NICARAGUA

Was the Reagan administration policy on Nicaragua successful?

Viewpoint: Yes. U.S. policy toward Nicaragua during the Reagan administration halted the spread of communism and encouraged the development of democracy in Central America.

Viewpoint: No. Reagan administration policies damaged U.S. credibility and led to protracted civil war in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua, a small Central American country once considered a potential site for a canal that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (the canal was eventually built in Panama), was ruled by the Somoza family since 1934, when General Anastasio Somoza García took power after deposing President Juan Bautista Sacasa. During the Sacasa presidency Somoza had arranged the murder of Augusto César Sandino, who since 1926 had led a rebellion against the U.S.-supported government of Nicaragua. Somoza himself was assassinated in September 1956 and was succeeded by his son, Luis Somoza Debayle, who in turn was succeeded by his brother Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1967.

The Somozas ruled Nicaragua as if it were their private estate. Resentment among the masses grew, and in 1961 the left-leaning Frente Sandinista de Liberación (FSLN, or Sandinista National Liberation Front) was created, a movement named for the murdered rebel leader. For the first ten years of FSLN existence, the U.S.-trained Nicaraguan National Guard managed to control the activities of various antigovernment movements. In 1972, however, the Somoza regime began to lose control. That year a powerful earthquake shook Managua, the capital city, killing more than six thousand residents and rendering more than three hundred thousand homeless. International relief agencies immediately began to send money and other assistance to the victims, but it was soon learned that Somoza, who took charge of the relief effort, stole a large portion of the money. Many more people died as hunger worsened, disease spread, and the rubble remained uncleared. Resentment against the regime increased as well.

In 1976 Jimmy Carter was elected U.S. president, and he placed the pursuit of human rights at the center of his foreign policy. American support for Somoza declined, and his continued repression at home further weakened his position. The Sandinistas, under the leadership of Daniel Ortega Saavedra, controlled ever larger sections of the Nicaraguan countryside, and on 19 July 1979 they entered Managua. Somoza fled the country the same day and was killed in Paraguay in September 1980.

The Carter administration initially welcomed the Sandinistas and offered Nicaragua a generous economic aid package of $75 million. It was not too long, however, before Sandinista domestic and foreign policies gave the U.S. administration pause. When Ronald Reagan became president in January 1981, he froze the unpaid portion of Carter's economic package and in April, saying that the Sandinistas were aiding left-wing antigovernment forces in El Salvador, suspended it altogether. Relations between the United States and
Nicaragua continued to deteriorate, and in 1983–1984 the Reagan administration imposed a boycott on trade with that Central American nation.

During the early phase of the Sandinista reign, a group of about two thousand former members of Somoza’s National Guard organized a military opposition (known as the Somocistas) to the new regime. Operating out of bases in neighboring Honduras, they launched attacks against targets important to the government. They were soon joined by an anti-Sandinista rebel group made up of members of the English-speaking Miskito tribe, who were resentful of government efforts to force them to become more integrated into Nicaraguan society. In 1981 they combined to form a counter-revolutionary group commonly called the Contras.

Congress initially agreed to Reagan administration requests to support the Contras. That changed, however, after the Sandinistas won the November 1984 elections, which were held under international supervision. Covert involvement of the administration with the anti-Sandinista cause continued and was a central part of the 1986 Iran-Contra affair. Following mediation efforts by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, the Sandinistas agreed to hold free elections on 25 February 1990. They lost the election to the Unión Nacional Opositor (National Opposition Union, or UNO), led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, and handed over power. After the elections, U.S. president George Bush lifted the economic sanctions on Nicaragua.

**Viewpoint:**

Yes. U.S. policy toward Nicaragua during the Reagan administration halted the spread of communism and encouraged the development of democracy in Central America.

