnesty and lifting the state of emergency would not occur until contra aid stopped. He pointed to other steps: two exiled bishops had been granted permission to return to Nicaragua and the church radio allowed to resume broadcasts. (An opposition request to open a television station had not been answered.)

Honduras had not undertaken its main commitment, that of denying bases to the contras. On October 13, however, Arias had said that it need not do so until there was a cease-fire in Nicaragua. The contras were now mostly in Nicaragua, but Hondurans feared they could be forced back into Honduras by Sandinista military pressure or a cutoff of U.S. aid. Logistical supply of the contras has continued through Honduras; it is unclear whether the accord permits humanitarian aid to continue via this route during a cease-fire.

All of these fears led Honduran Foreign Minister Carlos López Contreras to propose bilateral talks with Nicaragua in a November 12 speech to the OAS. He suggested trading expulsion of U.S. troops for that of Nicaragua's Soviet-bloc advisers, and creating a demilitarized zone for any contras in Honduras in exchange for a Sandinista no-incursion pledge and a military pullback from the border. The Honduran ambassador told a worried United States that these were merely ideas, but Honduras clearly felt a need to plan for its own compliance.

To comply with the accord, Guatemala formed a National Reconciliation Commission, declared an amnesty and held an inconclusive round of talks with its guerrilla opposition, whose forces number less than 2,000. While sporadic fighting continues, the current question is whether the country's 1985 return to democracy can lead to a process of reform. Though less publicized in U.S. media, Guatemala's war of the 1970s and early 1980s took more lives than El Salvador's. Unlike its Salvadoran counterpart, the Guatemalan army has won its war—and without U.S. aid. As one conservative put it, there is no need to negotiate, and there are no political prisoners to release. Even officials in the Cerezo government echo the sentiment that this chapter is closed; all military abuses were pardoned by the outgoing military government. Cerezo's at-

⁴ Estimates of political prisoners range from a few thousand to 10,000. The Lawyers' Committee on Human Rights reported in November 1987 that 3,000 suspected contra supporters were arrested in the first six months of 1987; well over 1,000 were awaiting trial before the Anti-Somocista People's Tribunals. Sandinista militants sit on these tribunals, which can impose sentences of up to 30 years without any right of appeal to the regular court system.

tempts at reform have been limited; his main task is completing his term and turning over power to a civilian.

Guatemala's concerns are far removed from the Nicaraguan conflict. Although conservative Guatemalans in particular are concerned about the potential security threat, Cerezo has a *modus vivendi* with the Sandinistas: don't aid our guerrillas and we won't aid yours, as prominent opposition politician Edmund Mulet described it. While the previous government had aided the *contras*, Cerezo's policy is "active neutrality." He is firmly in favor of democracy in Nicaragua, but he is not going to do much about it.

VI

The Salvadoran government is obviously much more worried about the Sandinistas, who have supplied Salvadoran guerrillas with matériel, aid and comfort. But the guerrillas, the Faribundo Martí National Liberation (FMLN) front, also have weapons captured from the Salvadoran army and sanctuaries in El Salvador. A U.S. official said the effect on the FMLN of a cutoff of Sandinista aid would be "significant but not definitive." Although the military has won back much territory, the country still receives well over \$500 million a year in U.S. aid. This level of aid—only Israel and Egypt receive more—makes claims of success sound ludicrous; on the other hand, in 1980 many predicted the country would fall to the guerrillas. The questions now are whether El Salvador can begin to sustain itself economically, which depends on the war winding down further, and whether the democratic process can move ahead.

There is no sentiment in the U.S. Congress for cutting off aid to El Salvador, but budget pressures may force a decrease. The FMLN fighters are down to 5,000–6,000 from 12,000 in 1984, but they still are a potent force. In March they attacked the El Paraíso base north of San Salvador, killing 69 Salvadoran soldiers and one U.S. adviser. Their attacks on economic and transportation targets and laying of landmines continue to plague the countryside. Much more of Salvadoran territory is under guerrilla control than in Nicaragua. Media coverage of the Salvadoran war has decreased, partly because the sensational death-squad killings have fallen off. But the casualty rate is still high; in one week in August, according to the auxiliary bishop's Sunday homily (which regularly reports such news), 46 people died in war-related violence.

