

Toward a National Strategy for Central America

Paul F. Gorman
General, U.S. Army (Retired)

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In January, at the request of Senator Nunn, I testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on national strategy for special operations and low intensity conflict --the ends and means for dealing with politically motivated saboteurs, terrorists, paramilitary narcotraffickers, and insurgents. The hearing devolved into questions and answers on U.S. support for the Nicaraguan rebels, the so-called "Contras". Subsequent press coverage depicted me at odds with Administration policy, although I repeatedly disclaimed any first hand appreciation of Central America since I left command two years ago there, and tried to respond on the plane of national strategy, critical alike of Congress and the Administration.

In particular, I urged that the U.S. "gear for the long haul," adopt a long-term policy regarding the principal actors in the region, and pursue consistently over the years national objectives such as those set forth in the Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America. No national strategy can be underwritten by material aid and training meted out in highly-conditioned spurts, accompanied by repeated challenges to fundamental policy, and subjected to frequent cliff-hanging votes in Congress predicated on wholly unrealistic demands for "progress". If what we have seen in recent months is all that can be expected in Washington, if our government is incapable of the patience and persistency required in treating insurgencies, then we should acknowledge that disability, and squelch hopes that the United States will support Central Americans willing to fight and to die for democracy. The trouble is that such hopes are widespread: in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and now in Nicaragua, people expect our support, and many of them --especially the "Contras"-- have their lives on the line as a result.

At the invitation of USCINCSO, I have since the Senate hearing revisited Honduras and Panama. It was a most useful update for me. I agree with General Galvin that the Nicaraguan rebels of the FDN now have a fighting chance to present to the Nicaraguan people an alternative to the oppressions and militarism of the government in Managua. While a concerted effort to launch a wide-spread guerrilla campaign within Nicaragua did not get underway until after the aid authorized by Congress began to reach them in late October, they have accomplished much in a

short while. The training their key tactical leaders have received, while abbreviated, was directed at the right learning objectives, and should stand them in good stead in the months of fighting which lie ahead. Fighting there will be, for nearly 10,000 FDN guerrillas, armed and organized for an extended unconventional warfare campaign, are now operating inside Nicaragua, and a significant number of these have penetrated beyond the strategic Rama Road, deep into the southeast. Their overall campaign plan seems sound, and their successful infiltration of fresh units through and around the government forces massed along the Honduran border to prevent their reentry, is one dramatic indication of what they have learned since 1985, when last I tracked their operations through the intelligence available to me in USSOUTHCOM.

It is much too early to form judgement concerning their prospects. Over the coming years, we will have to watch carefully to discern whether the troops of the FDN:

- Pursue a campaign which avoids engagement with major formations of the government's army, extends and exposes the security force, and inhibits its control over land and people.

- Earn the support of the people, for this will be the most important measure of their success.

- Link their military operations with political initiative, at least through relating their actions afield to a media campaign directed at informing the Nicaraguan people of their struggle for a free nation, preferably through the former plus political cooperation with the numerous parties trying to bring the government in Managua to accept a test of ballots rather than bullets, and to settle for the outcome of verifiably free elections.

Concerning the approval for the \$40 million remainder of the \$100 million approved by Congress, I believe that members of Congress ought to vote conscious of the fact that some 10,000 Nicaraguans are now engaged in a civil war against the Marxist-Leninist government there, committed, largely at our instance, to a life-death struggle to win freedom for their countrymen. They are quite dependent upon logistics which only the United States Congress can assure them, and the promised additional aid is vital to their continuing their struggle.

But far more is at stake than the fate of the Nicaraguan rebels: the neighbors of Nicaragua, in Honduras, in Costa Rica, in Guatemala, and in El Salvador, are watching anxiously to see whether Congress supports the

Nicaraguan democratic resistance as an acid test of the U.S. national will to support democracy in Central America. All the democratic governments there are threatened, all are dependent upon continued U.S. support, and all have good reason to regard the Marxist government in Managua as inimical to peaceful resolution of the region's economic, social, and political problems. The tragedy of the present circumstance is that the hubris of a handful of men handling U.S. policy re Iran is likely to undercut Congressional support for a Central American policy which overall has achieved a number of striking successes. Five years ago the following would have seemed quite unattainable:

--Democracy is accepted as the wave of the future in Central America, and the U.S. is its proponent and protector. Where once we were perceived as the prime support for authoritarianism, today we are seen as the main hope for economic and social progress, and as the shield of freedom.

--The U.S. now has a regional military strategy with both offensive and defensive aspects, a strategy which makes possible defense in depth of U.S. vital interests with minimal forces, encourages and sustains the advocates of democracy, and dismays and deters authoritarians of both the right and the left.

--El Salvador has not only adopted reformist democracy, but has, with substantial Congressional support embodied in a multi-year program of economic and military aid, substantially reduced the numbers of insurgents, and reasserted control over most of its people and productive land. Not since Magsaysay's campaign in the Phillipines has a U.S. supported government been similarly successful against guerrillas.