U.S. actions in Nicaragua, including support for anti-Sandinista Contra guerrillas, were perhaps the most controversial aspects of Reagan administration foreign policy. The United States suffered international disrepute because of its role in mining Managua Harbor in 1984. The Iran-Contra scandal (1986) wracked the administration when it was revealed that proceeds from secret arms sales to Iran were intended for diversion to the Contras in apparent violation of a congressional ban on Contra aid. This scandal paralyzed the administration for months before it was able to regain its footing and conclude nuclear-arms-reduction agreements with the Soviet Union. The disregard for congressional will suggested by the Iran-Contra scandal seemed to some a veritable shredding of the Constitution. These concerns, however, should not obscure the fact that Ronald Reagan’s Nicaragua policy was a necessary and largely successful attempt, conducted in the face of inconsistent and often opportunistic congressional obstructionism in order to combat radical totalitarianism.

Five main facts need to be remembered in evaluating Reagan’s Nicaragua policy. First, the Sandinistas, members of Frente Sandinista de Liberación (FSNL, or Sandinista National Liberation Front), were determined to impose a totalitarian government on Nicaragua; even U.S. congressional opponents of Contra aid had little positive to say about the Sandinistas. Second, the Sandinistas saw no distinction between their domestic and foreign policies and were committed to encouraging revolutions in neighboring countries that would defeat not only right-wing dictatorships but “bourgeois” democracies as well. Third, the Carter administration set the tone for creativity in devising ways around clear congressional mandates concerning Nicaragua. Fourth, the majority of congressmen did not consistently oppose Contra aid nor offer a coherent alternative. Throughout the 1980s, congressional restrictions on Contra aid varied widely, generally based upon whatever parliamentary maneuvers opponents were able to execute to overcome their lack of voting strength. Prior to the Iran-Contra scandal, fiscal 1985 was the only year that Contra aid was prohibited; variations in congressional restrictions made it extremely difficult for the administration to develop a consistent policy. Fifth, significant attention has been paid to Contra atrocities and weaknesses; less recognition has been given to the popularity they maintained among the Nicaraguan people. When the Sandinistas finally permitted an open election, confident of victory, the opposition candidate who was linked to the Contras and the United States won a smashing victory. Reagan’s Nicaragua policies were part of a successful strategy to halt the spread of communism and encourage the development of democracy in Central America.

The totalitarian tendencies of the Sandinistas are sometimes obscured because they came to power at the head of a coalition opposing Anastasio Somoza Debayle and were part of a government junta that included moderate elements. Sandinistas, however, made tactical alliances to gain power and never
THE CONTRAS
The United States supported the anti-Sandinista rebels (the Contras) in their war to regain control of Nicaragua. Marine colonel Oliver L. North, who helped supply the rebels, described life in the base camps in Honduras in his memoirs.

During the day, the camps were a hub of activity. As the men trained for incursions back into Nicaragua, the women washed clothes in the river, collected wood for the fire, and carried water from the purification system. They also prepared the meals—black beans and rice in the morning, and then, for variety, rice and black beans at night. The dining area was often no more than an open pavilion with a plastic sheet overhead to keep out the rain. By the end of the day, everyone was exhausted from the spartan labor of survival.

When times were good, the soldiers had boots. For everyone else, it was bare feet, sneakers, or sandals. The fighting men wore whatever would pass for a uniform: it wasn't unusual to come across a formation that included Honduran army fatigues, Guatemalan khakis, U.S. Army-type camouflage outfits, and even Cuban army clothes, captured from a warehouse in Nicaragua. Some of the best uniforms were dark-blue work suits that Catero had ordered from Sears—right out of the catalogue.

Many of the camp residents wore clothes donated by American philanthropic organizations, and I would see kids wearing the most incongruous T-shirts: Alcatraz Prison, Minnesota Twins, Esprit, Harvard University, even "Kiss me, I'm Irish."