The other undramatic but new fact of life in El Salvador is

the increasing professionalism of the military. U.S. training appears to have improved fighting and reduced abuses perpetrated by soldiers. Still, as in Guatemala, few right-wing killers have been punished. An amnesty law, passed in October to comply with the peace plan, permits release of rightists and leftists accused or convicted of political crimes. That same month 4,700 refugees returned, but several hundred thousand remain abroad.

Salvadoran civilian politics continue to be fractious. Opposition legislators were on strike until April. Conservatives protest taxes and any reform or austerity that Duarte proposes, and the coffee-dependent economy is a shambles. Those on Duarte's left decry his failure to bring about fundamental change, and all sides complain of corruption and the low caliber of his cabinet.

President Duarte took the initiative the peace plan had given him and called for a dialogue with the FMLN. Two rounds of talks held in October produced no substantive agreement; neither side's position has changed since previous meetings. The government asks the guerrillas to lay down their weapons and join the political process, saying democracy has now made their fight unnecessary. The guerrillas insist on being given a role in the government until elections can be held, and on integrating their forces with the army. The guerrillas show no sign of compromising, but neither do they have the leverage to gain their maximum aims, despite some success in rebuilding their urban base the past few years.

The FMLN broke off talks after the killing of a human rights leader on October 26, which raised fears of renewed right-wing terror. The most important event was the November visit of prominent politicians in exile, Rubén Zamora and Guillermo Ungo, allies of the FMLN under the Democratic Revolutionary Front. They said they would test the accord by organizing for the March 1988 legislative and municipal elections. Duarte called on them to renounce their guerrilla ties; observers say the FMLN might retaliate by killing them, though the right may get to them first.

In what was viewed as an attempt to steal the returning exiles' limelight, Duarte announced that a witness had come forward to testify in the unsolved 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero. The witness implicated Roberto D'Aubuisson, a former military officer who was Duarte's main challenger in the 1984 elections (Duarte won 54 percent in a runoff vote).

There is a less cynical interpretation of Duarte's move: to the extent that the right is on the defensive, it may be less likely to strike out. But Duarte has made himself as much a target as those to his left: D'Aubuisson counter-charged that one of Duarte's key military aides, Colonel Reynaldo López Nuila, had overseen killings while head of the National Police. There are skeletons in many military closets, but conviction of D'Aubuisson and others is unlikely. Legal requirements for proof are onerous, witnesses are often intimidated or killed, and many judges side with rightists.

El Salvador appears to be entering another volatile period. The U.S. embassy had been predicting that the moderate elements of the guerrilla coalition would return to build an electoral following in the vacuum on the left; it may be that this is the only possible passage to normalcy for the country. El Salvador is far too divided to achieve a steady-state under a Christian Democratic monopoly. While the Christian Democrats will probably win the next elections, the long-term viability of democracy there may be better served by a multiparty system. The right is presently divided; the weaker its electoral prospects, the more tempting may be the resort to violence.

While a successful transfer of power in 1989 will be a test of democratization in El Salvador, the key over the next year may be the power of U.S. aid. If Duarte—or possibly Zamora or Ungo—were to be assassinated by the right, Congress might well cut off aid. Duarte's allies in the military know this, and while their power over extremists is limited, it may suffice. Still, some rightists have already suggested that a coup might be in order. In the longer run the military's dominance must be addressed; this largely depends on the civilian government becoming more efficient. The military not only prosecutes the war; it effectively runs the regions that it reclaims from the FMLN, providing services and reconstruction. The more professional of the officers know that this gainsays the goal of leaving government to the civilians, but they say it is often a question of their doing the job or its not getting done.

VII

As for the war in Nicaragua, its death toll was mounting to Salvadoran proportions; in a speech on November 4 at Moscow's Bolshevik Revolution anniversary, President Ortega said there were now 45,714 victims of the war in his country of 2.7

million. (The Salvadoran toll: 61,000 deaths, population 5.6 million.)

Ortega also said "the North American government . . . will try to use our presence in this glorious event to get those 270 million [dollars] approved. But . . . we will never give up our fraternal relations with the Soviet Union." Another Sandinista official, Bayardo Arce, in a Managua speech on the same occasion, expressed appreciation for Soviet nonmilitary aid, which he estimated at \$2 billion since the 1979 Sandinista victory. (Soviet military hardware alone has been estimated by the United States at \$2 billion.)

