

The US and Nicaragua:
Understanding the Breakdown in Relations

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The confrontation that developed between the US and Sandinista Nicaragua in the 1980s significantly affected both countries. For the US, the conflict led to events like the Iran-Contra affair, which threatened to bring down the Reagan administration. For Nicaragua, the antagonism grew to the point that the US-supported rebels, the *contras*, were able to cause enough damage to the regime that it agreed to elections that removed the Sandinistas from power. As was the case with a number of other revolutionary states during the Cold War, the US seemingly had reasonably good relations with Nicaragua for some time after the Sandinista-led revolution. Thus arguably the most perplexing issue in the troubled US-Nicaragua relationship is ascertaining why and how the two states moved from cooperation to hostility. What best explains the breakdown in relations between the two countries?

The most popular explanation has focused on the US and its unequal relations with Nicaragua. Given the power discrepancy between the two states, the US, particularly during the Reagan administration, resented any move on Nicaragua's part that challenged Washington's interests. Moreover, given the legacy of American intervention in Nicaragua and Washington's support for the Somoza regime, the Sandinistas had every reason to suspect the worst from Washington.

From a theoretical perspective, Stephen Walt (1996) offers the spiral model as an explanation for the breakdown in relations between status quo states and revolutionary ones. The mutually defensive steps taken by each state potentially threaten the security of the other. For Walt, revolutions give rise to a number of factors that exacerbate the mistrust between them and status quo states. With respect to US-Nicaragua relations, one might extrapolate that Washington's moves to promote its security thus threatened

Managua's, setting in motion a downward spiral in relations that in time resulted in considerable mutual hostility.

We reject the view that the US caused or precipitated the breakdown in relations and argue that neither the spiral model nor US ideological intransigence is satisfactory in this case. Instead, this paper uses a theory about international conflict and revolutionary states, which it distinguishes from the spiral model, that maintains that revolutionary states initiated conflict with the US for ideological and domestic reasons. A big problem for theories of international politics based on ideology and domestic politics, however, is that they seldom take into consideration security, a fundamental concern, which we address. Given the imperial role of the West in Third World states that later went through revolutionary upheavals, and given the transnational connections that liberal elements in these revolutionary states had with the West, radical regimes used conflict with the US in order to defeat the liberals, to mobilize the masses, and to build new institutions.¹ Furthermore, they promoted hostility in order to advance the global revolutionary movement. After a brief period of hesitation, the US reciprocated the antagonism of the revolutionary states and escalated the conflict.

This paper shows that the Sandinistas caused the rupture in relations when they began arming the Salvadoran rebels in the summer of 1980, violating the agreement between the US and Nicaragua. This foreign policy move coincided with domestic efforts to radicalize the revolution and to defeat the liberal bourgeoisie in particular. Moreover, while the Sandinistas supported the Salvadoran guerrillas in part for security reasons, the biggest factor was ideological: to promote the larger Marxist-Leninist cause in

¹ This paper expands upon the argument along these lines put forth in Snyder (1999).

international politics. In 1981, the Sandinistas and the new Reagan administration tried to restore the damaged relationship. Both sides might share some of the blame for their failure to do so, but the Sandinistas ultimately rejected a new course for ideological reasons that knowingly risked the security of the state. An examination of US government documents from 1981-82 shows that, contrary to the conventional view, the Reagan administration was somewhat reluctant to give up on finding some kind of accommodation with the Sandinista government.

This paper follows the process tracing method, which highlights multiple causation and path dependency (George and Bennett, 2005). The breakdown in relations follows four stages: in the first, domestic conflict develops between the radicals and moderates; in the second, the radicals externalize the tensions by fomenting conflict with the US; in the third, the US hesitates to reciprocate the revolutionary state's hostility; in the fourth, Washington becomes antagonistic toward the revolutionary state and escalates the conflict. The paper demonstrates the Reagan administration's initial reluctance to escalate any confrontation and suggests that the Sandinistas knowingly chose a course of conflict for ideological and domestic reasons.

The Theoretical Debate

The spiral model has been put forth as a popular explanation for the breakdown in relations between the US and revolutionary states. Given the anarchic nature of the international system, a state that attempts to increase its security unintentionally threatens the security of another state. This may result in a "spiral of insecurity" whereby each

state, in not recognizing the intentions of the other state, continues to bolster its defenses in reaction to the other state (Jervis, 1978). Refining the spiral model, Walt (1996: 33-37) suggests that the anarchic structure is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one in the development of hostile relations between revolutionary states and status quo ones, for they slip into conflict because of mutual “suspicions.” These suspicions are fuelled by the revolutionaries’ antagonistic ideology, their challenging domestic circumstances, and the different views of their historical relationship. Likewise, the status quo states have problems ascertaining the intentions of the revolutionaries, relying too much on the views of exiles after the loss of their own diplomatic expertise. Rejecting a “legitimate conflict of interest,” Walt claims that the conflict occurs primarily because of a “spiral of suspicion.”

In contrast with realism, the ideological theory of international politics emphasizes the “clash of ideas” (Owens, 2010) or “clash of ideologies” (Haas, 2012) as the basis of international conflict. Owens argues that the history of international politics has seen three waves with respect to the clash of ideas: following the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the later conflicts between monarchism and republicanism, the struggles among the fascists, communists, and liberals dominated international politics during the twentieth century. He says that the distinguishing feature during these waves was the high number of attempts by major powers to promote regime change in other states. Haas claims that it is the degree of ideological distance that largely determines the severity of the conflicts.

The alternative theory that we present emphasizes more the salience of the *revolutionary state’s* ideology and *its* domestic politic. It argues that radical social

revolutions, as distinct from liberal revolutions, produced regimes that thrived on international conflict, particularly with the US, the dominant liberal power. In turning hostile to the US for ideological reasons, the revolutionary elites found it easier to achieve their goal of producing radical domestic change, and they also sought to advance the larger revolutionary agenda in the international arena. During the ouster of the old regime, the core revolutionary elites usually downplayed their radical objectives in order to build and sustain a multiclass coalition. After toppling the old regime, however, a domestic conflict soon developed between the radical revolutionaries and the moderates. The radicals discovered that provoking international tensions with the United States allowed them to discredit the moderates, for the former claimed that the latter's ties with the US threatened the security of the revolution itself. The radicals did not foment international conflict, however, until they have achieved a dominant position over the bourgeoisie. Recognizing that dramatic internal change is often easier to achieve as a result of international conflict (Tilly, 1975), the radicals externalized their domestic struggles in an effort to develop new institutions. Moreover, as Theda Skocpol (1988) writes, social revolutions led to mass military mobilization, allowing the radicals to forge ties with the lower classes, which they used against the moderates. Finally, the radicals moved to oust the moderates in order to remove the obstacle to their major goal of establishing an anti-American foreign policy.