No matter how often I visited the camps, the resistance fighters were always younger than I expected. At Yamales, the largest of the camps, I met a dark-eyed ten-year-old named Tomás who had arrived at the camp with his teenage brother. Their parents were described as "missing"—probably detained, or worse, by the Nicaraguan authorities. Tomás had a child's eagerness for what his older brother was doing, and when he insisted that he, too, wanted to fight the Sandinistas, the officers allowed him to tag along with his brother during the training. He was quite a sight with his heavy AK-47, which was almost as big as he was.

When his brother's unit left the camp and went back into Nicaragua, Tomás had to be restrained from going with them. He was crushed: the only real connection he had left in the world was leaving, and Tomás knew that his brother might never return. That night, Tomás ran away from the camp. They found him in the morning, safe—but still furious that his brother had gone off without him.

In one respect, however, Tomás was fortunate. At least he and his brother were fighting on the same side. As in any civil war, there were families in Nicaragua where brothers were actually shooting each other.

The White House and the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy did what they could to make Americans aware of the conditions in the camps, but it was never easy. In 1991, when the Kurds started fleeing Iraq, I was reminded all over again of what the Contra camps were like. Americans are a generous people. We send relief to earthquake victims and refugees all over the globe. But the Contras, most of whom were refugees from Sandinista oppression, were largely ignored.


intended to permit "bourgeois democracy" to hijack their revolution. In their first weeks in power the Sandinistas established Civil Defense Committees to be organized street by street throughout Nicaragua to identify potential opponents. Leading Sandinistas explained their intention to keep power until completion of their revolutionary program. In the spring of 1980 the Nicaraguan Council of State was expanded and membership altered to ensure a permanent Sandinista majority. Sandinista leaders on many occasions denigrated the elections they had promised the Organization of American States (OAS) they would hold. In August 1980 they announced that elections would not be held until 1985, and opposition political activity was prohibited before 1984 to ensure time for the proper indoctrination of the Nicaraguan people. In September 1980 the governing junta officially announced its subservience to the Sandinista directorate.

A logical adjunct of the commitment to Marxist revolution, and their ties to Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, was the Sandinista
friendship with the Soviet Union. The late 1970s and early 1980s looked like a propitious time for close ties to the Soviets. Several pro-American regimes had been replaced by pro-Soviet governments during the 1970s; these losses and the apparent lack of U.S. resolve contrasted sharply with Soviet gains and growing confidence. With the U.S. economy suffering from stagflation that defied conventional economic logic and appeared unsolvable, the comparative economic weakness of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) eluded many observers. Internal considerations, not U.S. pressure, led the Sandinistas to seek close ties with the Soviets and the Cubans. By the time Jimmy Carter left the U.S. presidency the Sandinistas were openly supporting Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador, and Guatemalan Marxist guerrillas had established their headquarters in Managua. Sandinista support for the unsuccessful “final offensive” launched by Salvadoran guerrillas in January 1981 led Carter to suspend aid to Nicaragua that had been part of his unsuccessful program to try to moderate the revolution; the offensive also led Carter to renew military shipments to El Salvador that previously had been terminated for human-rights reasons.

Despite Reagan’s antipathy to communism and Sandinista support for the Salvadoran guerrillas, the Reagan administration in 1981 gave the Sandinistas two opportunities to focus on domestic concerns and refrain from revolutionary ferment abroad in return for improved relations with the United States. On both occasions the Sandinistas were unwilling to abandon their commitment to revolution. Only after these two efforts failed did the Reagan administration opt to support the armed anti-Sandinista resistance. The administration expected that this backing would prevent the Sandinistas from consolidating their control internally and limit their ability to support subversion in neighboring countries.

Reagan’s support for the armed resistance was different from Carter’s initial approach to the Sandinistas. Carter hoped cordial relations and aid would either moderate the Sandinistas or encourage sources of moderation within Nicaragua. Even though his policy differed from that ultimately followed by Reagan, Carter also encountered congressional prohibitions that hindered his ability to pursue his foreign policy. Congress imposed conditions on Carter’s aid program before passing it in 1980; one condition required Carter to certify that the Sandinistas were not supporting guerrilla movements in other countries. Although U.S. government analysts concluded that the Sandinistas were supporting the Salvadoran guerrillas as a matter of policy, administration lawyers reasoned that the absence of “conclusive proof” of official Sandinista involvement permitted Carter to certify Sandinista nonsupport for guerrillas in order to comply with the law. Thus, even before Reagan took office the executive branch had resorted to evasive measures in an attempt to develop a coherent policy in the face of legislative challenges.