In October a call went out for 30,000 more Nicaraguans to register for military service; the draft is the reason many of the half-million Nicaraguans have left the country. On October 25 a senior Defense Ministry aide, Roger Miranda, defected to the United States; to preempt his expected divulgence of information, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega announced that Nicaragua had plans to put 600,000 under arms.⁵ The army now numbers 65,000–70,000. There are 1,000 to 2,000 Cuban advisers, some of whom are reportedly taking Nicaraguan citizenship, which could undercut any agreement to remove foreign advisers.

Miranda's information was made public in December, and while he reportedly had failed a polygraph test, Humberto Ortega made another speech, again confirming the planned buildup, and acknowledging that the Soviets had agreed to supply weapons well into the 1990s. Miranda said the Soviets had promised MiG jets, but these had been sought before and never delivered. The revelations were expected to help the Administration win further stopgap aid from Congress. Even though the Central American accord did not bar Nicaragua from receiving Soviet-bloc aid, the Sandinista statements plus Miranda's revelations certainly contradicted the spirit of the agreement.

The Sandinistas have expressed their willingness to reduce foreign advisers and refrain from subversion, but doubt persists. Secretary Shultz told the American Bar Association on February 12, 1987, that Soviet reconnaissance planes have already begun operations in Nicaragua. The U.S. embassy in El Salvador said Sandinista aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas is

⁵ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Latin America*, Nov. 5, 1987, pp. 9–15.

difficult to track, but does continue. It is usually discovered after the fact, when peasants report being forced to carry arms that have been brought in. The U.S. government is understandably loath to publish the evidence of the arms flow, but doing so would buttress its assertion that the Sandinistas still threaten their neighbors.

About mid-1987 the press began to report contra military gains; the contras launched offensive actions in April, July, October and December, the last two being the most effective. In October contra forces cut traffic on the important Rama road for 48 hours and held several towns, and in December they attacked three towns and a Sandinista army headquarters in northeast Nicaragua. They have used Redeye missiles effectively, by their own count downing 25 Soviet-supplied helicopters.

Human rights problems, however, continue to plague the resistance. An investigation, funded from the \$100 million in U.S. aid and conducted by a Nicaraguan exile organization, cited numerous cases of summary executions, civilian abuses and kidnapping.⁶ Perhaps more damning was the group's report that Enrique Bermúdez, military chief of the main contra army Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN), had ordered the investigators out of the northern border camps. He was "disturbed" that one case was being reinvestigated, since "the FDN prosecutor had considered the case closed." It involved the 1984 summary execution of eight Sandinista soldiers, which had been corroborated by several witnesses and raised by Amnesty International and Americas Watch. As of late 1987 no further action had been taken. In fact the accused, Comandante Atila, led a unit accompanied in April by a *Newsweek* reporter, whose report cast doubt on the leader's military prowess and discipline, and surmised that peasants felt forced to aid the contras.

The efforts of the State Department, notably Elliott Abrams, to reform the contra leadership and reduce the abuses continued in 1987. A major reorganization of the civilian directorate was accomplished in March, bringing in four more liberal directors to balance the two conservatives. But the basic problem remained: the conservative factions control the troops, and hence ultimate power.

⁶ La Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos, "Six-Month Report on Human Rights in the Nicaraguan Resistance," San José, Costa Rica, July 1987. See pp. 7-9, 40.

The death of an American citizen was the kind of one-time incident that affects U.S. public opinion beyond any proportionate measure. Benjamin Linder, who lived in Nicaragua and worked on a northern hydroelectric project, was killed on April 28; there were numerous reports as to just how he died, but it was certainly at contra hands. The dam he helped build was blown up by contras on September 12; this kind of economic warfare, while practiced by other insurgencies, including the Salvadoran one, is far more likely to alienate the population than attacks on strictly military targets.

