

## ABSTRACT

NIX, SHANNON. *Absolute Commitment: Ideology, Human Rights and the Carter Administration's Policy toward Central America, 1978-1979.* (Under the direction of Dr. Nancy Mitchell).

The trajectory of U.S. foreign policy is “incomprehensible, perhaps inconceivable,” argued Michael Hunt, without taking into account the panoply of ideas that permeate U.S. foreign policy. Hunt traced the evolution of three persistent ideas, often subtle though sometimes shrill, that have informed U.S. foreign policy from its inception: the pursuit of national greatness through a proselytizing foreign policy, informed by racial and cultural chauvinism and an aversion to revolutionary change. In one sense, Hunt's work was an existence proof, one that has been widely accepted by historians. On the other hand, he was tendering a call to arms, a Geertzian mandate to bring the subtle influences of ideology on U.S. foreign policy “into the light of day.”

Some have argued that interests, and not ideology, are what determine foreign policy – policymakers are imagined to be hard-nosed realists with omniscient capacities to determine “national interests.” While it is not my thesis that ideology determines U.S. policy, I argue that ideology does mediate the formulation, deployment and reception of policy. Ideology forms the mediating lens through which policymakers grapple with the complex and nuanced realities that comprise national interests. Ideology shapes and circumscribes the discourse that determines national interests. Ideology matters.

In an attempt to answer Hunt's call, I pose this central question: To what extent and in what ways did these persistent ideas affect the formulation, deployment and reception of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua and El Salvador during the crises that culminated in the last half of 1979? Many in the Carter administration were more conscious than most of the legacies of U.S. empire in Latin America, of racial discrimination and cultural chauvinism, and of an “inordinate fear of communism.”

Nevertheless, they were incapable of escaping ideology's gravitational pull. Ideologies are socially constructed phenomena and, as such, have historic arcs and mass – ideological inertia, sensitivity to which is insufficient to arrest their momentum.

The discourse of universal human rights, steeped in notions of Western exceptionalism, provides rich auger for exploring Hunt's trilogy of ideas. While many in the Carter administration were sensitive to past U.S. interventions in Latin America, the administration's human rights policy was a proselytizing policy. In Central America, it replaced Roosevelt's gunboats and Taft's greenbacks with human rights commissions, foreign assistance, and diplomatic *démarches*. The Carter administration founded its prescription for advancing human rights on Western tropes of modernity; U.S. values and institutions – presumed to be at once universal and the ultimate expressions of modernity – were deployed to remedy a presumed Latin American “backwardness.” Nevertheless, the administration also deployed these values and institutions as a means of waging the Cold War – Burkean prescriptions meant to reduce the vulnerability of benighted societies to the specious ideologies of revolution.

To discover ideology at work, I examine the use of language by those who formulated, deployed and reacted to the Carter administration's human rights policy during the 1978 Nicaraguan succession crisis and the 1979 Salvadoran crisis. While the ultimate object of this study is the effect of ideology on foreign policy, I employ “thick description” to examine the policy and its surrounding rhetoric in two case studies that focus on the U.S. policy during these crises, during which I remain detached from ideological analysis, not wishing to “ransack” the ample documentary record for selective evidence. Only in the conclusion, do reflect on the effects of ideology's siren song on the administration's response to the crises in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

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Absolute Commitment: Ideology, Human Rights  
and the Carter Administration's Policy  
toward Central America, 1978-1979

by  
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Shannon Nix completed his Masters in History from North Carolina State University in December 2009. His principal field of study is Cold War Diplomatic History with a minor in Intellectual History. His MA thesis explores how long-standing shared beliefs about the nation's identity and proper role in world affairs mediated the formulation, deployment and reception of the Carter administration's policy toward Central America. Mr. Nix is currently employed at Cisco in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina; working for the Global Government Solutions Group, on a team advises worldwide governmental, private sector and non-governmental agencies on the use of internet technology to enhance their capacity to perform vital missions to secure public safety and security. He has worked as a researcher, developer and executive in the computer communications industry for more than 25 years, after receiving degrees in Computer Science and Mathematics in 1981 from the University of Kansas.

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I have undoubtedly accumulated a great many debts in the course of this project, though none greater than that owed my thesis advisor. Dr. Nancy Mitchell has been exceedingly generous with her knowledge, expertise and insight – which are considerable – and with her time, which is much in demand. I shudder to think of the hours spent pouring over my inchoate ideas and tortured prose; I continue to be impressed by the quality and quantity of patient and constructive feedback; and I have no doubt that my research, writing, analysis and overall work are much the better for these. While I have learned many things from Professor Mitchell, foremost, she has *shown* me what it means to be a scholar, an educator and a mentor.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the other members of my thesis committee: Dr. Lars Schoultz, Dr. Richard Slatta and Dr. Steven Vincent. Their work, their courses, and their generous supervision, guidance and counsel have informed and improved my work. In general, I would also like to acknowledge the History Departments at North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina, both for the quality of their committed faculties and for structuring and enabling a program that enables full-time workers, like me, to pursue an advanced history degree.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Michael Hunt, whose *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* provided the inspiration for my thesis, which is meant to be a conversation with that seminal scholarship. During the course of this venture, I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in a graduate colloquium conducted by Dr. Hunt as he was revising this 1987 work. Because of this seminar, I am further indebted to Professor Hunt for his comprehensive reading list, his guidance and counsel, and for his provocative and insightful exploration of the themes of nationalism, empire and hegemony.

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## PROLOGUE

Since John Winthrop uttered his messianic “city on a hill” rendering of the Anglo-Protestant Massachusetts Bay Colony, many Americans have invoked and internalized the presumed exceptional nature of their nation’s values, institutions and historical experience. Anders Stephanson traced the roots of this “chosenness” to both its sectarian Protestant and secular Enlightenment roots and credits the genius of James Madison with fusing the Calvinistic conception of predestination with Enlightenment republicanism to form a destinarian consensus that the United States was chosen, whether by Providence or history, to be at once the “New Israel” and the “New Rome.” This ideology of exceptionalism is the synthesizing thread in what Michael Hunt refers to as a “constellation of ideas... which have been tested, refined and woven into the fabric of the national consciousness” that have fostered an American nationalism imbued with a “strong millennial strain.”<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Jefferson spoke of an “empire of liberty.” Conceiving his *empire* as an exemplary and reflective republic, Jefferson called for a studied “aloofness” in foreign affairs, insulated by geography from a “rapacious and turmoil-prone Europe.” Aloofness notwithstanding, the Sage of Monticello presided over one of the most expansionistic presidencies in U.S. history, recognizing the importance of territorial expansion and foreign trade to his agrarian vision. Jefferson’s ambivalence toward empire was no anomaly. By the end of the nineteenth century, following its “splendid little war” with Spain, having fulfilled its “*manifest destiny* to overspread the continent,” the United States experimented briefly with formal empire in the Caribbean

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<sup>1</sup> For Winthropian exceptionalism, see: Loren Baritz, *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America*, New York: Wiley, 1964; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, p. 3-27; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 172, 191.

and the Philippines. While there were fervent cries, which echo to this day, for the nation to take up Kipling's mantle during that age of empire, for many Americans, the notion of empire has carried a stigma, most preferring to think of their nation as a benevolent *hegemon*, exerting legitimate influence within an ever-expanding sphere of influence.<sup>2</sup>

This aversion to empire flows from its contradictions with the nation's shared political creed, from solidarity inspired by the nation's "remembered" colonial past, from reluctance to bear the cost of formal empire, and from what every student of Western civilization learned from the Romans about the fate of empires – they rust from within and collapse under their own weight. This aversion notwithstanding, the breathtaking expansion from the union of thirteen British colonies to *global hegemony* in less than two centuries betrays an ideological penchant for expansion that Michael Hunt has characterized as the "keystone" of a long-standing foreign policy ideology – "the pursuit of national greatness" through an active and missionary foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

How then to sate this appetite for expansion, this manifest destiny, without falling into the *imperial trap*? The answer lies in what I refer to as the *hegemonic project*, which I distinguish from *hegemony*, for which I accept Webster's definition as a "predominant influence exercised by one nation over others." The hegemon is, by definition, free to exercise either coercion or suasion, free to consult with or dictate to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, April 27, 1809. Lipscomb, Andrew A. and Albert Ellery Bergh eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 12*. Washington D.C.: Issued under the auspices of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903-04, p. 277; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 19-41; John O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no.1, July-August 1845, p. 5-10; Secretary of State John Hay's "splendid little war" reference to the 1898 conflict with Spain; Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," *McClure's Magazine*, Vol. 12, February 1899.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 172-4, 188-9, 191; Much has been written on the animating motives of this policy of expansion. Many credit Williams for raising the questions of *ideology* and *empire* as animating forces in U.S. foreign policy: William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959.

other nations within its sphere of influence, and free to exercise its power in ways perceived as benevolent or pernicious by other nations. Hegemony is, by this definition, amoral and is not mutually exclusive with imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, I define the *hegemonic project* as an overt attempt by a hegemon to legitimize the exercise of the power underwriting its “predominant influence” in the service of domestic and foreign policy objectives and to perpetuate that influence by attracting others to the ideals that animate its own objectives. Joseph Nye defines this *soft power* as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than by coercion or payments,” the attraction “rising from a country’s culture, political ideals and policies.” This is not to say that *hegemonic projects* produce disinterested behavior or abstinence from coercion. On the contrary, Elizabeth Borgwardt describes this ambivalence in U.S. policy following the Second World War, the “newly minted hegemon...firmly entrenching its own interests but also voluntarily limiting its influence through institutional channels; coercing smaller countries but also consolidating their consent through robust policies of aid, trade and consultation.”<sup>5</sup>

The culture, values, and institutions that inspired the qualified admiration of Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 were those that provided the attraction that helped buoy the nation’s rise to global hegemony a century later, filling up Wendell Willkie’s “gigantic reservoir of goodwill toward the American people” following the Second World War. The delicate balance between “entrenching one’s own interests” and “consolidating the

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<sup>4</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992; For the uniqueness of U.S. post-war hegemony, see: Patrick Karl O’Brien, “The Pax Britannica and American Hegemony: Precedent, Antecedent or Just another History?” *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, ed. Patrick Karl O’Brien and Armand Cleese, 2002, Chap. 1, pp. 3-64.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004. Cited in Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

consent” of the coerced has been the tightrope walked by generations of U.S. policy makers between benign hegemony and exploitative empire. When the balance has tipped toward empire, in any sense of the word, U.S. foreign policy has more often than not left *imperial sediment* in its wake. In this ambivalent sense, Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” was a hegemonic project from its inception, but one that had deposited multiple layers of imperial sediment in the two centuries leading up to Carter’s presidency.<sup>6</sup>

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During my first graduate diplomatic history course, I read Michael Hunt’s 1987 ground-breaking *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. This has greatly influenced my approach to understanding U.S. politics, foreign policy and popular culture. Hunt claimed that the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy is “incomprehensible, perhaps inconceivable,” without taking into account a panoply of ideas – a U.S. nationalism. He traced the evolution of three persistent ideas – often subtle but sometimes shrill – which have informed U.S. foreign policy from its inception, and comprise an exceptional national identity. The “keystone” of these ideas has been the pursuit of “national greatness” abroad through a proselytizing foreign policy. Second, Hunt claimed that this activist bent has consistently been informed by a cultural hierarchy, steeped in the tropes of development, democracy and modernity, with the nation’s singular version of modernity imagined to be the pinnacle. Finally, Hunt claims that U.S. foreign policy has reflected a profound skepticism of revolutionary change at home and abroad, despite clinging to the narrative of our own revolutionary past.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835, Isaac Kramnick ed., New York: Norton, 2007. Tocqueville’s ability to look past the seamier side of the Jacksonian era was greatly abetted by his aristocratic and racially stratified sensibilities; Wendell Willkie, *One World*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

Hunt's work was, in essence, an existence proof. He traced the arc of these ideas as they developed throughout the nineteenth century and gave a sweeping survey of their impact throughout the twentieth century. Although Hunt published two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exceptional national identity he posited has remained remarkably resonant in the post-Cold War years, having reached the point of caricature in the latter Bush administration. The academic community has largely accepted Hunt's existence proof, the author concluding in the "Afterword" of a revised edition published twenty years later that his work had stood the test of time.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding the broad acceptance of its thesis, Hunt's work was also a call to arms. He suggested that while it is well and good to prove that these ideas exist, such a proof leaves unanswered many questions such as how ideology functions in the context of U.S. foreign policy. Did these ideas matter? If so, in what ways and why did they matter? Without addressing the question of how ideology functions within a specific foreign policy context, it is impossible to draw meaningful conclusions about its power to explain. As Hunt states at the outset of his groundbreaking work, "The place of ideology in U.S. foreign policy" often "ventures into a complicated realm where conceptual confusion reigns." It is a "big and slippery subject" that is "difficult to pin down." Despite a broad acceptance of Hunt's existence proof and a subsequent uptake in constructionist interpretations in diplomatic history, few have grappled with the impact and function of ideology in foreign policy. Armed with the confidence that only abject ignorance can inspire, I have therefore plunged into this morass. Foolhardy as it may have been, I have not regretted it.<sup>9</sup>

In order to explore the function of ideology – of nationalism – in foreign policy, it

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Hunt, "Afterword," *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. xi.

seems essential to engage that policy at close arms. I have chosen the foreign policy of the Carter administration for a variety of reasons. Aside from the personal affinity I feel for the times, having come of age during Carter's presidency, there are some very pragmatic reasons for focusing on his administration. Not least of these is my good fortune to be under the advisement of Dr. Nancy Mitchell, a highly respected Carter scholar. In addition to the fact that Mitchell knows where most of the "bodies are buried," the historical record of Carter's foreign policy is highly accessible to a student working full time and located equidistant from the Carter Library and the National Archives. The online archives alone contain tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of well-organized primary sources, most notably the *Digital National Security Archives*, which contains comprehensive collections from Nicaragua and El Salvador, the principle subjects of my research.<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, aside from the convergence of my personal interests with pragmatic access to expertise and sources, the central role Carter's administration assigned to human rights in its policy toward Central America provides fertile ground for examining ideology at work. As with any foreign policy, it should be considered in three important contexts: regional, domestic, and geopolitical. Ideology played an important role in each: The Monroe Doctrine cast its long shadow over the regional context of any U.S. policy toward Latin America; a contested narrative of national redemption in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate as well as an incipient neoconservative movement informed the domestic context; while the geopolitical context was shaped by ongoing attempts to contain the influence of the Soviet Union and Cuba as well as concurrent attempts to establish more productive relations with

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Mitchell, "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn Leffler, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2009, Forthcoming.

each, amidst real and perceived expansionist designs of both of the United States' geopolitical adversaries. The foreign policy objective of advancing “universal” human rights also played a vital role in each of these contexts: while it was undoubtedly grounded in a sincere commitment to human rights on the part of many in the administration, it was also at once a means of addressing the imperial sediment of past U.S. Latin American relations, a means of reconstructing an exceptional national identity, and a means of waging the Cold War.

Founded on Western conceptions of human rights, the policy rested on the active promotion of the institutional tropes of a Western unilinear conception of modernity. Human rights, as articulated by Cyrus Vance on April 30, 1977, was defined in three tranches: rights to the “integrity of the person,” social and economic rights, and political rights. Correspondingly, human rights, so defined, were understood in terms of three core institutional tropes of U.S. exceptionalism: the rule of law (order), free market development, and democracy. These institutions were presumed to be most perfectly embodied in their exceptional U.S. models but also, with no apparent sense of contradiction, to be universally applicable to “less evolved” cultures. By assuming the role of the ordained arbiter of “universal” human rights, the Carter administration, despite renouncing all interventionist aims, was nonetheless engaged in a proselytizing foreign policy designed to export its nation’s “exceptional” institutions to “less exceptional” cultures. Placed in geopolitical context, this policy was deployed to counter a competing Marxist-Leninist narrative of “universal human rights,” which preferred justice over liberty and was based on anathematic institutions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977. The text of Vance’s speech can be found in David D. Newsom, *The Diplomacy of Human Rights*, Latham, MD: University Press of America, 1986, p. 207-12; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 8-72. Westad explicates the competing Western and Eastern narratives of “universal” human rights, one that

On the eve of his inaugural, had one asked Carter to predict his legacy in the Middle East and Central America, it seems likely that the Arab-Israeli conflict and Panama would have played prominent roles in his response. While these were indeed among his administration's most significant accomplishments, his presidency became identified with what most have considered 'policy failures' in the consecutive crises in Iran, Nicaragua and El Salvador, which culminated in rapid succession throughout 1979. Each resulted in the overthrow of a conservative regime that had assiduously cultivated the image of a staunch Cold War ally of the United States. Each regime had also acquired an unsavory image as a notorious abuser of human rights, having resorted to increasingly repressive tactics to cling to power in the face of a increasing demands for broader political and economic participation in their respective societies. Consecutive revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua resulted in the emergence of two radical regimes openly hostile to U.S. interests, while the ostensibly reformist officers' coup in El Salvador did little to avert the bloody civil war that ensued between a reactionary status quo and Marxist revolutionaries.

Hunt's recipe for establishing the persistence of U.S. nationalism was to take the "long view," which was in essence a comparative approach over time. However, in order to explore how nationalism functions in foreign policy, we have already acknowledged the need to engage policy at close arms. To gain a comparative purchase on this "slippery subject" in a more compressed timeframe, I have opted to examine its function within multiple contexts – the successive crises in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Each is an independent case study advancing chronologically in overlapping timeframes between early 1978 and late 1979, the latter unquestionably a critical year

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gives priority to "liberty" and the other to "justice."

for the Carter administration's foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

The first chapter will begin by examining the early articulation of the administration's human rights policy and its early *ad hoc* application in both an East-West and North-South context leading up to Vance's comprehensive articulation of the emerging policy in his April 30, 1977 Law Day Speech. The second and third chapters present case studies of how the administration applied its human rights policy during the successive crises in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The primary research in the first case study focuses on the period between the incendiary assassination of dissident journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro in January 1978 and the reluctant U.S. decision, nine months later, to lead the mediation of the crisis that ensued. During this period, the administration grappled with the inherent conflict between its commitment to the principle of non-intervention – arising from its acute awareness of the U.S. imperial legacy in Latin America – and its commitment to human rights, at its core a proselytizing policy. The primary research of the second case study focuses on the period between early 1979, in the wake the failed U.S.-led mediation in Nicaragua, and the October 15 officers' coup, a Salvadoran attempt to head off a repeat of the violent revolution in Nicaragua. Decidedly less anguished over a more active U.S. role in the Salvadoran crisis, administration officials attempted to apply the unfolding lessons of Nicaragua, but nonetheless encountered the inherent conflicts and limitations of their human rights policy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. xi, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977. For two of the best accounts of U.S. policy during the Nicaraguan succession crisis: Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2002; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. For similarly good accounts of the Salvadoran succession crisis: William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, "Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 5 (Summer 1980), p. 1084-1103; William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

It is hardly surprising that so much has been written about these succession crises, or that many accounts attribute blame for these ‘failures’ to an ill-conceived and overly idealistic U.S. policy in which human rights played a central role. It will become necessary to engage these interpretations in the course of this venture, though contribution to this voluminous literature is not my primary objective. Rather, I seek to contribute to the understanding of the functioning of ideology in the formulation, deployment and reception of U.S. policy applied in the contexts of these successive crises.<sup>14</sup>

Any attempt to understand the past calls for a great deal of prudence and humility, as we cannot know what individual actors were thinking, only what each said, wrote and acted upon as reflected in the imperfect and incomplete mediums of the historical record and our collective memory. Nevertheless, I will argue that their rhetoric is an important tool for advancing our understanding, and that it betrays both the presence and function of deep-seated ideas. In essence, my method for discovering ideology at work in foreign policy is to examine the discursive contrails of that policy – rhetoric matters. Without making assumptions about the degree to which a given individual actually subscribes to the ideas that he or she articulates, or the import he or she assigns to those ideas, we can nevertheless assume that individual actors deploy rhetoric purposefully. Ideas tacitly embedded in one’s rhetoric reflect a deep-seated acceptance of those ideas, while ideas explicitly deployed to advance a calculated agenda reflect one’s belief that these ideas have meaning to a given audience. In effect, these ideas

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<sup>14</sup> For a good historiographical treatment of the Carter administration’s human rights policy: David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 2004); Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. Smith provides the proto-critical scholarly work that, as Schmitz has noted, touches most of the later critics’ objections (Schmitz, p. 144).” In Smith’s final assessment, events, bureaucracy and inherent policy conflicts combined to make Carter’s “vision appear naïve.”

comprise a set of meaning-making symbols that enable policy makers to turn a complex reality into policy – to understand; and to communicate a given policy to various stakeholders – to persuade. To add to the texture of the interpretation, I will examine a variety of rhetorical forms, from official policy statements, to memorandums of conversation, to public speech to contemporary media and journal articles.<sup>15</sup>

The language of human rights, like most languages, is a fungible lexicon, often deployed to advance multiple divergent agendas. Nevertheless, within this ‘cage of language,’ the ideas associated with its symbols have both influenced and constrained the interlocutors in this narrative. I will necessarily draw measured interpretations from the observations in this study, though this should not distinguish mine from any prudent interpretation of other ostensibly more material influences on foreign policy. While the ultimate object of this study is the effect of ideology on foreign policy, the immediate object of my examination will be the policy itself and the discursive acts surrounding that policy. I will remain largely detached from any ideological analysis during the course of this examination, deferring this until the final chapter. If at the end of this enterprise, I have contributed in some small way to answering Michael Hunt’s call to arms – the Geertzian mandate to bring the subtle influences of ideology on U.S. foreign policy “into the light of day” – then I shall consider this a successful venture.<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to answer this call, I pose as the central question of this thesis: To what extent and in what ways did persistent strains of nationalistic ideas affect the formulation, deployment and reception of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua and El Salvador during their respective succession crises that culminated in rapid succession in the last half of 1979? In order to grapple with this question, I will introduce the

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*; Clifford Geertz, *An Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

concept of *ideological inertia* – the central claim of my thesis. The Carter administration was more self-conscious than most about the legacies of a historically nationalistic U.S. foreign policy – the legacies of empire, of racial discrimination and cultural chauvinism, and of an “inordinate fear of communism.” Nevertheless, as Lloyd Kramer has asserted, nationalisms are socially constructed and, as such, are historical phenomena. They have an historic arc and an historic mass – in short, an *ideological inertia*, sensitivity to which is insufficient to arrest its momentum. The Carter administration, though more reflective than most, while self-consciously grappling with this legacy, was ultimately incapable of escaping the gravitational pull of these ideas and their historical residue.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say that ideas determined the Carter administration’s foreign policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Rather, most in the administration seem to have been deeply committed to protecting what each perceived to be the national interests. In fact, many saw human rights as a means to this end, rather than an end unto themselves. This Machiavellian calculus does not imply, however, that their commitment to human rights was necessarily cynical. Rather, as German historian Peter Alter has noted, nationalism is “both an ideology and a political movement which holds the nation and sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values, and which manages to mobilize the political will of a people or a large section of the population.” For many in the Carter administration, the values implicit in human rights were indistinguishable from the nation itself and, by implication, their preservation was indistinguishable from the national interest.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, [Link to text](#); Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 58, No. 3, July 1997, p. 525-545.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, Stuart McKinnon-Evans, trans., London: 1994, p. 4. Cited in: Lloyd Kramer,

This is the essence of ideology – it is a set of socially constructed shared meanings that disciplinary practitioners, in this case policymakers and politicians, employ to mediate the complex reality of their discipline. It serves as a prism that refracts the complex colors of reality into a small number of commonly understood tenets, the primary colors of reality. It is employed to understand and to be understood. It facilitates common understanding but often obscures true understanding. As Michael Hunt has argued, “The general direction American policies have taken is inexplicable, perhaps even inconceivable, without taking account of the influence of a constellation of [persistent] ideas... which have been tested, refined and woven into the fabric of the national consciousness.” Ideology matters.<sup>19</sup>

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“Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” p. 525-6.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 171-2.

## SETTING CONTEXT: TOWARD A HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

“Our commitment to human rights must be absolute,” proclaimed Jimmy Carter at his 1977 inauguration. When examining the record, it seems clear that the administration’s commitment to human rights was anything but “absolute,” a fact that has drawn alternating charges of cynicism and naiveté. Nevertheless, to assert that the Carter administration’s human rights policy was empty rhetoric or that it lacked effect would be simplistic. In the face of these persistent caricatures, I hope to shed a more nuanced light on the policy by considering it within two contexts: First, the policy was a means of constructing a beleaguered national identity in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Second, it was deployed as a means of waging the Cold War, by differentiating the ideals of the ‘West’ from those of the ‘East’ in order to attract other nations to those ideals. It is important to also bear in mind, lest we assign too much agency to either superpower, that both Washington’s and Moscow’s agendas were subsumed in a larger transnational discourse of universal human rights, which predated the Cold War but had also become entangled in its ideological fault lines.<sup>20</sup>

Melvyn Leffler has argued that the United States enjoyed a “preponderance of power” relative to the Soviet Union in the early years of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Carter’s National Security Council began with the assumption that the Soviet Union was operating at ‘strategic parity.’ From the outset, National Security Advisor

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<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, [Link to text](#); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Hunt has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to an exceptional national identity in U.S. foreign policy; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Westad treats the East-West ideological contrast, contested primarily on the North-South periphery; Daniel Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Thomas has examined the working of a transcendent transnational human rights discourse.