When Carter was looking for ways to influence the new Managua government, moderate and conservative Democrats were among those suspicious of the Sandinistas; such Democrats also were crucial to Reagan-era debates on Contra aid. Arguments between Democrats and Republicans were only part of this contention; liberal, moderate, and conservative Democrats argued with each other, and older intelligence-committee members sought to protect their prerogatives against younger legislators who were concerned about the U.S. role in Central America. This infighting did not yield a clear, coherent alternative to the Reagan policy. Supporters and opponents of Contra aid engaged in a series of clashes over the amount and type of aid to be dispensed and the restrictions to be placed on it. The Sandinistas themselves were never popular with the members of the U.S. Congress, even when they were not flying to Moscow or sending military forces into Honduras just days after votes against Contra aid. The Democrats never committed to anything approximating support for the Sandinistas; 1984 Democratic presidential nominee Walter F. Mondale said during the campaign that he might “quarantine” Nicaragua if he were elected. The fact that many opponents of Contra aid also disliked the Sandinistas led liberal representative Michael D. Barnes (D-Maryland) to point out that moderate and conservative Democrats sought “a way to be on both sides of the issue.” Their lack of voting strength forced leading Contra-aid opponents to employ creative parliamentary maneuvering that further muddied the picture. Barnes said, “Our whole strategy was to postpone an up-or-down vote for two years. We just didn’t have the votes if Reagan ever presented it that way.” There also were elements of opportunism in some opposition to assistance to the Contras. Some Democrats hoped to deal a decisive defeat to Reagan to blunt his legislative momentum; James C. Wright Jr. (D-Texas) saw Contra aid as an avenue he could utilize to prove to liberal Democrats that he was not too conservative to succeed Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) as Speaker of the House.

The law banning Contra aid at issue in the Iran-Contra scandal was the Boland Amend-
The Contras themselves are crucial to any assessment of Reagan’s Nicaragua policy. Much attention was paid to their atrocities, U.S. support, and the former members of Somoza’s National Guard among them. Far less attention has been devoted to their battlefield successes, the amount of territory they were able to seize and hold, their popularity among the peasantry and Indians, and Reagan administration efforts to ensure that the Contras served as a force for Nicaraguan democracy. By 1988 the U.S. State Department estimated that fewer than two hundred out of sixteen hundred Contras had served in the National Guard; moreover, one-fifth of the officer corps consisted of former Sandinistas. Many who had supported the overthrow of Somoza were displeased that the Sandinistas were replacing a Somocista dictatorship with a Sandinista dictatorship. Reagan’s support for the resistance was part of a strategy for not only confronting the Soviet Union but also advancing democracy. Support for the anti-Sandinista resistance, armed and political, was part of a strategy that included pressure on communist nations such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Angola; forcible eviction of the communist government from Grenada (1983); and diplomatic efforts to encourage transitions toward democracy in such countries as Chile, the Philippines, Haiti, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. As part of this strategy, the United States did not support diplomacy for its own sake but sought to encourage the Contadora and Arias peace processes when they gave promise of moving Nicaragua toward democracy. In the context of this strategy, support for the Contras was a means of pressuring the Sandinistas to permit genuine pluralistic democracy in keeping with their promises to the Organization of American States (OAS).