The option of continuing the war is less likely since the Guatemala accord; still, it bears asking what the contras could expect from more fighting. In February then U.S. Southern Command chief General John Galvin testified in Congress that three to seven more years of military aid to the contras was necessary if they were to evolve into a successful insurgency. Assistant Secretary Abrams defended the need for an open-ended commitment: "If it's a cause worth supporting, it's worth supporting if the contras are going to take Managua . . . in December 1988 or if they're going to take Managua in December 1995."⁷ Though Congress has surprised many by continuing support for the contras, it seems unlikely to do so at high levels for several years—making an eventual negotiated settlement more likely.

In December 1987 indirect talks between the contras and the Sandinistas mediated by Cardinal Obando were held, but ended in a standoff, though a Christmas truce was agreed. The accord did not require the Sandinistas to discuss political matters, but the contras kept insisting on it. Obando was potentially the contras' ally; he saw the conflict as a civil war, prompted by wide disaffection with the Sandinista agenda. But in assuming the role of mediator, the cardinal came under pressure to find a deal that both sides could accept, and to downplay his personal views.

The Guatemala accord did not require the Sandinistas to hold early elections, but the opposition may be able to exploit the freedoms provided in the accord to pressure the Sandinistas into making some changes. The likelihood of real power being contested at the polls has already been dismissed by many, however, given the conditions under which the opposition will be operating.

⁷ *The Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 5, 1987.

In January 1987 Nicaragua promulgated a constitution that opposition parties had tried to revise, objecting to the virtual wedding of state and army with the Sandinista party. The legislature's powers are weak, even over the budget. Sandinista mass organizations are state-funded, and the block committees, though defunct in some areas, are not only in charge of services but dispense ration cards, approve public housing applications and conduct neighborhood surveillance. Municipal elections, expected in 1987, were deferred by the Sandinistas.

The real test will not come until the 1990 presidential elections. The 1984 presidential elections provide a lesson. After extensive negotiations, candidate Arturo Cruz agreed to run if he could get his opposition coalition to agree to the terms he had negotiated. His coalition had been badly divided over participating, but the Sandinistas would not give him 48 hours to try to gain approval and called off the deal. The 1990 elections will be supervised by an electoral commission nominated by the Sandinista leaders and confirmed by a Sandinista-dominated assembly. Observers may prevent blatant fraud. But defeating the Sandinistas in elections would require a unity and cohesion that the opposition does not now have, and the Sandinistas possess the means to ensure that it won't.

VIII

The Miranda revelations spurred Congress in December to add \$8.1 million in nonlethal aid for the contras to its 1988 appropriations bill.⁸ In November Congress had supplied a stopgap infusion of \$3.2 million in nonlethal contra aid through December 16. Congressional sources warned that a majority would oppose any request for military aid if the peace process was making progress. Determining what would constitute sufficient progress was a matter of debate, both in Washington and among the Central American leaders. President Arias was unlikely to declare his plan a failure, but he could not ignore the lack of full compliance. So long as the compliance record remained insufficient, Congress risked being charged with abandonment of the Nicaraguan rebels. As the plan's final deadline of January 15 approached, therefore, it became ap-

⁸ The complicated measure allowed nonlethal aid and transportation of previously purchased military equipment for up to two months. It set votes for Feb. 3-4 on an expected Administration request for more aid, and left open the possibility of another request after June 30. *The New York Times*, Dec. 21, 1987, p. A17.

parent that the Sandinistas would have to take some further steps toward compliance.

When the five presidents met in San José on January 15–16, 1988, Daniel Ortega was reportedly pressured by the other four to offer some concessions or face the possibility that the peace process would break down. If the Sandinistas were blamed for the breakdown, the United States might renew military aid to the contras. To avert this possibility Ortega agreed to open direct talks with contras, but only on cease-fire terms and not political matters. He also agreed to suspend the state of emergency, and to issue a fuller amnesty subject to certain conditions. After the meeting President Arias stressed that fulfillment of these pledges would be required to forestall contra aid, saying the future of aid was “entirely in Daniel Ortega’s hands.” While the presidents were meeting, however, several leaders of Nicaragua’s internal opposition were arrested by Sandinista police because they had met with contras in Guatemala. The internal opposition and the contras had agreed in that meeting to call on the Sandinistas to hold joint talks with both the armed and the unarmed opposition.