After attempting to maintain cordial relations with the revolutionary state so as not to push it into the arms of the Soviets, the US reciprocated the former's hostility after it moved to befriend the Soviet Union and/or another communist adversary of the US. Washington eventually escalated the conflict, for the administration did not want to be

accused by the opposite party of being a sucker in maintaining positive relations with the now antagonistic revolutionary state for too long. Thus, contrary to the ideological perspective of international politics, US foreign policy, particularly in its early relations with the revolutionary state, was based more on geopolitics and responding to the revolutionary state's foreign policy than its domestic politics.

Since Walt suggests that ideology can influence spiraling, and since revolutionaries motivated by ideology and domestic politics must worry about security, can a theory of international conflict based on ideology and domestic politics be different from the spiral model? Or, as Walt implies, must the spiral model subsume explanations based on ideology and domestic politics? Ideology and domestic politics may offer a better explanation for the behavior of the revolutionaries if, in the name of promoting security, they choose a more difficult course that knowingly would result in conflict. Likewise, while revolutionaries might have reasons to mistrust the US, not giving Washington much of a chance may indicate that other motives better account for their actions. Scholars find that the security dilemma rarely results in war, for foreign policy elites on both sides usually take measures to halt mutual escalation that might lead to armed conflict (Reiter, 1995; Kydd, 1997).

We advance six propositions that differentiate the ideology and domestic politics explanation (I&DPE) from the spiral model (SM):

First, the hostility that developed between the US and the revolutionary state was because of a conflict of interests (I&DPE), not because of mutual suspicions (SM).

Second, the foreign policy of the revolutionary state was driven more by ideology (I&DPE) than security concerns (SM).

Third, in examining security interests, the focus should be on the regime (I&DPE), not the state (SM). Indeed, radicals in the revolutionary state were willing to run considerable risks to the state's security in order to enhance their own domestic position, which was their primary concern upon coming to power (David, 1991).

Fourth, the security moves that the radicals took with respect to the US were preventive actions (I&DPE) as opposed to preemptive ones (SM).

Fifth, externalization of domestic tensions by the radicals (I&DPE) explained the conflict with the US better than their fears of internalization, whereby the US used the moderates to undermine the radicals (SM).

Sixth, the radicalization of the revolution came about through design (I&DPE), not as an unintended consequence of international conflict (SM).

The Case

When it ended its unofficial protectorate in Nicaragua in the 1930s, the US, even if inadvertently, set the stage for the establishment of the Somoza regime when it helped to create the National Guard. Although American support for the Somozas was not always as unstinting or as uncritical as frequently believed in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America (Pastor, 1987), it was often key in helping them to remain in power. Although the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN) effectively led the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, it brought about its final triumph by recruiting tactical allies from the Nicaraguan "establishment," including bourgeois opponents of the regime. The Carter administration had encouraged Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the last Somoza to rule Nicaragua, to leave for months so that the moderate

opposition could come to power; it failed despite having terminated military and financial aid.

Apprehensive about each other, the US and the new regime were, however, able to establish a somewhat positive relationship. Carter wanted to support the regime because he saw this as a way to influence the revolution, and he believed that after years of supporting the corrupt Somoza regime the US owed the Nicaraguan people considerable assistance in helping them to recover from the devastation caused by the removal of the dictator (Pastor, 1987: 191-197). Desperately seeking capital, and desiring to keep its ties with Washington, the new government accepted US assistance. From 1979 until early 1981, the US gave \$118 million in direct aid, far more than any other donor, and far more than it had given Somoza during a comparable period. Washington insisted, however, that the new regime not support the Marxist-Leninist rebel groups in El Salvador, who had close connections with Cuba (Pastor, 1987:208-12; Kagan, 1996: 134-47). Although the Sandinistas thought this curtailed Nicaragua's sovereignty, they accepted the condition. For Washington, this condition was reasonable, in light of the Sandinistas' ties to Cuba and the Soviet bloc, and in light of its generous support.

One matter on which no agreement was reached was American military aid to the Sandinista armed forces. The Carter administration was willing to discuss the matter. However, the tentative American-Nicaraguan military contacts of 1979 made little progress; one gets the impression that the Sandinistas were not seriously interested.²

² Pastor, who was the Carter administration's Latin American specialist on the National Security Council, notes that no formal Nicaraguan request for American military aid was ever sent (1987: 204-205). Training for Nicaraguan military personnel at American

Even though these American efforts to establish a military partnership bore no fruit, they do indicate that the administration accepted that the Sandinistas regime was a reality and that it wanted friendly relations.

Relations between the new regime and the Carter administration, even in the early stages, were always marked by a bit of mistrust. Walt notes, “[R]evolutionary regimes may harbor suspicions based on historical experience” (1996: 34). However, it is also useful to remember that not all citizens of a country necessarily interpret historical experiences the same way. During the 1980s, critics of Reagan administration Central America policy argued that one should understand Sandinista anti-Americanism as simply a manifestation of nationalistic assertion of Nicaraguan independence against previous North American dominance (Payne, 1988: 113). However, some Nicaraguans interpreted their history differently. For example, ideological predispositions and other factors seem to color how some remembered Augusto Cesar Sandino’s 1927-33 war against the US Marines.³

bases in Panama was offered. Sandinista People’s Army Chief of Staff Joaquin Cuadra Lacayo visited the United States at the invitation of the U.S. Army in November 1979. Defense Minister Humberto Ortega was supposed to go early in 1980 but canceled the trip only a few days before it was to take place. His justification was that he was not going to be received by an officer of sufficiently high rank. This ended American-Sandinista military contacts (Christian, 1985: 168-169).

³Sandinino’s insurgency was to a large extent rooted in the traditional rivalry between the Liberal Party, of which Sandino was a member, and the Conservative Party. Those who supported the Conservatives might remember Sandino as a bandit (Christian, 1985: 3-21). During her field research in rural northern Nicaragua, one American scholar found conflicting historical memories; although some residents of Quilali municipality recalled the Marines as abusive and perceived Sandino’s forces as heroes resisting foreign invasion, others remembered the Marines positively and saw Sandino’s forces as cruel bandits (Horton, 1998: 29-31).

From the first, the ideological distance between the US and the FSLN was bound to be great. The Sandinista Front originally grew out of the youth wing of the Socialist Party of Nicaragua, that country's orthodox, Moscow-oriented communist party. During their struggle against the Somoza regime, Sandinistas had been educated in the Soviet Union and trained in such communist countries as Cuba, Czechoslovakia, and North Korea. One could say that in many ways the Sandinistas shared the general pro-Soviet, anti-American stance of a number of Third World "liberation movements" of the 1960s and 1970s (Hager, 1993: 114-119).

Therefore, the distrust on the Nicaraguan side was not just a reaction to the previous American role in Nicaragua. The noncommunist moderates working in the Sandinista government in 1979-81 often felt that the US was trying to accept the revolution, that realistically Nicaragua should try to avoid provoking a quarrel with the Americans, and that the FSLN should accept Carter's goodwill. In other words, Nicaraguan officials who did not adhere to the communist ideology of the Front thought there was no reason for Nicaragua and the United States not to have friendly relations. Many of them disagreed with the general pro-Soviet alignment on such matters as Afghanistan (Cruz Sequiera, 1983: 95-99). In short, Sandinista hostility to the US was in large part a function of the FSLN's ideological distance from the US, a distance not felt by other members of the ruling coalition.