The Reagan administration sought to encourage democracy in Nicaragua, not fraudulent elections that conferred respectability on a Marxist dictatorship. Accordingly, the U.S.-backed opposition did not participate in the 1984 elections. The violence by Sandinista mobs and police, and Sandinista domination of media outlets and their restriction of campaigning opportunities, made participation by the opposition pointless. By 1990, however, the situation had changed. The Sandinistas had been prevented from consolidating their control because of the efforts of the Contras and the related political opposition in Nicaragua. The United States appeared tired of the issue, and the Bush administration suggested that it would recognize the Sandinistas if they won fair, open elections. Moreover, the loss by the Soviet Union of its Eastern European sat-
ellites and the liquidation of its war in Afghanistan showed its limitations as a future patron. The prospect of improved relations with the West and their confidence of victory led the Sandinistas to hold a fair election and invite large numbers of international observers to vouch for its legitimacy. In the end, however, Sandinista confidence was misplaced.

The prospect of improved relations with the United States kept the pressure on the Sandinistas and prevented the consolidation of their revolution. As former State Department and National Security Council official Peter W. Rodman argued, in More Precious Than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World (1994), "In the end, the United States kept the Contras alive long enough to extract from the diplomatic process and from the Sandinistas a crucial quid pro quo—a sufficiently free election in which the core issue of Nicaragua’s destiny would be addressed." That election demonstrated the success of Reagan policy. The opposition candidate, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, made no effort to dissociate herself from the Contras or the United States and was even photographed with George Bush. On election day in Nicaragua, 90 percent of registered voters cast ballots. Chamorro received 55 percent of the vote to Sandinista Daniel Ortega Saavedra’s 41 percent; she carried eight of nine administrative regions. The Nicaraguan people freely had chosen a democratic alternative to Somocismo—and to the Sandinistas.

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Viewpoint:
No. Reagan administration policies damaged U.S. credibility and led to protracted civil war in Nicaragua.

The presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) earned respect for its contributions to the downfall of communism and the withering away of undemocratic leftist, authoritarian governments. Reagan possessed a clear vision for the promotion of democratic freedoms: his rhetoric was rooted in solid plans and realized in extraordinary achievements. Throughout the decade, however, Reagan administration policies in Nicaragua were marked by undeniable inconsistencies and antidemocratic ironies. International supporters, such as former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, emphasize that Reagan restored confidence in the American experience and rendered the U.S. voice in global affairs more powerful and clearly understood. The circumstances of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua in the 1980s, however, damaged American credibility.

To characterize Reagan’s vision as an amalgamation of Francis Bacon, John Locke, and trendy 1960s modernization theorists would be to underestimate its potency. In fact, the “hard-liners” who dominated U.S. foreign policy relative to Latin America consciously framed their arguments and plans on Reagan’s expressed views. One of the clearest ironies is that a president so widely criticized as dissociated from significant policy decisions was shielded in the context of special congressional and independent prosecutorial investigations by the evidence of this pattern, while proponents of the controversial barter with the Iranians in 1984, in order to resupply the Contras, considered the plan a sincere and noble application of theory to practice.

The key to Reagan’s view of the future was his abiding belief that growth and human progress can make the greatest strides in countries that encourage economic freedom. Prosperity depends on the ability of individual citizens to fulfill their needs and pursue their ambitions. In other words, freedom begins in the daily lives of individuals. As Reagan noted in 1981:

Trust them, because whenever they are allowed to create and build, whenever they are given a personal stake in deciding economic policies and benefiting from their success, then societies become more dynamic, prosperous, progressive, and free.

In his 1989 farewell address to the nation, Reagan described “a city teeming with people of all kinds . . . with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.” Reagan considered that in order for the United States to approach the ideal of his “shining city on the hill,” it also had to serve as inspiration to travelers who would participate in its commerce as well as foster similar cities in other lands.

Reagan’s vision contained a set of mutually reinforcing goals: to promote economic prosperity by protecting the freedoms of individual Americans and to increase the potential of U.S. prosperity by expanding the push for freedom into international affairs. His prime directive to promote democracy abroad was less a moralistic crusade than a pragmatic plan to preserve American economic and security interests, which was certainly what Reagan was elected to do. In pursuit of these goals in Nicaragua, however, his administration worked in contradiction to the will of Congress, which put up roadblocks—particularly the Boland Amendments (1983, 1984) to the War Powers Act (1973)—that had to be circumnavigated. Ironically, the battle for democ-
racy abroad, Reagan administration officials decided, supposedly required some accommodation to undemocratic methods.