Zbigniew Brzezinski warned of the danger of leaving unchecked the perception of a “democratic establishment...in decline.” In 1975, the U.S. embassy in Saigon had been evacuated, after the U.S. military had leveled historically unprecedented firepower on an enemy whose agrarian society was considered “backward” by most tropes of modernity. The “longest war” in U.S. history had left open deep political, social, economic and psychological wounds, as had the Yom Kippur War and subsequent oil embargo of 1973 as well as Richard Nixon’s public disgrace and resignation in 1974. Amidst rising inflation, swelling unemployment and an evaporating trade surplus, Leffler’s “preponderance of power” was giving way to a “crisis of confidence.”<sup>21</sup>

In the throes of this “crisis of confidence,” it is hardly surprising that Carter looked to soft power to restore a tarnished image of national greatness. He offered redemption from the “intellectual and moral poverty of Vietnam [and a way] back to our own principles and values.” Deploying a narrative of American exceptionalism, he proclaimed, “Ours was the first society openly to define itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty giving us an exceptional appeal,” an exceptionalism that carried with it “special obligations [and] moral duties.” Carter’s rapid rise from the

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<sup>21</sup> Melvyn Leffler, *Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War, 1947-52*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983, p. 146, 177; Presidential Review Memorandum / NSC-10, “Military Strategy and Force Posture Review: Final Report,” June, 1977, Digital National Security Archives, “Presidential Directives on National Security from Truman to Clinton,” Item no. PD01545, Washington: George Washington University, [Link to repository](#); Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, March 11, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #4,” *Declassified Documents Reference System* (hereafter *DDRS*). Brzezinski speaks of a “crisis of capitalism.” Carter would later talk about a “crisis of confidence” in the so-called “malaise speech:” Carter address to the nation, July 15, 1979, *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, Transcribed by Michael E. Eidenmuller, [Link to text](#); See also: Nancy Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn Leffler, Cambridge University Press, 2009, forthcoming, p. 1-3. Mitchell notes, “the striking feature of the widespread perception of American weakness in 1980 is how wrong it was .” In reality the United States still enjoyed a position of power relative to the Soviets. Nevertheless, in the formulation and reception of policy, “perception was reality.”

relative obscurity of the Georgia statehouse to the White House reflects a broad national identification with this redemptive discourse. As the president's early approval ratings soared, the *Detroit Free Press* resonated, "America, after 200 years and many shameful episodes, remains a beacon of liberty without peer in the world."<sup>22</sup>

Although the president declared his administration "free from the inordinate fear of communism," it would be wrong to underplay the centrality of the Cold War in its policy calculus. Historian Nancy Mitchell explains, "Carter stressed 'inordinate' and did not mean that he had transcended anticommunism." Rather, asserts Mitchell, "the Cold War permeated Carter's foreign policy;" Many in the administration, not least the president, were unblinkingly committed to containing Soviet influence and power, but hoped to pursue a different set of tactics to achieve those ends. Brzezinski recalls the role of human rights, "The best way to answer the Soviets' ideological challenge was to commit the United States to a concept that most reflected America's very essence. [We] felt quite strongly that a major emphasis on human rights...would enhance America's global interest by demonstrating to the emerging nations of the Third World the reality of our democratic system, in sharp contrast to the political system and practices of our adversaries."<sup>23</sup>

Human rights had become an ideological football, deployed along two lines of scrimmage in the Cold War, between the so-called East and West as well as the so-called North and South. Deployed by ideological rivals in the East and the West, human rights were at once a means of differentiating core values, criticizing rival practices,

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004; Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address. Jimmy Carter, May 22, 1977, Notre Dame Commencement Address. Both at John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*; *Detroit Free Press*, February 20, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, p. 123-6; Nancy Mitchell, "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," p. 6, 10.

and securing global hegemony by constructing a compelling vision of modernity to sway the hearts and minds of the developing world. Arne Westad has characterized the central competing ideological claims of this contest as being those of “liberty” vs. “justice.” In essence, Thomas Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” and Sergei Bulgakov’s “empire of justice” represented two competing vision of the rights of man, the proper role of society in securing those rights, and the individual’s reciprocal obligation to society. Since the Second World War, the United States had held the ideological initiative in Eastern Europe by emphasizing the lack of individual civil and political rights in the monolithic party-states of the Soviet Bloc, while the Soviet Union held the ideological initiative in the post-colonial Third World by emphasizing social and economic rights and impugning the Western colonial legacy for its lack of social and economic justice. By emphasizing human rights, cold warriors like Brzezinski saw an opportunity to press the Western initiative in Eastern Europe and to counter the Soviet initiative in the Third World. Early in the administration Brzezinski expanded on this theme in his weekly brief to Carter, ‘human rights’ was “both broader and more flexible than such words as ‘liberty’ or ‘freedom.’ This gives our foreign policy a wider appeal, more in tune with the emerging political consciousness of mankind – which is concerned both with liberty and equity.”<sup>24</sup>

Unquestionably, the exceptional and emancipatory discourse that Carter and Brzezinski invoked had indeed been a “city on the hill” to countless downtrodden in the world. No doubt, the “American Dream” has improved the lifestyles of countless others. Its spirit of generosity has inspired generations of Americans to give selflessly of their time, their bounty, and for many their “last full measure of devotion” in the

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<sup>24</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, p. 8-72; Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7,” *DDRS*.

service of nothing more tangible than the ideas represented in this exceptional creed. Attractive, powerful and beneficent as these ideals have been, they have also thrown into stark relief something Elizabeth Borgwardt has termed the “cognitive dissonance” between those ideals and “lived reality.” Tocqueville’s sanguine treatment masked the “inconvenient truths” of Jacksonian America, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised of Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” – those that Frederick Pike referred to as the “internal colonials” of the United States. In light of these internal contradictions, when the proselytized have been presented with universal applicability of those ideals and institutions, supported by the “existence proof” of a mythologized U.S. past, the formula has not always produced attraction. All that is to be admired in the nation’s ideals and history has too often been muted by the “cognitive dissonance” between ideals and policy, as well as the “contextual dissonance” between the “lived present” of others and a mythologized past.<sup>25</sup>

Nowhere has this dissonance – between ideals and practice, between reality and myth – been more salient to U.S. foreign policy than in Latin America, a dissonance amplified in the Caribbean region by proximity and Thucydides’ axiom about power disparity. Nowhere has United States’ inexorable drive to hegemony left a greater imperial residue. During the Latin American struggle for independence, from his retirement in Monticello, Jefferson reflected on the prospects of spreading his nation’s

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<sup>25</sup> For the attractiveness and power of the “American Dream,” see: Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005; Christopher Endy, “Where in the World is the American Consumer?” (draft ms., August 2007); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights*; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835; Fredrick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992; See Rosenberg’s “ideology of liberal developmentism” for a treatment of the “mythologized past:” Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982; For the otherizing quality of nationalistic identities see: Kramer, Lloyd. “Historical Narrative and the Meaning of Nationalism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 58 (July 1997): 525-45; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 46-91.

values and institutions throughout the hemisphere, “What a Colossus we shall be, when the southern continent comes up to our mark!” Revealing concerns shared by most of his contemporaries, concerns that have persisted to modern times, Jefferson tempered this optimism by noting that the “blessings of liberty” in Latin American would have to wait “until their experience in [self-government], their emancipation from their priests, and their advancement in information, shall prepare them for complete independence.”<sup>26</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the denial of empire and paternal claims of benevolent tutelage by the “Colossus of the North” have been contested by Latin American actors since ‘The Liberator’ Simón Bolívar, who also saw the hand of Providence in his northern neighbor’s destiny, albeit one “to plague America in the name of freedom.” Chilean Francisco Bilbao, a contemporary of John O’Sullivan’s, offered a more rueful commentary on Manifest Destiny, “The Colossus... steadily advances without fearing anyone,... impetuous and audacious,... believing in its right to rule as did imperial Rome...Infatuated with the long roll of its felicities, [it] advances like a tide to discharge its waters like a cataract over the south, ...menacing the autonomy of America.”<sup>27</sup>

As the noted historian of the Monroe Doctrine, Dexter Perkins, has noted, this

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<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, “The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must;” Jefferson cited in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, p. 24; and in Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 6. Schoultz exhaustively documents the persistent belief that Latin Americans were ill-equipped for the “blessings of liberty;” Carter’s Latin American expert on the National Security Council posits the unique relevance of U.S. Caribbean policy in: Robert Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Bolivar, “Letter to Colonel Patrick Campbell,” *Selected Writings of Bolivar*, Vincente Lecuna, comp., Harold A Bierek, Jr., ed., Lewis Bertrand, trans., Vol. 2, 1823-1830, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: The Colonial Press, 1951, pp. 731-2. Bilbao quoted in Dexter Perkins, *Hands Off: A History of the Monroe Doctrine*, Boston: Little and Brown, 1941, p. 104-5.

blueprint has been as “likely to repel as to attract.” Predating George Kennan’s Long Telegram by more than century, Monroe and Adams promulgated the original doctrine of containment in 1823, a bristling attempt on the part of the new Republic to circumscribe the pernicious spheres of influence of European rivals by audaciously, and with no apparent sense of irony, carving out its own sphere of influence. Steeped in an exceptional ideology – a chosen nation with values and institutions that were presumed to be at once exceptional and universal – the doctrine’s discursive contrails were marked with paternal benevolence toward less exceptional nations that fell under the ever-expanding tutelage of the United States. While Michael Adas has shown that exceptional identities were in fact not exceptional among “neo-European settler colonies,” the North American strand carried with it an imperative to “make every effort to perpetuate” its own presumably universal values and institutions, an imperative which has consistently been linked to the nation’s “peace and safety” and “moral duty.”<sup>28</sup>

“Special obligations” and “moral duties” notwithstanding, the Carter administration encountered centuries of imperial residue in Latin America. While U.S. policy makers, from Jefferson’s era to Carter’s, have been quick to acknowledge the deleterious effects of Iberian and Papal domination in this region, they have been less reflective about their own role in creating and perpetuating the structural inequalities that plagued Central American societies and the repressive apparatus that perpetuated

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<sup>28</sup> Dexter Perkins, *Hands Off: A History of the Monroe Doctrine*; President James Monroe to Congress, December 2, 1823, “Seventh Annual Message.”; George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” in United States. The Department of State, Office of the Historian. *The Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946: Volume VI* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office), 696-709; For the relationship between the Monroe Doctrine and the panoply of Cold War doctrines, see: Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1994; Michael Adas, “From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History,” *American Historical Review* 106 (December 2001).

these structures. Considering the words of Bolívar and Bilbao in the first half of the nineteenth century, the imperial interlude near the turn of the century, and the string of interventions accompanied by an economic and cultural onslaught from the McKinley to the Nixon administration, it is not difficult to appreciate the cumulative weight of past U.S. policies on Central Americans' perceived realities.<sup>29</sup>

The Carter administration was more reflective than most regarding the imperial residue of past U.S. policy, certainly more than the Nixon and Ford administrations that preceded it. Writing in 1970, Zbigniew Brzezinski called for an “explicit move to abandon the Monroe Doctrine,” which had long been a source of antagonism for the United States' Latin American neighbors. The future National Security Advisor noted with irony how the 1823 proclamation had evolved from its origins to prevent Great Power meddling in the Western Hemisphere to become a pretext for U.S. meddling in the name of containment. “The officer corps,” claimed Brzezinski, “is more likely to be the source of revolutionary change than the local communist parties, and Latin American discontent will be galvanized not by ideology but by continuing anti-Yankeeism – pure and simple.” The Latin American specialist on Brzezinski's National Security Council staff, Robert Pastor, acknowledges that the Carter administration

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<sup>29</sup> The literature on this *imperial residue* is vast: On charges of economic or cultural imperialism, consider the “New Left” critique: Walter LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. LaFeber also documents the twenty marine landings in service of Gunboat/Dollar Diplomacy; Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945*. For parallels between authoritarian proxies, installed during the era of “Good Neighbor,” and British modes of informal empire, with its reliance on elite colonial collaborators: Ronald Robinson, “Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,” *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe. London: Longman, 1972, p. 117-40; Michael Adas, “Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15 (March 2004). p. 31-63. For Rooseveltian and Cold War interventions: Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Norton, 1993; Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

“viewed the origin of the crises as one of social injustice, political-military stagnation, and repression.” Notwithstanding their self-conscious appreciation for the problem, many in the administration embraced the tacit assumptions that underpinned both Monroe’s and Truman’s doctrines and would encounter the deep layers of imperial sediment that had been deposited by this credo of exceptionalism, which were complicated by its inherent contradictions.<sup>30</sup>

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Although the values that animated the Carter administration’s human rights policy comported with the president’s religious, moral and political instincts, the issue of human rights was muted in his early campaign rhetoric, subsumed under a more general theme of morality in government. “The moral theme was something right in Carter’s soul,” remembered James Fallows, one of his principle speechwriters. Although many associate Carter’s presidency with the emergence of human rights as a U.S. foreign policy concern, there was a crescendo of human rights activism, both within the U.S. government and globally, during the years leading up to the 1976 election. Minnesota Democrat Donald Fraser, chairing a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, convened dozens of hearings on various human rights issues, triggering a series of legislative actions that increasingly linked U.S. foreign aid to the human rights practices of recipient nations. A junior representative from Iowa, Democrat Tom Harkin promulgated many of these linkages in an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, declaring that a “principal goal of the foreign policy of the United States is to promote the increased observance of internationally recognized human rights by all countries. In 1974, one of Carter’s rivals for the 1976 Democratic nomination, Washington

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<sup>30</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*, New York, Viking Press, 1970, p. 279, 288; Robert Pastor, “Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1984, p. 181.

Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson co-sponsored an amendment that restricted ‘most favored nation’ trade status to governments with liberal economic and emigration policies.<sup>31</sup>

Daniel Moynihan proclaimed the 1976 Democratic Platform to be the “strongest platform commitment to human rights in history.” In reality, it reflected a superficial consensus that papered over a growing chasm in the party. Liberals like Fraser, reacting to Washington’s history of complicity in the excesses of right-wing dictators through much of the Cold War, saw human rights as a redemptive means to exorcise the skeletons of Vietnam and Chile from the national closet. Riding that same wave of activism, conservatives like Jackson, whose amendment had taken dead aim at Soviet repression of predominantly Jewish dissidents seeking to emigrate, sought to leverage human rights to take the ideological offensive in the Cold War. Although candidate Carter had characterized Jackson’s amendment as “ill-advised [meddling in the affairs of] a proud nation,” the Georgian did not fit neatly in to either camp, seeing human rights as an effective tool to advance both agendas. As the ‘Jackson Democrats’ became increasingly disillusioned with mainstream liberalism, some formed the vanguard of the neoconservative movement, which later assailed the Carter administration for allegedly showing too much enthusiasm for prosecuting the excesses of ‘authoritarian’ dictators, and too little for those of the ‘totalitarian’ regimes of the Communist bloc.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Fallows, quoted in Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, Latham, 1986, p. 1; Kenneth Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3, (December, 1999), p. 1233-5. “In the years just prior...there was a phenomenal burst of human rights activism in the United States;” Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 189-203. Fraser “determined the fate of most, if not all, human rights questions in the House” between 1973 and 1976. The legislation most notably included a series of amendments sponsored in the House by Iowa Democrat Tom Harkin; Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*;

<sup>32</sup> Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, p. 2-4. Carter speechwriter Patrick Anderson later recalled that human rights “were seen politically as a

Independent of the various agendas and activism within the United States government, an emerging transnational network of human rights activism was exerting increasing influence on policy makers in both the East and the West. In 1975, under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the nations of NATO and the Warsaw Pact signed the Helsinki Final Act. The Western nations of the European Commission insisted on the centrality of human rights norms as a means of constructing a European identity. They pressed for the inclusion of the ‘basket-three provisions,’ which bound signatories to respect human rights in their countries, presenting Eastern Bloc governments with stark ideological and structural conflicts. Nevertheless, these repressive regimes signed the accords, having negotiated what they hoped to be a countervailing non-interference principle, while no doubt drawing solace from the dismal enforcement record of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>33</sup>

Many concluded that the non-interference principle constituted an implicit recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. While some dubbed Helsinki “Ford’s Yalta,” exiled Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn called it “a funeral for Eastern Europe.” As the election drew near, Carter joined in the fray, pronouncing Helsinki “a tremendous diplomatic victory for Leonid Brezhnev.”

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no-lose issue at the convention; For one of the most notable neoconservative critiques of Carter’s human rights policy, see: Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary*, 68 (November 1979); John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy: Carter to Clinton*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997, p. 17; Partial Transcript of the National Democratic Issues Conference, Louisville, KY, November 23, 1975, *The Presidential Campaign, 1976, Vol. 1, Part 1, Jimmy Carter*, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978, p. 83-4.

<sup>33</sup> Final Act, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Helsinki, August 1, 1975, excerpted in Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 11-7; Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, p. 9-54, 91-194. Kissinger’s State Department downplayed Helsinki’s human rights provisions, fearing that they would undermine the strategic and tactical objectives of détente; Kenneth Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” p.1234.

Impugning the Ford administration, he added, “We cannot look the other way when a government tortures people, or jails them for their beliefs, or denies minorities fair treatment and the right to immigrate.” Nevertheless, Daniel Thomas has argued that under Helsinki’s rhetorical rubric, an erstwhile fragmented community of dissidents found solidarity. They employed a discourse of resistance, now legitimized by the international community, trapping the repressive regimes in a cycle of nominal compliance punctuated by reactionary repression.<sup>34</sup>

Following the Georgian’s narrow victory in November, Thomas has noted that “the burgeoning Helsinki network,” no doubt encouraged by Carter’s recent rhetoric, “worked to shape the foreign policy priorities of the new administration.” The head of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, Florida Democratic Representative Dante Fascell, urged the Carter administration to include a strong statement on human rights in his inaugural address. “Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere.” Carter proclaimed, “You can depend on the United States to remain steadfast in its commitment to human freedom and liberty.” Almost immediately the incoming administration was inundated with a firestorm of human rights advocacy. The State Department took the initiative soon after the inaugural by publicly rebuking Prague for its repressive response to *Charter 77*, a human rights manifesto signed by 240 dissidents whose modest claims referenced Helsinki. The department’s spokesman proclaimed, “We must strongly deplore the violation of such rights and freedom wherever they occur.” Marking the first time the U.S. government had officially filed a complaint under Helsinki’s auspices he continued, “All signatories...are pledged to promote, respect and observe human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.” Twenty-

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, p. 9-54, 91-194; Jimmy Carter, Address to the B’nai B’rith, Washington D.C., September 8, 1976, *The Presidential Campaign, 1976, Vol. 1, Part 1, Jimmy Carter*, p. 712-4.

four hours later, Foggy Bottom turned its sights on Moscow, warning that “any attempts by the Soviet authorities to intimidate [prominent dissident and Nobel laureate] Andrei Sakharov would not silence legitimate criticism in the Soviet Union and would conflict with accepted international standards in the field of human rights.” Unprecedented though they were, the impact of these statements was soon blunted when the public learned that senior administration officials had not authorized the criticism of Moscow.<sup>35</sup>

The president told the press that while neither he nor Vance had been consulted before the State Department’s public criticism of Moscow, it reflected “his attitude.” He was concerned, however, that “preaching to other governments in a superficial way” would “exacerbate the situation...and hurt progress.” Nevertheless, he would not “back down.” Carter insisted that the Soviets had to be made aware of the administration’s “deep commitment to human rights.” The following day Vance elucidated, the United States would “speak frankly about injustice,” but “in a non-provocative way,” not wishing to appear “strident or polemical.” The fact that the administration let these statements stand drew praise, both domestically and internationally, although these equivocal endorsements also drew charges that the administration was beating a hasty

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<sup>35</sup> Dante Fascell, cited in Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, p. 135-7; Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*; In early January a group of 240 Czech dissidents published *Charter 77*, “Charter 77,” *New Leader*, January 31, 1977. Full text reprinted in: Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 103-6, 111-15. Among the luminaries advocating on behalf of the Charter were newly minted Nobel laureate Saul Bellow and former German Chancellor Willy Brandt; *Washington Post*, January 26, 1977, “Sakharov Gets an Official Warning about Statement on Moscow Subway Explosion. Sakharov had been threatened by Soviet authorities on January 25 after he had earlier accused the state police of staging a fatal bombing in the Moscow subway system as a pretext for cracking down on dissident ‘terrorists;’ *Washington Post*, January 27, 1977, “State Department Shows New Talkativeness;” *Washington Post*, January 28, 1977, “Soviet Treatment of Top Dissident Criticized by the U.S.,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1977, “U.S. Cautions Soviet on Sakharov Curbs;” Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 103, 105, 111-23; *The Christian Science Monitor* of January 28, 1977 nodded approvingly, “The Carter administration is wasting no time setting the right tone in the conduct of foreign policy.”

retreat from its “absolute” commitment to human rights. The public censure of the official who issued the unauthorized warning to Moscow prompted the *Dallas Morning News* to quip that “Frederick T. Brown has plainly been reading too many Jimmy Carter speeches.”<sup>36</sup>

There can be little question that the administration’s response to the surge of human rights advocacy in early 1977 was unprecedented: from the State Department’s public rebukes of Prague and Moscow; to Carter’s subsequent well-publicized formal response to Sakharov’s letter; to the reception of Vladimir Bukovsky in the White House. Nor can it be doubted that these actions provoked vocal reactions from Eastern governments, diplomatic sparring on both sides, and a short-term increase in repressive tactics behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, given that the stimulus for these actions came from outside the administration in virtually every instance, one must question the degree of latitude that the administration enjoyed in formulating its response. The political cost of not responding was abundantly clear to its senior officials. In a nationally televised debate that pollster George Gallup dubbed “the most decisive moment in the [1976] campaign,” Carter reminded the world that the Ford White House had refused to receive Solzhenitsyn, “a symbol of human freedom recognized around the world.” Accepting that the Carter administration felt compelled to respond in some fashion, this leaves open questions concerning the impacts of its response: Did its

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<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, January 31, 1977, “Carter Says Warning on Soviet Dissident Reflected His Views.” February 1, “Vance Says U.S. Won’t Be Strident Over Rights Abroad;” Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 105, 116-23. Both Carter and Vance dedicated a significant portion of these press conferences to discussing the upcoming Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with the Soviets. Vance prognosticated that the public rebuke would not hinder these talks; *Dallas Morning News*, February 2, 1977; Media response ranged from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of February 2, 1977, heralding “a refreshing change...The Carter Administration has put itself squarely and publicly on the side of those courageous Czechs;” to the polemics of the *Manchester New Hampshire Union Leader* of February 6, 1977, characterizing the remarks as “predictable but nonetheless shameful...a double talk routine which should have embarrassed everyone...a stammering act [that] fooled no one.”

advocacy improve the plight of the dissidents? Did it harm relations with the Soviet Union on other matters of considerable national interest?<sup>37</sup>

Thomas has gone so far as to suggest that the subsequent collapse of the Soviet empire was precipitated “by domestic and international demands for compliance with human rights norms.” Nancy Mitchell sees Helsinki as “the Greek army in the Trojan horse; invisible at first; it penetrated the heart of the Soviet empire and destroyed it.” Independent of these bold conclusions, there can be little doubt that the Carter administration’s response to this “Helsinki network,” far from empty rhetoric, amplified and contributed to its corrosive effects. Although Carter expressed doubts as to whether his advocacy helped or hindered the near-term plight of the dissidents, their words speak volumes. Solzhenitsyn told an audience of influential Americans during the campaign, “Interfere as much as you can...We beg you to come and ‘interfere.’” In the words of another dissident, “That one letter [from Carter to Sakharov] gave enough spiritual food...for three months.” Still another told the *Cleveland Press*, “World opinion is what keeps us going.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, January 29, 1977, “Text of Sakharov Letter to Carter on Human Rights;” *Washington Post*, January 27, 1977, “State Department Shows New Talkativeness.” *New York Times*, January 28, 1977, “U.S. Cautions Soviet on Sakharov Curbs;” *New York Times*, February 6, 1977, Bernard Gwertzman, “U.S. Orders Ouster of Soviet Newsmen in Move of Reprisal: Test of Washington is Seen;” *New York Times*, Bernard Gwertzman, February 7, 1977, “U.S. Again Comments on Soviet Dissident,” p. 1; *New York Times*, Graham Hovey, February 18, 1977, “U.S. Stoutly Defends Letter that Carter Wrote to Sakharov,” p. 1. Carter’s letter (dated February 5) excerpted on p. 3; *New York Times*, February 25, 1977 “Moscow Apparently Asks Carter not to Meet with Bukovsky,” p. 8; *New York Times*, March 2, 1977, “Carter and Mondale See Bukovsky;” Transcript of the Second Presidential Debate between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, October 6, 1976, San Francisco, CA, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*; Gallup, quoted in William G. Hyland, *Mortal Rivals: Superpower Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, New York: Random House, 1987, p. 173; Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 452-4.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, p. 123-5, 136-7, 284-6. Quotes Solzhenitsyn; Nancy Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter,” p. 5; “Another dissident” quoted in Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, p. 26-7; *The Cleveland Press*, February 18, 1977, p. 128. Reprinted in Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 108.

Apart from the rhetorical blandishments of the inaugural address, there is no evidence to suggest that any in the administration believed that its human rights policy could or should be uniformly applied, much less trump all other national interests. Immediately after his department fired the opening volley across the bows of Prague and Moscow, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance told the press that the administration would comment “from time to time...when seeing a threat to human rights, [but only when] believing it constructive to do so.” Reiterating this message the following week, the president “reserved the right to speak out forcefully whenever human rights are threatened...when he thought it advisable,” but emphasized that he would not do so in “every instance.” In the first of his weekly National Security briefs to the president, which would become a part of Carter’s policy-making routine, Brzezinski worried that the crescendo of media attention drawn by the administration’s criticism of Soviet human rights abuses might detract from its “efforts to stimulate a serious discussion of the central and concrete issues in the U.S.-Soviet relationship.” He advised Carter to “define more broadly his overall posture on human rights, underlining...that it is based on principles...applicable to all nations [and not] a matter of anti-Soviet tactics.”<sup>39</sup>

Of the “central and concrete issues” to which Brzezinski referred, none was more “central” than the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks. Immediately following the election, Carter dispatched long-time Soviet hand Averell Harriman to meet with Anatoly Dobrynin. The Soviet Ambassador to Washington informed the Kremlin that

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<sup>39</sup> *New York Times*, February 1, 1977, Bernard Gwertzman, “Vance Says U.S. Won’t be Strident over Rights Abroad;” February 9, “Transcript of Presidents Press Conference on Foreign and Domestic Issues;” Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, February 19, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report,” *DDRS*; Testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Vance explained that the administration’s human rights policy would be applied on a case-by-case basis, “We must balance a political concern for human rights against economic and security goals.” Vance testimony cited in Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 114.

Carter was “very interested in the question of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, which along with the question of limitation of strategic arms would be a priority” in his administration. Soon after the inauguration, in what became one of his earliest and most visible diplomatic missions, Vance was slated travel to Moscow in late March to resume the dormant arms limitations talks. A strong believer in personal diplomacy, Carter dispatched a letter to Brezhnev just after settling into the Oval Office. He reiterated his desire to advance the arms limitations talks, to “improve bilateral economic relations, [and to cooperatively foster] peace in critical regions [like the Middle East].” While those topics were prominent in the ensuing correspondence, Carter also made it clear, “We can not be indifferent to the fate of freedom and individual human rights.”<sup>40</sup>

Over the coming weeks, while their two governments were engaged in acrimonious debate and diplomatic sparring over human rights in the public arena, the two heads of state privately probed one another on the same issue in the subtext of the four letters exchanged during Carter’s first month in office. As the public debate grew increasingly shrill, so did the tone of the private correspondence, with Brezhnev’s final response described by Carter’s National Security Advisor as “brutal, cynical, sneering and even condescending.” Moscow “would not like to have our patience tested in any matters of international policy,” Brezhnev frostily warned, and would not “allow such interference in its internal affairs...whatever pseudo-humanitarian slogans are being used to present

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<sup>40</sup> Memoconv between Anatoly Dobrynin and Averill Harriman, December 1, 1976, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *Cold War International History Project* (hereafter *CWIHP*), *The Carter-Brezhnev Project*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution, [Link to collection](#); *New York Times*, January 28, 1977, Bernard Gwertzman, “Carter Looks to New Arms Talks with the Russians within Three Months;” Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, p. 151, 154-5; Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, January 26, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*.

it.”<sup>41</sup>

Carter informed Brezhnev that his administration “expected cooperation...toward the fulfillment of the agreements reached in Helsinki.” Brezhnev reminded Carter that these accords also called for the strict observance of “the basic principles of...non-interference.” Carter held his ground, while “it was not his intention to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, [he felt compelled] to publicly express the sincere and deep feelings which our people and I feel.” Indeed the president’s stance was playing well on both ‘Main Street’ and Pennsylvania Avenue. “It is the responsibility of this nation,” opined the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, “to be the world’s leading advocate of freedom regardless of the diplomatic difficulties created by such advocacy.” Amidst the discordant public debate, on the eve of the SALT talks fifty-eight Senators signed a letter assuring Carter, “American leadership in the field of human rights will be welcomed by our own citizens and overwhelmingly by the peoples of the world...There can be no true understanding among nations unless formal pledges about human rights are implemented.”<sup>42</sup>

The centerpiece of the Nixon and Ford Soviet policy was the notion of ‘linkage,’

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, January 26, 1977; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 5, 1977; Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, February 14, 1977; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 25, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, p. 154-5.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, January 26, 1977; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 5, 1977; Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, February 14, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, February 21, 1977; *New York Times*, March 26, 1977, “58 in Senate Send Letter of Support to Carter on Rights: A Prelude to Talks in Soviet;” Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D, OH), Letter to Carter, March 25, 1977, cited in Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 108; In fact, while the administration was disavowing linkage in its relations with Moscow, Carter’s National Security Advisor reported that the policy of linking human rights to foreign assistance was evoking individual and collective “expressions of national indignation” in Latin America (Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, March 11, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #4,” *DDRS*).

architected by Henry Kissinger and based on reciprocal concessions in otherwise unrelated areas of mutual interest. From the beginning, the Carter administration sought to distance its Soviet policy from these entangling linkages. While “a competition in ideals and ideas is inevitable between our societies,” he wrote to Brezhnev, “This must not interfere with common efforts towards the formation of a more peaceful, just and humane world.” Nevertheless, as one *Washington Post* pundit noted, Congress had gone Kissinger “one better,” by statutorily linking U.S. aid and trade policies to the human rights practices of other countries. This was not lost on Brezhnev, who warned Carter that “attempts to...link trade...to the domestic competence of governments” would damage not only economic relations but the overall relationship. Brezhnev’s inversion of the trade linkage was an oblique suggestion that progress on arms limitations was linked to a “Carter retreat on human rights.” *Pravda* was more direct, “Carter’s outspokenness on human rights could damage the atmosphere in which a strategic arms agreement must be negotiated.” Undaunted, the White House announced that it “did not fear open debate on the principles that guide our respective societies, [nor would it] allow this...healthy debate to stand in the way [of the SALT negotiations].”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, January 26, 1977; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 5, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*; *Washington Post*, February 7, 1977, Op-ed; Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, March 11, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #4,” *DDRS*; *New York Times*, February 19, 1977, Juan de Onis, “Some Latin Nations Uneasy on U.S. Ties,” p. 7; March 14, 1977, “Pravda Cautions U.S. on Rights Criticism,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 1977; White House press release by Jody Powell, March 22, 1977, in *New York Times*, March 23, 1977, “Carter Encouraged by Soviet on Arms; Adamant on Rights; An op-ed in the same issue, “A Sneeze from Moscow,” opined that Carter “spoke for an overwhelming majority of Americans...to project an American vision...a posture that Americans have held through much of their history, and which their history entitles them to hold.” Carter had mentioned that some were concerned “every time that Brezhnev sneezed.” Both Carter and Powell were reacting Brezhnev’s critical remarks with regards U.S. policy at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of Trade Unions, March 21, 1977, excerpted in: *New York Times*, March 22, 1977, “Excerpts of Brezhnev’s Speech at Labor Congress.”