Stage One (Domestic Conflict). One can easily conclude that the FSLN's conflict with the noncommunist opposition and the United States was built in from the start due to its ideological orientation. This was spelled out most clearly in the Front's 1977 "Platform" (FSLN, 1977). Even those elements of the bourgeoisie who already opposed

the Somoza regime were seen as temporary allies who were not to be granted any meaningful political power in the revolutionary government that was to rule post-Somoza Nicaragua.⁴

Hints of the Front's real attitude toward its supposed allies actually already had emerged several times during the last year before its July 1979 victory. One was the public proclamation issued during the August 1978 seizure of the National Palace in Managua, which indicated that capitalists were invited to join the struggle against Somoza. However, they could not "impose formulas in which their personal interests come before those of the population" (Pastor, 1987: 71-72). This shows the FSLN's desire to limit the role of the private sector in politics, even while soliciting the support of "progressive" businessmen. That the Sandinistas would let this slip at this time also supports the theory of "externalization;" it was already foregone that even those capitalists who supported the overthrow of Somoza would not have any long-term role beyond what was convenient for the Front.

The attitude spelled out in the "Platform" does much to explain Sandinista efforts to oppose any succession to the Somoza regime that did not leave the FSLN as the dominant political force in Nicaragua. Sergio Ramirez, ostensibly a moderate but actually a secret Sandinista, worked to undermine the opposition "Group of Twelve" from within in October 1978 (Pastor, 1987: 101-102). On December 4, 1978, all three FSLN factions issued a statement opposing a plebiscite to end the crisis in Nicaragua. They feared that the "heroic struggle of our people" would "be stolen by the machinations of yankee imperialism and the treasonous sectors of the local bourgeoisie"

⁴ See especially certain passages of the "Platform" (FSLN, 1977: 302-305).

(Pastor, 1987: 109-110). This all indicates that the FSLN desired to prevent any possibility of a negotiated end to Somoza's succession that favored the moderate opposition.

Part of the reason for the Sandinistas' willingness to promise a role for the moderate opposition in post-Somoza Nicaragua during the final stages of their revolutionary struggle in 1979 had been pressure from the United States and a number of Latin American governments to ensure a role for the moderates and to preserve the structure of the National Guard. However, the collapse of the Guard in mid-July eliminated the reason why the Front had accepted these arrangements (Kagan, 1996: 102-112). The FSLN's efforts to prevent any meaningful role for its noncommunist erstwhile allies were predictable.

Examining the 1977 "Platform" also explains much of the FSLN's foreign policy orientation. The document makes clear that the Front saw itself as part of the same world revolutionary process that began with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and as a part of the world communist movement.⁵ According to the "Platform," Nicaragua's "bourgeoisie [had] liquidated and castrated itself...by clearly surrendering to the interests of Yankee imperialism." Therefore, the bourgeoisie "in general, including the faction that... [in 1977] oppose[d] the Somoza Regime...also constitute[d] part of the reactionary forces" (FSLN, 1977: 303). Accordingly, repression of the opposition at home and an anti-American foreign policy would go hand in hand since they sprang from the same ideological source.

⁵ Again, certain passages are very revealing (FSLN, 1977: 292 and 301-302).

Ostensibly, the new revolutionary Government of National Reconstruction was a coalition headed by a five-member Junta that included two members from the liberal bourgeoisie (Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Chamorro). However, this formality aside, the Sandinista National Directorate was much more important in actually determining government policy; since the Sandinistas controlled the arms, they dominated. In many ways Sandinista policies conformed to those that the Soviets urged other Third World “states of socialist orientation to follow during the 1970s and early 1980s. Although a controlled private sector would be tolerated in the economy, the Marxist-Leninist “vanguard” would remain in effective political control while carrying out the “progressive” reforms that would prepare society for transition to “socialism.”⁶ Party documents reveal that the FSLN saw its alliance with the bourgeoisie as temporary, even though the Sandinistas claimed that they supported free elections, a pluralist society, and a mixed economy (Gilbert, 1988:36-40).

The true thoughts of the FSLN leadership were revealed at the three-day First National Assembly of Cadres in Managua in September 1979 and in the subsequent report known as the “Document of Seventy-Two Hours” (FSLN, 1979). It is noteworthy that at this time the Sandinistas were not very concerned about any military challenge; units of the National Guard that had fled to neighboring countries could not “possibly organize an attack...for the time being” and Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were too mired in their own difficulties to seek military confrontation. It was clear that the Sandinistas were more concerned with the supposed domestic threat of the “traitorous

⁶ See Hager (1998: 138-143). A more extensive analysis can be found in Hager (1993: 146-165).

bourgeoisie.” Although they felt that they had “already lopped off a strategic portion of the bourgeoisie’s economic power,” they felt that it had to be gradually reduced in power even more since it could use “imperialism for adversely affecting our revolutionary process.” Again, it is striking how repressing the domestic opposition was linked to an anti-American foreign policy.

This link is further suggested by the course of events in 1980. Although the normalization of Soviet-Nicaraguan diplomatic relations was announced in October 1979, a real turning point seems to have been a visit of Nicaraguan government and Sandinista Front officials to the Soviet Union, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria in March of the next year. This led to the signing of an agreement on party-to-party relations by the FSLN and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the beginning of Soviet arms shipments, and agreements on economic and technical cooperation. This also marked the beginning of similar ties with a number of East European states. This pattern of Soviet-bloc aid to and cooperation with Nicaragua was very much like that of earlier support to Third World “states of socialist orientation” (Hager, 1993: especially 135-139, 142-143, and 191).

Part of this relationship included Soviet and other East-bloc support for a military build-up by the Sandinistas. Although not feeling immediately threatened by the United States, they were wedded to a worldview that saw Nicaragua as perpetually and inevitably locked in a struggle with the US. Accordingly, their course should be alignment with the USSR and Cuba (Miranda and Ratliff, 1993: 69-74). The Sandinista People’s Army (EPS) would be organized to fight a conventional style war on the lines of the Warsaw Pact militaries. The main battles were expected to be along the Pacific Coast

and to end with the defeat of the Americans. In reality, the EPS would be prepared for a campaign it never fought; instead it would have to fight a counterguerilla war in the northern mountains (Miranda and Ratliff, 1993: 222-227).

This closer alignment with the Soviet bloc was soon followed by the break between the Sandinistas and the noncommunist opposition, which occurred in the spring of 1980 when the former sought to expand the parliament to a number that would give them control (Christian, 1985: 227-28). Robelo and Chamorro resigned from the Junta in protest. In August, the Sandinistas proclaimed that elections would not be held for five years. After reading the FSLN proclamation, Defense Minister and National Directorate Member Humberto Ortega added that the elections would be unimportant in determining political power in Nicaragua; the FSLN “vanguard” intended to retain it (FSLN, 1980). Others in the opposition began to protest and to entertain a violent course.