American economic assistance to developing countries is intended to increase the level of material benefits provided to the populace. Because the reduction of poverty levels undercuts the popular tendency (or necessity) to revolt, foreign aid can also serve to undermine the international labor movements that are frequently organized and joined by socialist-leaning individuals. The dampening of social unrest serves to sustain the global markets needed by growing industrialized capitalist economies.

Latin America was a proving ground for the battle between the spreading forces of global capitalism and world socialism. Although Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov Lenin had predicted such developments in the international political economy, the most practical strategy he could propose to combat imperialism was to best the opponent at his own game. As did the United States throughout the Cold War, the socialist Soviet empire steadily pushed resources into Latin America in order to stake claims to the territory.

The promotion of democracy did not mesh consistently with these concerns. On significant occasions the U.S. government chose to work with undemocratic dictatorial leaders, as long as these authoritarians supported anticommunism. The democratic good of the foreign peoples weighed less heavily in the balance-of-power calculations. In a 1982 address to the nation, Reagan emphasized the importance of viewing specific policies from a broad perspective:

We desire peace. But peace is a goal, not a policy. Lasting peace is what we hope for at the end of our journey. It doesn't describe the steps we must take nor the paths we should follow to reach that goal.

The fact that the Reagan administration short-changed democracy in order to crush world socialism detracts from the moral value of the ultimate victories. At best, these contradictions are ironic; at worst, they raise questions that may damage American credibility.

"Never give up the fight for freedom, a fight which, though it may never end, is the most ennobling known to man," Reagan declared in 1990, upon the presentation of a section of the Berlin Wall at the presidential library established in his honor. A look at the methods used in advancing guerrilla warfare in Nicaragua, however, reveals a distinctive, and perhaps regrettable, lack of "nobility."

Historical authoritarian traditions in Nicaragua were distinguished by the lack of accepted political institutions or mechanisms for balancing social groups, as well as the dearth of established legal norms for competition and development. The anticommunist plans of certain individuals in the U.S. government was to support the movement of "national liberation" in Nicaragua to drive out the communist leaders. Although the provision of military equipment, training, or other support to the anti-Sandinista rebels by any U.S. intelligence agency had been forbidden by Congress, the National Security Council (NSC) deemed itself exempt from this law, and staff members continued to route support to the Contras. Marine colonel Oliver L. North secretly raised more than $34 million for the Contras in 1984 and added to that total by syphoning profits from the clandestine sale of American missiles to Iran in 1985–1986.

After years of civil war the Nicaraguan people were decimated. Currency devaluation, continued property expropriation, and the militarization of the economy crippled their ability to meet rudimentary needs of the population. War service reduced the productivity of individuals needed for family income and pit- ted classes against one another. In other words, the "psychological operations" of the Contras and the Reagan administration were successful. From the U.S. perspective, the decade of war was worthwhile not merely because it finally achieved the installation of democratic elections but because future socialist efforts were effectively undermined. The inevitable by-products of a successful war effort (profits of middlemen, extraction of surplus value, and privileges of state bureaucrats) eroded the possibilities for a developed unity among classes that could have led to the return of communist leaders.

Out of true respect for the democratic achievements of the Reagan presidency arise deep concerns with the contradictions inherent in the policies in Nicaragua. The lofty goals of "democracy promotion" exist a bit uncomfortably alongside angry frustrations with an obstructionist Congress, inconsistencies in the application of theory to practice, and brutal results of a protracted civil war. In 1959 Henry Cabot Lodge wondered, "The U.S. can win wars, but the question is, can we win revolutions?" The extant case raises the question of how to measure a win or a loss in a revolution.

—EMILY CUMMINS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

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