When the talks collapsed on March 30, as the *Times* of London observed, it was inevitable that some would question whether “the president’s outspokenness on human rights had soured the Russians.” Indeed Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko seized the moment, “We shall not permit others to take the stance of tutors and teach us how to conduct our internal affairs.” Predictable posturing aside, the *Times* rhetorically asked “whether the hardnosed [Soviets would] let such irritation affect strategic interests?” Rather, the record overwhelmingly suggests that the material terms of the proposed treaty derailed the negotiations. Brezhnev believed that the new administration was acting in bad faith: both by advancing proposals that were “militarily inequitable,” and by reneging on terms that he believed to have been resolved in the 1974 Vladivostok negotiations. Mitchell explains, “Carter’s proposed cuts eviscerated the heart of [the Soviet] nuclear force...while leaving the U.S. force...largely in place. Brezhnev was appalled.”<sup>44</sup>

Joshua Muravchik has implied that “from that moment” the Carter administration retreated from its commitment to human rights, “pulling back from [its] outspoken criticism of Soviet...violations.” It is important to remember, however, that much of the impetus for the flurry of activism came from outside the administration: from a transnational network of human rights advocacy; from the national and international media; and from the actions and reactions of other governments, not least that of the Soviet Union. Rather than ‘an administration in retreat,’ it seems more plausible that

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<sup>44</sup> *London Times* article quoted in: Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7,” *DDRS*; Andrei Gromyko official statement, March 31, 1977, cited in: Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 108; Nancy Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter,” p. 7-8; For the arc of the respective negotiation positions of the U.S. and Soviets, see: Correspondence between Carter and Brezhnev, Letters of January 26, February 4, 14 and 25, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*; *New York Times*, March 31, 1977, “U.S – Soviet Proposals on Arms Cuts;” February 9, 1977, “Transcript of President’s News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters.”

the frequency and intensity of advocacy attenuated at roughly the same time that an ambitious foreign policy agenda was hitting stride. Moreover, there are a variety of equally plausible explanations for this attenuation, not least a near-term crackdown by repressive governments.<sup>45</sup>

There was undoubtedly a multitude of high expectations invested in the rhetoric Carter deployed on his road to the White House. It was inevitable that these expectations would be attenuated when confronted with the complex reality of accelerating geopolitical entropy. For its part, the Carter administration, as have most, looked to early symbolic gestures to establish a tone for its presidency, while scrambling to formulate more substantive policy lines. For its part, the Kremlin tested the incoming administration, as it had with most, and was understandably more wary of Carter's early rhetorical posturing in the absence of a demonstrated commitment to continued cooperation on matters of mutual interest. For its part, the transnational network of human rights advocates released a torrent of pent-up advocacy, which no doubt suffered a subsequent 'chilling effect' from the repressive reaction it evoked. For its part, the media had a short attention span, then and now – yesterday's headline is tomorrow's international brief. While the vocal public debate retreated from the front pages, there is little evidence that the Carter administration modulated the principles that guided its responses to this early wave of human rights advocacy in the face of Soviet intransigence in early 1977.

Even as Vance returned from Moscow empty-handed, Carter publicly reiterated that he saw "no evidence [of an] incorrect linkage" between human rights and arm limitations. He promised to "hang tough" on his negotiation terms and flatly

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<sup>45</sup> Joshua Muravchik., *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, p. 32-5.

announced that he would “not modify his human rights statements.” Taking stock of the administration’s human rights policy in the wake of the failed talks, Brzezinski told the president, “Our commitment to human rights has put the Soviet leadership on the defensive in an area where it has had a free ride for at least...eight years. The reason [they] are reacting so strongly to your insistence on human rights,” he continued, “is not because they fear that we will make human rights a condition for our relations with them. [Rather,] they know that human rights is a compelling idea and that associating America with this idea not only strengthens us, but...generates pressures from within their own system. Ideologically,” he concluded, “[the Soviets are] on the defensive.”<sup>46</sup>

The Carter administration’s vocal advocacy of human rights had also placed on the defensive a number of erstwhile allies whose human rights abuses were well-known. When Secretary Vance announced sanctions against Argentina, Uruguay and Ethiopia citing human rights violations on February 23, the administration’s disavowal of linkage in its East-West relations had a hollow ring to those nations for whom U.S. foreign assistance was linked to human rights. As the administration was engaged in its public and private debate with its Soviet interlocutors, Brzezinski reported that the administration’s foreign aid policy “continued to reverberate throughout ...countries of Latin America, evoking individual and collective “expressions of national indignation.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jimmy Carter press conference, March 30, 1977, excerpted in: *New York Times*, March 31, 1977, “Excerpts of Remarks by President,” p. 12; Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7, *DDRS*.”

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 5, 1977; Letter from Jimmy Carter to Leonid Brezhnev, February 14, 1977, “The Path to Disagreement: U.S.-Soviet Communications Leading Up to Vance’s March 1977 Trip to Moscow,” *CWIHP*. Carter expressed his sympathy for Brezhnev’s views on Jackson-Vanik but reminded the General Secretary that his hands were tied by Congress; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, p. 154-5; Brzezinski recalls that Secretary Vance “also felt strongly that we should do what we could to lift the trade restrictions that were imposed on U.S-Soviet trade by the Jackson-Vanik Amendment;” *Washington Post*, February 7, 1977; Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards;”

Brzezinski was particularly concerned with the impact on U.S. relations with Brazil, in his mind an “emerging superpower” with the potential to be a stabilizing influence both in Latin American as well as Africa. In reaction to the release of the State Department’s legislatively mandated country reports that were critical of its human rights practices, the military government in Rio headed by Ernesto Geisel, following the leads of both Argentina and Uruguay, informed the U.S. embassy on March 5 that it would reject fifty million dollars in military sales credits for fiscal year 1978 and then proceeded to abrogate the twenty-five year Mutual Defense Agreement between the two governments. The governments of El Salvador and Guatemala soon followed suit. The Brazilian Foreign Ministry denounced the “unacceptable and tendentious commentaries and judgments” in the State Department report and were joined the following day by leaders of the opposition party in their condemnation of “North American interference in the internal affairs of Brazil, setting aside their “opposition to the government” with the “sovereignty of the nation at stake.”<sup>48</sup>

While the U.S. embassy in Rio de Janeiro released the now-familiar statement that the United States “did not consider concern among nations for the observance of human rights, in keeping with the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights..., to constitute interference in the internal affairs” of other nations, the authoritarian regimes in Latin America fell back on the ‘non-interference’ principle of the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American states, just as the

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Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, March 11, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #4,” *DDRS*; *New York Times*, February 19, Juan de Onis, “Some Latin Nations Uneasy on U.S. Ties,” p. 7; February 25, Bernard Gwertzman, “U.S. Cuts Aid in Rights Violations: Assistance is Reduced for Argentina, Uruguay and Ethiopia;”

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7, *DDRS*; *New York Times*, March 6, Jonathan Kandell, “Brazilian Government Reject U.S. Military Sales Credits for 1978-79 Period,” p. 11; *New York Times*, March 7, Jonathan Kandell, “Brazilian Opposition Joins Protest to U.S. over Human Rights Report,” p. 8; Reuters, *New York Times*, March 18, 1977, “General Brown Concerned over Latin Stand on Aid, p. A7.

Soviet bloc nations had done when confronted with the human rights provisions of the Helsinki accords. Moreover, the Carter administration's vocal disavowal of any linkage between human rights and other aspects of its relations with Moscow was ringing hollow in the capitals of the Western Hemisphere where, under the explicit pretext of human rights linkages, vital assistance was either being cut or was under duress. As Brzezinski told the president in early 1977, officials in the Argentine government had already issued private statements pining for the simpler Cold War dynamic of the Ford administration where "military regimes in Latin America [were viewed] more as anti-communist bulwarks than as violators of human rights."<sup>49</sup>

Things were never so simple for the opposition parties in these repressive regimes. The actions of the Carter administration had indeed struck a nationalistic chord with the opposition, amplified by the *imperial residue* of gunboat and dollar diplomacy couched in a narrative of exceptional paternalism, which triggered a superficial show of solidarity. Nevertheless, as the contemporary media coverage reveals, there was a high degree of ambivalence toward the administration's stance. Robert Guzzo, the editor of *Veja*, an important Brazilian weekly publication, captured this ambivalence in a letter to his readers, "While Brazil surely does not need outsiders pointing out her errors or determining what the nation can or cannot do, the controversy over human rights would not have been initiated if Brazil were living under fully democratic institutions." Guzzo ran the full text of the State Departments damning report in an eight-page cover story on March 14. While the report may have been full of "tendentious commentaries and judgments," there is no denying that it also had a corrosive effect on the structures

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<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, March 6, Jonathan Kandell, "Brazilian Government Reject U.S. Military Sales Credits for 1978-79 Period," p. 11; *New York Times*, March 7, Jonathan Kandell, "Brazilian Opposition Joins Protest to U.S. over Human Rights Report," p. 8; Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, Feb 19, 1977, "Weekly National Security Report," *DDRS*.

of power that perpetuated the repressive tactics it sought to indict.<sup>50</sup>

Liberalizing as this pressure may have been over the long term, it nevertheless left open the fears that in the short term it would provoke a reactionary response from the repressive regimes and that reductions in aid would worsen the lot of those suffering under their repressive apparatus while leaving intact the organs of repression. As Jonathan Kandell noted in the *New York Times*, Brazilian strongman Ernesto Geisel had over the past two years been relaxing his government's authoritarian hold on moderate opposition factions and many feared that "any gesture from Washington would be greeted with cynicism...[and] could lead to a backlash" against that opposition. Still others, like Carlos Marchi editorializing in Rio's prestigious *Jornal do Brasil*, believed that Carter's election had forced Brazil "to look into itself and rethink everything about its foreign policy...Carter has changed the rules of the game...breaking the pleasant relationship developed by Kissinger."<sup>51</sup>

Although some have criticized Carter and his administration for carelessly deploying 'empty rhetoric,' this rhetoric was not without effect. Although the Geisel government had already been responding to international pressure to liberalize, State Department officials reported in mid-1977 that reports of torture in Brazil had ceased, a trend that one *Washington Post* reporter attributed in part to pressure from the new administration. The authoritarian head of the Paraguayan government Alfredo Stroessner announced that because of his "impression that Carter is serious about human rights" he was releasing dozens of political prisoners, including some communist leaders that had been imprisoned for two decades. President Francisco

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Guzzo editorial and cover story, *Veja*, March 14. Cited in Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, March 18, 1977, "Weekly National Security Report #5, *DDRS*."

<sup>51</sup> *New York Times*, March 7, Jonathan Kandell, "Brazilian Opposition Joins Protest to U.S. over Human Rights Report," p. 8; Carlos Marchi editorial, *Jornal do Brasil*, April 25. Cited in Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 29, 1977, "Weekly National Security Report #11, *DDRS*."

Morales of Peru announced plans a general amnesty for political prisoners in “direct response to the emphasis being placed on human rights by the U.S. President,” a move which Brzezinski believed was in part meant to embarrass rival governments in Santiago and Rio de Janeiro, although the Pinochet government had already released hundreds of political prisoners following Carter’s election.<sup>52</sup>

In early April, Brzezinski offered this sanguine assessment of the administration’s Latin American policy to the president, “We are still shaping our basic approach, but I am hopeful.” The National Security Advisor elaborated, ours “will not be a new policy, something which every new administration has tended to proudly proclaim – and then forget. Instead of focusing on Latin America as something special to be protected by the Monroe Doctrine (which most Latin Americans resent),” the Carter administration was “moving toward an approach which stresses bilateral relations of various types, with individual Latin American states, and which deals with their broader problems in a wider global context. I believe this is responsive to their pride and to their needs.”<sup>53</sup>

Notwithstanding the “basic approach” outlined by the National Security Advisor, the Latin American specialist on his staff, Robert Pastor, admitted that high level administration officials had “little time,” given their ambitious domestic and foreign policy agenda, for specific policies toward individual Latin American countries. Pastor argues, however, that “the absence of high-level attention, however, did not mean that...the United States did not have a policy” or that countries like Nicaragua were

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<sup>52</sup> *Washington Post*, July 17, Dan Morgan, “Issue of Human Rights Complicates Relations with Dozens of Nations,” p. p. 17; *New York Times*, February 19, Juan de Onis, “Some Latin Nations Uneasy on U.S. Ties,” p. 7; Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, February 19, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report,” *DDRS*; *New York Times*, February 24, 1977, “Paraguay is Freeing Political Prisoners,” p. 6; Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, March 25, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #6, *DDRS*; Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 29, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #11, *DDRS*; *New York Times*, November 17, 1976, “Chile to Free More than 300 Political Prisoners,” p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7, *DDRS*;

neglected. Rather, he claims that the general policy approach was set at the highest levels of the administration and then “fashioned” by middle level officials to the “specific circumstances” of the various countries. Upon taking office, Carter immediately directed the Policy Review Committee, the high-level interdepartmental policy-setting apparatus coordinated of his National Security Council, to undertake long-term reviews of policies for Latin America in general, North-South relations and human rights – all of which provided rubrics against which middle level officials “fashioned” their policy positions. Pastor elaborates, there “was no specific policy toward Nicaragua early in the Carter Presidency,” rather “only human rights policies that applied to Nicaragua.” Nevertheless, as we have already seen and will continue to see, while the principles that guided this high-level human rights policy were well-understood and broadly agreed upon, the ways in which these principles interacted with other foreign policy goals and the “specific circumstances” to which they were meant to be applied often resulted in conflicts that were laden with ambiguity. Moreover, given the legislative mandates that the administration inherited, it hardly enjoyed full freedom of maneuver to set policy in the realm of human rights.<sup>54</sup>

As we have already noted, in the flurry of human rights legislations leading up to the Carter administration, Congress had required the State Department to submit annual reports on the human rights practices of foreign governments receiving U.S. military or economic assistance. This legislation called for the creation of the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs to discharge that mission. While Kissinger’s State

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<sup>54</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 41-2, 5. The notable exceptions to Pastor’s observation (which he acknowledges) is Panama, the first policy review directive issued by Carter immediately following his inauguration. See: Presidential Review Memorandum / NSC-1, “Panama,” January 21, 1977, *DNSA*, Item no. PD01536; Presidential Review Memorandum / NSC-8, “North-South Strategy,” January 21, 1977, *DNSA*, Item no. PD01540; Presidential Review Memorandum / NSC-17, “Review of U.S. Policy toward Latin America,” January 26, 1977, *DNSA*, Item no. PD01533.

Department gave little more than perfunctory attention to the newly minted bureau, the Carter administration sought to invest it with policy-making authority. To head this effort, Carter tapped Patt Derian, a fellow southerner and veteran civil rights activist who, while “no stranger to the human rights struggle” in the United States, was a self-professed “novice in foreign affairs.” While Derian believed Governor Carter to be “soft on race and bad for women” she threw her support behind him in her home state of Mississippi on the sole qualification that he did not “turn out to be George Wallace in a double-knit suit,” believing the Georgia governor offered the best answer in the deep-South to the popularity of the former Alabama governor. She later told a *New York Times* reporter that Carter turned out to be a “happy surprise.” She liked the “way he made decisions...the way he thought about the country...his administrative ability and the great discipline he showed. She decided he was just what we needed.” Robert Pastor has described Derian as the “articulate public voice” of the bureau, while her deputy Mark Schneider, who had been Senator Edward Kennedy’s Latin American advisor in his 1976 bid for the presidency, was the “adept bureaucratic operator.” Although the Senate confirmed Derian as the Coordinator for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, her position was later elevated to the level of Assistant Secretary of State and her bureau took on additional staff and responsibility.<sup>55</sup>

Derian has often been cast as a dilettante and idealist, a fish out of water in the pragmatic old-boy network of the State Department. There is some truth to this. Prior to her confirmation, she offered this pithy explanation for why the Carter administration was so committed to human rights, “Because it’s the right thing to do.” She told one *New York Times* reporter, “It’s almost discouraging to hear the same arguments, the

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<sup>55</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 189-203; *New York Times*, June 23, 1977, Barbara Gamarekian, “The Human Rights Spokeswoman,” p. C1; Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 43.

same defenses, and the same rationales for not doing things. Hunger is hunger, and pain is pain, and the abused and mistreated are the same everywhere.” Outspoken by nature, Derian grasped better than most the power of rhetoric when wielded by American officials, “We ought not to minimize the value of talking about human rights. Countries are just like individuals – they are exquisitely sensitive to the opinions of others.” It was precisely this outspokenness that made her colleagues in the State Department uneasy.<sup>56</sup>

More often than not the views of the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs came into conflict with the regional bureaus reflecting the inherent tension between idealism and pragmatism that we have already observed at work in the administration’s early East-West relations. To many career Foreign Service officers, like Wade Matthews, the Central American Chief of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Derian’s rhetoric was “empty ‘feel good’ symbolism.” Historian John Dumbrell explains that the newly minted Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs saw autocrats like Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza “as exactly the kind of dictator the U.S. had so often supported in the past and as a symbol of the kind of legacy that Carter was elected to vanquish.” Conversely, the regional bureaus, like Inter-American Affairs, “tended to argue that Somoza should be patronized and that he would reform if the carrot of aid were dangled in front of him.” While the well-known clashes between Humanitarian Affairs and the regional bureaus often did break along these lines, Derian exhibited an oft-overlooked penchant for pragmatism. “I believe that cutting off aid to a country shows that we have failed,” she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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<sup>56</sup> *Newsweek*, June 20, 1977, Angus Deming, “The Push for Human Rights.” Cites “the right thing to do” quote; *New York Times*, June 23, 1977, Barbara Gamarekian, “The Human Rights Spokeswoman.” p. C1.

prior to her confirmation. Such an approach is “starting at the wrong end.”<sup>57</sup>

During the Ford administration, the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs was headed by Assistant Secretary Harry Shlaudeman, the deputy chief of the Santiago mission during the now-infamous U.S.-abetted 1973 ouster of Salvador Allende. Prior to his own confirmation, Vance told a group of influential Hispanic Americans that he was looking to fill that post with someone “whose credentials on the human rights issue were impeccable, who had no past relationship with intelligence agencies, and was a tough, effective administrator.” Testifying at Vance’s confirmation hearing, the president of the national Congress of Hispanic American Citizens, Manuel D. Fierro, called for Vance to appoint UAW official Esteban Torres. Suggesting that the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs post had in years past been treated as the Foreign Service equivalent of a “sentence in Siberia,” he reminded Vance that the Hispanic community in the United States was no longer a “sleeping giant.” Despite widespread pressure from this community to broaden Foggy Bottom’s perspective in the Western hemisphere, Vance drew from the ranks Foreign Service establishment, finessing the race issue by calling on the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica, a black native of the Virgin Islands, Terence Todman. Lars Schoultz has noted with a mixture of amusement and reproach that while Todman professed to be “one hundred percent behind the doctrine” of linking aid to human rights, he “spent the better part of his brief career as Assistant Secretary of State trying to block aid reductions to the hemisphere’s most repressive regimes,” constituting what Schoultz has described as “something of a reverse human rights policy.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Matthews, quoted in John, Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation*, Manchester U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 151-2; *New York Times*, March 8, 1977, “State Department Aides Testify Rights Are Key Concern in Carter Foreign Policy, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 79-80, 117-8; Graham Hovey, *New York Times*, January 13, 1977, “Liberals Resisting Naming of a Black to a Key

“From the beginning,” argued Schoultz, it was obvious that the President and his major advisors held a near-perfect consensus that human rights would be given a greater relative value than they had during the Nixon-Ford years.” While this is true, it is also true that most in the administration harbored serious questions about the efficacy of the legalistic means prescribed by Congress. In one of his early weekly briefs to the president, Brzezinski worried that “the overzealous approach by the Congress...threatens to make virtually all of our international economic relationships conditional on the human rights performance of other countries” and would constitute “a major blow to our relations with the Third World and severely compromise our position in the multilateral financial institutions.” Carter underlined the words “overzealous approach” and jotted in the margins, “We need to check this.”<sup>59</sup>

Early in the administration’s tenure Todman appeared alongside Derian before the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs and warned that cutting aid to nations with whom the United States had cultivated “political-military relationships...dating back to and beyond the Second World War” would result in “widespread resentment and alienation.” While Derian called for the use of more “positive” influence tools, Todman urged Congress to allow the administration the “leeway to work with the military in Latin America, using the traditional tools of relatively modest security assistance programs to take advantage of whatever opportunities we might have to advance the cause of human rights and our other *real interests* in the hemisphere.”<sup>60</sup>

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Latin Post,” p. A7.

<sup>59</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 115; Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, April 9, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #8,” *DDRS*. Brzezinski was reacting to the recent passage in the House of a Harkin-sponsored amendment which, if it carried in the Senate and was not vetoed by Carter, would further limit executive discretion in trade and aid.

<sup>60</sup> *Washington Post*, January 12, 1977, Lee Lascaze, “Black Veteran of Foreign Service Leading for Suddenly Desired Post,” p. A2; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 117; Todman testimony before the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, April

While Congress had indeed mandated that U.S. aid be linked to the human rights practices of recipient country, it had also left to the executive branch the discretion to grant aid in cases where it could be shown to directly benefit those in need. Robert Pastor explains that this discretionary power left open considerable grounds for debate, “One could argue either that aid should be approved because it would always benefit some needy people, or that it should be denied because it would legitimize a repressive regime and prolong suffering.” One deputy administrator of USAID, Abelardo Valdez, was skeptical “about the effectiveness of cutting off economic aid as a means to force better human rights performance. In the first place our programs are generally not large enough to constitute effective leverage, at least in Latin America. In the second place the impact is probably felt more by the people the programs are aimed toward rather than by their own governments.” Arguing “that economic assistance directed at the poor should be one of the last cords to be cut, not one of the first,” Valdez nevertheless acknowledged that “there are cases in which a regime's record is so reprehensible that we should dissociate ourselves from it.”<sup>61</sup>

Pastor explains that this so-called ‘needy people loophole’ required a “framework for case-by-case decision-making.” The responsibility for this decision-making fell to Vance’s deputy Warren Christopher, who chaired an interagency committee chartered to “transform Carter’s commitment into policy,” and which relied on regional specialists in both the State Department and the National Security Council. Faced with the question of “whether to provide aid to encourage good performance, or deny aid to penalize bad performance,” the Christopher Group “judged that the best way to

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5, 1977, cited in *New York Times*, April 6, 1977, “Congress Asked to Aid Latins Despite Rights Curb,” p. 3. *Ital* added.

<sup>61</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 43-4; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 204.

implement the policy was to combine both the carrot and stick.” Tipping his hand to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early March 1977, Christopher declared that while the United States had an obligation to speak out so that “other countries will know we’re serious about this,” he believed that “quiet diplomacy” and “friendly persuasion” would be more effective tools than public pronouncements and cutting aid.<sup>62</sup>

Speaking at the Law Day ceremonies on April 30 in Athens, Georgia, Secretary Vance offered a first attempt at a more comprehensive articulation of the administration’s human rights policy: “Vance asks [for] realism in U.S. rights policy, conceding [that] there are constraints on Carter’s commitment,” headlined Bernard Gwertzman in a *New York Times* special report. Although Gwertzman characterized this as a “concession,” Vance’s call for realism deployed strikingly similar terms as his statement in the early days of the administration when he qualified Foggy Bottom’s reprimand of Prague and Moscow. “We must always keep in mind the limits of our power and of our wisdom,” the secretary reminded the audience in Georgia three months after his first disclaimer. A “sure formula for defeat of our goals would be a rigid, hubristic attempt to impose our values on others,” he cautioned. “A doctrinaire plan of action would be as damaging as indifference. We must be realistic... [and] steer away from the self-righteous and strident... [as well as any] mechanistic formula [meant to] produce an automatic answer.” Vance insisted that the administration could “only achieve its objectives if it shaped what it did to the case at hand.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 43-4; *New York Times*, March 8, 1977, “State Department Aides Testify Rights Are Key Concern in Carter Foreign Policy, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977, in David D. Newsom, *The Diplomacy of Human Rights*, Latham, MD: University Press of America, 1986, p. 207-12; *New York Times*, May 1, 1977, Bernard Gwertzman, “Vance Asks Realism in U.S. Rights Policy: He Concedes there are Constraints on Carter’s Commitment,” p. 1.

The secretary offered a broad, multi-faceted justification for the policy, a curious admixture of altruism, self-interest, exceptionalism and legalism. Echoing Derian's pithy justification, Vance proclaimed, "We seek these goals because they are right," but also "because we, too, will benefit. Our own well-being, and even our security, is enhanced in a world that shares common freedoms and in which prosperity and economic justice create the conditions for peace." Vance offered a note of caution that now seems strikingly prescient as we now know that the Carter administration would soon be visited by more than its share of Reverend Wright's proverbial 'chickens.' The United States "risks paying a serious price when it becomes identified with repression." Invoking the narrative of exceptionalism, Vance noted that "the message of individual freedom...had been a great national asset in times past" for a nation that had "fought for freedom... [and had] offered haven to the oppressed." The secretary expressed confidence that the American people would "support foreign policies that reflect our traditional values. To offer less is to define America in ways that we should not accept."<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the secretary provided a legalistic justification for the policy by invoking both U.S. and international legal norms. While Vance invoked the Harkin amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act as a source of domestic legitimacy, we have already noted that most in the administration jealously guarded the discretionary power to override such prescriptive measures when applying the policy to "the case at hand." The secretary directly addressed the objection that had been raised by many foreign interlocutors by noting that "it is not our intention to interfere in the internal affairs of another nation." Nevertheless, he cited Carter's address to the U.N. General Assembly where the president argued that any signatory nation to that institution's charter could

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<sup>64</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

neither “claim that the mistreatment of its citizens was solely its own business” nor “avoid its responsibility to review and to speak” when abuses occurred in other nations. It is interesting that the overall tone of Vance’s address was multilateral, underscoring the centrality of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. While the administration faithfully acknowledged the importance of strengthening the human rights protocols of these multilateral institutions as a source of and repository for international legitimacy, it is also true that the administration would demonstrate a penchant for unilateral and bilateral action when implementing its policy, seeking *ex post facto* legitimization from the international institutions.<sup>65</sup>

While none of this was a departure from previous administration rhetoric, Vance provided for the first time a more holistic articulation of the administration’s policy, explaining that it “must be understood in order to be effective.” In order to “define what we mean by ‘human rights’” he invoked three tranches of human rights each of which “were recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” First, the secretary declared “the right to be free from governmental violation of the integrity of the person,” which included “torture; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or imprisonment...denial of a fair public trial and invasion of the home.” Second, Vance asserted “the right to the fulfillment of such vital needs as food, shelter, health care, and education,” denouncing both corrupt and unjust economic policies as well as “indifference to the plight of the poor.” Finally, the secretary proclaimed the “right to enjoy civil and political liberties,” calling out the freedoms of thought, religion, assembly, speech, and the press as well as “freedom of movement

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<sup>65</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

both within and outside one's country [and]...to take part in government.”<sup>66</sup>

While the secretary acknowledged that “there may be disagreement on the priorities these [various] rights deserve,” he declared that the administration’s policy was “to promote all these rights...believing that, with work, [they] could become complementary and mutually reinforcing.” While Vance believed that they could “justifiably seek a rapid end to such gross violations as those cited” in the first tranche, he acknowledged that the rights in the latter two tranches – social, economic and political rights – while “no less worth pursuing,” represented a “broader challenge” and would “be slower in coming.” The administration “nourished no illusion that a call to the banner of human rights would bring sudden transformation in authoritarian societies.” Nevertheless, they embarked on this “long journey,” buoyed by their “faith in the dignity of the individual” – by their belief in the universal nature of their own values – their “belief that people in every society...will in time give their own expression to this fundamental aspiration.”<sup>67</sup>

This seemingly reasonable and practical belief system was the whitewash that concealed the fundamental paradox that would confront administration officials time and again. Grounded in this faith, they repeatedly sought to bring about a rapid end to repressive governmental tactics while encouraging gradual and voluntary political, social and economic changes. The paradox arose because in these authoritarian societies, repression was the sole tenuous and crumbling ocean-wall that protected vested interests from the rising and roiling tide of popular demands for broader political, social and economic participation. Any breach in this wall of repression, however appealing to liberal sensibilities, brought waves of increasing demands from

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<sup>66</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

<sup>67</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

the popular forces crashing down on the status quo, and calls for reactionary measures to protect those interests that would be swept away in the ensuing deluge.