Stage Two. (Externalization). These changes in Nicaragua’s overall foreign policy and domestic radicalization in 1980 would be accompanied by the Sandinistas’ decision to aid decisively the Salvadoran guerrillas. According to Sandinista defector Major Roger Miranda, the Sandinistas began “irregular and disorganized” arms shipments as early as late 1979. Even into 1980 the shipments were not as much as the Salvadorans wanted (Miranda and Ratliff, 1993: 140). A captured Communist Party of El Salvador “trip report” indicates that it was in early June that Sandinista leaders “assume[d]...the cause of E.S. as their own” (United States. Department of State (1981: Document D, p. 5). Other captured documents dated September and November indicate that Salvadoran rebel representatives were satisfied with the flow of weaponry into

Nicaragua and Sandinista assistance in forwarding arms to El Salvador (United States Department of State (1981: Documents I and K).

It was not until September, that the Carter administration confronted the Sandinistas about their arming the rebels and threatened to end US economic assistance to Nicaragua. For a short time, Managua curtailed its shipments (Pastor, 1987: 227-28). By November, however, the revolutionary regime began sending a large volume of weapons. Aware of this, Carter ended US assistance just before he left office in 1981.

Why did the Sandinistas send these weapons to the Salvadoran insurgents? Some observers have argued that the FSLN feared the prospect of a Reagan victory in the 1980 US presidential elections. Therefore, the decision to arm the Salvadoran communists was part of a preemptive strategy of presenting any Reagan administration with a *fait accompli*; the other part of this was the assassination in Paraguay of the exiled Somoza by members of an Argentine terrorist group with ties to the FSLN (Crawley, 1983: 17). This interpretation of Sandinista actions would be consistent with the spiral model.

However, Robert Kagan challenges this interpretation of Sandinista motives. On the basis of captured Salvadoran rebel documents, he argues that the Sandinistas were planning to ship weapons to the guerrillas regardless of the US election but delayed and postponed the timing in order to aid Carter's reelection campaign. This was in the context of Sandinista optimism regarding the forthcoming revolutionary offensive in El Salvador (Kagan, 1996: 160-62).

The Sandinista Front wanted an ideologically kindred revolutionary state as a neighbor. This aim can to some degree be considered a security concern, if one sees a

connection between regime type and the willingness of a state to coexist with others. Robert Jervis noted in his analysis of the security dilemma, “When there are believed to be tight linkages between domestic and foreign policy or between the domestic politics of two states, the quest for security may drive states to interfere preemptively in the domestic politics of others in order to provide an ideological buffer zone” (1978: 168). One of the moderates then working in Nicaragua’s Foreign Ministry, indicates that the Sandinista leadership saw the world this way. “According to the National Directorate, a region as small as Central America allowed for only one of two options: a revolutionary solution for the entire region, given the ‘ripple effect’ of the Sandinista revolution, or the eventual defeat of Nicaragua” (Cruz Sequiera, 1983; 104).

This decision marked the greatest turning point of the revolution. The FSLN knowingly brought Nicaragua into conflict with the US as it accelerated its struggle with the domestic opposition. The Sandinistas’ willingness to permit Nicaraguan territory to be used to aid the Salvadoran rebels made them a party to what would become a rather extensive effort by Cuba, Vietnam, and other allies of the Soviet Union to aid the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) “Final Offensive” of early 1981.⁷

This important foreign policy move was accompanied by increasing repression of the moderates; the Sandinistas argued that their ties with the US threatened the security of the revolution. Late 1980 saw stepped up harassment of the opposition, including arrests of politicians and restrictions on access to the media by Catholic Church leaders (Pastor, 1987: 223). The Sandinistas lost their most popular and challenging foe when Jorge

⁷ Although the Reagan State Department’s 1981 “White Paper” on this matter became controversial, by and large it appears to have been based on accurate intelligence. See Hager (1995).

Salazar, who had the support of numerous farmers, was killed under circumstances that indicated he had been murdered by the Sandinista Ministry of the Interior (Christian, 1985: 170-85).⁸

Stage Three (US Hesitation). Contrary to the spiral model, Washington did not become hostile when the Sandinistas shoved the liberal bourgeoisie aside in the spring of 1980. Instead, US Ambassador Pezzullo recommended that the opposition not take an antagonistic position toward the Sandinistas (Kagan, 1996:138-39; Pastor, 1987: 211-12). When the opposition became more confrontational in the fall of 1980, Washington did not move to support it (Pastor, 1987: 221-23).

However, a policy less friendly to the Sandinistas was being implemented by late 1980. This is probably best illustrated by Carter's approval of a \$19.5 million "covert political action program" to fund private sector organization, unions, political parties, and media in Nicaragua (Grow, 2008: 123). Shortly before leaving office, he suspended US aid in January 1981.

However, the Carter administration rendered no effective assistance to the armed opposition to the Sandinistas. There had been attacks almost from the first by former members of the National Guard who had fled to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Also, by mid-1980, there were a number of small bands of rural guerrillas made up of former supporters of the Sandinistas, some of who had fought with the Front against the Somoza regime (Brown, 2001: 13-68; Horton, 1998: 95-124). One scholar sympathetic to the *contras* believes that the US Central Intelligence Agency contacted exiled

⁸ A defector from the Sandinista Ministry of the Interior later alleged that weapons had been planted in Salazar's car to give the appearance that he had fired first on State Security personnel (US, Department of State: 1986: 5).

opposition groups through Argentine intelligence operatives in Honduras and Guatemala by late 1979, which was still during the time of the Carter administration.⁹ Apparently some such meetings took place and some Nicaraguans received money from CIA contacts after a “finding” signed by Carter in 1980. However, the CIA was not yet authorized to arm any rebels (Kagan, 1996: 188). It seems that no US aid would reach armed opposition groups until late 1981 at the earliest.¹⁰

Stage Four (US Hostility). The new Reagan administration and Nicaragua would not mend the relationship. The former felt that it had been elected to restore American power in the world and that stopping further communist gains in Central America would enhance Washington’s credibility. Some officials, such as Secretary of State Alexander Haig, favored direct American military action to sever Soviet-bloc arms shipments to the region.¹¹

However, the Reagan White House was not set on confrontation with the Sandinistas. For one thing, the administration was constrained by public opposition to what many perceived as an excessively belligerent Haig. Secondly, the priority of its Central America policy was preventing an FMLN victory in El Salvador, not on

⁹ This is Brown (2001: 83-85). He generally rejects the possibility that Argentine military intelligence was operating on its own in Central America. However, this overlooks how strained US relations were with Argentina during the Carter era. Brown himself acknowledges Sandinistas ties with exiled Argentine terrorist groups, which would have given Argentina’s government its own reasons for involvement in anti-Sandinista actions.