--Honduras has been induced to extraordinary generosity toward its former enemy, El Salvador, in training Salvadoran troops on its soil, and in policing its border areas where Salvadoran insurgents have sought sanctuary. Its long-standing border dispute with El Salvador is now being peacefully adjudicated in The Hague. Honduras, moreover, has assumed grave risk by harboring the "contras", and has accepted an unprecedented U.S. military presence on its soil. It has nonetheless continued its land reform and other evolution toward pluralistic democracy.

--Costa Rica's investments from abroad are up two thirds this year, and despite recent publicity over President Arias' refusal to allow use of his territory for support of the Nicaraguan rebels, military cooperation with the U.S. is the closest it has been since 1948.

--Guatemala's military leaders have adopted enlightened policies providing for support by the armed forces of the constitutional, elected government, and for respect for human rights.

Central Americans therefore are likely to see continued U.S. support for the "Contras" as an affirmation that the U.S. will help them to cope internally with staggering debt-servicing problems, stagnated economies, and grave threats to security, as well as externally with the menace of the Marxist militarists in Managua. As far as the Sandinistas are concerned, the best hope for a negotiated settlement lies in their perceiving the U.S. Congress as committed to Central America for the long haul, including and especially continued support for the UNO and the FDN in Nicaragua.

Conversely, should Congress abrogate its commitment to the Nicaraguan rebels, governments of the four democracies in Central America are likely to be shaken. This is no "domino theory", but a realistic assessment of the fragility of those governments:

El Salvador President Duarte, pressed now not only by the continuing war, but by a devastating earthquake, would surely have to contend with a reinvigorated Left and a vengeful Right, and his base of power, already eroded, would probably disintegrate.

Honduras With the U.S. wavering, President Azcona would find it more difficult to restrain further his powerful and restive military, within which are venal, nationalist, rightist individuals who question continuing cooperation with the U.S. These men are fully capable of seeking an accommodation with Managua, to insure against the return of FDN troops to Honduran soil, to seek respite from threatened insurgency within Honduras, and to free Honduran forces to face the Salvadorans, whom they regard as their main threat.

Costa Rica President Arias would be likely to adopt a stance less critical of Managua, conceivably at the cost of military collaboration with the U.S., but businessmen and democratic politicians alike would lose confidence, and internal security, already precarious, would be impaired.

Guatemala President Cerezo could expect challenges from his military, many of whom, already sceptical of U.S. persistence and concerned over their obdurate guerrilla foes, would be impelled to regress to direct control of the government, and repressive counterinsurgency.

Nicaragua A negative Congressional vote on aid for Nicaraguan rebels is quite likely to doom efforts to negotiate an end to the civil war. That war will continue, even intensify, as the Sandinistas throw in their reserves seeking a final victory. Some portions of the FDN force may try to reenter Honduras, and, if so, there could be Sandinista hot pursuit, complicated by the possibility that the Hondurans will fight to keep the "Contras" out, or to disarm them -- one U.S. supported force fighting another. In the short run there will be human costs in casualties among the rebels and the migration of their families, and political costs in terms of lost U.S. credibility. And in the longer run, the collapse of the democratic resistance in Nicaragua could precipitate a return to authoritarianism in most of Central America, and by unfettering the Sandinistas for new mischief, bring warfare to Honduras and Costa Rica as well as Guatemala and El Salvador.

I know that there are some in Congress who profess to believe that it does not matter to us whether there be a Marxist government in Managua, and that the U.S. could adopt a strategy of containment, based on extensive U.S. economic and military commitments to Nicaragua's neighbors. I agree that commitment is required in any event, but I hasten to point out that the costs of containment may prove to be intolerably high. More importantly, a strategy of containment may be self-defeating by destroying our political basis for commitment, for some of the governments which could materialize in Central America in the wake of a U.S. turn-about re the Contras may be authoritarian regimes, hardly worthy of U.S. support, and vulnerable themselves to Marxism.

It is my considered judgement that additional aid for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance is a small price to pay for preserving the gains realized in recent years by those we support in Central America, and for keeping open the prospect of negotiated settlement. I believe that denying that aid would jeopardize all that has been achieved there for democracy in recent years, a risk wholly disproportionate to the expenditure involved.

But the larger issue remains a national strategy. I advocate that our strategic objective be pluralistic democracy for all Central Americans, achieved and maintained by Central Americans. I recommend that we devote to the attainment of that objective, under the concept of helping them to help themselves, the full power of the United States -- our political influence, our economic vigor, our military strength, and our moral authority -- not for a few months, or for this session of Congress, but for the foreseeable future. I urge that Congress adopt a comprehensive, long-range plan of aid for Central America which would convince friends and enemies alike that we are committed, that we intend to stay

committed until every Central American enjoys the right to choose his government in free elections, and until all governments there enjoy the peace and prosperity befitting our close neighbors.