Of course the Carter administration understood this paradox and the urgency of building liberal political, social and economic institutions to channel these popular demands that they considered to be inherently legitimate – these fundamental human rights. However, these efforts were complicated by three factors: First, acutely aware of the adverse legacy of past U.S. incursions into the affairs of other nations – this imperial residue – the Carter administration adopted a rigidly adhered to, though narrowly defined, policy of non-intervention. Nevertheless, the actors in other nations were equally aware of and sensitive to this imperial residue and accordingly construed any action, even non-action, as an intervention on behalf of on one side or another. While eschewing gunboats, customs receiverships, marine expeditions and, as nearly as can be determined from the extant record, covert interventions, the means employed by the Carter administration, articulated by Vance on April 30 – “from quiet diplomacy in its many forms, to public pronouncements, to withholding of assistance” – could all be and were construed as intervention as was failure to take these or other censorious actions. This role, which Richard Feinberg, the Latin American expert on the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, would later term that of “restrained interlocutor,” rather than promoting an aura of fairness as intended, more often than not seemed overly censorious to the status quo and insufficiently so to advocates of change.

The second complicating factor is that both social and economic rights as well as civil and political rights were ideologically charged constructions. Firmly convinced of the exceptional and universal nature of their own values and institutions, many in the Carter administration, like many in previous administrations, equated these rights with liberal economic and political institutions, harboring an implicit faith in the all-healing

power of democracy and the free market. This ideological predisposition challenged the vested interests of the established order and was anathema to the Marxist left. Trapped in the escalating violence of this ideological stalemate and frustrated by the slow pace of liberal reform, even those with vested interests in the bourgeois order – this elusive political ‘center’ that the Carter administration assiduously courted – were driven into alliance with the more radical opposition.

Finally, on the domestic front the Carter administration was swallowed in the growing ideological chasm in his own Democratic Party. As we have already noted, liberals in the party pushed to sever all ties with authoritarian Cold War allies that refused to adopt their own worldview. On the other hand, conservative Democrats, many of them incipient neoconservatives, saw authoritarian regimes more as midwives to liberal institutions and drew a curious distinction between ‘authoritarian’ and ‘totalitarian’ abuses of human rights, the latter typically reserved for those regimes that espoused a Marxist worldview, and the former seen a necessary evil that served as a bulwark against the irredeemable harms of the latter and that would ultimately lead these ‘backward’ societies to a liberal order. Carter, as were many in his administration, was too much a realist to embrace the liberal exorcism of authoritarian allies and too much an idealist to accept the conservative accommodations with them. Caught in this ideological ‘no man’s land’ he lacked the domestic political capital to weather the controversy that his middle course was sure to provoke.

From the beginning, the administration sought to manage the expectations implicit in that word “absolute.” As his administration sought to institutionalize a multifaceted commitment to human rights, the ‘Washington outsider’ encountered what one contemporary pundit has called “the ultimate exercise in multi-tasking,” the American Presidency. Those naïve enough to believe that the administration’s approach could

have been “absolute” or uniform, have tended to charge it with cynicism. On the other hand, those cynical enough to banish human rights from the political realm altogether have tended to charge the administration with naiveté. To those who have made either charge, the president offered these exceptionalist and unapologetic words in July 1977 as the international community prepared to continue Helsinki’s work in Belgrade, “Tough and public debate will accrue when controversial issues are addressed. [While his administration] could have sat quiescently and never raised the issue, [he] had no regrets...There are no hidden meanings in our commitment to human rights, [only a] positive and sincere expression of our deepest beliefs as a people.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> CNN correspondent Candy Crowley, January 14, appearing on *Lou Dobbs Tonight*; Jimmy Carter press conferences, July 12 and 21, 1977, cited in: Judith Buncher, *Human Rights & American Diplomacy: 1975-77*, p. 108.

## **NON-INTERVENTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: NICARAGUA, 1978**

In what remains one of the best accounts of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua leading up to the 1979 revolution, written by the National Security Council's Latin American specialist during that revolution, Robert Pastor asserted, "the inauguration of Carter, Somoza's heart attack, the murder of Chamorro, the establishment of the Group of Twelve, and the palace raid – these five events between January 1977 and September 1978 shook the foundation of Somoza's dynasty." During that period, opposition forces, dismissed as late as December 1977 by U.S. intelligence analysts as "vociferous, but fragmented," consolidated around a radical agenda: Anastasio Somoza Debayle must go, and with him any vestiges of the power structures that had perpetuated his family's hold on Nicaraguan politics for more than forty years. By late 1978, moderates had been radicalized and heretofore radicals now drew legitimacy from the dearth of legitimacy surrounding the incumbent regime.<sup>69</sup>

With peaceful democratic change in Nicaragua looking increasingly less likely throughout that period, the Carter administration was forced rethink its "neutral" role in promoting peaceful and gradual political, social and economic change in Nicaragua, a Central American nation that had seen its share of heavy-handed and, by many accounts, imperial policies emanating from the Colossus of the North throughout much

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<sup>69</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2002, p. 61; Defense Intelligence Agency: Intelligence Appraisal, December 1, 1977, "Nicaragua: Challenge to Regime," *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO24. For a detailed examination of the various opposition factions: John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1985, p. 97-126, 134-55. For another excellent account on U.S. policy formulation in the Nicaragua Crisis: Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. See also, the memoirs of the U.S. ambassador in Managua throughout the crisis: Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

of the preceding century. Undoubtedly, many in Carter's administration were keenly aware of the *imperial sediment* of past U.S. policy toward Latin America and, with the effects of a protracted intervention in Indochina still fresh on every American's mind, U.S. policy makers sought to adopt a policy of non-intervention, albeit one that was both narrow in its conception of what did and did not constitute intervention and rigid in its implementation when confronted with an array of unattractive options. While this self-awareness and stated respect for the sovereignty of other nations was admirable, it was insufficient to erase the effects of more than a century of policy that led most Latin Americans to see U.S. intervention as the rule and not the exception.<sup>70</sup>

This case study examines the role of subtle but powerful ideas in the formulation, implementation and reception of the administration's policy toward Nicaragua, in which the language of human rights provided a vessel for the deployment of these persistent ideas. It will focus on formulation and articulation of policy in early 1978, when the assassination of dissident journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro provided the spark that ignited the brittle timber of Nicaraguan society into revolutionary flame, as the administration sought to respond to the rapidly escalating crisis. During that period, U.S. policy makers, convinced of their nation's exceptional role in regional and world affairs and of the universal nature of its values and institutions, sought to navigate the narrow straits of legitimate hegemonic leadership around the sediment of more than century of perceived imperial policies. Central to the Carter administration's policy were two ideas: there were universal human rights and it was a proper objective of U.S.

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<sup>70</sup> For evidence of senior administration cognizance of the *imperial residue* of past U.S. policy toward Latin America consult: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*. New York: Viking Press, 1970, p. 288; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "America in a Hostile World," *Foreign Policy*, No. 23, (Summer 1976), p. 96; Cyrus Vance, Memorandum to Jimmy Carter, October 1976, in Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983, p. 451-2.

foreign policy to promote them. It recast the familiar tropes of U.S. exceptionalism – the rule of law, democracy, and development – into three corresponding tranches of human rights: the integrity of the person, political rights and economic rights.

It is unsurprising that some would suspect that Anastasio Somoza Debayle played a role in the assassination of Chamorro. As one CIA analyst noted, there was a “personal rivalry between the Chamorro and Somoza families dating back to the 1800s.” Chamorro was no stranger to the repressive tactics employed by the Somozas against political opponents, having been implicated in four different plots to overthrow each of the three Somozan heads of state, including the 1956 assassination of the senior Somoza García. As the editor of the popular opposition paper *La Prensa*, with a circulation that outstripped the Somoza-owned government bully pulpit, *Novedades*, Chamorro’s uncompromising polemics had been a thorn in the sides of three consecutive Somoza regimes across three decades. The aforementioned CIA analysis attributed his popularity to the “Nicaraguans’ love of sensationalism and the opposition’s desire to see the Somoza regime pilloried in print,” noting that the dissident editor frequently “obliged readers on both counts with very little restraint.” Nevertheless, the same analyst concluded that “few people in Nicaragua or abroad believed Somoza would have been so foolish as to condone such an act,” in effect, “martyring an opponent who, despite their mutual antagonism, was no real threat to him.” Whether he did or not, most have concluded that Chamorro’s assassination sealed the fate of Somoza’s regime and set in motion the forces that led to its demise.<sup>71</sup>

Given Chamorro’s unabashed opposition to Somozan rule, his apparent willingness to take up the sword as well as the pen in opposition, and the demonstrated likelihood

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<sup>71</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 103; Central Intelligence Agency: Latin America Weekly Review, January 19, 1978, “Nicaragua: Chamorro’s Assassination,” DNSA, Item no. NI00036.

that he would receive an unwelcome knock on the door whenever one Somoza or another gave the order to “round up the usual suspects,” the outspoken editor maintained a surprising freedom of maneuver in his opposition up until meeting his violent end. Despite being detained, tortured and convicted of treasonous acts on multiple occasions resulting in combined sentences of twelve years in prison, Chamorro spent a mere eighteen months in prison and less than four years in exile, some of which were voluntary. Throughout, his newspaper continued to give voice to opposition factions, albeit subject to the caprice of the censorious Nicaraguan government. In fact, this served a useful purpose to the Somozas, who were fond of parading this ‘forbearance’ in front of their American interlocutors as evidence of their liberal tendencies. Equally plausible explanations for Chamorro’s resilience in opposition can be found in his membership in one of Nicaragua’s most influential political families; in the visibility and support he enjoyed as an esteemed member of the international press; and in the role that his newspaper, *La Prensa*, played in the Somozas’ carefully cultivated image abroad as a ‘liberal republic.’<sup>72</sup>

The Conservative Party, in which the Chamorro family played a prominent role dating back to the prior century, was equally likely to feel the sting the editor’s acerbic pen. Having parted ways with this “tame opposition” in 1969, Chamorro embraced a more radical and confrontational brand of politics, playing a central role in the formation of the Democratic Liberation Union (*Union Democrática de Liberación* or UDEL), a coalition of small parties united in their opposition to Somoza that counted several communist affiliations in its number. This solidarity was the seed that, in the wake of Chamorro’s tragic end, grew into the more mainstream Broad Opposition Front

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<sup>72</sup> Central Intelligence Agency: Latin America Weekly Review, January 19, 1978, “Nicaragua: Chamorro’s Assassination,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00036.

(*Frente Amplio Opositor* or FAO) that eventually coalesced around the radical agenda of the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional* or FSLN). Although few in the mainstream opposition subscribed to the ideological tenets of Marxist-Leninism, most would eventually embrace the Front's objective of violent revolution. Having concluded that Somoza must go, with Washington's reluctance to force that outcome, the Sandinistas were increasingly seen as the only faction possessing the military capacity to unseat Somoza's National Guard.<sup>73</sup>

The Sandinistas bore the name of Augusto César Sandino, the populist and anti-imperialist revolutionary whose followers prosecuted a guerrilla war against occupying U.S. forces during the latter years of the 1920s and who was martyred in 1934 by the U.S.-trained National Guard, headed by none other than the patriarch of the Somoza dynasty, Anastasio Somoza García. The U.S. occupation had begun during in the Taft administration, when the Liberal reformist government of José Santos Zelaya, whose overtures to Germany and Japan were perceived to threaten Washington's transisthmian monopoly. U.S. marines went ashore at Bluefields, securing Zelaya's resignation and installing the minority Conservative Party in power for nearly two decades, a party in which the Chamorro family would play a decisive role, propped up by an ongoing U.S. military occupation. In 1927, Washington shifted allegiance to the more powerful Liberal Party, setting the stage for the withdrawal of U.S. expeditionary forces in 1933, under the auspices of Good Neighbor, placing the senior Somoza in command of a proxy security force, where he remained until passing control to his

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<sup>73</sup> Central Intelligence Agency: Latin America Weekly Review, January 19, 1978, "Nicaragua: Chamorro's Assassination," DNSA, Item no. NIOO36. General Emiliano Chamorro Vargas, who later presided over the Conservative government in Managua, negotiated the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty with U.S. Secretary of State Williams Jennings Bryan.

West Point trained son in 1944, who then commanded the Guard until its dissolution in the revolution in 1979. This was ultimately the power structure, underwritten by U.S. patronage, which secured the Somozan forty-year hold on Nicaraguan politics after Somoza García seized the presidency in 1936.<sup>74</sup>

Formally founded in 1961 in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) built on an established and widespread resistance to Somozan rule, drawing new inspiration from what Robert Pastor has termed Fidel Castro's "new recipe" that fused "Marxism, nationalism and anti-Americanism." According to the founding Sandinista leader, Carlos Fonseca Amador, "the Nicaraguan rebels' spirit recovered its radiance...with the victory of the Cuban Revolution." Newfound radiance notwithstanding, the Sandinistas posed very little threat to Somozan rule throughout the sixties and into the early years of the next decade, and as time passed, with their hopes for a reprise of the Cuban Revolution perpetually crushed under the boot of the repressive National Guard, the Sandinista ideology became less a doctrinaire Castroite Marxism and increasingly better described as anti-Somozan pragmatism.<sup>75</sup>

While the Sandinistas' revolutionary vision languished, some Nicaraguans had made significant strides in social and economic development. This relative prosperity fueled increasing demands for broader political and economic participation, demands

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 18-24.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 28-30, 33-6. Pastor describes the three ideological factions of the Sandinistas: The original group, the *Prolonged Popular War (GPP)* faction that initially subscribed to a Guevarian 'foco' theory, invested their revolutionary hope in the peasantry, and later adopted General Giap's winning strategy in Vietnam. The second group, the *Proletarian Tendency (TP)*, was the most doctrinaire and subscribed to a Marxian theory that an urban proletariat would lead the revolution. The 'third force,' the Terceristas, was described by Pastor as "young, idealistic Christians," with little patience for "debates over Marxist purity." The Terceristas were pragmatists, willing to ally with the bourgeoisie to bring about revolutionary change. Pastor cites: Carlos Fonseca Amador, "El Aporte Revolucionario de Sandino," from *Escritos*, in *Nicaragua: La Estrategia de la Victoria*, Mexico: Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, 1983, p. 71-2.

that were frustrated by autocratic rule and a widening gap between haves and have-nots, with the Somozas enjoying an increasingly preponderant share of the pie. As Pastor explains, “the economic growth created new groups that placed pressure on an anachronistic political system...like magma pushing up against a mountain peak.” Capitalizing on this building pressure, a less patient though more pragmatic third faction of the Sandinistas emerged, the Terceristas, who “wanted to overthrow Somoza and realized this could only be done by concealing their Marxist rhetoric and looking for allies” across a broader opposition base.<sup>76</sup>

Two events contributed to the growing ferment. On December 23, 1972 a devastating earthquake rocked Managua leaving the city in rubble, thousands dead and hundreds of thousands indigent. Amidst a huge outpouring of international aid, Somoza steadied his government and, as Pastor quipped, “transformed a tragic national loss into a personal financial gain” for his family and clients by “channeling aid” through personally-owned businesses and speculating on property in Managua where he had the power to dictate the reconstruction plans. More than a few have attributed the widespread disaffection of the bourgeoisie with Somoza to this wanton corruption.<sup>77</sup>

Two years later, at a Christmas day party in honor of the departing U.S. ambassador, a group of Sandinistas pulled off what historian Stephen Kinzer has referred to as a “spectacular raid” giving them a “glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel leading to victory.” After killing the party’s host, a wealthy friend of Somoza, the insurgents took hostage a number of Nicaraguan notables for nearly a week before exacting \$1 million in ransom, the release of fourteen of their imprisoned comrades, and safe passage on a Havana-bound flight while thousands of onlookers cheered their

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<sup>76</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 33-7.

<sup>77</sup> *New York Times*, December 24, 1972, “Thousands Dead as Quake Strikes Nicaraguan City,” p. A1; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 30-1.

exploits. Insurgent leader Humberto Ortega has referred to the raid as the “most important operation carried out by the Front.” Founding Sandinista Tomás Borge has claimed that the subsequent public airing of their carefully crafted manifesto, calling for an end to the Somoza dynasty and condemning U.S. imperialism, “put the Sandinista movement in the spotlight worldwide.” Somoza reacted by initiating a ‘state of siege,’ which remained in effect throughout the first summer of Carter’s presidency, consisting of a series of censorious and repressive political actions designed to quell all opposition, combined with a sustained National Guard offensive to root out and decapitate the insurgency and to intimidate and eradicate elements of the population suspected of providing succor to the insurgents. Citing an August 1977 *Amnesty International* report on Nicaraguan human rights practices during the ‘state of siege,’ Alan Riding of the *New York Times* reported “widespread abduction, torture and killing of peasants by the National Guard.” Throughout the siege, *Amnesty* reported numerous occurrences of ‘political imprisonment, denial of due process...torture and summary executions’”<sup>78</sup>

Against the backdrop of the historical U.S. role in Nicaraguan affairs, the Carter administration’s claims of ‘neutrality’ in the escalating crisis would raise more than one Nicaraguan eyebrow. U.S. Ambassador Mauricio Solaún recalled that “virtually all” of his Nicaraguan contacts perceived Washington’s claims of neutrality to be “avoiding... its historic responsibility” for creating what historian John Booth has described as a “political monster.” Without a doubt, many in the Carter administration were aware of

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 31-3. Citing June 3, 1984 interview with Tomás Borge; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, December 30, “Nicaragua will Free 26 to Win Hostage’s Release,” p. A1; Stephen Kinzer, “Sandinistas Mark Raid that Presaged Victory,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1985, p. A4; Humberto Ortega, “Interview with Humberto Ortega,” *Sandinistas Speak*, Tomás Borge et. al, eds., New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982, p. 55; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, August 16, 1977, “Rights Organization Accuses Nicaragua Regime of Widespread Abuses,” p. 6.

the deep layers of imperial residue associated with U.S. foreign policy dating back to William Walker's naked imperial ambitions at the middle of the nineteenth century. During the 1976 campaign Zbigniew Brzezinski had written, "America's long-range interests would be harmed by continuing indifference to the mounting desire in Central America for greater social justice and national dignity," which would "only make it easier for Castro's Cuba to exploit that desire." Nevertheless, while cognizance of this imperial legacy is a necessary condition to contending with its effects, cognizance alone was insufficient to undo that legacy. Neutrality, viewed through this historical lens, was seldom perceived as neutral.<sup>79</sup>

Ironically, although the Somozas held the preponderant military and economic power in Nicaragua, in contrast to the *braggadocio* and *machismo* commonly associated with the stereotypical Latin American *caudillo*, it is important to note that Somoza's power was sustained by the assiduously cultivated image of Nicaragua as a U.S. client. In effect, Somoza derived and perpetuated his power from the *imperial residue* of U.S. foreign policy and perpetuated it through the tacit or explicit consent of Washington. Carter's election and the early articulation of his administration's human rights policy had a profound effect on Nicaraguan politics, which, by all appearances, were firmly in the grip of Somoza's security apparatus. Notwithstanding this apparent control, the human rights rhetoric of the Carter administration signaled a sea change, a signal that was lost on few of the political actors in Nicaragua, and was certainly not

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<sup>79</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 103. For a thorough account of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua between 1909-1936: John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*, p. 30-58 ("political monster," p. 50). For the Sandinistas account of U.S. "acts hostile to the right...of sovereignty" in Central America and Nicaragua between 1855 and 1977, see: Daniel Ortega, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, October 7, 1981, reprinted in "An Appeal for Justice and Peace," *Sandinistas Speak*, p. 146-50; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "America in a Hostile World," *Foreign Policy*, No. 23, (Summer 1976), p. 96; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 50-2. Citing Brzezinski; Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*, p. 451-2.

lost on Somoza.

Somoza's confidante, lifelong friend and West Point classmate, New York Congressman Jack Murphy, recalls that the Nicaraguan strongman "knew that he was in trouble five days" into Carter's term when the administration cancelled export licenses for sporting arms signaling that "he would have difficulty with the Carter administration." When the administration soon thereafter announced cuts in foreign aid linked to poor human rights performance, other Latin American military regimes defiantly renounced military aid packages from Washington. However, as National Security staffer Robert Pastor has noted, "That was not Somoza's style." The Nicaraguan set to work to influence U.S. policy with a coterie of lobbyists and a personal network of contacts in Washington that included members of Congress like Murphy and free-wheeling Texas Democrat Charlie Wilson, whose influence on the House Appropriations Committee and whose willingness to use that influence to fight the spread of communism have since been enshrined and embellished in the annals of Hollywood filmmaking. While Somoza tended to work quietly from within the halls of power, the U.S.-educated and politically savvy *cuadillo* also knew the right buttons to push when taking his case to the court of public opinion. When the State Department released its congressionally mandated country report on human rights in April, Somoza publicly denounced its criticism of his country's practices as "unacceptable," charging that it "constituted interference in the internal affairs of Nicaragua."<sup>80</sup>

For all of his private lobbying and public bluster, however, there is clear evidence that Somoza recognized the need to moderate his practices in the face of both U.S. and international pressure. Although *Amnesty International* issued a sharply critical report

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 44-5. Citing May 15, 1984 interview with Jack Murphy; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy toward Latin America*, p. 58-64.

in August, Alan Riding reported that in recent months both “church and diplomatic sources believed that the indiscriminate assassination of peasants in the northeast had ceased” in the face of pressure from the Carter administration. Quoting one “well-placed source, “We have not received any reliable report of a massacre” since March, in contrast to “regular reports of mass executions and disappearances of peasants” before that time. “The National Guard has definitely been told to clean up its act.” Most telling, though, was Somoza’s decision to lift the three-year state of siege in September, as he recovered from an August heart attack in a Miami hospital.<sup>81</sup>

The Sandinistas found this liberalizing gesture more threatening to their revolutionary cause than the sustained repression that had by all accounts decimated their ranks in recent years. Founding Tercerista Humberto Ortega later explained the concern raised by the “shift given to U.S. foreign policy by the Carter administration.” If the “bourgeois opposition,” in concert with the forces of “imperialism and reaction,” were able capitalize on that shift to effect “changes in the regime without touching the basic strings of power: the tremendous economic and repressive power of the National Guard,” then the Sandinistas would find themselves in a “difficult position.” Accordingly, they adopted a two-pronged shift in tactics. First, they seized the opportunity afforded by the newfound freedom of maneuver to “speed up the offensive,” resuming guerrilla incursions from safe-havens across the Costa Rican and Honduran borders. Tomás Borge later explained that the Sandinistas were “focused on the destruction of the National Guard.” Second, and more significantly, they downplayed their Marxist agenda and sought “alliance with the democratic sectors of the national bourgeoisie.” As Alan Riding reported in the *New York Times* in late

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<sup>81</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, October 15, 1977, “Rights Organization Accuses Nicaragua Regime of Widespread Abuses,” p. 6; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 44-6.

October, they replaced their publicly stated aim of Marxist-Leninist revolution, and its relatively narrow appeal, with calls for the wholesale democratization of Nicaraguan politics, which dramatically broadened their appeal.<sup>82</sup>

The Sandinistas' renewed incursions on the Nicaraguan frontier were more symbolic than menacing. In a more significant development, twelve Nicaraguan dissidents in exile took up the Sandinistas' hue and cry – prominent business leaders, clergymen, and academics, only a few of them known revolutionaries – lending an air of legitimacy to the rebels. This 'Group of Twelve' issued a manifesto that circulated widely in the U.S. capital calling for Somoza's resignation and the inclusion of the Sandinistas as well as other proscribed actors in an expanded Nicaraguan political dialogue. "There can be no permanent solution to the escalating armed conflict, which now threatens to envelop all of Nicaragua," proclaimed the Twelve, "without the participation of the Sandinista National Liberation Front."<sup>83</sup>

A broad cross-section of the Nicaraguan opposition joined in the call for an expanded political franchise as the Catholic clergy, the business and academic communities, and marginalized political parties, pressed for a "national dialogue" between Somoza's government and opposition groups. From the ramparts of *La Prensa*, Chamorro continued his relentless attack on Somoza's "legal fiction of democracy," in reality a dictatorship. There is "no solution with Somoza," the

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<sup>82</sup> Humberto Ortega, Interview with exiled Chilean journalist Marta Harnecker, "Nicaragua – The Strategy of Victory," in *Sandinistas Speak*, p. 53-84; Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, *Latin America Weekly Review*, October 20, 1977, "Renewed Guerilla Activity in Nicaragua," DNSA, Item no. NIOO37; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 45-8. Citing Interview with Borge; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, October 26, 1977, "Nicaraguan Rebels Deny Marxist Aims," p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, January 29, 1978, "Respectable Rebels Threaten Somoza Dynasty," p. E4; Felip Mantica Abaunza et. al (The Group of Twelve, *Los Doce*), October 19, 1977, "*Primer manifesto del los Doce*, Gladys Segal, trans., in *The Central American Crisis Reader*, Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin, eds., New York: Summit Books, 1987, p. 172-3; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-9.

outspoken editor insisted. Outwardly, Somoza remained defiant. “I will not carry on a dialogue under threat of violence and pressure.” In reality, he was trapped. “For fear of alienating Washington,” observed Alan Riding, “General Somoza has been unable to respond to the new offensive...by...unleashing a wave of repression against his opponents. Instead, the traditional strongman has appeared indecisive as the political initiative has slipped from his hands.” This indecision enabled a downward spiral fueled by increasing dissent and demands, heretofore repressed under the state of siege.<sup>84</sup>

Somoza’s September 1977 genuflection toward liberalization presented U.S. policy makers with a stereotypical conundrum associated with their ‘carrot and stick’ method of using foreign assistance to influence the behavior of foreign governments. As Pastor recalled, the debate divided along predictable lines, with the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs arguing that “the United States should theoretically release [some] aid” to acknowledge Somoza’s gesture. Unsurprisingly, the Human Rights Bureau argued that the dictator’s gesture was but a “small, insignificant step on the path toward a long and difficult dialogue.” Releasing the aid would demoralize the opposition and remove any incentive for Somoza to follow up on his initial step. “The problem,” observed the *Washington Post*, “was to find some means of recognizing the gesture while still making clear that the State Department wanted to see even more improvement.” The *Post* cited department sources in asserting that this would have normally been accomplished “by holding back on military aid and going forward with economic assistance.” Nevertheless, Warren Christopher, as usual the arbiter in such matters,

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<sup>84</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, October 30, 1977, “In Nicaragua, This May Be the Twilight of the Somoza Regime;” Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, Speech at La Cuesta Country Club at a Meeting in His Honor, November 6, 1977, in *The Central American Crisis Reader*, p. 173-5; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-9.

decided to “postpone” all further assistance until Somoza made further improvements, noting that this was "a big enough signal [to Somoza] for the time being." Pastor explains, “Christopher chose to keep the options open...United States would neither approve nor disapprove aid.”<sup>85</sup>

What transpired, however, left “even the most astute State Department watchers...bewildered,” according to the same *Washington Post* reporters in their front-page article, citing one administration source who claimed that “what should have been a straight line got bent into a pretzel.” The confusion arose because, under Congress’ use-it-or-lose-it provisions for military assistance, Christopher was forced to sign the agreement for military aid to Nicaragua before the end of the fiscal year, although he publicly announced that he would withhold distribution of that aid until human rights conditions in Nicaragua improved. Under-Secretary of State for Security Assistance Lucy Benson explained, "We had to decide whether we were going to throw this weapon away or try to preserve it as an instrument for future leverage...All we did was keep the agreement on the burner as a basis for further negotiations” with Somoza.<sup>86</sup>

While it seems to have been Christopher’s intent to defer both military and humanitarian assistance, by signing the military agreement he opened the door to charges that he had inverted the ‘carrot and stick.’ At least one unnamed administration source contributed to this impression, telling the *Post*, “the rules prevented us from using the logical stick to beat Nicaraguans - military... [Thus] we were left trying to dance our way out of the situation by reversing the logical order -

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-7; John Goshko and Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, October 24, 1977, “U.S. Decisions Send Nicaragua ‘Garbled’ Rights Message,” p. A1.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-7; John Goshko and Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, October 24, 1977, “U.S. Decisions Send Nicaragua ‘Garbled’ Rights Message,” p. A1.

using military aid as the carrot and humanitarian aid as the stick.” NSC Director of Global Affairs Jessica Tuchman publicly charged, “in the name of promoting human rights, we are denying assistance to the needy.” Furthermore, while there was both coherence and prudence in Christopher’s decision, the overloaded and conflicted ideological constructions surrounding the role of the United States in promoting human rights led to the growing perception that “for all its hymns to the human rights cause,” the Carter administration “didn’t really have a policy to match its rhetoric.” Equally important, there was probably more than a grain of truth to what one anonymous policymaker told the *Post*, “If no one else seems to have understood the point of the message, there are grounds for supposing that Somoza didn’t either.”<sup>87</sup>

Such was the state of affairs in the months immediately following the arrival of Carter’s newly-appointed ambassador to Managua in August 1977. Ambassador Solaún recalls that the General’s behavior at their first meeting was “crude, arrogant and rude” but that over time, as he became increasingly solicitous of U.S. support, Somoza became “less lordly and distant.” One of Solaún’s Nicaraguan friends, prominent businessman Alfonso Robelo, later remembered that the political appointee “trembled when Somoza came in the room.” For his part, Somoza would credit Solaún with “doing his best,” though not being “forceful enough” and lacking the “clout to impress his superiors in the State Department.” NSC specialist Robert Pastor, also an academic, found the “modest and unassuming” Solaún to be “among the more intelligent and informed of the administration’s ambassadors,” though “not a good match for Somoza’s gruff personality.” A Cuban-born American professor of political science with no prior diplomatic experience, there is reason to believe that some in the

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-7; John Goshko and Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, October 24, 1977, “U.S. Decisions Send Nicaragua ‘Garbled’ Rights Message,” p. A1.