¹⁰ This is what former rebels in Quilali municipality told Horton (1998: 113). Peasants living in the area remember the rebels of 1980 and 1981 as being very ragged; only in 1982 did any of them appear to be well supplied. (Horton, 1998: 332, n. 12).

¹¹ For a comparatively recent discussion of early Reagan administration policy, see Grow (2008: 123-129).

influencing events in Nicaragua. A number of scholars have argued that, rhetoric aside, there was little substantive difference between the late Carter and early Reagan administrations in their approaches to Nicaragua.¹²

The account by former Reagan administration State Department official Robert Kagan argues that the Sandinistas might have taken the opportunity to rebuild relations if they had some desire to do so. The administration's overwhelming concern was the Sandinistas' continued support of the Salvadoran rebels (Kagan, 1996: 167-77).

Declassified documents from inside the Reagan administration support Kagan's contention. Although some analyses still dismiss the estimates of the scale of outside arms shipments to the FMLN which were published in the 1981 State Department "white paper" (Stokes, 20003: 82-92), they were apparently based on what the Central Intelligence Agency concluded was solid intelligence.¹³ One recent study of Cuban relations with the FMLN notes that after 1980 the key problem for the Salvadoran rebels was not obtaining weapons but getting them to El Salvador. Nicaragua would play a key role in this process (Onate, 2011: 143-144). In brief, the administration believed its own case against the Sandinistas and had some reason for doing so.

The issue of Sandinista assistance to the Salvadoran rebels dominated all else in US-Nicaraguan relations in 1981. Instructions from Haig to US Ambassador to

¹² This case is made by Soares (2006: 89-91). Earlier, Pastor noted that "US foreign policy" was not "so neatly divided between the Carter and Reagan administrations" (1987: 191).

¹³ CIA Deputy Director for Operations John McMahon briefed the figures reported in the "white paper" to President Reagan and the rest of the NSC on February 18, 1981, shortly before the report's release. See Executive Secretariat, NSC: Meeting File. NSC 00002 02/18/1981.

Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo emphasized, “The key consideration is that we want Nicaraguan support for the insurgents in El Salvador and the ability of Cuba to use Nicaraguan territory to stop and stay stopped.”¹⁴ Pezzullo would often find Sandinista officials to be less than frank on this issue.¹⁵

Despite this, documents from within the Reagan administration indicate that American officials believed that the issue of Nicaraguan arms shipments to El Salvador might be resolved to its satisfaction. Pezzullo perceived that the Nicaraguan officials with whom he was dealing clearly wanted to avoid a confrontation with the US and accepted just how strongly the Reagan administration felt about El Salvador.¹⁶ By mid-

¹⁴ This quote is from memo from Haig to Reagan, January 26, 1981, folder 3, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). In this memorandum, Haig discussed the demarche that Pezzullo was to present to the Nicaraguan government.

¹⁵ For example, at a meeting on January 30, 1981, Humberto Ortega tried to suggest that American belief in Nicaraguan support for the Salvadoran guerrillas was due, in his words, to US intelligence “distorting the picture.” Pezzullo rejected that implication and noted that American information on this matter was corroborated by multiple sources. Section 1 of Message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, January 31, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

¹⁶ In his reporting on the demarche that he had delivered to Nicaraguan officials, Pezzullo noted that they were “clearly shaken” by finding themselves in a position of deteriorating relations with the US at the same time that the Salvadoran Left’s offensive seemed to have stalled. In a separate conversation, apparently the next morning, Junta member Arturo Cruz told Pezzullo that the FSLN leadership was impressed by “your argument that the best security guarantee for Nicaragua is cordial relations with the US.” These meetings are reported in separate messages from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, dated January 29, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

February, National Security Advisor Richard V. Allen was coming to share Pezzullo's optimism on this matter.¹⁷

Another reason for the administration's reluctance to force a premature confrontation with Managua was concern for the safety of American personnel in Nicaragua and the consequent desire to avoid providing an excuse for any actions against them or the US embassy in Managua. A number of documents from the 1981 period mention this issue,¹⁸ which could seem very real to American officials who would still vividly recalled the Iran hostage crisis.

The decision to end economic aid to Nicaragua was put off for a time. Part of the reason for the delay appears to have been Pezzullo's personal lobbying at the February 11 meeting of the NSC, where he had pushed hard for avoiding such a move.¹⁹ After Pezzullo returned to Managua, Haig would cable him that he should let the Sandinistas know that they risked a cut-off of American aid unless they demonstrated that the flow of arms to El Salvador was ended. However, the latter also indicated that while the issue of further aid was "under review," the administration would try to avoid any public commentary that would "further strain" American relations with Nicaragua.

¹⁷ Memo Allen to Reagan, February 16, 1981, folder 3, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). A copy of message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, February 14, 1981, was attached as a tab to this memo.

¹⁸ Haig's concern about a threat to U.S. personnel in Nicaragua is mentioned in memo from Allen to Reagan and Vice President George Bush, January 27, 1981, folder 3, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). See the discussion of this matter in memo Allen to Reagan, March 28, 1981, folder 2, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

¹⁹ See Executive Secretariat, NSC: Meeting File. NSC 00001 02/11/1981.

Additionally, the Sandinistas would be permitted “the maximum additional period” to convince the administration that they had complied with American conditions.²⁰

The cut-off of aid would be announced on April 2. The administration felt that this was justified since it believed that Sandinista aid to the FMLN had not ended. Since Nicaragua “had reduced the arms flow,” the president would waive the requirement that US loans be immediately repaid. Pezzullo was told to hold out the prospect of renewed economic aid “[i]f the favorable trend in eliminating military support for the Salvadoran guerrillas continues.”²¹ He himself apparently believed that Nicaraguan aid to the Salvadoran rebels had stopped and opposed the ending of American economic aid. One observer, has, therefore, concluded that the administration’s decision on this matter was dictated by the need to accommodate President Reagan’s conservative base.²² However, the “seizure of a munitions-laden truck by Honduran authorities” only days later in April left Washington convinced that “Nicaraguan involvement in arms trafficking” was continuing.²³

²⁰ This was covered in a two-part message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, signed by Haig, February 13, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

²¹ Telegram, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, signed by Haig, April 1, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

²² Pastor (1987: 233). Pezzullo reported his opposition to the aid termination to Pastor in an interview on March 8, 1987, (359, n. 16).