The U.S. Administration announced that it would request more aid for the contras as planned, making the February 3–4 votes in Congress the new deadline for progress. The Central American summit of January 15–16 broke up with a call for immediate compliance, and did not set any date for a further meeting.

The Sandinistas are clearly counting on Congress’ aversion to aid; as one Nicaraguan official put it: “The Administration does not have the political capacity to ignore the will of Congress.” But Congress does not want to get too far out on a limb, because the Administration might see it off.

The year 1987 had ended with complicated maneuvering by Speaker Wright, the Sandinistas and the Administration over what was to be done. In a November 11 speech to the OAS in Washington, Ortega charged that the United States had reneged on its pledge to hold direct talks with the Nicaraguan government, apparently referring to the Wright-Reagan plan.⁹ But two days earlier, President Reagan had said the United States would engage in multilateral talks only after “serious

⁹ The Wright version said: “The United States shall enter into bilateral discussions with the governments of the region—including the government of Nicaragua,” but the Administration version omitted “bilateral.”

negotiations between the Sandinistas and the freedom fighters, under the mediation of Cardinal Obando, are under way.”¹⁰

At a meeting with Speaker Wright on November 13 Ortega presented a cease-fire proposal to Cardinal Obando. Wright also offered the services of four people, including two of his aides and veteran arms control negotiator Paul Warnke. Wright soon heard from an irate Administration, which expressed concern that the Speaker was creating “confusion” and “misleading impressions.” Wright was unyielding, and only after two meetings was a statement issued saying that the differences had been resolved, both parties wanted the Arias peace plan to succeed and they agreed that negotiations should be “guided primarily by Central Americans.”

Secretary Shultz dismissed the conflict with Wright as a “tiff,” which it was, but it revealed not just frayed nerves but fundamental differences. The Administration had decided, at least for the time, to stay in the background of the peace process, while Wright clearly wanted the United States to get involved in talks. It was not clear whether Congress might make such negotiations a litmus test for renewing aid. To put the focus on U.S.-Nicaraguan talks, the Administration argued, would take pressure off the Sandinistas to negotiate seriously with the contras.

Waiting for progress in the cease-fire talks made sense, but active U.S. participation would probably produce a better deal. If the Administration waits too long, it may find itself excluded again. In signing the accord, the Central Americans usurped the Administration’s obvious bargaining chip; they traded the contras for democratization, but as they defined it. If the United States wants to negotiate for more, it will need new carrots or sticks; the promise of normal relations and renewed aid might be carrot enough, but it is not certain.

In the United States, liberals have often acted as though the main problem with Nicaragua was Ronald Reagan. Many think that insurgencies should ipso facto not be made in the U.S.A., that the country cannot achieve its goals by acting like the Soviet Union. A U.S.-created resistance is bound to have less appeal than an indigenous one. On the other hand, despite the contras’ origins they now have a base in the country, and disaffection with the Sandinistas is great. Yet the Reagan Doc-

¹⁰ “Remarks by the President to Leaders of the Organization of American States,” Nov. 9, 1987.

trine, whatever its rhetorical value, may be unworkable simply given congressional ambivalence. It is ironic, however, that Congress continues to support insurgencies in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola but not one closer to home where U.S. interests are greater.

Nevertheless, it will be impossible to return to a contra policy if those fighting are left unaided for many months. Given the situation inside Nicaragua, the contras could not remain there in force for long. The Sandinista army is too strong and well equipped, and the informant-control network is very good. If necessary the government would once again round up all suspected supporters. The revolution is about three-quarters consolidated, despite economic troubles and discontent. Those familiar with such consolidation elsewhere are well aware that it can proceed against the wishes of much or even most of the population.

If U.S. material support for the contras is virtually finished—dribbling “humanitarian” aid only whitewashes the end—the United States must decide whether and how it should help obtain the best possible nonmilitary settlement. There are several outstanding questions. What further democratization guarantees might be obtained; what recourse is available if the Sandinistas renege on such pledges? Should a U.S.-Nicaraguan or regional security accord be negotiated? What Soviet and Cuban commitments should be sought that would shore up any such accord? These measures fall under the broad heading of “containment plus internal provisions”—perhaps a second-best solution compared to the initial goals of the Reagan Administration, but probably the best one left.