State Department may have considered Carter's political appointee to the Managuan post to be out of his depth in other respects, as well.<sup>88</sup>

On the eve of Chamorro's assassination, the U.S. embassy was preparing for Assistant Secretary Terence Todman's impending visit to Managua to meet with Somoza and members of the opposition. In a cable to Washington, the newly installed ambassador speculated that this visit "represented an important opportunity to give impetus to our past efforts to advance respect for human rights in Nicaragua." Somoza, he speculated "would be interested in learning from [Todman] what specific steps he can take which the U.S. would interpret as requisite for improved relations." Solaún prepared the customary laundry list of talking points for the assistant secretary in which he identified an "institutionalized" framework for "democratic change" to be the "most important issue," indeed the "principal" talking point. While the United States was "not trying to promote the downfall or overthrow of any government," continued Solaún, the assistant secretary should make the Nicaraguans aware through "forceful communications" that Washington "preferred democratic solutions to political problems" to "military coups or revolutionary violence." To do less "would have been violating not only U.S. law and international obligations but also our fundamental national beliefs." While the ambassador worried about the Nicaraguan opposition's capacity to "responsibly organize the discontent which exists in Nicaragua in order to promote mature political change," he counseled the career foreign service officer, the ranking U.S. diplomat in the Inter-American Bureau, that it would be "inappropriate to attempt to counsel the political opposition as to how it should exert pressure for change." He recommended that the assistant secretary "reinforce the message that the

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<sup>88</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 103; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 44. Citing interview with Alfonso Robelo; Anastasio Somoza Debayle, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, Boston: Western Islands, 1980, p. 70.

Nicaraguans themselves, not the United States, are responsible for the political future of Nicaragua.”<sup>89</sup>

This short cable, one of the earliest from the scholar-cum-diplomat, gives us some insight into the ideological predilections of the newly appointed ambassador. Its didactic tone, prevalent in many of Solaún’s dispatches as well as in his memoirs, revealed the long-suffering tutelary posture that Solaún often assumed toward his interlocutors in both Washington and Managua. This could only have exacerbated his status as a Foreign Service outsider. Solaún recalls that his experiences when receiving instructions at Foggy Bottom prior to being dispatched to Nicaragua “confirmed his belief that Washington still lacked a clear idea of what to do,” prompting the political appointee to “embark on what he personally considered an exploratory mission, hoping that with time a coherent policy would develop in Washington.” Despite this “discomfiting...absence of political clarity,” Solaún recalls arriving in Managua with a clear mandate for the “peaceful democratization” of Nicaragua, informed by a clear “consensus” against the use of “forceful means against Somoza to change his government.” Both this mandate to democratize and the consensus against intervention are evident in this early dispatch. Nevertheless, we also sense a bias toward activism in the ambassador’s “personal exploratory mission,” informed by his own nagging doubts about the capacity of Nicaraguans, left to their own devices, to “organize responsibly” or to “promote mature political change” or to resist their propensity for “military coups and revolutionary violence.”<sup>90</sup>

When dissident journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro perished in a hail of shotgun

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<sup>89</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Cable to Terrence Todman, January 10, 1978, “Your Meeting with Somoza,” *DNSA*, Document NI00026.

<sup>90</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Cable to Terrence Todman, January 10, 1978, “Your Meeting with Somoza,” *DNSA*, Document NI00026; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 93.

blasts on January 10, 1978, the U.S. ambassador in Managua recalls that his “immediate reaction” was to anticipate the collapse of the U.S. “agenda of trying to influence the most powerful oppositionist and Somoza to work out a mutually guaranteed process of democracy.” He asserts that the murder of Chamorro on January 10 was the “turning point” in the Nicaraguan revolution, which “intensified the regime crisis, and dramatically shrank the acceptability of continuing Somoza’s rule.” It “shattered pending plans for an early 1978 dialogue mediated by the archbishop” and “resulted in a broad refusal” to negotiate with Somoza. Moreover, as historian William LeoGrande has observed, Managua “erupted in a paroxysm of outrage and spontaneous violence” that Alan Riding described as the beginnings of a “national mutiny.” Before the assassination, Somoza had “only reluctantly been willing to dialogue or negotiate with his adversaries,” remembers Solaún; thereafter, “he earnestly wanted to do so, but the opposition refused.” Succeeding Chamorro as the head of the Democratic Liberation Union (UDEL), Rafael Córdova Rivas told reporters, “The United States is pressing for a dialogue, but the murder has ended the dialogue. Talking to Somoza won’t turn Nicaragua into a democracy or resurrect Chamorro.”<sup>91</sup>

Córdova Rivas’ Democratic Liberation Union took the initiative to organize a unified opposition in the wake of its founder’s assassination, most notably by calling for a national work stoppage with the stated intention of bringing about Somoza’s resignation. While Solaún initially characterized this initiative as “feeble,” the work stoppage gained impetus when the business community, under the leadership of Alfonso Robelo, took up the cause. On January 29, nearly a week after having refused an invitation to dialogue with Somoza, leaders from the principal private sector

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<sup>91</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 103-6. Alan Riding, *New York Times*, January 17, 1978, “Somoza at His Seaside Home Belittles Unrest in Capital.” Citing Córdova.

organization in Nicaragua issued a manifesto vowing to continue the work stoppage until there is “justice and liberty in Nicaragua.” Registering his astonishment at this “unusually strong statement,” Solaún speculated that Somoza had similarly been “surprised by the intensity and spread of anti-Somoza feeling among the business sector.” The Sandinista guerrillas seized the opportunity to renew their incursions along the Nicaraguan border.<sup>92</sup>

On the political front, the Democratic Liberation Union called on the nation’s only sanctioned opposition party to boycott the upcoming February 5 municipal elections. Although Somoza refused to yield to the Conservative Party’s request to postpone these elections, threatening to revoke the party’s legal status, Conservatives, on the whole, refused to turn out for the elections. This further undermined the legitimacy of Somoza’s ruling Liberal party despite its Feb 5 ‘landslide victory,’ running largely unopposed amidst dismal voter turnout. One news service reported that capital residents joined in the protest by constructing barricades of rubbish in the streets of Managua while homemakers “pledged to beat upon pots and pans until Somoza quits.” The week before the elections, the Catholic bishops in Nicaragua issued a pastoral letter calling for an “order based on truth, established according to norms of justice, sustained by and filled with charity and, finally, realized beneath the auspices of liberty.” Notwithstanding the “careful” tone of the letter, the bishops explicitly supported those anti-Somozan factions that employed a “civilized path” to resolve the crisis and unambiguously laid the “responsibility” for the crisis at Somoza’s feet, calling on the “national government to...respond to the call of the majority.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 20, 1978, “Sitrep No. 1 – Nicaragua – Todman Visit,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00037; Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 24, 1978, “Analytical Update,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00039; Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 30, 1978, “Private Sector Statement of January 29,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00044.

<sup>93</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 20, 1978, “Sitrep No. 1 – Nicaragua – Todman

Publicly, Somoza remained defiant and dismissive of the widespread dissent and growing violence that was engulfing Nicaraguan society. The caudillo expressed confidence that “it was just a matter of time” until the general strike and protests would lose steam. “These guys are up in a coconut tree,” he quipped, “and they don’t know how to come down.” Nevertheless, on January 16, Somoza publicly announced his intention to resign the presidency in 1981. Though dramatic, the announcement contained two provisos: In language that Solaún described as “uncompromising,” Somoza made clear his intention to remain in power until 1981, and he left open the possibility that he might remain in control of the National Guard after that. During their forty-year reign, it is worth noting that under a façade of constitutionalism, the Somozas had deftly maneuvered out of and back into the presidency, all the while maintaining their firm grip on the National Guard and, for that matter, on the presidency by proxy. It is therefore not surprising that many in the opposition took little heart in so distant a promise, calling for the dictator’s immediate resignation, as they noted a third-generation Somoza rising rapidly through the ranks of the National Guard in the person of the strongman’s Harvard-educated son, Major Anastasio (Tachito) Somoza.<sup>94</sup>

Privately, Somoza expressed concern to the U.S. ambassador over the worsening

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Visit,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00037; Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 19, 1978, “Somoza Press Conference [of January 16],” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00034; *Washington Post*, February 6, 1978, “Vote Turnout is Light in Nicaraguan Elections,” p. A15; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 107. Solaún claims to have planted the seed of the pots and pans (*cacerolas*) protest having related the Brazilian precedent to his Nicaragua interlocutors; Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 31, 1978, “The Bishops Speak Out,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00045.

<sup>94</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 18, 1978, “Ambassador’s Meeting with President Somoza, January 14,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00031; Mauricio Solaún, Cable to State Department, January 19, 1978, “Somoza Press Conference [of January 16],” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00034; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, January 17, 1978, “Somoza, at Seaside Home, Belittles Unrest in Capital,” p. 3; Marlise Simons, *Washington Post*, February 1, 1978, “Somoza Son Has Trappings of Power and Not Everyone is Happy About It,” A16.

crisis, though predictably blaming the U.S. human rights policy for his predicament. In his memoirs, Solaún reflected, “the paradox of successful revolutions is that the government does not employ *effective* repression because it cannot or because it lacks the will.” The ambassador recalled that “during the next months, until September 1978, opposition activity snowballed, encouraged by a virtually uncensored, incendiary mass media. Trapped, “Somoza could not govern without at least reimposing the state of siege, but he would not do so.” In his memoirs, Somoza recalls that “his concern about a further deterioration of relations with the United States induced him to follow such tactics.” Under what Somoza viewed as the “protective umbrella” of the United States, the opposition, according to Solaún, “vengeful of his past repression, learned tactics, recruited, grew and was emboldened.”<sup>95</sup>

For their part, U.S. policymakers faced a conundrum of their own. As we have noted, Assistant Secretary Todman was slated to visit Managua in late January. Less than two weeks after Chamorro’s death, however, Solaún posed the question to Foggy Bottom of whether this “visit would be productive under such circumstances?” The embassy in Managua had gotten wind of opposition plans to organize demonstrations in “repudiation of the Somoza regime” and “favoring U.S. human rights policy” as well as government plans for “counter demonstrations” and for providing a “very heavy security umbrella” during the assistant secretary’s visit. Solaún cautioned that the probabilities that the assistant secretary’s presence “would become a focal point for demonstration and increased unrest” while making it “impossible to maintain the U.S. role as neutral” were “weighing against the visit at this crucial time.” He felt it likely that “all groups would attempt to use Todman by placing on him demands to support

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<sup>95</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 105-8; Anastasio Somoza Debayle, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, p.106; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 44.

[their own position] and rejecting their opponent's" making it impossible for the diplomat to "satisfy the high expectations of any group."<sup>96</sup>

The goal of maintaining an air of U.S. 'neutrality' would prove elusive, a fact that would ultimately lead to the widespread frustration of expectations that Solaún had hoped to avoid. The ambassador's dispatch in fact anticipates this inevitability by noting that the "net effect" of cancelling Todman's visit, far from a neutral decision, was to "demonstrate that Somoza's position had been weakened and affirm that the U.S. was reluctant to be perceived as the key actor in the...political crisis." While Solaún considered the possibility that, while a more active U.S. role "could be seen as tipping the scales in favor of one element or another," it might nevertheless advance U.S. interests by "influencing the possibility for democratic change and avoiding an escalating guerrilla insurgency which involves neighboring countries." Ultimately, the ambassador rejected this approach because it "required highest level detailed policy decision, which cannot be accomplished under present conditions." Foggy Bottom did not dispute Solaún's conclusions.<sup>97</sup>

With Managua removed from his Central American itinerary, Assistant Secretary Todman nevertheless took advantage of a January 28 stopover in Costa Rica to communicate his government's expectations to Somoza by way of Ambassador Lacayo, the Nicaraguan envoy to José. Todman reasoned that Somoza, having already expressed willingness to dialogue with the opposition, would be "willing to offer significant concessions," the general strike having demonstrated the "extent of hostility to him by business community and government workers." Although Todman asked that

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<sup>96</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the Secretary of State, January 20, 1978, "Situation Report No. 1 – Nicaragua – Todman Visit," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00037; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the Secretary of State, January 24, 1978, "Analytical Update," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00039.

<sup>97</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the Secretary of State, January 24, 1978, "Analytical Update," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00039.

Lacayo not attribute these terms to the U.S. government, he authorized the Nicaraguan ambassador to inform Somoza that they met with his approval.<sup>98</sup>

Todman's demarche called on the Nicaraguan president to "show maximum restraint" in dealing with the crisis, to redouble his efforts to facilitate a 'national dialogue' with "responsible opposition leaders," and to refrain from "reprisals against individuals or firms" that demonstrated a willingness to "join in a common effort to solve the nation's problems." In this dialogue, Somoza was to demonstrate a willingness to "push...significant changes," both statutory and if necessary constitutional, that would facilitate "fair and open elections in 1980" and open the political process to a broader set of political parties heretofore proscribed from national politics. Somoza was expected to make concessions, in advance of this dialogue, that would demonstrate his commitment to conciliation and change.<sup>99</sup>

Back in Washington the following week, Todman expanded on the demarche in a meeting with the Nicaraguan plenipotentiary, Somoza's brother-in-law, Guillermo Sevilla Sacasa. Todman called on the Nicaraguan government to invite the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to investigate human rights conditions in Nicaragua and to create an independent national investigatory commission endowed with subpoena power in order to investigate Chamorro's murder. The following day Todman informed Solaún of his two indirect overtures and instructed the ambassador to request an immediate audience with Somoza to deliver the demarche in person in order to "signal Somoza that [Washington] gives the highest priority to orderly change."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Wade Matthews (approved by Terrance Todman), Dispatch to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 5, 1978, "Proposed Initiatives with Somoza and the Opposition," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00050.

<sup>99</sup> Wade Matthews, Dispatch to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 5, 1978, "Proposed Initiatives with Somoza and the Opposition," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00050.

<sup>100</sup> Wade Matthews, Dispatch to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 5, 1978, "Proposed Initiatives with Somoza and the Opposition," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00050; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State

The ambassador was to help Somoza understand that the U.S. government was “interested in defusing the present situation and avoiding widespread violence,” and that he should not view the demarche as a “vehicle for removing him from power.” If Somoza was willing to follow the prescribed approach, the ambassador was to assure him that the U.S. government was “willing to encourage the opposition to engage in meaningful dialogue” and would make it clear that Washington did not condone the “overthrow of Somoza by extra-legal means.” The U.S. government was also prepared to “use its influence on neighboring countries to help control the [insurgency] problem.”<sup>101</sup>

Upon receiving his instructions, Ambassador Solaún requested that the State Department make a concomitant public statement clarifying the administration’s policy toward Nicaragua, hoping to “strengthen his leverage” in advance of delivering the demarche to Somoza. On the day before the ambassador’s scheduled appointment in the ‘bunker,’ State Department spokesperson Hodding Carter dedicated the prepared statement at the noon press briefing to the escalating crisis in Nicaragua: “The United States Government has observed...the calls for justice, democratization and respect for human rights, ideals which we and all men of good will share. Given our long and close friendship with Nicaragua, we hope a peaceful solution to the present political crisis can be found.” The statement “encouraged moderation and conciliation,” acknowledged the “restraint” thus far shown by Somoza, and preemptively tendered the administration’s “deep regrets” should any party pursue “further violent action.” Cautious and constructive, the statement could hardly have been what the ambassador

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Department, February 8, 1978, “Demarche to President Somoza,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00055.

<sup>101</sup> Wade Matthews (approved by Terrance Todman), Dispatch to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 5, 1978, “Proposed Initiatives with Somoza and the Opposition,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIO050; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 8, 1978, “Demarche to President Somoza,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIO055.

to Managua had in mind. Nor did it satisfy the curiosity of the State Department press corps as was revealed by the questions that ensued.<sup>102</sup>

The opening volley came from a reporter citing a rumor that the United States “may ask Somoza, in one way or another, to give it all up and resign. Given the U.S. influence and weight in that area, is the United States doing anything at all to influence either Somoza or the other parties as to what to do?” Obviously, parried Vance’s spokesperson, “That would constitute...a direct interference in the affairs of that country, and that we are not doing.” Rather, he reiterated, the United States was “urging restraint on both sides.” The game of cat and mouse continued. “What is the American role, as you see it? A number of people in Nicaragua are looking for the United States for support in opposing Somoza.” Was the administration seeking to “wash its hands completely of that?” Rather, didn’t the State Department’s statement in and of itself not “imply an American role?” Hodding Carter steadfastly refused the bait, “No. For us to express our concern about a situation does not suggest that we have the solution.” He insisted, “The situation...is going to have to be determined by the people on the ground.”<sup>103</sup>

Shifting tack, one reporter suggested that “the whole process in Nicaragua would not have been possible [were it not] for the Carter Administration’s human rights policy?” The department spokesperson replied, “Frankly, [the United States] was very hesitant about our claiming...or seeming to claim that it was responsible for something in another country.” Human rights advocacy was not something “unique to the United

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<sup>102</sup> Hodding Carter, Mark Schneider Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 6, 1978, “Transcript of Noon Briefing February 6, 1978,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55. For a revealing sketch of the mechanics of the noon press briefings, see: Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 168-92.

<sup>103</sup> Hodding Carter, Mark Schneider Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 6, 1978, “Transcript of Noon Briefing February 6, 1978,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55.

States.” Rather it was reflective of the “general level of concern internationally...over the past year or so.” This was undoubtedly true, though many in the international community were also calling for the United States to take a more active role in mediating the conflict.<sup>104</sup>

Having established the party line, the State Department spokesperson deftly cracked open the door, noting that Washington had in the past “welcomed certain steps that were taken by the Nicaraguan government, which we thought were moves toward greater freedom.” Sensing a concession, the questioners pressed the issue. Was the administration “advocating that the Somoza regime accede to the request [from the Catholic Church and various groups] for a dialogue between the government and all the opposition forces?” Hodding Carter’s response was cautious but suggestive: the United States favored a “process in any country that leads toward greater democratization,” whether in Nicaragua or elsewhere, and naturally viewed “dialogue [as] preferable...to the other alternative.” This was all the “leverage” that Ambassador Solaún would carry with him on the morrow as he proceeded to Somoza’s ‘bunker’ on February 7, carrying with him evidence that the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs harbored a more expansive vision of the U.S. role in resolving the Nicaraguan conflict than the one related by the department’s spokesperson.<sup>105</sup>

When the U.S. ambassador handed Somoza a written summary of the demarche on February 7, the caudillo noted that he was by then familiar with its thrice-delivered terms. He informed the ambassador that everything was “in the mill,” with the exception of the Inter-American Human Rights commission visit, a provision that the

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<sup>104</sup> Hodding Carter, Mark Schneider Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 6, 1978, “Transcript of Noon Briefing February 6, 1978,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55.

<sup>105</sup> Hodding Carter, Mark Schneider Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 6, 1978, “Transcript of Noon Briefing February 6, 1978,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55.

Nicaraguan president correctly attributed to Venezuelan meddling. Somoza insisted that he “was no fool and was not going to let himself be embarrassed or screwed.” While understanding Washington’s position, he nevertheless “feared that [the demarche] might be taking away all of his cards.” Somoza maintained that the “opposition would never moderate” and expressed grave concern over the “growing respectability of the communists.” He “repeated his desire for U.S. support,” and reiterated his “belief that the withdrawal of [U.S.] support has led to the current crisis.” While Somoza assured the ambassador that he “had no intentions of taking reprisals against the opposition,” he reminded Solaún that some of the reforms “would require constitutional change, which would take time.” Solaún reported that Somoza “could be stalling.”<sup>106</sup>

The ambassador explained to Somoza that he could take the demarche in two ways: “either as an imposition; or a constructive suggestion for a program for democratization which could lead to his and Nicaragua’s success.” Washington was merely “trying to help him as a friend, not trying to take advantage of him.” While the U.S. “position should not be taken as a threat,” Solaún explained in terms sounding very much like a threat, that Somoza “should know that there would be some temptation within the U.S. to support elements antagonistic to him if he does not act responsibly.” In one of the most telling exchanges of the meeting, Solaún declared that it was “essential that the president decide what he wants to do: go out as a leader who has provided for democratic transfer of power or leave office as a dictator.” While the ambassador extended the offer to use Washington’s influence with the Nicaraguan opposition and with regional governments, this was clearly made contingent on

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<sup>106</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 8, 1978, “Démarche to President Somoza,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55.

Somoza's willingness to choose the former course of action. The message was clear. Somoza *was* leaving office; it was only a question of when, and under what terms.<sup>107</sup>

The State Department's public position, staked out by Hodding Carter in his February 6 briefing stood in stark contrast to the conversation that occurred between the U.S. ambassador and the head of the Nicaraguan State the following day. This was indicative of an active debate unfolding in Washington between various factions within the policy-making community. Robert Pastor recalls that representatives from the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs favored a more active role mediating the conflict between the Nicaraguan government and its opposition, which was in effect the *de facto* course of action Todman and Solaún had been pursuing. Ultimately, though, representatives from the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, the Policy Planning staff and Pastor himself, representing the National Security Council, convinced Christopher that the United States should merely "reaffirm its support for democracy...but avoid becoming an intermediary." As Director of Policy Planning Anthony Lake explains, those advocating 'neutrality' based their position on both principle and pragmatics. As a matter of principle, they considered it wrong for the United States to interfere in the affairs of a tiny Latin American neighbor, which was in effect repeating the behavior that had led to the 'imperial residue' with which they were now contending. Moreover, many argued that, notwithstanding the best of intentions, an active U.S. role in the conflict could have unintended consequences that could harm both the reputation and interests of the U.S. government.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 8, 1978, "Demarche to President Somoza," *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO55.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 52; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 5, 1978, "Proposed Initiative with Somoza and Opposition," *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO51; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 116-7.

While the State Department bureaus and the White House staff were grappling to find an appropriate policy line in Nicaragua, there is little evidence that this issue received much if any attention from the senior administration officials until foreign leaders began to apply pressure for the U.S. to take a more active role. Somoza's regime had been a concern to other heads of state in the Caribbean region for some time. This concern stemmed from an admixture of personal animosity toward Somoza because of his decades-long status as an 'imperial' collaborator, and fears that political and social unrest in Nicaragua would spill across their own borders. Providing bookends to the Central American isthmus, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia were all hostile to Somoza. The Sandinistas received material support from Panamanian strongman Omar Torrijos, who had negotiated the historic canal treaty with the United States in the fall of 1977, undoubtedly one of Carter's top foreign policy priorities. Costa Rica's borders provided safe haven to the guerrillas while the San José government looked the other way. Perhaps Somoza's most vociferous detractor, Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez had been pushing, as noted, for an OAS-sanctioned investigation of human rights practices in Nicaragua by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. While foreign leaders like Pérez may very well have been genuinely concerned with human rights, it is also clear that human rights and the Carter administration's professed commitment to them provided a convenient pretext with which to attack Somoza.<sup>109</sup>

Pastor recalls that Pérez ultimately forced the Nicaraguan issue on Carter and Brzezinski in February 1978. When Brzezinski and Carter sought the Venezuelan's support in the escalating crisis in the African Horn, Pérez insisted that the U.S.

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<sup>109</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 24-6, 42, 101-2. The Costa Rican government later provided material support to the Sandinistas after the Nicaraguan National Guard repeatedly violated its sovereignty while in 'hot pursuit' pursuit of the guerillas (p. 70).

administration respond to his letter requesting assistance in dealing with Somoza, which to Pérez meant driving the dictator from power. This request fueled the unfolding debate within the Christopher group, as a divided administration sought to formulate an appropriate response to this request. The response was ultimately sympathetic but stopped far short of the roll that Pérez was seeking for the United States. Meanwhile, in one of the few times during the first half of 1978 that Nicaragua made the State Department's "daily briefs" to the president, Vance informed Carter on February 18 that Nicaragua was taking on the character of "an uncoordinated incipient revolution."<sup>110</sup>

When Carter traveled to Caracas in early April, the two leaders discussed Nicaragua, though this topic was far from the top of the agenda. Pérez warned of the Sandinista threat and repeatedly drew parallels to Batista and the Cuban revolution. While Carter expressed a willingness to encourage Somoza to reform his human rights practices, he explained that, while it might be possible for Pérez to convince the Nicaraguan strongman to step down, it was difficult for Carter to "propose direct action by the U.S. to bring about Somoza's downfall." Carter's reticence frustrated Pérez who, despite his preoccupation with the Cuban precedent, began to pursue Somoza's ouster by funding and arming the Sandinistas, hoping to bolster his nation's leverage with the successor regime in the process.<sup>111</sup>

Pérez's letter forced the administration to crystallize its position on Nicaragua, prompting Christopher to convene an inter-agency meeting on February 15 both to

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 52-4; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 24-42; Cyrus Vance, Memorandum for the President, Daily Report, February 18, 1978, *DDRS*. Nevertheless, this is one of the few mentions of Nicaragua during the Vance's 'daily briefs' to the president during the first half of 1978.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 53-4; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 42-3.

decide on the tenor of Carter's response to Perez, and more broadly, to revisit the administration's policy toward Nicaragua. The following day, Christopher dispatched a new set of instructions to Managua meant to "guide the role" of the U.S. embassy "until further notice." He instructed Solaún's mission to "avoid direct involvement in internal [Nicaraguan] political maneuvering" and to "avoid being seen to be propping up the Somoza government or supporting efforts by opposition to unseat Somoza." In both public and private forums, the embassy in Managua should "maintain support...for individual human rights and open political process." Unsurprisingly, given the differences of opinion within the administration, the tone of the instructions suggests that Christopher believed the ambassador had been taking too active a role in Nicaraguan politics. Embassy officials should not "slide into a middleman role" and "should not, *repeat not*, carry messages, proposals or assurances of any kind." In fact, the instructions suggested that the U.S. legation in Managua should minimize "contact with both the opposition and the government...for the immediate future." It seems clear that the department was seeking to rein in its free-lancing ambassador in Nicaragua.<sup>112</sup>

Solaún recalls being "most upset with these new instructions" which had "dashed [his] hopes that the embassy would play an active role in working a compromise." In his view, this new policy line "abdicated any U.S. leadership, in spite of the desires that all Nicaraguans manifested to the embassy." In the ambassador's view, had "Nicaraguans been capable of peacefully evolving their system into one respectful of human rights, they would have not 'needed' the American human rights policy." He expressed frustration with the contradictions inherent in the strict policy of 'non-intervention' and the existing U.S. policy which he viewed as unavoidably and

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<sup>112</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 35-44; Warren Christopher, Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 16, 1978, "Role of the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua," DNSA, Item no. NIOO64.

justifiably “activist.” Solaún’s memoirs and official dispatches betray his conviction that Nicaraguans were in need of U.S. tutelage and it seems clear that the ambassador relished such a tutelary role at the hub of Nicaraguan politics.<sup>113</sup>

Solaún claims to have considered resigning his post when confronted by his new instructions, which he later characterized as “irrelevant and irresponsible.” Nevertheless, he had ample opportunity to air his views at a chiefs-of-mission conference in Foggy Bottom that convened a few days after the instructions reached Managua. The ambassador found a sympathetic ear in the person of Terence Todman, who was also not enamored with the emerging policy line. On the day before Christopher’s meeting, shortly after returning from his Central American mission, Todman had publicly broken with the administration’s policy. “We must avoid holding entire countries up to public ridicule and embarrassment,” he told the Washington Press Club. “We must avoid condemning an entire government for every negative act by one of its officials.” The assistant secretary’s outspokenness soon earned him a reassignment to the calmer diplomatic waters of the U.S. embassy in Madrid.<sup>114</sup>

Together in Washington for the chiefs of mission conference in late February, the lame duck assistant secretary worked with Solaún to draft a new set of instructions, more in line with the ambassador’s thinking, though still constrained by the prevailing views. While Christopher did not adopt the bureau’s draft verbatim, he placated the ambassador by engaging him in the process of drafting a new set of instructions, which softened the edge of the February 16 instructions. Despite their differences, both parties agreed, “Nicaragua may well present a crucial test” of the administration’s

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<sup>113</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 115-7.