²³ Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, signed by Clark, April 21, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

In addition to the issue of Managua's support for the Salvadoran rebels, there were other US concerns in 1981. One was the scope of the Sandinista military build-up and its potential threat to Nicaragua's neighbors. It was one of the matters that Pezzullo raised several times with the Sandinista leadership.²⁴ Concern over the delivery of Soviet-made heavy equipment and the training of Nicaraguan military personnel in East-bloc countries would become a matter of sustained concern at the NSC by summertime.²⁵

Closely related to the issue of the Sandinista military build-up was Nicaragua's general foreign policy alignment with the Soviet Union and Cuba. Pezzullo discussed this personally with Humberto Ortega. The former said that even if the Soviet-bloc alliance had been for "self-defense" it was "unwise" and that the US was offering "a way out" if Nicaragua would cut itself loose from "Cuban/Soviet designs to destabilize countries in Central America."²⁶ Generally Reagan administration documents concerning

²⁴ Pezzullo raised the matter of the projected increase of Sandinista plans to raise the strength of army and militia forces to 200,00 with Daniel Ortega on April 1, 1981. The former also pointed out that this was all carried out in a context in which "the FSLN has gone out of the way to flaunt its militarism." Later that same month, Pezzullo again raised this matter with Ortega along with the apparent upgrading of Nicaraguan airfields to handle jet aircraft. Section 1 of message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, April 30, 1981. Both messages are in folder 4, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

²⁵ Memo from Robert Schweitzer and Roger Fontaine to Allen, May 18, 1981. Memo from Allen to Reagan, June 6, 1981; memo from William L. Stearman and Fontaine to Allen, June 8, 1981; and Secret Attachment for "President Carter [sic]" from Allen, June 15, 1981, in folder 2, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

²⁶ Section 1 of Message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, January 31, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

the Sandinistas' foreign policy orientation mentioned this in connection with Nicaragua's military build-up.²⁷

Despite the administration's apparent willingness to reach some sort of settlement with the Sandinistas, there admittedly were harbingers of a tougher policy toward Managua during the Reagan transition in late 1980 and in the early stages of the new administration in 1981. Some Nicaraguan politicians like Jose Francisco Cardenal solicited American aid in overthrowing the Sandinistas. There were also conservative figures, like US Senator Jesse Helms, who advocated such a course. The CIA began to increase its contacts with Nicaraguan exiles and Honduran intelligence in March 1981. However, the final decision to support armed insurgency against the Managua regime had not yet been made. (Kagan, 1996: 184-89).

In fact, Reagan administration documents indicate a definite reluctance on its part to associate itself with armed opposition to the Sandinistas. As of early 1981, both the CIA and the new White House were reluctant to assist organizations consisting of members of the former National Guard.²⁸ Even later in the year, the NSC remained

²⁷ For examples of this, see the sources cited in the above paragraph.

²⁸ James W. Nance of the White House Staff noted that the CIA had been "contacted numerous times by ... [spokesmen for] '500 well-trained troops' and had found they were nothing but the remnants of the old Nicaraguan National Guard. In general, they simply wanted money from any source they could get it from in the United States." Nance himself decided to cancel a scheduled meeting with representatives of one of these organizations. Memo from Nance to Allen, copy to James Baker, February 25, 1981, folder 3, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). At the bottom of the memo is the hand-written note, "Good job! Thanks, Dick", which would seem to indicate Allen's concurrence with Nance's actions.

noncommittal when approached by a non-*Somocista* group for aid.²⁹ So far, the Reagan administration did not find that aiding any armed opposition groups would be an effective policy instrument.

Despite its frustrations in dealing with the Sandinistas, the administration sent Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders to Managua in August to find a diplomatic solution. Pezzullo, who had decided to resign from and to leave his post in August, had encouraged this trip (Pastor, 1986: 233). Although works claiming that the US collision with the Sandinistas resulted from American inability to accept revolutionary change do not even mention Enders' 1981 efforts to negotiate an understanding with the Sandinistas,³⁰ Kagan argues that they were a serious US attempt to improve relations with Nicaragua. In short, Managua would be expected to meet American security concerns; in return, Washington would address Nicaragua's, and also renew economic aid (1996: 191-192).

Available declassified diplomatic cables again bear out Kagan. In a meeting with Sandinista officials, Enders, as Pezzullo would summarize it, "emphasized that we had come to an important fork in the road; with one path leading toward continued

²⁹ On July 30, Norman A. Bailey met with Edmundo Chamorro Rappaccioli of the Nicaraguan Democratic Union (NDU), who claimed to have 800 men under arms in Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica and was seeking US aid. Bailey hinted that perhaps Argentina, Brazil, and Israel might be forthcoming but did not promise any American government assistance in helping the NDU get aid from those states. Memo from Bailey to Allen, copy to Fontaine, Schweitzer and Don Gregg, July 30, 1981, folder 2, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³⁰ These sources sometimes ascribe differing reasons for this. For example, LaFeber interprets US policy in terms of trying to keep the region in a state of "neodependency" (1993). Rabe sees US policy as resulting from American anticommunism, which he finds to be a malevolent force, as the main motivation (2012).

deterioration and ultimate confrontation, the other to a reappraisal and improvement in relations.” The “two issues [that] had to be resolved” were, firstly, the “arms transiting through Nicaragua to Salvador” and, secondly, Managua’s “excessive buildup of armaments” which would “likely” lead “to a generalized war in Central America, involving the US and threatening Nicaragua’s own revolution.”³¹ These issues would be the main foci of Enders’ conversations with the FSLN National Directorate. Along with arms shipments to El Salvador, there were the closely related matters of Salvadoran personnel being trained and “an important...guerrilla headquarters in Nicaragua.” He also continued to reject the idea that Nicaragua needed such a large military force because of the need to resist a US invasion; in the end, in Enders’ words, the Nicaraguans would “never be able to match our arsenal of power.”³²

While delivering a rather grim warning to the Sandinistas, the Reagan administration offered to meet their concerns on a number of security issues. The biggest concern was about the activities of anti-Sandinista exile groups in Honduras and elsewhere.³³ In discussions with FSLN officials early in 1981, Pezzullo had indicated

³¹ This is from the report on Enders’ initial meeting with Sandinista Junta members on August 12. Message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, August 13, 1981, folder 4, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). The quoted words are Pezzullo’s.

³² This is from the report on Enders’ second meeting with Sandinista Junta members on August 12. Section 1, Message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, August 13, 1981, folder 4, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³³ This issue crops up in a number of reports that Pezzullo filed from Managua. For example, Message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, January 29, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

American willingness to deal with these matters but linked them to Nicaraguan willingness to address US worries about El Salvador and the Sandinista military build-up.³⁴ After his meetings in Managua, Enders, while continuing to be adamant about Washington's previous demands, was willing to address Sandinista concerns about whether the US would aid Nicaraguan exile groups.³⁵ The administration was ready to pledge that it would enforce American domestic law in order to prevent these organizations from using US territory to attack the Sandinistas.³⁶

There were other security issues about which the Reagan administration was willing to meet Sandinista concerns. In his rather lengthy discussions with FSLN leaders, Enders offered to provide Nicaragua with information on American military assistance to other Central American countries and proposed an information-sharing relationship between it and the US military.³⁷ When Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto

³⁴ Section 2 of message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, January 31, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³⁵ This was expressed in a letter that Enders directed to have forwarded to Daniel Ortega. Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, for Charge Roger Gamble, August 28, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³⁶ See the text of the message that Enders directed the charge to deliver to Daniel Ortega. Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, September 5, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³⁷ Section 2, message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Pezzullo, August 13, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

Brockman protested scheduled US naval and military exercises in the autumn of 1981, Haig himself offered to discuss permitting Nicaragua to observe them.³⁸

During Enders' meetings with FSLN officials in Managua, Daniel Ortega apparently raised the issue of renewing American economic assistance. The American administration indicated that it was willing to do this once its conditions on security issues were met.³⁹

The seriousness of the administration's stated willingness to accept the Sandinista revolution if its concerns were satisfied was illustrated by its response in late August 1981 when former Junta member Alfonso Robelo informed the State Department of a forthcoming attempt to bring back Eden Pastora, a hero of the fighting against Somoza who had split with the regime and was by then in exile in Costa Rica. Although the officials who met with Robelo expressed, as they put it, continuing interest in "reinforc[ing] pluralism" in Nicaragua, they noted that "Nicaraguan agreement to stop shipping arms to the insurgency in El Salvador was the *sine qua non* of [the American]...effort" to achieve an understanding with the Sandinistas. While Enders' efforts were underway, Washington would do nothing to upset this "process." Furthermore, the Americans suspected that "this scenario might be a possible provocation

³⁸ See the text of the letter signed by Haig that Enders directed to have sent to D'Escoto. It was apparently sent in response to a diplomatic note that the D'Escoto had sent to Haig on September 19. Haig began, "Dear Miguel:". Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, September 25, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

³⁹ This was also expressed in the letter that Enders directed to have forwarded to Daniel Ortega. Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, for Charge Gamble, August 28, 1981, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

by the Ortega brothers and [Sandinista Interior Minister Tomas] Borge” to justify a crackdown on the opposition. Accordingly, Roger W. Fontaine at the NSC greeted the reported attempt to bring back Pastora with “a mixture of caution and skepticism.” When the FSLN arrested former Pastora associates on September 3, he seemed relieved that the US was not implicated in the alleged coup attempt.⁴⁰

Although the Sandinistas resented Enders’ imperious style (Gutman, 1998: 77), they considered the proposal for two months. In October, they responded by declaring that it was “sterile” (Miranda and Ratliff, 1993:156).

In a repeat of their late 1980 performance, the Sandinistas stepped up repression of their domestic opposition while relations with the US continued to deteriorate. This included the proclamation of a state of “economic and social emergency” for one year. A foreign policy of tense relations with the US was linked to ideological mobilization and repression of dissent (Kagan, 1996: 197).

Some scholars discuss the Enders mission and treat it seriously but seem to think that it was the end of any meaningful US effort to avoid confrontation with Managua (Pastor, 1987: 215; Brands, 2012: 200). This is incorrect. Despite Enders’ apparent

⁴⁰ The Fontaine quote is from memo from Fontaine to Allen, September 2, 1981. The meeting with Robelo is recorded in an attached memorandum of conversation by Everett E. Briggs and L. Craig Johnstone of the State Department, August 29, 1981. Fontaine’s reaction to the arrests is in a memo from Fontaine to Allen, September 9, 1981. These are all in folder 2, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

After returning to Managua via Costa Rica, Robelo had a conversation with Gamble in which he was again informed that US priorities were on achieving an understanding with the Sandinistas. Gamble also warned Robelo against any involvement in a coup attempt and that such schemes would have no US government support. This was reported to Enders in message from American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, signed by Gamble, September 3, 1981, folder 4, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

failure, the Reagan administration continued diplomatic efforts to get the Sandinistas to desist from aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas. On December 2, Haig would have what he “report[ed as]...a lengthy and sterile discussion with Nicaraguan Foreign Minister D’Escoto,” in which the latter denied the Sandinistas’ “intervention in El Salvador, the presence of Cuban military personnel in Nicaragua, and any plans to acquire MiG aircraft. Haig warned his counterpart that Managua was “exposing itself to serious risk.”⁴¹

In December, Reagan approved US support to Nicaragua’s anti-Sandinista rebels, the *contras*, in Honduras. He was seeking to gain bargaining clout to compel Managua not to continue its support of the Salvadoran rebels (Kagan, 1996: 200-203).

If the Sandinistas had any serious desire to establish a truce with the Reagan administration, they still might have been able to do so. President Ronald Reagan himself signed the “finding” authorizing CIA support for the *contras* reluctantly. Furthermore, this was only after Haig had met secretly in Mexico City with Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez in an attempt to negotiate an end to arms supplies to the Salvadoran rebels (Kagan, 1996: 202-204). As a recent study highlights, the administration’s choice of covert operations was at first hesitant and made with the rationale of using American aid to the *contras* as a bargaining chip to be given up in return for Sandinista willingness to meet American security concerns (Grow, 2008: 123-138). At least as late as March 1982, Haig would present the Mexican foreign minister with another proposal to send Enders to Managua with an offer of virtually the same

⁴¹ Nance to Reagan, December 3, 1981, folder 1, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982). This meeting would have taken place at a meeting of the Organization of American States in St. Lucia. (Kagan, 1996: 207.) However, Kagan gives the date of the meeting as December 4.

terms as had been proposed in 1981. However, the Sandinistas' still perceived the Reagan administration as being unable to deliver on its threats due to domestic constraints. This and the increase of Soviet military aid to Managua made them confident that they did not need to negotiate. It was only later, after the successful elections in El Salvador in March 1982, that the administration made Nicaragua a major focus of its foreign policy (Kagan, 1996: 233-236).

The spiral model would seem to be supported if, in not trusting the Reagan administration, the Sandinistas chose not to cooperate for security concerns. However, in negotiations with Enders, the Sandinistas had the opportunity to address their security concerns, and supporting the Salvadoran rebels surely would have increased their security problems, as the Reagan administration would unleash its hostility. Likewise, the Sandinistas arguably had reason to worry about the Reagan administration's rhetoric, but they could have given Washington some time to see if their fear was warranted. In his meetings with Enders, Daniel Ortega of the FSLN National Directorate frankly stated that the Sandinistas were "interested in seeing the guerillas in El Salvador and Guatemala triumph." They were "our shield—it makes our revolution safer," a kind of ideological buffer (quoted in Kagan, 1996: 192). But even facing the US's wrath with potential leftist allies in El Salvador would be riskier to Nicaragua's security than having an uneasy accommodation with Washington. Thus, ideology and domestic politics better explain the Sandinistas' course.

While ideology dictated acceptance of a clash with the US as inevitable, it also seems to have had the paradoxical effect of emboldening the Sandinistas in defying the North Americans. Miranda and Ratliff note that during this period "the Sandinista

revolution was in a blooming stage, self-confident and unbending in its rejection of the US and support for both Cuba and the Salvadoran guerrillas” (1991: 157). This was also the earlier assessment of a noncommunist official of the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry (Cruz Sequiera, 1983: 104-105). The perception of being part of a world revolutionary process that was on the winning side of history was common at this time among the Marxist-Leninist Left in Central America and the Caribbean (Hager, 1993: 283-285).