<sup>114</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 117-8; Warren Christopher, Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, March 7, 1978, “U.S. Posture in Nicaragua Crisis,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO75; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, May 8, 1978, “El Salvador’s Dissidents Disappointed at U.S. Silence,” p. A10. Riding quotes from Todman’s February 14 speech.

policy, which was to avoid the “emergence of a retrogressive and repressive right-wing dictatorship,” or “a repressive regime of the extreme left along the Cuban model.” Either would be detrimental to both Nicaraguan welfare and U.S. interests, would “constitute a major setback to [the administration’s] policy in the hemisphere [well as] its human rights policy and [would] necessarily affect Nicaragua’s neighbors.”<sup>115</sup>

Notwithstanding these points of consensus, a comparison of Solaún’s original draft with the later draft reveals lingering points of contention. In the original draft, Solaún and Todman had written, “While we must continue to maintain a posture of non-intervention in Nicaragua, we believe that the United States cannot abdicate its role of leadership and moral responsibility...As Nicaragua is a test for our human rights policy it would also be inappropriate to completely wash our hands of the present crisis and merely sit by, watching events take their course at the probable cost of considerable death and suffering.” The final draft removed the ambassador’s pejorative phrasing like “abdication,” and “washing of hands,” and recast these into positive responsibilities, though decidedly more circumspect responsibilities than those envisioned by Solaún. Where the ambassador had spoken of “moral responsibility,” the final instructions acknowledged “an obligation to encourage by legitimate means the concerned parties to work out a made-in-Nicaragua solution that would minimize violence and put Nicaragua on the democratic road.” Where Solaún had spoken of the need for U.S. “leadership,” the final instructions acknowledged that “Nicaraguans look to [the United States] for support for democracy and human rights.” Where Solaún had acknowledged the goal of non-intervention, the final instructions bolstered this clause by flatly noting that the administration would “not seek to impose a ‘made in the U.S.’

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<sup>115</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 117-8; Warren Christopher, Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, March 7, 1978, “U.S. Posture in Nicaragua Crisis,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO75.

solution.”<sup>116</sup>

This tug-of-war over the appropriate role of the United States in the Nicaraguan crisis also extended, more pointedly, into the ambassador’s personal role and the role of the embassy in Managua. Where Solaún had hoped to “continue...*normal* contacts with all legitimate forces in the society,” the final draft substituted the word “reasonable” for “normal.” Where the ambassador had hoped to secure the latitude, “as he deemed appropriate, to assist in clarifying and encouraging compromise between opposing factions and positions,” the final instructions circumscribed this latitude, merely authorizing Solaún to “encourage all factions to communicate with each other and to seek a democratic and peaceful solution.” Completely absent from Solaún’s draft, the final instructions explicitly instructed the embassy to “avoid being perceived as a hub of domestic political activity,” a role that the ambassador appeared to have relished, judging from the tone of his memoirs. Nevertheless, after all of this smithing of words, Solaún recalls returning to Managua feeling that he had sufficient room to maneuver and that “he did not have to resign.” Even so, it is telling that, in his memoirs, Solaún chose to publish his original draft, rather than the more circumscribed revised instructions – his marching orders.<sup>117</sup>

Although striving to uphold a policy of ‘neutrality,’ the U.S. government was nevertheless applying public diplomatic and economic pressure to the Nicaraguan government. As the Carter administration was preparing to present its foreign assistance package to Congress in early February, *La Prensa* picked up on a beltway

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<sup>116</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 117-8; Warren Christopher, Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, March 7, 1978, “U.S. Posture in Nicaragua Crisis,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO75.

<sup>117</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 117-8; Warren Christopher, Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, March 7, 1978, “U.S. Posture in Nicaragua Crisis,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO75.

leak to the Associated Press, its headlines proclaiming, the “United States cuts military assistance to Somoza.” Caught unaware, the U.S. embassy was inundated with questions, as Solaún sought guidance from Foggy Bottom, anticipating the “need to respond more forthcomingly” before the aid package became public. The Nicaraguan government had already conveyed its “disgust” to the U.S. defense attaché in Managua and Solaún conjectured that opposition leaders “were likely to interpret this news as the signal from the U.S. that they have been seeking.” Notwithstanding Solaún’s protestations, five days later, *La Prensa* reported that the U.S. ambassador purportedly told a group of prominent Nicaraguan business leaders that Washington’s military aid to Nicaragua had in fact been “cut to zero.” Although Solaún flatly denied this charge and while there was undoubtedly motivation for the opposition to have fabricated the story, it seems equally plausible that the U.S. ambassador left his interlocutors with some impression that corroborated the leak. On February 7, John Goshko of the *Washington Post* ran a story revealing that while U.S. military aid had not been “cut to zero,” the proposed budget singled out Nicaragua, from among multiple human rights violators, for deep military aid cuts.<sup>118</sup>

The annual congressionally mandated country reports on human rights practices provided another opportunity for the administration to apply public pressure to Somoza’s regime. Here again, we see the delicate balance between the need to acknowledge Somoza’s positive steps to improve human rights and the need to condemn the continuing abuses. In his February 6 press briefing, reporters had pressed Hodding Carter to preview the report’s findings, shortly after the rumor of aid cuts had

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<sup>118</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 1, 1978, “Story on Military Assistance Termination,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00047; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 6, 1978, “Embassy Issues Statement Clarifying *La Prensa* Misquotes,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00054; John Goshko, *Washington Post*, February 7, 1978, “U.S. Cites Rights Abuses in Three Nations; Only Nicaragua Faces Big Cutback in U.S. Foreign Aid.”

made headlines in Managua. The State Department spokesperson's response was noncommittal, disavowing knowledge of the report's contents and noting blandly that the United States "welcomed...steps taken," by the Nicaraguan government and "hoped that the process would continue." John Goshko, who claimed to have seen the reports, was more forthcoming in the next day's edition of the *Washington Post*, calling out the reports on Nicaragua, Iran and South Korea. While these reports acknowledged "some improvement in the human rights situation" in these three countries during 1977, reported Goshko, they also noted "credible" and persistent "allegations of torture, cruel or inhuman punishment, arbitrary imprisonment and denial of fair trials."<sup>119</sup>

Soon after, when Congress officially released the already much publicized country report on Nicaragua, its treatment of Nicaragua was indeed ambivalent. Although the report acknowledged that Somoza's government was making some progress in the realm of human rights, its tone was anything but glowing. Recognizing the lifting of the 'state of siege' and "steps toward a 'national dialogue,' it nevertheless cited continued instances of physical abuse, arbitrary detention, electoral fraud and government corruption. Todman's deputy Sally Shelton told Congress the following week, "Although problems remain, it is our opinion that marked progress has been manifested since early 1977." Shelton acknowledged that the National Guard had behaved in a "generally restrained manner" during the escalating crisis of recent weeks. Nevertheless, there was no escaping the fact that, of the 105 countries cited in the 426-page report – the overall tenor of which was characterized by Bernard Gwertzman of the *New York Times* as "bleak" – Somoza's government held the sole distinction of

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<sup>119</sup> Hodding Carter, Mark Schneider Cable to U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 6, 1978, "Transcript of Noon Briefing February 6, 1978," DNSA, Item no. NIOO55; John Goshko, *Washington Post*, February 7, 1978, "U.S. Cites Rights Abuses in Three Nations; Only Nicaragua Faces Big Cutback in U.S. Foreign Aid."

having its military aid reduced due to human rights performance.<sup>120</sup>

Just as the U.S. message was mixed, so too was Somoza's reaction. At a Liberal Party rally two weeks after the report was made public, the Nicaraguan autocrat took the opportunity to criticize the State Department's country reports. "Liberalism," evidently alluding to his family's dynasty with apparent no sense of irony, "was promoting human rights before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," he told the party faithful and members of the media, "Those who historically oppressed blacks and hold Indians as second class citizens are teaching nothing to us in Nicaragua." Nevertheless, Somoza made the most of the tepid acknowledgments that his government had made limited improvements in its human rights practices, citing the State Department's country reports and public statements by department officials as evidence of Washington's approval, when taking his case to the American public in a *New York Times* op-ed the following week.<sup>121</sup>

Notwithstanding his public demagoguery, Somoza responded symbolically, if not substantively, to the U.S. demarche. In that same Liberal Party rally, the General reaffirmed his intention to resign the presidency in 1981 and for the first time publicly announced his intention to give up command of the National Guard as well, so that the nation's "armed institution would evolve for the benefit and welfare of all Nicaraguans." While this was significant, the following day's edition of *La Prensa* provocatively asked why Somoza did not surrender his National Guard post

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<sup>120</sup> United States State Department, Report Submitted to the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, and the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978; Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, February 10, 1978, "U.S. Rights Report on 105 Lands is Bleak Except for a Few Gains," p. 18; John Goshko, *Washington Post*, February 16, 1978, "Nicaraguan Human Rights Situation Caught in a Crossfire," p. A22.

<sup>121</sup> Rubenstein, Dispatch to the State Department, March 12, 1978, "Somoza's February 26 Speech: Analysis," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00069.

immediately. In response to Somoza's call for social welfare proposals "to benefit the poor in accordance with the economic capacity of the nation," *La Prensa* challenged the Liberal party to stop exacting a mandatory five percent of civil servant's pay. Moreover, the mouthpiece of the opposition characterized the General's proposal for land reform as insufficient and nothing more than a "means to avoid real and integral agrarian reform. While Somoza had announced his intention to create an independent commission to investigate the Chamorro murder, *La Prensa* called on him to appoint commissions to investigate corruption and human rights violations."<sup>122</sup>

Across the board, as Somoza was making concessions, the opposition was calling for more – in short, any government in which Somoza played any role, even if only until 1981, was becoming increasingly unacceptable to the opposition. In April, *New York Times* correspondent Alan Riding noted that Somoza's "concessions have failed to defuse the opposition and nonviolent groups have stepped up their efforts to form a broad front against the regime." Central to this effort, business leader Alfonso Robelo, who had emerged onto the political scene as the *de facto* leader of the general strike, organized a group of young politically active professionals on March 16 to found the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (*Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense*, MDN) on March 16. Using his establishment credentials, Robelo proceeded to work to bring all opposition elements under a single umbrella, which came to be known as the Broad Opposition Front (*Frente Amplio Opositor*, FAO). "Opposition has spread like a brush fire, consuming one sector after another," noted one foreign diplomat in April, "It's like watching a slow-motion revolution." By May, most of the moderate opposition had cast their lots with Robelo's coalition and in August the Group of Twelve, representing

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<sup>122</sup> Rubenstein, Dispatch to the State Department, March 12, 1978, "Somoza's February 26 Speech: Analysis," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00069.

Sandinista interests, associated with this Broad Opposition Front. “The country is in an insurrectional mood,” noted one opposition leader who noted that the “situation is rapidly becoming anarchic.”<sup>123</sup>

Meanwhile, the Carter administration pursued a conflicted strategy of ‘carrots and sticks’ to encourage and coerce Somoza to liberalize his regime, while refusing to acknowledge any role, past or present, in the constitutional crisis that threatened to engulf the Central American nation, if not the region, in war. As Somoza made continued concessions, his American interlocutors, like his Nicaraguan opposition, insisted that more were needed. The ongoing debate over whether to reward past concessions with the ‘carrot’ or induce future concessions with the ‘stick’ continued to break along bureaucratic lines. As William LeoGrande has observed, “The administration was unable to reconcile its conflicting priorities into a clear, coherent policy.” In the few notable cases where Somoza was rewarded with the ‘carrot,’ the result was renewed truculence on Somoza’s part, heightened disenchantment on the part of his opposition, and confusion on the part of policy observers.<sup>124</sup>

Two well-known carrots, in the spring and summer of 1978, were such sources of frustration and confusion. The first was less an incentive to Somoza than a response to congressional blackmail. In May 1978, administration reversed its October 1977 decision to block more than ten million dollars in economic development funds to Nicaragua, in order to ‘purchase’ the cooperation of Texas Representative Charlie Wilson. Wilson threatened to oppose the administration’s proposed aid packages to other nations that he contended were worse human rights offenders than Nicaragua.

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<sup>123</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, April 25, 1978, “Somoza Appears Politically Isolated as Unrest Spreads in Nicaragua,” p. 12; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 52-3.

<sup>124</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p. 19.

While the administration did not approve the loans in order to reward Somoza, the calculus of carrots and sticks played a role in rationalizing its decision. Moreover, administration officials offered a coherent public justification for the decision – the loans would benefit the poorest while the United States had drastically cut and was still withholding military assistance. Nevertheless, Anthony Lake recalls that by that time “the press was leaping at every sign of the inconsistency for which the Carter administration was being criticized.” While John Goshko of the *Washington Post* did in fact faithfully report the administration’s rationale and acknowledge Wilson’s behind-the-scenes wrangling, his front-page headline read, “U.S. alters stand on rights, frees aid to Nicaragua.” In Nicaragua, Solaún recalls, *La Prensa* and the government-controlled *Novedades* were engaged in a “competition to demonstrate that the U.S. government condemned [or] supported Somoza, respectively.” The net result was that neither Somoza nor the opposition was happy with the U.S. position astride the fence, while observers in the United States questioned the administration’s commitment to human rights.<sup>125</sup>

The second ‘carrot’ came from the president, who, true to his penchant for personal diplomacy, made the ill-fated decision to send a personal – and ostensibly private – letter to the Nicaraguan dictator. Carter expressed his “great interest and appreciation” for promises made in a June 19 press conference for further concessions, including the strongman’s intention to allow the Group of Twelve – in exile since their October 1977

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<sup>125</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 82-3, 206. Holding a swing vote in the House Committee that approved foreign assistance, Wilson was also threatening to propose an amendment to the foreign assistance legislation that would remove the discretion of the executive branch. The Texas congressman proposed quantifying human rights practices using *Freedom House*’s rankings of political freedoms, in which Nicaragua ranked ahead of a number of nations receiving U.S. assistance; John Goshko, *Washington Post*, May 16, 1978, “U.S. Alters Stand on Rights, Frees Aid to Nicaragua,” p. A1; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 126-32; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 54-5.

manifesto – to return to Managua. Carter saw these as “important and heartening signs, [which if] translated into actions [would] mark a major advance for your nation in answering some of [its] criticisms.” Most in the U.S. administration – not least those involved in the day-to-day formulation of policy toward Nicaragua – felt the timing of the letter was inopportune, as violence was escalating in Nicaragua and Somoza had yet to fulfill his “heartening” promises. More importantly, by acknowledging those concessions already tabled by the Nicaraguan, Carter’s letter left the impression that these steps were sufficient. It conveyed, in effect, a tacit endorsement of Somoza’s stated intention to serve through 1981, an outcome that was becoming increasingly unacceptable to the Nicaraguan opposition.<sup>126</sup>

Hoping at first to dissuade Carter from sending the letter and later to buy time to encourage Somoza to follow through on his promises, the State Department managed to delay the delivery of the letter for a few weeks. When Ambassador Solaún delivered Carter’s letter to Somoza on July 21, having verbally conveyed its gist ten days earlier – he conveyed his “strict instructions” that the letter was “a confidential communication between President Carter and himself and that neither the text nor the existence of the communication should be disclosed.” Somoza – having no “interest in a collector’s item,” but rather a tool to “ward off his enemies,” – promptly scheduled a rendezvous off the coast of Venezuela to confront his biggest detractor with evidence of

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<sup>126</sup> Jimmy Carter, Letter to Somoza, June 30, 1978, *DNSA*, Item no. NI00132; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 83-90. Although he opposed sending the letter, the task of drafting the letter fell to Robert Pastor, with editorial comments from the State Department and the president adding the final “touches of warmth,” much to Pastor’s chagrin. While Pastor had expressed his dissent in a cover letter to the president, Carter was unaware of his opposition, since National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski removed the cover letter before passing it to the president; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, June 19, 1978, “Voiding of Arrest Orders for the Twelve,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00126; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 138-43; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 55-9.

Washington's support. Pérez informed the Nicaraguan, "He did not care what Carter said, Somoza would have to go."<sup>127</sup>

Somoza's indiscretion was neither the only nor the most damaging violation of Carter's trust. Citing unnamed department sources, John Goshko ran a front-page exposé in the August 1 *Washington Post* proclaiming, "President Carter...has sent a letter congratulating Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza for promises to improve the human rights situation in his country." Purportedly the leak's source expressed "concern that a revelation of the letter...would raise questions about the credibility and sincerity of the administration's human rights policy." Notwithstanding this concern, the source was apparently unable to contain its compulsion to leak the information. Goshko's exposé contributed to the growing domestic charges that the administration's "policy toward Somoza is confusing, inconsistent and ineffective," noting that it "has seemed to veer back and forth." Moreover, as Robert Pastor has noted, the leak "associated Carter with Somoza in a way that the actual letter did not." In Managua, *Novedades* eagerly echoed Goshko's tagline, "Carter congratulates Somoza...acknowledges respect for human rights." While Solaún recalls that Somoza's boasts went "basically unnoticed in Nicaragua," the letter undoubtedly did little to bolster the opposition's dwindling hopes that Washington would play a meaningful role in removing Somoza from power. Moreover, the letter, the State Department's delay tactics and the recriminations surrounding the leak exacerbated the bureaucratic tensions within the administration.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 83-90; Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 138-43; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 55-9; Anastasio Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, Chapter 10.

<sup>128</sup> John Goshko, *Washington Post*, August 1, 1978, "Carter Letter to Somoza Stirs Human Rights Row," p. A1; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 138-43; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 55-9; Anthony Lake, *Somoza*

Robert Pastor claims that Carter's letter "represented a watershed" in the administration's policy in that it "impelled Brzezinski and Carter to focus on Nicaragua for the first time" and that it "represented the last time Nicaragua would be defined solely in the...context of the human rights policy." In the wake of the leak, the *Washington Post* opined that the administration's approach to Nicaragua was "fundamentally wrong," premised as it was on the assumption that the United States was "dealing with...a human rights problem." Rather, the editorialist "increasingly suspected" that what the nation was "really dealing with in Nicaragua...was a revolution," with the possibility that Somoza may be replaced with "elements that were ideologically beholden to...the Sandinista National Liberation Front." In short, it was "not out of the question" that the United States could find itself confronting a "second Cuba" on its southern border.<sup>129</sup>

Nearly one hundred thousand, many flying Sandinista colors, cheered the 'Return of the Twelve' in July, setting the stage for Edén Pastora's audacious 'Palace Raid' in which a handful of Sandinista guerrillas laid siege to the National Palace on August 22, taking fifteen hundred hostages. Following the contours of the 1974 Christmas Raid, the Sandinistas were able to exact the release of fifty-nine political prisoners including Tomás Borge, a ransom of half a million dollars, multiple airings of a communiqué calling for the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, and safe passage – not to Havana – but to Venezuela by way of Panama. While Carter's letter does not seem to have provoked the raid, Pastora nevertheless took advantage of the public relations opportunity, rhetorically asking a *Washington Post* correspondent, "How could [Carter] praise Somoza while our people were being massacred?" Though the hostages were

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*Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 83-90.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 55-9; Editorial, *Washington Post*, August 3, 1978, "Nicaraguan Question," p. A22.

freed, the crisis in Nicaragua was escalating. The Palace Raid provoked a month-long general strike that would cripple the nation's economy while escalating guerrilla conflict claimed thousands of lives and left tens of thousands homeless. Reports had even emerged that elements of the erstwhile loyal National Guard were plotting a coup, although this posed little threat to Somoza's hold on the military at the time. As Anthony Lake would later assert, "The dramatic events of August and September 1978 had overtaken the policy of disassociation. Policy could no longer be made only in the context of human rights concerns, for Nicaragua itself had become an issue."<sup>130</sup>

Pastor recalls that administration officials were "startled and unsettled at how easily that hatred [for Somoza] was transformed into support for the Sandinistas." Where the administration had heretofore viewed its policy toward Nicaragua in terms of human rights objectives, Pastor asserts, following the August raid it "approached Nicaragua as a political-security crisis." Assistant Secretary Viron Vaky was settling into his new role, replacing Terence Todman atop the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs. Perhaps Vaky's recent tenure as U.S. ambassador in Caracas had influenced Vaky's perspective; he shared many of the views of Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Also drawing the analogy to Batista's Cuba, Vaky believed that Somoza must go and the sooner the better. Few in the administration took issue with Vaky's conclusions, though there was considerable disagreement about which methods would be most effective and appropriate to bring about an early termination to the Nicaraguan's term of office. Once again, the tenets of non-intervention and

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<sup>130</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 59-60; Tad Szulc, *Washington Post*, September 3, "Rocking Nicaragua: The Rebel's Own Story," p. A12; Coup plotting: Richard Feinberg, Dispatch to the State Department, August 30, 1978, "Meeting with President's Son, Major Somoza," *DNSA*, Item no. NI00188; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 100-6, 109.

multilateralism dominated the debate.<sup>131</sup>

Like Pérez, Vaky felt that by playing a more active role in mediating the conflict, the United States both should and could ‘engineer’ the early succession of a more moderate regime in Nicaragua. Vaky was convinced “that a moderate solution would not emerge on its own” and the administration must “face the issue of the future of Somoza squarely.” Others opposed this position as a matter of both principle and pragmatics; Pastor and Lake, for example, had a “common anxiety of...asking [a chief of state] to step down.” To them, the United States should not intervene in the affairs of another nation nor could the administration predict or control the character of any successor regime at an acceptable cost. Warren Christopher later admitted that he could have compromised on the matter of principle had he been convinced that more active U.S. role was practical. Vaky later agreed.<sup>132</sup>

While Vaky was making his case for a more active U.S. role, the Associated Press, citing “functionaries” in the State Department, reported that the Carter administration was “studying the possibility of offering its services as a mediator” in the escalating crisis. *La Prensa’s* new editor Xavier Chamorro confronted the U.S. ambassador, ostensibly “on behalf of the opposition,” stating that Nicaraguans wanted not part of a U.S. mediation that would allow Somoza “to remain in power until 1981.” Others in the opposition, however, were calling for the U.S. to mediate, some hoping for U.S. assistance in “breaking the deadlock” and for an “expression of support for their

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<sup>131</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 59-60, 64-5; Tad Szulc, *Washington Post*, September 3, “Rocking Nicaragua: The Rebel’s Own Story,” p. A12; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 112-4.

<sup>132</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 114-7; U.S. National Security Council, Memorandum of Conversation, September 4, 1978, “U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua,” *Declassified Documents Reference System*; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 64-65.

cause.” Solaún reported that many “members of the upper middle and upper classes...[from] traditional families” had a “positive and friendly attitude” toward the United States.<sup>133</sup>

While most “moderates” and “conservatives” in Nicaragua feared “civil war, anarchy and communist takeover,” they were more fearful of three more years of Somoza. Many in the Nicaraguan opposition had no wish to negotiate with Somoza “without some form of international mediation,” having been outmaneuvered in the past. The Nicaraguan Archbishop, who had been instrumental in negotiating the release of the hostages in the Palace Raid, also supported the idea of international mediation. By September 3, the ambassador concluded, “It is apparent that the idea of mediation is attractive to moderate elements in Nicaragua.” It was the opinion of “the embassy” that the United States “should support a mediation effort assuming that the bulk of the opposition” could reach consensus in support such an approach. He warned that “events were unfolding fast,” driving the need for a quick decision.<sup>134</sup>

Although calling for Washington to support the mediation effort, the U.S. ambassador plainly admitted, “There is ample evidence that as of today Somoza is unwilling to consider mediation, except perhaps to guarantee his remaining in power until 1981.” Despite the growing consensus in Washington and Nicaragua on the undesirability of his continued tenure, Somoza was not inclined to leave. At a meeting with Richard Feinberg, on August 28, the Nicaraguan dictator was “in a fighting

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<sup>133</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, August 31, 1978, “Opposition Does Not Want U.S. mediation in Current Crisis,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00190; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, September 1, 1978, “A View of the Private Business Sector Strikers in Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00194.

<sup>134</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, September 1, 1978, “A View of the Private Business Sector Strikers in Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00194; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, September 3, 1978, “INDE Leaders Initiate Contacts for Possible Mediation of Nicaraguan Strike,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00199.

mood.” The State Department’s Policy Planning strategist for Latin America concluded that Somoza “intended to remain in power at least until 1981 and [possibly] beyond that date” if he was unsatisfied with the trajectory of political change in Nicaragua. Three days later, Somoza threatened to “throw the ambassador out of Nicaragua” if Washington called for his early resignation. While acknowledging that his regime was embroiled in “total confrontation” and was in “real trouble,” Somoza dismissed the opposition as “paper tigers and fools” and warned that if he were to leave power, “chaos would prevail.”<sup>135</sup>

The Carter administration debated this issue as the waning days of August gave way to September and principals in the administration were preparing for the historic summit at Camp David. Vaky and Pastor, supporting conflicting positions, agreed to convene a Special Coordinating Committee meeting to reach consensus on a policy line in Nicaragua. Although the president was preoccupied with the Middle East, Deputy National Security Advisor David Aaron conveyed the Carter’s “deep concern over recent developments in Nicaragua,” as he called the meeting to order. Undersecretary David Newsom presented a position paper prepared by the State Department that concluded, “Ultimately Somoza would have to go.” Nevertheless, if this objective was made clear too early, it could become “extremely difficult...to deal with the evolving situation” in Nicaragua. Rather, a consensus emerged that the United States “should stimulate the Central Americans to promote mediation between Somoza and the moderate opposition as a first step in the political process.” Policymakers soon rallied

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<sup>135</sup> Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, September 3, 1978, “INDE Leaders Initiate Contacts for Possible Mediation of Nicaraguan Strike,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00199; Richard Feinberg, Dispatch to the State Department, August 28, 1978, “Feinberg Meeting with President Somoza,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00183; Viron Vaky, Dispatch to Ambassador Solaún, August 29, 1978, “Human Rights Demarche,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00182; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, August 31, 1978, “Ambassador Meets with Somoza,” *DNSA*, Item no. NI00191.

around the vision of a Central American-led mediation, legitimized by the Organization of American States, and supported by the United States and the regional bookends of Mexico, Venezuela and Columbia. This multilateral approach would lend an air of legitimacy to the process while enabling the United States to remain in the background, although Vaky insisted that ultimately it would be the decision of the United States that “would count.”<sup>136</sup>

Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo Odio had in fact already offered his services to lead a Central American mediation effort, after Carter had sought his advice on the deteriorating situation in Nicaragua. Administration officials reasoned that Carazo would be the ideal candidate to lead the mediation since Somoza respected him and Costa Rica’s democratic credentials would further legitimize the prospective mediation. Notwithstanding these “best-laid plans,” the policy encountered growing reluctance from Carazo and stiff resistance from Somoza as administration officials and the diplomatic corps set about tugging on marionette strings hoping to be seen as a ‘neutral actor.’ On the same day that the Special Coordinating Committee formalized the policy of Costa Rican-led arbitration, Somoza’s government sealed its fate when Nicaraguan troops fired on sovereign Costa Rican territory while in ‘hot pursuit’ of guerrillas retreating to Costa Rican safe havens. Regional governments, in a twist of irony, demonstrated they too could tug on marionette strings as they continued to increase the pressure on Washington to take a more active role in the mediation. Tony Lake has asserted, Pérez and Torrijos “forced the American hand” by threatening to internationalize the conflict by dispatching warplanes against Somoza. In reality, U.S.

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<sup>136</sup> U.S. National Security Council, Memorandum of Conversation, September 4, 1978, “U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua,” *DDRS*; Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling. The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 134-6; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 66-7.

officials had already prepared for this contingency. ‘Option 4b,’ as laid out by Christopher in the September 12 SCC meeting, allowed for an active U.S. role in the mediation if the Central American initiative failed. Informed of Washington’s commitment to become directly involved in the mediation, the Venezuelan and Panamanian heads of state “sheathed their swords.”<sup>137</sup>

Stepping to the fore, Washington pressured a recalcitrant Somoza to acquiesce to an international mediation; he ultimately found the terms “dialogue” or “friendly negotiation” more palatable. Meanwhile, U.S. diplomats attempted to convince a fragmented opposition to bargain as one under the auspices of the Broad Opposition Front (FAO). While the Sandinistas opted out of this “bourgeois accommodation with the forces of imperialism,” the balance of the Broad Opposition Front (FAO) came to the table in good faith, although many were unwilling to accept an outcome that involved Somoza remaining in power until 1981. While there is considerable doubt as to whether Somoza was ever truly negotiating in good faith, versus merely stalling, there is little doubt that he intended to remain in power at least until 1981.<sup>138</sup>

The international team, chartered by the Foreign Ministers of the Americas on September 23 in Washington to mediate the fundamental impasse in Nicaragua, was comprised of U.S. Ambassador William Bowdler, joined by a representative from the Guatemalan government – which was sympathetic to Somoza – and a representative from the Dominican government – which was critical of the dictator. These three struggled valiantly or the better part of three months to reach an outcome that would

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<sup>137</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 135-9; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 69-74.

<sup>138</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 139-40; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 69-74; William G. Bowdler, June 4, 1979, “Report to the Secretary of State on the Work of the International Commission of Friendly Cooperation and Conciliation for Achieving a Peaceful Solution to the Grave Crisis of the Republic of Nicaragua,” 328 pgs.

restore legitimacy to the Nicaraguan government and peace to the Nicaraguan landscape. It seemed for a brief period that the mediation team would succeed; it ultimately proposed an internationally supervised referendum that would allow the Nicaraguan people to determine whether Somoza's government should cede power to a broadly constituted provisional government. In the end, Somoza's fundamental rigidity scuttled the talks and the mediators returned home empty-handed.<sup>139</sup>

In the wake of the collapsed mediation, on February 8, 1979, the administration announced further U.S. economic and diplomatic sanctions against the Nicaraguan government. "Somoza's unwillingness to accept the essential elements of the mediators' most recent proposal," a deteriorating human rights situation, as well as "prospects for renewed violence and polarization" must "unavoidably affect" relations between the United States and Nicaragua. The United States would withdraw its military assistance group and abrogate the heretofore-suspended military aid, suspend further economic aid, reduce the embassy staff in Managua by more than half, and withdraw all Peace Corps personnel from Nicaragua. As had been the case from the beginning, Somoza's well-positioned allies in the U.S. Congress struggled with some effect to blunt the impact of these sanctions. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence, distracted by the revolution in Iran and attenuated by a diminished in-country presence because of the sanctions, was slow to recognize the military and political inroads that the Sandinistas were making in the spring of 1979. As Pastor has observed, between the middle of May and June 19, 1979, U.S. intelligence estimates of Somoza's ability to remain in power shrank from years to days.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 141-67; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 82-97.

<sup>140</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 97-114. Future economic aid would not be considered, some existing loan packages suspended, while only "well advanced" projects that would provide the "basic human needs of the poor" would move forward;

On June 17, the Sandinistas announced the formation of a provisional government in exile – a junta comprised of Marxist-Leninist Daniel Ortega, one of the authors of the Sandinista accommodation with bourgeois oppositionists, two left-leaning academics and two moderates from the business community, including the wife of martyred *La Prensa* editor, Violeta Chamorro. Junta member Moisés Hassan Morales told the media, “We want the United States to keep its hands off Nicaragua...Let us solve our own problems.” The Nicaraguan professor who received his PhD from the University of North Carolina continued, “We want good relations with every country. We want respect, we want friendship, we offer friendship, but we don’t want to be told what to do.” That same day, the Andean Pact nations of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela declared Nicaragua to be in a “state of war” and the Sandinistas to be “legitimate combatants” seeking to establish a “true representative democracy, freedom and justice in Nicaragua.” Mexico and Costa Rica had already broken diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and the Panamanian government followed suit clearing the way for its anticipated recognition of the Sandinista-sponsored provisional junta in San José.<sup>141</sup>

“The reasons the Carter Administration cannot quite bring itself to declare the

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Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling, The Nicaraguan Dilemma: A Portrait of Washington at Work*, p. 168-192, 208-18.

<sup>141</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 18, 1979, “Rebels in Nicaragua Name Five to Form Provisional Junta,” p. A1; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 21, 1979, “Nicaraguans Open Counteroffensive against Insurgents,” p. A1; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 24, 1979, “Nicaraguan Rebels’ Junta Denies Cuban Involvement,” p. A11; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 111-13. The five-person junta was comprised of: Daniel Ortega Saavedra (Cuban-trained Marxist Leninist, member of 9-man Sandinista National Directory and leader of *Tercerista* movement to seek accommodation with bourgeois oppositionists), Moisés Hassan Morales (U.S.-educated professor and leader of National Patriotic Front, coalition of leftist organizations disaffected with the FAO accommodations), Sergio Ramírez (Group of Twelve member and U.S. educated former Secretary General of the Central American University), Alfonso Robelo Callejas (U.S.-educated business leader and founder of the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement), and Violeta Chamorro (wife of the martyred *La Prensa* editor);

[Somoza] finished, as a number of Latin governments have done,” opined one *New York Times* columnist three days after Panama broke relations with Managua, “probably have more to do with politics in the United States than in Nicaragua.” Carter’s rival in the 1976 Democratic primary, Washington Senator Scoop Jackson had been ravaging the administration’s arms limitations policy with charges that it was “making too many gratuitous concessions” to the Soviets, the tell-tale “signs of appeasement...all too evident.” Meanwhile, conservatives in the House, like New York Representative Jack Murphy, were attacking the legislation to actuate the Panama Canal Treaty. Panama’s conspicuous support of the Sandinista regime was lending credence to the charges that General Torrijos was a “revolutionary activist” and unreliable partner, who would leave the U.S. dangerously exposed on the all-important waterway. Although the administration was slow to recognize what was unfolding, by the time senior officials returned from the SALT II summit in Vienna, the Nicaraguan crisis had the full attention of the administration principals. As the *New York Times* column had concluded, “President Carter can do without the title of midwife to a Central American radical regime.”<sup>142</sup>

In spite of, and perhaps because of, the growing regional support for the Sandinistas, the administration sought to lend an air of multilateral legitimacy to its policy line under the auspices of the Organization of American States. Although this tenet remained important to most, Pastor has noted the ease with which the administration moved from its reluctance to act as a mediator in October to an active arbiter eight months later, the tenet of non-intervention by then a casualty of the

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<sup>142</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, June 14, 1979, “Vance Hopes Talks in Vienna will Spur Stable Soviet Ties; Denies Appeasement Charge,” p. A1; Steven Roberts, *New York Times*, June 21, 1979, “Administration Wins Crucial Vote in the House on Panama Canal Bill, p. A10. The bill passed the House by a vote of 224-207; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 115, 119-20.

growing domestic and international pressure on the administration to act. On June 18, the State Department called for an emergency meeting of the foreign ministers of the O.A.S. and senior administration officials met the following day to agree on a policy line. It had been four days since the fighting had reached the gates of the U.S. embassy in Managua. It had been two days since the Archbishop of Managua had called world attention to the “painful and desperate situation” in Nicaragua, with over fifty thousand refugees in Managua alone.<sup>143</sup>

Two days later, on June 20, the world had watched in horror as a National Guardsman summarily executed ABC correspondent Bill Stewart with a single bullet to the back of the head while the reporter lay prostrate. On that same day, Alan Riding asserted, “Anti-American sentiments are probably stronger today than at any other time since the Marines ended their intervention here in 1933.” Riding continued, “Washington has succeeded in alienating both government and opposition.” The *Times* reported recounted a confrontation with a shouting woman in a Managua hotel, “What happened to Carter’s human rights policy? Carter is as crazy as Somoza. He thinks he can negotiate with the tyrant. It’s all the fault of the Americans.” On June 21, Vance took the podium to address the foreign ministries of the OAS with a speech that Bernard Gwertzman of the *New York Times* described as an “anguished turning point.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 16, 1979, “Nicaraguans Fight Beside U.S. Embassy; Guardsmen on Grounds Open Fire on Suspected Guerilla Group – No Americans Injured,” p. A3; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 17, 1979, “Nicaraguan Archbishop Appeals to the World for Help for Refugees,” p. A7; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 114-7.

<sup>144</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 21, 1979, “Nicaraguans Open Counteroffensive against Insurgents; ABC-TV Correspondent Slain,” p. A1; Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, June 22, 1979, “A Painful Decision for Carter; Belief that Disaster May be Imminent in Nicaragua; Overturns Nonintervention Resolve,” p. A1; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 116-9.

Vance called for a “clean break with the past,” proclaiming that any “solution must begin with a replacement of the present government with a transitional government of national reconciliation,” although the U.S. secretary made no mention of the provisional junta in José . He condemned the “mounting evidence of involvement by Cuba and others in the internal problems of Nicaragua.” Vance also proposed an immediate cease-fire, the “cessation of arms shipments” to either side, and a “major international relief and reconstruction effort.” Most controversially, the U.S. Secretary of State proposed an OAS-sanctioned peacekeeping force, to maintain stability for the provisional “government of national reconciliation.”<sup>145</sup>

Yet it was not the United States that would forge the June 23 OAS resolution. Rather, Mexico and the nations of the Andean Pact took the lead in promulgating the resolution that the OAS overwhelmingly embraced two days hence, with the United States falling into line. While the resolution called for Somoza’s “immediate and definite replacement,” it rejected the cease-fire, reasoning that force was the only means of removing the dictator. Most pointedly, the Latin American proposal rejected the OAS peacekeeping force, which many associated with the ghosts of interventions past.<sup>146</sup>

With clear evidence that the U.S. proposal was “dead,” at Carter’s Friday morning cabinet breakfast on June 22, Zbigniew Brzezinski made the case for U.S. military intervention. Ever the cold warrior, the National Security Advisor reasoned that the administration could not afford to appear weak to its adversaries in Moscow, Havana or Washington. Although Brzezinski found little support for unilateral military

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<sup>145</sup> *New York Times*, June 22, 1979, “Excerpts from Vance Speech to O.A.S. Ministers; Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, June 22, 1979, “A Painful Decision for Carter; Belief that Disaster May be Imminent in Nicaragua; Overturns Nonintervention Resolve,” p. A1; Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 118-9.

<sup>146</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 119-20.

intervention, Warren Christopher and the U.S. delegation scrambled to negotiate some concessions from their Latin American interlocutors on the final language of the O.A.S. resolution. The revised resolution authorized member nations to “take steps...within their reach, to facilitate an enduring and peaceful solution of the Nicaraguan problem,” technically leaving the door open for the United States to act unilaterally – to intervene in Nicaraguan politics with the ‘blessings’ of the O.A.S.<sup>147</sup>

All the while, Viron Vaky had been arguing that the United States should reconcile its policy with the inevitability of a Nicaraguan government in which the Sandinistas would play a significant roll, if not a decisive one. Pastor explains that a “dual strategy” emerged, in which U.S. policymakers sought rapprochement with the provisional junta in San José, while attempting to dilute the Sandinista influence within the junta and at the same time to disintermediate the junta in favor of a Washington-approved “executive committee.” Accordingly, Ambassador Bowdler boarded a plane for José to begin negotiating with the provisional junta, while Solaún’s replacement, Lawrence Pezzullo, took up his post in Managua with the doubly daunting tasks of convincing Somoza to leave and of finding moderates crazy enough to associate themselves with an “executive committee” that had been hand-picked by the United States.<sup>148</sup>

As the Sandinista guerrillas laid siege to the ramparts of Managua, Ambassador Pezzullo completed the first part of his mission as Anastasio Somoza Debayle ended his family’s dynasty with his July 17 resignation, notwithstanding one last-ditch effort to pass power to a crony. Yet despite U.S. efforts to moderate the junta, replace the junta and preserve the National Guard, it was the five in San José that were the legitimate

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<sup>147</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 120-2.

<sup>148</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 123-9; Lawrence Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza*, Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 1993.

arbiters of Nicaraguan politics, having won the popular support of their nation and a broad level of material and moral support from other governments in the region. As Pastor has noted, “Decisions on the future government of Nicaragua were being made in Washington, but they were not being implemented anywhere.” As the junta triumphantly entered Managua on July 20, the Carter administration contemplated how it should relate to this “second Cuba,” while images of falling dominos colored its reassessment of relations with the remaining authoritarian regimes in Central America.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, the United States and Nicaragua*, p. 135-53; Lawrence Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza*, Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 1993.

## QUID PRO QUO: EL SALVADOR, 1979

Anastasio Somoza Debayle fled Managua on July 17, 1979, bringing to a close his family's 46-year autocracy, culminating the short, but violent, civil war that brought the Sandinista regime to power in Managua. As the *Washington Post* later observed, Somoza's downfall "spurred a burst of preemptive diplomacy" in the United States. Was Nicaragua destined to become a "second Cuba?" The Carter administration had struggled in vain for eighteen months to prevent this outcome, a struggle constrained by an obsessive concern not to be perceived as 'intervening' in Nicaraguan politics. To many in the United States, Somoza's downfall was made more troubling by the fact that it was occurring in the nation's "own backyard" at a time when the U.S. president was attempting to "give away" the isthmian canal. The shockwaves from the Nicaraguan revolution rippled outward in concentric rings of significance, raising troubling questions about other embattled, authoritarian regimes in Central America, not least that of Carlos Humberto Romero in El Salvador.<sup>150</sup>

Returning to the central question of my thesis: to what extent and in what ways did persistent strains of nationalistic ideas affect the formulation, deployment and reception of U.S. policy in Central America? While it is not my thesis that these ideas

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<sup>150</sup> Alan Riding, "Somoza Yields Post and Arrives in the U.S.," *New York Times*, July 18, 1979; Alan Riding, "Somoza's Successor in Flight to Guatemala," *New York Times*, July 19, 1979; "Central American 'Domino,'" *Washington Post*, October 30, 1979. William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, "Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 5 (Summer 1980). p. 1084-1103; William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. For a good account of the political uproar caused by the Canal Treaties: Adam Clymer, *Drawing the Line at the Big Ditch: The Panama*

determined U.S. policy, I submit that they mediated the formulation and reception of that policy. My method for discovering ideology at work in foreign policy is to examine the discursive contrails of that policy – rhetoric matters. While the ultimate object of this study is the effect of ideology on foreign policy, the immediate object of my examination is the policy itself and the rhetorical acts surrounding that policy. Not wishing to “cherry-pick” my evidence from the voluminous record surrounding the Salvadoran crisis, I will attempt to remain detached from any ideological analysis during the course of this “thick description,” deferring such analysis until the final chapter.<sup>151</sup>

This chapter will begin by briefly tracing the arc of the Carter administration’s human rights policy toward El Salvador throughout the Nicaraguan crisis, up until Somoza’s departure in July 1979. It will then dive more deeply into the reformulation of the administration’s policy toward the embattled Romero government just days after the Sandinistas took power in Managua. Dubbed the *quid pro quo* policy, the administration’s approach to Romero’s government from July to October 1979 was strikingly similar to its policy toward Somoza in early 1978 – with one notable difference: by August 1979, it had become increasingly acceptable to interfere in the politics of a Central American nation, in the name of human rights, to protect perceived U.S. interests.

Although the Romero government was outwardly receptive to the U.S. demands for

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*Canal Treaties and the Rise of the Right*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008.

reform, it was unable or unwilling to arrest the escalating violence from both political extremes in El Salvador or to woo the moderate opposition to accept its “political opening.” As the optimism inspired by Romero’s early genuflection toward reform faded with the autumn leaves, Washington ultimately signaled tacit, if not active, support for the October 15 “young officer’s coup,” which had been endorsed by the moderate Salvadoran opposition. Like that opposition, most in the Carter administration had come to believe that Romero was a “dead horse” and saw the coup as the “best chance” of arresting the violence and bringing reform to El Salvador.

As the Sandinista-controlled junta was receiving its “tumultuous welcome” in Managua on July 20, 1979, the radical opposition groups in El Salvador, though considerably more fragmented than their Nicaraguan counterparts, were growing in strength. Just as the Nicaraguan left drew inspiration from Augusto César Sandino, the Salvadoran left looked to Sandino’s contemporary, Augustín Farabundo Martí Rodríguez. Just as Sandino had been martyred at the hands of the senior Somoza, Martí had been martyred for his role in the 1932 peasant rebellion, which had been brutally crushed by the military dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, an event known in Salvadoran lore as *La Mantanza* – the slaughter.<sup>152</sup>

Martínez had ushered in an era of military ‘presidencies,’ de facto dictatorships under a thin veneer of constitutionalism, which maintained order on behalf of an

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<sup>151</sup> Clifford Geertz, *An Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

<sup>152</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, p. 8-14; William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, “Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador,” p. 1084-6.

oligarchic elite during the years leading up to Carter's presidency. 'The Fourteen' – referring loosely to a small number of families that controlled a disproportionate share of the economic, social and political power in El Salvador – had vested the repressive organs of state within the military who governed at their behest and for their benefit. Unlike Nicaragua, where a cult of personality – *Somocismo* – controlled the military and political institutions up until the revolution, the Salvadoran elite had institutionalized the reins of power in El Salvador, which after 1962 had passed regularly from one military officer to another on a 'constitutionally' prescribed schedule.<sup>153</sup>

From its formation in 1962 until Carter's election in 1976, the conservative Party of National Conciliation (*Partido de Conciliación Nacional*, PCN) held the Salvadoran executive branch, overseeing the election of four successive hand-picked career military officers, each designated to serve out a non-renewable five-year term as president. The second PCN administration under Fidel Sánchez enjoyed a boost of nationalism during the brief Soccer War with Honduras in 1969, which strengthened the political and repressive capacity of the Salvadoran military, but exacerbated the larger trend of social and economic unrest in the highly urbanized Salvadoran society. As one State Department analyst noted, "The rapid industrialization and urbanization that began in earnest in the early 1960s had produced growing middle classes and industrial unions whose political strength had increased to the point of challenging

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<sup>153</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, p. 15-52; William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins,

military candidates at the polls.” To remain in power, the military governments had employed increasingly fraudulent tactics to deny centrist civilian coalitions electoral victories in the presidential contests of 1972 and 1977.<sup>154</sup>

In 1972, election returns from the capital precincts appeared to project an upset victory for the coalition ticket in opposition headed by Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte, the popular three-term mayor of San Salvador. Following an unexplained blackout in media coverage the military-backed government declared victory for the PCN ticket headed by Arturo Armando Molina. Following days of popular agitation in San Salvador and alleged coup plotting, Duarte “was encouraged” to take up residence in Venezuela. Molina’s administration, though authoritarian, was reform-minded but faced stiff opposition from extremes on both the right and the left in a rapidly polarizing Salvadoran society.<sup>155</sup>

Such was the political landscape, one month after Carter’s inauguration, when the Salvadoran Defense Minister, the designated successor to Molina, Carlos Humberto Romero claimed the 1977 presidential election. The streets of San Salvador once more filled with protestors who struck a familiar chord with their charges of intimidation,

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“Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador,” p. 1084-7.

<sup>154</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, p. 15-52; William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, “Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador,” p. 1087-9; U.S. Department of State, Strategy Paper, January 1, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA*, Document ES00089.

<sup>155</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Hearings before the Subcommittees on International Organizations and on Inter-American Affairs, “The Recent Presidential Elections in El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy,” March 9 and 17, 1977, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1st Session, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977; U.S. Congressional Research Service, Report to the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, “Human Rights Conditions in Selected Countries and the U.S. Response,” July 25, 1978, 95<sup>th</sup>

election rigging and ballot stuffing. During the ensuing protests, the Molina regime's response was characteristically heavy-handed, with a significant but disputed number of dissidents injured, killed, imprisoned and forcibly exiled. Soon after, Molina invoked a state of siege, which remained in effect until Romero's July 1 inauguration, further abridging the constitutional rights of an already-repressed society. In the United States, the Fraser Committee convened a congressional hearing on the Salvadoran election controversy, largely substantiating the opposition charges, resulting in a widespread consensus, from policymakers to the U.S. mainstream media, that both Molina's and Romero's 'elections' had been "blatant frauds."<sup>156</sup>

During Molina's lame-duck period, before Romero took office on July 1, relations between Washington and San Salvador festered, as the Carter administration sought to institutionalize its vague commitment to human rights. One week after the Fraser Committee hearing, El Salvador joined Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in preemptively refusing to accept any military assistance conditioned on human rights. When the

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Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978; William LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, "Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador," p. 1087-9.

<sup>156</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittees on International Organizations and on Inter-American Affairs, "The Recent Presidential Elections in El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy," March 9 and 17, 1977. 1972 opposition presidential candidate Napoleon Duarte and 1977 opposition vice-presidential candidate Antonio Morales, both exiled, testified at the hearings (statements and testimony on p. 48-67). While Romero's "official" margin of victory was nearly two to one, the overwhelming evidence of widespread, sustained and systematic fraud robbed his government of any claims to a democratic mandate. *Washington Post*, March 1, 1977, "Heavily armed Salvadoran forces routed 6,000 antigovernment demonstrators from a downtown square." In what became known as the "February 28 Massacre" the death toll ranged from official claims of five dead to opposition claims in the hundreds; U.S. Department of State, Strategy Paper, January 1, 1979, "Central America," DNSA, Document ES00089. For one of many examples of U.S. media characterizations of the 1977 election, see Alan Ridings "blatant fraud:" *New York Times*, February 26, 1978, "Salvadoran Battle of the Two Romeros," p. 7.

Molina government recalled Salvadoran soldiers receiving training in the United States two days later, policy makers in Washington made plans to reduce the size of the U.S. military mission in San Salvador.<sup>157</sup>

On the heels of Vance's Law Day Speech, State Department officials in Washington expressed their "deep concern" to Salvadoran envoy Bertrand Galindo "over the human rights situation in El Salvador." They informed Galindo of their intent to oppose an upcoming Salvadoran bid for a \$90 million Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan for a hydroelectric dam project in San Lorenzo. From San Salvador, U.S. Ambassador Ignacio Lozano reported that the prospect of a U.S. veto on the IDB loan "appears to have had a devastating impact" on the Salvadoran government, leading the ambassador to share his cautious optimism that this might "signal a new...attitude on human rights" in San Salvador. The following week, Vance added emphasis in a letter to President Molina, reminding the lame-duck president, and his successor alike, of El Salvador's "positive duty to respect the basic human rights and fundamental freedoms of those persons within its jurisdiction."<sup>158</sup>

Yet despite this flurry of diplomatic activity that reached the "seventh floor" of the

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<sup>157</sup> Reuters, *New York Times*, March 18, 1977, "General Brown Concerned over Latin Stand on Aid, p. A7; *Washington Post*, March 20, 1977, p. B7; William H. Luers, Memorandum to Philip Habib, March 18, 1977, "Next Steps with El Salvador," DNSA, Document ES00007; Terrance Todman, Memorandum for Philip Habib, March 23, 1977, "Reduction of U.S. Military Group in El Salvador, Issues for Decision," DNSA, Document ES00008.

<sup>158</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Ignacio Lozano, May 10, 1977, "Meeting with Salvadoran Ambassador," DNSA, Document ES00023; Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, New York: Vantage Press, 1981, p. 5-7; Cyrus Vance, Letter to President Molina, May 24, 1977, DNSA, Document ES00029; Ignacio Lozano, Cable to State Department, May 17, 1977, "Relations with the Government of El Salvador," DNSA, Document ES00026. Devine became ambassador to El Salvador in the Fall of

State Department, the Ford-appointed ambassador to San Salvador, like Molina a lame duck, soon began to level charges in the U.S. media and Congress that belied the hopeful tenor of his earlier dispatches. His embassy, he told a congressional committee in July, received “little to no support from Washington” on the human rights situation in El Salvador. Making the generous assumption that these charges were not politically motivated, they seem to have stemmed from Lozano’s frustrated preoccupation with the disappearance of U.S. citizen James Ronald Richardson, last known to be in the custody of the Salvadoran immigration authorities. The embassy had received “information that he was taken out and shot by the government” and had received no other “believable explanation” for his disappearance. An unnamed “high level embassy source” told the *Washington Post* that Salvadoran officials were “laughing at” Washington’s tepid human rights advocacy, charges that outgoing U.S. ambassador would repeat in his testimony to Congress in a July hearing convened by the Fraser Subcommittee.<sup>159</sup>

While there is little question that the Molina government stonewalled the administration on the Richardson matter, Lozano’s charges of indifference toward human rights practices in a “small” nation of “no importance to the United States” have

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1977, but was acting as Todman’s deputy assistant secretary in the Inter-American Bureau at this time.  
<sup>159</sup> Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, May 22, 1977, “Catholic Church, Military Draw Battle Lines in El Salvador,” p. A22; Ambassador Lozano’s statement and testimony to Fraser Committee, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Organizations, “Religious Persecution in El Salvador,” July 21 and 29, 1977, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1st Session, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977, p. 11-27; Dan Morgan, *Washington Post*, July 22, “Envoy to Salvador Says U.S. Didn’t Back Human Rights,” p. A10; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, July 25, 1977, “Salvador Confused by American Moves,” p. 2.

little foundation during the early days of the Carter administration. Rather, on many levels, the record “attests to an active policy on the Richardson case,” and on Salvadoran human rights in general, which the department’s Central American chief Wade Matthews was quick to point out in his sharp rebuke to the soon-to-be-recalled ambassador.<sup>160</sup>

While Chamorro’s *La Prensa* provided a public voice to the opposition in Nicaragua, the two leading papers in San Salvador were even more conservative than the government and spoke unambiguously on behalf of the status quo. Rather, in El Salvador, the Catholic Church, led by the unlikely activism of newly appointed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Goldámez, provided the public voice of the opposition. The forward-leaning posture of the Latin American church following the 1968 Medellín Conference, which was by no means uniform, and the ‘liberation theology’ of such vanguards as Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez provided the impetus and theological framework for this newfound activism in this heretofore bastion of the status quo.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Wade Matthews, Cable for Ignacio Lozano, May 24, 1977, “Washington Post Article on El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document ES00028. Matthews cites four cables as “but a sample” of the “voluminous traffic” of cables on the matter as well as the “very strong terms” in which the case had been raised in higher-level demarches. For example of “voluminous cables:” Ignacio Lozano, Cable to Terrance Todman, May 3, 1977, “Relations with the Government of El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document ES00021. For example of high-level demarche: Cyrus Vance, Letter to President Molina, May 24, 1977, *DNSA*, Document ES00029. The following winter a Salvadoran expatriate provided eyewitness testimony that Richardson had in fact been tortured and murdered while in the custody of the Salvadoran government: (Marvin Weissman [U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica], Cables to Department of State, March 8-10, 1978, “Richardson Case,” *DNSA*, Documents ES00050, ES00051, ES00053).