The FSLN leadership seems to have perceived little immediate risk in pursuing its policies. Kagan argues that the Sandinistas believed that the international “correlation of forces” favored socialism, not America. Their actions, which were accompanied by a tightening of economic and social controls inside Nicaragua, were not motivated by fear (1996: 197). The provocative actions that Nicaraguan aircraft took against US Navy ships in 1982 seem to bear out this contention.⁴²

It actually appears that the Reagan administration was definitely not eager for the sort of conflict with the Sandinistas that later developed. Although analogies never fit exactly, here it is useful to look at that administration’s relations with Mozambique. That country was ruled by a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist regime that initially had a pro-Soviet foreign policy orientation. Nevertheless, by 1984, the Reagan administration was touting its improving relations with Mozambique, including the resumption of US economic aid, as a major success of its Africa policy (Clough, 1991: 90-91). There is no

⁴² Secretary of State George Shultz directed the American embassy to Nicaragua to protest about a number of simulated strike missions flown by Nicaraguan pilots against US Navy ships in international waters in 1982. Message, Secretary of State to American Embassy Managua, September 8, 1982, signed by Shultz, folder 5, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File. RAC Box 32. Nicaragua (01/20/1981-12/31/1982).

reason to believe that a similar improvement with Nicaragua could not have been achieved if the Sandinistas had wanted one.

Conclusion

We advanced six propositions that differentiate the ideology and domestic politics explanation (I&DPE) from the spiral model (SM). Let us assess how well they have been born out by the evidence presented here.

Our first proposition was that the hostility that developed between the US and revolutionary state was because of a conflict of interests (I&DPE), not because of mutual suspicions (SM). American relations with the “new Nicaragua” developed during a time of active Soviet intervention in Third World conflicts to tip the balance in favor of local communists and a deterioration of superpower détente. Accordingly, the Sandinista policies of initiating a Soviet-bloc supported military build-up, supporting insurgencies in neighboring countries, and generally aligning with the USSR’s foreign policy were going to be perceived as hostile by Washington.⁴³

The second proposition was that the foreign policy of the revolutionary state was driven more by ideology (I&DPE) than security concerns (SM). Although scholars writing from a realist or neorealist perspective have tended to downplay the importance of ideological considerations in states’ security policies,⁴⁴ others have noted that rulers of communist states often did not see the choice between security concerns and ideological

⁴³ Good recent analyses can be found in Soares (2006) and Grow (2008).

⁴⁴ For example, see Walt’s (1987) study of alliance formation in the Middle East.

goals in either/or terms.⁴⁵ At the very least, we can conclude that the Sandinistas saw their security needs filtered through an ideological prism that was not necessarily shared by noncommunist Nicaraguans. The FSLN leadership saw an inevitable conflict with the US that neither the Carter nor even the Reagan administration wanted. It pursued policies that it knew would provoke North American ire and refused to end them even when offered a security guarantee in return.

Communist regimes seemed to have been especially prone to this sort of behavior. This is indicated by Stephen J. Morris's study of two closely related conflicts in post-1975 Indochina: that between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and that between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the SRV. Although these conflicts are sometimes discussed as if they were simply products of atavistic hatreds from previous centuries,⁴⁶ in fact differing interpretations of Marxist-Leninist ideology often affected the decisions of all three of the communist countries involved. The DK leadership exaggerated the initial Vietnamese threat and finally provoked the stronger SRV into a conflict that was avoidable in 1978. Similarly the Vietnamese communist leadership from 1968 onward pursued policies that needlessly antagonized the PRC; these would lead to the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979. In both cases, it was the weaker adversary that provoked the stronger side (Morris, 1999).

⁴⁵ For example, Gould-Davies (1999) makes the point that tactical flexibility and caution were not necessarily evidence of lack of ideological commitment; they often were quite compatible.

⁴⁶ Walt (1996: 326) claims, "[T]he U.S. withdrawal from Indochina allowed the long suppressed rivalry between China and Vietnam to reemerge." This ignores that the Chinese and Vietnamese communists had at times had fairly close and harmonious relations. It also overlooks the fact that the rupture between Hanoi and Beijing began while the two were still comrades in arms during the Vietnam War. See Chen (2001) and Morris (1999).

The third proposition that we advanced was that, in examining security interests, the focus should be on the regime (I&DPE), not the state (SM). It seems that at the very least that the FSLN was willing to pursue policies that provoked American hostility and was quite happy to use the deterioration in relations with Washington as the occasion for cracking down on the opposition. Similarly Mao Zedong in the 1950s frequently had welcomed confrontation with the US even though it risked American attack on China precisely because it facilitated his domestic agenda of revolutionizing Chinese society (Chen, 1994; Chen, 2001).

We also argued that the security moves that the radicals took with respect to the US were preventive actions (I&DPE) as opposed to preemptive ones (SM). The case of the Sandinista military build-up bears this out. The EPS was expanded with Soviet-bloc assistance at a time when even the Sandinista leadership did not see an imminent threat.

We also proposed that externalization of domestic tensions by the radicals (I&DPE) explained the conflict with the US better than their fears of internalization, whereby the Americans could use the moderates to undermine the revolution (SM). As late as 1980, the US was still encouraging the moderate opposition to try to reach accord with the Sandinistas. It was Sandinista foreign policy that explains the conflict with the US, not American concerns about Nicaragua's domestic politics.

Our final proposition was that the radicalization of the revolution came about through design (I&DPE), not as an unintended consequence of international conflict (SM). In the case of Nicaragua, radicalization was well underway even while Washington was still providing economic aid to Managua.

Supporting the Salvadoran rebels for ideological reasons, the Sandinistas knowingly brought Nicaragua into conflict with the US. The resulting tension facilitated domestic radicalization; it made it easier to rationalize repression of the bourgeoisie, to bolster the dictatorship, and to continue revolutionary mobilization. The fact that the Sandinistas were unwilling to moderate their foreign policy reveals the critical role that conflict with the US played for the revolutionary regime.

Even after the beginning of American aid to the anti-Sandinista opposition, it would still have been possible for Managua to reconcile with Washington if the former had really been interested. Since the primary motivation of US foreign policy was to promote its strategic geopolitical interests, Washington responded more to the revolutionary state's foreign policy than its domestic policies. This was illustrated by the American rapprochements with Yugoslavia after it was expelled from the Soviet bloc in 1948 and with China after it abandoned its Mao-era role of promoting world revolution in the 1970s; both states had previously been militantly anti-American revolutionary states but became in effect associates of the Western alliance after their change in foreign policy orientation (Mueller, 2004-05: 268). US policies toward communist states during the Cold War appear to have been less the function of American hostility to their ideology than the latter's pursuit of policies perceived as impinging on Washington's security interests (Avey, 2012).

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