<sup>161</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Organizations, “Religious Persecution in El Salvador,” July 21 and 29, 1977, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1st Session, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977; U.S. State Department, Bureau of

During the period leading up to President Romero's inauguration, conspicuously boycotted by Archbishop Romero, reactionary forces had murdered two Jesuits for their activism and the ultra-right White Warriors Union issued a public threat that any foreign prelate remaining in El Salvador three weeks after Romero's election would meet the same fate. To his credit, President Romero denounced this mass death threat, although he did so under the watchful eye of the international community. To their credit, the prelates remained steadfast, the head of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, telling the international media that he and his brothers would remain in El Salvador "until they were all killed or expelled." Several expressed faith that the quest for international legitimacy would motivate the Salvadoran government to prevent further reprisals from the right.<sup>162</sup>

A master of public relations, Archbishop Romero recognized that this protective shroud of international legitimacy depended on public relations and remained on the offensive, despite the conciliatory tones coming from the other Romero now holding court in San Salvador. On the Sunday on which the White Warriors had threatened to make good on their violent promises, in a nationally broadcast sermon that was covered

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Intelligence and Research, "The Catholic Church and Human Rights in Latin America," *DNSA*, Document ES00041; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, August 4, 1977, "Priests in Central America are Called the Target of Official Enmity," p. 8; Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, May 22, 1977, "Catholic Church, Military Draw Battle Lines in El Salvador," p. A22. Romero's appointment was considered by conservatives and progressives alike to be a boost for the status quo: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, "Archbishop Oscar Romero: Biography, Notre Dame University, 2004, <http://kellogg.nd.edu/romero/pdfs/Biography.pdf>. The seminal work on liberation theology: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973.

<sup>162</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, August 4, 1977, "Priests in Central America are Called the Target of Official Enmity," p. 8; Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, July 25, 1977, "Priests in Salvador Turn to Revolution," p. C5.

by the international media, Archbishop Romero proclaimed to Salvadorans and the world, “The church cannot remain silent in the face of social, economic and political injustice.” The status quo in El Salvador was nothing less than “institutionalized sin.”<sup>163</sup>

Anastasio Somoza eased the reins of repression in Nicaragua in September 1977 during his family’s forty-first year in power, ending a three-year state of siege in a move that we have noted seems likely to have been a response to international pressure, not least that of the Carter administration. Less than three months into his presidency, Romero was making gestures of his own. Already under considerable pressure from Washington and others in the international community before his July 1977 inauguration, Romero immediately lifted the state of siege invoked by his predecessor following the disputed February election. Although there is significant evidence that the former defense minister resented the activism of the Catholic Church, he publicly called for a de-escalation of the conflict between church and state and for the protection of Jesuits in El Salvador.

While in Washington for the historic September signing of the treaty that restored Panamanian sovereignty over the strategic waterway, the new Salvadoran head-of-state met with President Carter in the White House. The Salvadoran committed to inviting the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to investigate human rights conditions in El Salvador and to pursue immediate steps to resolve his nation’s ongoing disputes

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<sup>163</sup> Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, July 25, 1977, “Priests in Salvador Turn to Revolution,” p. C5;

from the 1969 Soccer War with Honduras. In a press conference following their meeting, Carter signaled his approval. His administration was “very grateful that the new [Salvadoran] administration has been able to achieve these accomplishments in only two months in office.” While acknowledging that there had been few tangible steps taken on either front, Carter expressed confidence that Romero would “carry out these statements with enthusiasm, with determination and with success.”<sup>164</sup>

Like Somoza’s lifting of the Nicaraguan state of siege, Romero’s symbolic steps presented U.S. policy-makers with a conundrum: Should they reward these gestures or withhold the “carrot” until more tangible steps had been taken? The Salvadoran San Lorenzo Dam loan resurfaced at the International Development Bank and provided the focal point for this increasingly familiar debate. The prevailing camp in the administration argued that the dam was critical to the nation’s development and, hence, to relieving the suffering of “the poorest of the poor.” Moreover, as the newly-appointed envoy to San Salvador, Frank Devine, recalls having argued, “If the San Lorenzo Dam loan were going to disappear from the bargaining table,” it was better that it be a “positive factor” increasing future leverage than a “negative factor...casting a pall over our relations.” At a formal review of the administration’s human rights policy in October, subcommittee chairman Donald Fraser challenged this logic, “It would be unrealistic to determine that the fundamentally repressive nature of [the

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Alan Riding, *New York Times*, July 25, 1977, “Salvador Confused by American Moves,” p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Jimmy Carter, September 9, 1977, Remarks to Reporters following the Meeting with President Carlos Humberto Romero, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California, [Link to text](#).

Salvadoran] regime has changed overnight. Wouldn't our policy be more credible and more effective," he continued, "if we were to hold out rewards until enough time had passed to make a clear judgment whether or not the situations had changed fundamentally?" Nevertheless, the U.S. representative to the IDB voted in favor of the loan on November 3, since "in the [State] Department's view" there had been "improvements which justified altering our previous position."<sup>165</sup>

When the Sandinistas launched their October 1977 insurgency along the Nicaraguan border, we have noted that Somoza seems to have felt that his capacity to react was constrained by international pressure. President Romero seemed to have perceived fewer constraints. When the Salvadoran left mounted its own offensive in November, Romero called on the Salvadoran National Assembly – dominated by his own PCN party owing to the opposition boycott of the 1976 legislative elections – to pass the *Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order*. While this increased the state's pseudo-legal capacity to repress, the Salvadoran security forces had in fact measured their response to the agitation in early November. Reporting to Washington, Ambassador Devine "commended" the Salvadoran government's "moderate and non-violent" action in response to a series of provocations that left one "prominent industrialist" dead and culminated in the occupation of the Labor Ministry as fifteen

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<sup>165</sup> Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, p. 10-12. Devine received Carter's appointment to the Salvadoran post in September and was awaiting Senate confirmation. He recalls that Fraser reluctantly agreed to the loan, "I don't know if this is the right decision...but I will rely on the judgment of the State Department;" Committee Chair Rep. Donald Fraser (D, MN), State Department testimony before the House of Representative's Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations, October 25, 1977, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, p.28-9, 46.

hundred workers held dozens hostages for three days. Notwithstanding the pressure from the left, Devine astutely observed that the *Law of Defense* was as much a response to pressure from the right – the “established order and the military.”<sup>166</sup>

It is telling that the framers of the *Law of Defense*, while invoking the threat posed by “the grave actions of terrorists and the provocations of international subversives,” also positioned the decree within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While the legislation gave “wide latitude to...enforcement agencies” to deal with “anything that might constitute a threat to the public order and the established government,” this was a necessary measure to “ensure the exercise of individual rights and the liberty of the community.” Despite these attempts to “put lipstick on a pig,” Alan Riding best summarized the impact of the legislation on human rights. “Under the vaguely worded law, most normal political and trade union activities could be considered crimes,” observed the *New York Times* Central American correspondent, “including the holdings of ‘subversive’ meetings, propaganda that ‘threatens the social order,’ strikes that ‘prejudice the national economy,’ and the publishing of ‘false or tendentious’ news.”<sup>167</sup>

There is little evidence, though, that the promulgation of the *Law of Defense* drew much attention from U.S. policymakers, who were busy finalizing their human rights

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<sup>166</sup> Salvadoran National Assembly, November 24, 1977, “Law of Defense and Guarantee of the Public Order, Published in *Prensa Grafica*, November 25, 1977, English translation reprinted in *DNSA*, Document ES00045; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, November 25, 1977, “National Assembly Passes *Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order*,” *DNSA*, Document ES00044.

<sup>167</sup> Salvadoran National Assembly, November 24, 1977, “Law of Defense and Guarantee of the Public Order, published in *Prensa Grafica*, November 25, 1977; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, February 26,

policy. Ambassador Devine reported that while it “fell far short of a state of siege,” it provided a veil of “legality” and room to maneuver for the Salvadoran government in response to threats. In a speech the following day, the ambassador told the American Chamber of Commerce, “We believe any government has the full right and obligation to use all legal means at its disposal to combat terrorism.” Undoubtedly, the U.S. ambassador felt a personal stake in these measures as he arrived in San Salvador in the face of what U.S. security forces deemed credible threats of assassination from the right and kidnapping from the left. Assistant Secretary Todman offered public praise to the Salvadoran government for its “moderate and legal response to serious terrorist provocation.” In the face of these tacit and explicit signs of approval, events in El Salvador remained at the margins of the U.S. policy-making agenda.<sup>168</sup>

While Chamorro’s assassination seems to have created few repercussions on the ground in El Salvador, it undoubtedly created another level of distraction for the policymakers in Washington. As we have noted, it prompted Terence Todman to cancel his scheduled stop in Managua in his early 1978 visit to Central America, although the balance of his agenda remained intact. President Romero welcomed the assistant secretary to San Salvador on January 27. A skillful diplomat, Todman probed Romero on a variety of topics from the state of Salvadoran democracy, to church-state

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1978, “Salvadoran Battle of the Two Romeros,” p. 7.

<sup>168</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, November 25, 1977, “National Assembly Passes *Law of Defense and Guarantee of Public Order*,” DNSA, Document ES00044; Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, p. 17-20, 30-34; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, February 26, 1978, “Salvadoran Battle of the Two Romeros,” p. 7; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, May 8, 1978, “El Salvador’s Dissidents Disappointed at U.S. Silence,” p. A10.

relations, to extremist violence. Todman's approach was indirect and subtle, confronting Romero with what 'others' were saying about his government, rather than making direct accusations. For example, he "brought up the complaint he had heard that very morning from representatives of the PDC that they could not find the conditions necessary for freedom of action and would therefore not participate in the upcoming elections." Romero offered explanations for all – the Christian Democrats' "decision not to participate in the elections was their own problem" – while Todman listened, took note and probed further. The President noted that it was "refreshing to talk to people like Mr. Todman, who at least acted with decency, and did not shout and point fingers as a recent visitor from the U.S. Congress had done." Romero was referring to an acerbic interaction earlier that month with Massachusetts Representative Father Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest who had come to El Salvador to investigate labor practices. Described by contemporaries as "one of the most liberal members of Congress," Drinan was the first Catholic priest to become a voting member of the U.S. Congress.<sup>169</sup>

President Romero's posture toward the church was openly antagonistic, noting that with persons like Drinan "it was impossible to have a dialogue." The president bitterly recalled the Salvadoran Church's characterization of his "harsh and crude" tactics during his tenure as Minister of Defense, falling back on the age-old justification that

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<sup>169</sup> Terence Todman, Memorandum of Conversation with President Romero and Vice-President Astacio, January 27, 1978, *DNSA*, Document EL00612; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, January 19, 1978, "Eagle International Labor Dispute: The Worker's Version," *DNSA*, Document ES00046; See also: Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*; Mark Feeney, *Boston Globe*, January 28,

he had only been performing “his duty.” Romero openly resented the martyrdom of Father Rutilio Grande, recently murdered by rightist terrorists for his activism on behalf of the Salvadoran peasants. Grande had been nothing more than a “simple priest,” not a “saint,” complained the Salvadoran president, vowing that he would “not allow the rebel priests to stir up the country” with their “subversive propaganda.” While acknowledging that there were “many good priests,” Romero noted that he would “insist on checking the names and files” of future priests entering El Salvador and would only permit the “good ones” to enter. Elsewhere in San Salvador, Archbishop Romero remained on the offensive, telling the international media that under the auspices of the *Law of Defense* “the government is maintaining an atmosphere of fear and intimidation...Soldiers are to be seen everywhere, people are arrested, people disappear.”<sup>170</sup>

Seeking to accentuate the positive, Todman congratulated the Salvadoran head of state on making good his promises made to President Carter in September, as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had just completed its mission to El Salvador to investigate human rights conditions. Romero observed, “The quality of the people who came with the team was high and he had great respect for them.” Todman gently reminded the president that the State Department would soon be submitting its mandated annual country report on human rights practices to Congress and, while it

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2007, “Rev. Drinan, First Priest Elected as Voting Member of Congress, Dies.”

<sup>170</sup> Terence Todman, Memorandum of Conversation with President Romero and Vice-President Astacio, January 27, 1978, *DNSA*, Document EL00612; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, February 26, 1978, “Salvadoran Battle of the Two Romeros,” p. 7.

would “praise” the progress that Romero’s regime had made, it would include “reports of what *others* [emphasis mine] had said about the situation.”<sup>171</sup>

Throughout the conversation, the Salvadoran president and vice-president had struggled to demonstrate to their American interlocutors the “falsity of what others might say,” returning on several occasions to exaggerated reports of killings and detentions in the February 28 demonstrations in protest of the 1977 election results. Central American bureau chief Wade Matthews, present at the meeting, pointed out that the U.S. government had received a great many names of the ‘disappeared’ and that if the Salvadoran government could help provide an accurate accounting of their whereabouts that these ‘misunderstandings’ could be put to rest. Romero responded that “of course” his government could provide “lists of many Salvadorans allegedly detained or missing who had really taken off instead to Russia or Cuba.” There is no record of any further discussion about the plausibility of large numbers of subsistence peasants and wage earners emigrating *en masse* without notifying their distraught loved ones.<sup>172</sup>

Although the U.S. contingent must surely have concluded that Romero’s answer was less than forthcoming, there is evidence that both Todman and Devine sympathized

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<sup>171</sup> Terence Todman, Memorandum of Conversation with President Romero and Vice-President Astacio, January 27, 1978, *DNSA*, Document EL00612; Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, November 17, 1978, “Report on the Human Rights Situation in El Salvador,” Washington: General Secretariat of the OAS; U.S. Department of State, Report to the Joint Committees on International Relations in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Committee on Foreign Relations in the U.S. Senate, February 3, 1978, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Washington: GPO, 1978.

<sup>172</sup> Terence Todman, Memorandum of Conversation with President Romero and Vice-President Astacio,

with the Salvadoran's grievance that opposition claims were given undue credence while official accounts were dismissed out of hand. Soon after returning from his Central American tour, as we have noted, Todman publicly broke with the administration's human rights policy, earning him a new assignment as ambassador to Spain. "We must avoid speaking out before learning all the facts," the assistant secretary proclaimed, raising the same concerns he had recently heard from Romero, "We must avoid believing that only the opposition speaks the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."<sup>173</sup>

Ambassador Devine – a career Foreign Service officer in the Latin American bureau and a close friend and former deputy of Todman – reveals a similar sympathy toward the official Salvadoran position in his memoirs and, to a lesser extent, his official dispatches. The ambassador recalls having "set straight" one visiting member of the British Parliament, having informed the vociferous critic, "Most members of the Salvadoran Cabinet were in fact honorable, decent, family men and good friends of his, who were in no way connected with the violation of human rights which went on in the country." Todman's sympathetic posture toward the Salvadoran government was not lost on the opposition. When the assistant secretary's reassignment was made public, the leader of the progressive National Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*, MNR), Guillermo Ungo, who had been Napoleón

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January 27, 1978, DNSA, Document EL00612.

<sup>173</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, May 8, 1978, "El Salvador's Dissidents Disappointed at U.S. Silence," p. A10.

Duarte's running mate in 1972, cautiously observed, "Todman's exit has given rise to some new hope, but we'll have to wait and see."<sup>174</sup>

President Romero's theme of 'liberals' in the U.S. government and media being unduly influenced by opposition accounts of the situation in El Salvador was common in Devine's dispatches from San Salvador throughout the spring of 1978. When the Salvadoran government ultimately pressed Devine for an opportunity "to present [to Washington] its views about recent charges of human rights violations," to the apparent surprise of most, the State Department immediately dispatched not one but two deputy assistant secretaries, from the Bureaus of Human Rights and Inter-American Affairs. While this would likely have fallen within the purview of the former bureau, the department felt that Salvadoran officials might question the objectivity of Mark Schneider, who had lived in El Salvador during his tenure with the Peace Corps, held strong views on the human rights situation in that nation and was a close friend of exiled oppositionist Napoleón Duarte. Accordingly, Sally Shelton, originally tapped to fill Devine's post, accompanied Schneider to balance the perspectives of the two bureaus.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Exchange with M.P. Dennis Canavan in Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, New York: Vantage Press, 1992, p. 54-5; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, January 19, 1978, "Eagle International Labor Dispute: The Workers' Version," *DNSA*, Document ES00046. The ambassador's representation of the "workers' version" has a judgmental tone; Ungo cited in Alan Riding, *New York Times*, May 8, 1978, "El Salvador's Dissidents Disappointed at U.S. Silence," p. A10.

<sup>175</sup> Mark Schneider and Sally Shelton, Trip Report to State Department, May 16, 1978, "El Salvador," *DNSA*, Document ES00064; Mark Schneider, Memorandum to Assistant Secretary Derian, May 16, 1978, "El Salvador Trip," *DNSA*, Document ES00065; Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, p. 55-6.

Schneider and Shelton met with the Salvadoran vice president, four cabinet ministers and the army chief of staff, as well as officials within the church, the political opposition and the business community. They observed a “growing polarization within [Salvadoran] society, sharp divisions between church and state and within the church, a sense that electoral fraud and restrictions on political activities had undermined faith in the political system, and a subsequent increase in sympathy among the rural poor for leftist organizations.” Touring the Salvadoran countryside, they heard accounts of “torture by the National Guard and the paramilitary group, disappearance and deaths of rural peasants suspected of sympathizing with or participating in opposition political organizations.” In their official report, the deputy assistant secretaries concluded, “the government has not acted to halt repressive practices of the security forces or their paramilitary allies in rural areas, although it [has] avoided confrontations in the most recent urban demonstrations.”<sup>176</sup>

Schneider described their conversations with Salvadoran government officials as “cordial, cooperative but non-committal.” He questioned whether the officials “understood the depth of the divisions that now exist” within Salvadoran society. Despite the consensus that El Salvador was “visibly and perhaps fatally polarized,” Schneider reported that all parties “spoke of their desire for *dialogue* with other sectors.” Although Romero’s government had engaged in a cursory and circumscribed dialogue with selective segments of the opposition, a great many members of the

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<sup>176</sup> Mark Schneider and Sally Shelton, Trip Report to State Department, May 16, 1978, “El Salvador,”

opposition expressed a “desire for the United States to put more pressure on the [Salvadoran] government to engage [in a more comprehensive and substantive] dialogue.”<sup>177</sup>

Schneider sensed that his interlocutors, in both government and the opposition, harbored the “feeling that the United States has eased off on its expressed concern for human rights over the past six months.” Guillermo Ungo, Napoleón Duarte’s running mate in 1972, told the international media, “At first, Carter’s policy raised great hope here, but now it’s creating enormous frustration.” The leader of the progressive National Revolutionary Movement continued, “Now it’s criticized by everyone from the Archbishop to the man in the street.” Indeed, the archbishop told the press. “I feel greatly disappointed because we had hoped the U.S. policy on human rights would be more sincere.” In the United States and elsewhere internationally, Alan Riding reported, “close observers,” including those in government and the academy, believed that “El Salvador, more than any other Latin American country, illustrates the way that Washington has recently relaxed its commitment to greater respect for human rights.”<sup>178</sup>

The Salvadoran left had adopted a different set of tactics than had the Sandinistas, who had sought to directly engage and ultimately dismantle the Nicaraguan security

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*DNSA*, Document ES00064.

<sup>177</sup> Mark Schneider, Memorandum to Assistant Secretary Derian, May 16, 1978, “El Salvador Trip, *DNSA*, Document ES00065.

<sup>178</sup> Mark Schneider, Memorandum to Assistant Secretary Derian, May 16, 1978, “El Salvador Trip, *DNSA*, Document ES00065; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, May 8, 1978, “El Salvador’s Dissidents Disappointed at U.S. Silence,” p. A10.

forces. More fragmented, the Salvadoran militants carried out a series of high-profile acts of sabotage, assassinations and kidnappings against foreign and domestic targets in both the public and private sectors, while their corresponding “popular” organizations harassed the government and private sector by demonstrating and occupying businesses, government agencies and foreign embassies. These “political acts of terror” which Schneider characterized as “a relatively new phenomenon” had far-reaching implications.<sup>179</sup>

First, they provoked a response from government and rightwing paramilitary forces, including “routine disappearances, deaths and torture” of opposition forces, which Schneider noted were far more numerous, if less spectacular, than the acts of terror from the left. Second, they further undermined the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government, its tenuous claims resting on its ability to “guarantee the public order.” Third, they reduced the appeal of the radical Salvadoran left to the bourgeois opposition who viewed them as the “rock” to the status quo’s “hard place.” Fourth, the random acts of terror induced the flight of investment capital and tourism revenue from the fragile Salvadoran economy, while swelling the war chests of the left with extravagant ransoms exacted from high profile kidnappings.<sup>180</sup>

Finally, the tactics of terrorism hampered both diplomatic and humanitarian operations in a country badly in need of both diplomacy and relief. The title of Ambassador Devine’s memoirs – *Embassy under Attack* – reflects the ambassador’s state of siege mentality throughout his tenure in San Salvador, undoubtedly personalizing his sympathy for the government’s mandate to maintain order. As a

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<sup>179</sup> Mark Schneider, Memorandum to Assistant Secretary Derian, May 16, 1978, “El Salvador Trip, DNSA, Document ES00065.

<sup>180</sup> Mark Schneider, Memorandum to Assistant Secretary Derian, May 16, 1978, “El Salvador Trip, DNSA, Document ES00065.

former Salvadoran foreign minister informed Devine shortly after his arrival in San Salvador, “Good luck, Mr. Ambassador, I think you have come here at a most difficult time.” By early 1979, another foreign diplomat posed the rhetorical question, “Where do we go from here? I get more pessimistic the longer I stay,” he told the press, “The terrorists are growing more confident, the country becomes more anti-government every day, the regime is politically hopeless, responding with repression to everything, foreign businessmen are fleeing the country, the economy is beginning to suffer.”<sup>181</sup>

By the fall of 1978, as the situation in Nicaragua had driven the administration to become actively involved in efforts to mediate an “enduring democratic solution” in Nicaragua, some in the administration were becoming increasingly concerned with political, social and economic unrest elsewhere in Central America. In a memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor’s Latin American specialist Robert Pastor posed the provocative questions: “Can a Nicaraguan-type crisis happen again? And, if so, what are we doing now to prevent a similar crisis?” Pastor concluded that not only could it happen again, it was “likely to in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala,” where the structural conditions that “gave rise to the crisis in Nicaragua” were present in an even “more advanced state.” Urging Brzezinski to “place Central America relatively high on his list of priorities,” Pastor asserted that if U.S. policy makers failed to act, that within a few years the “Nicaraguan crisis” would

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<sup>181</sup> Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack*, p. 21-34. Devine’s conversation with former Foreign Minister Ortiz on p. 29. The ambassador speaks of the “psychological effect” of such a “lethal challenge” and “constantly changing threat” on p. 34; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, March 22, 1979, “El Salvador is Shaken by Violence and No End is in Sight,” p. A8.

“seem easy in comparison.”<sup>182</sup>

Shortly after the mediation efforts in Managua collapsed in January 1979, a State Department strategy paper vindicated Pastor’s anxiety: “The governments of Nicaragua and El Salvador, and to a lesser degree Guatemala and Honduras, are proving incapable of responding creatively to increasing pressing economic problems.” In a patronizing tone, the report noted that Central American regimes seemed “unable to devise political institutions considered representative by the politically-aware population.” Failing to anticipate the upcoming events in Managua, the authors opined, “no regime appears likely to fall in the near term,” but worried that “those in Nicaragua and El Salvador were under increasing pressure” and that this might trigger a “spillover” of “social tensions in neighboring countries” in the region. While Guatemala suffered under many of the same structural and institutional deficiencies as El Salvador, the primary concern with the Salvadoran government was that it appeared “less effective than the Guatemalan regime either in co-optation or repression” – evidently either would have sufficed – neither “broadening its power base” nor “containing an increasingly bold guerrilla movement.”<sup>183</sup>

By early 1979, the Salvadoran military – along with other vested Salvadoran interests – observed the events unfolding in both El Salvador and Nicaragua with growing trepidation. Based on high-level contact with the Salvadoran military, U.S.

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<sup>182</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, October 23, 1978, “Central America: An Emerging and Urgent Issue for U.S. Policy,” *DDRS*.

<sup>183</sup> U.S. Department of State, Strategy Paper, January 1, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA*, Document

intelligence assets reported that the Romero regime was “boxed in by a serious and growing terrorism problem, an intransigent and naïve church hierarchy which condoned the extreme left, powerful and vocal demands by the oligarchy for the protection of the status quo, and ‘confusing demands’ by the U.S. government.” The government complained of being “hampered by pressures,” domestically and internationally. On the international front, Amnesty International, the Organization of American States and the U.S. government released critical reports on human rights conditions in El Salvador, joining the Salvadoran Church, on the domestic front, in sharp criticism of the government’s practices. While Salvadoran officials considered the Amnesty report to be “mild,” coming from such a “leftist” organization, the severity of the report by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission report surprised them, and they considered the State Department’s country report to be the most critical of all.<sup>184</sup>

The Romero regime had been under pressure to repeal the *Law of National Defense* ever since its promulgation fourteen months earlier, and the president had appointed a commission to investigate its abrogation. According to U.S. intelligence sources, “many within the Salvadoran military criticized President Romero’s efforts to appease what they consider to be ‘radicals’ within the U.S. government.” U.S. intelligence reports also speculated that Romero’s willingness to abandon the measure probably had more to do with the fact that the legislation was largely ineffective, either in containing

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ES00089.

<sup>184</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, March 1, 1979, “Threat Assessment: El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document EL00001; Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, November 17, 1978, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador,” Washington: General

the rising tide of terrorism from both political extremes or in mediating the response of Salvadoran security forces.<sup>185</sup>

In early May, the Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR), responding to the death of several of its members, occupied the National Cathedral in San Salvador. Within a few days, the revolutionaries had taken hostages and occupied the French and Venezuelan embassies, as well as a number of other churches around the small nation, calling for the release of political prisoners allegedly in the custody of the Salvadoran security forces. During the ensuing standoff, which outlasted the month of May, a loosely coordinated admixture of popular demonstration and violence from across the political spectrum punctuated the Salvadoran capital and countryside. The Archbishop, returning from an extended visit to Rome, called for moderation and concessions from both sides and offered his good offices to mediate the impasse, an offer that was rejected by the rebels, although their cause if not tactics enjoyed the sympathy of the prelate. By the time that the insurgents abandoned the National Cathedral and embassies in early June, having accepted asylum in Panama, domestic and international confidence in Romero's government was at an all time low, while violence and polarization flowed. As the State Department weekly *Current Foreign Relations* observed, Romero's regime sought "to deal with an increasingly radicalized opposition, patch up relations with the United States, and yet retain the support of its conservative backers among the wealthy

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Secretariat OAS, 1978.

<sup>185</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, March 1, 1979, "Threat Assessment: El Salvador," *DNSA*, Document EL00001.

and military.” As one U.S. official told the press, “Romero was a prisoner of the same system that put him in office.”<sup>186</sup>

Hoping to “patch up” relations with Washington, the Salvadoran government had proposed a “high-level dialogue on human rights,” to clear the air on the principle issue responsible for the chill in relations. Two weeks into the crisis on May 16, the U.S. legation met with the Salvadoran government to initiate this dialogue. The U.S. ambassador spoke of “the necessity for a real commitment” on the part of the Salvadoran government both to “the alleviation of poverty” and to “a movement toward an open political system.” The Salvadoran officials acknowledged that they “faced a serious crisis” and expressed a desire for “genuine – not cosmetic – improvement.” The following day, President Romero addressed the nation, in a speech that the U.S. ambassador characterized as “surprisingly conciliatory.” Romero called for “a cessation of violence, the beginning of a national dialogue and free municipal and legislative elections in 1980 – even suggesting that he would be willing to change the electoral law in a move judged by State Department officials as “new” and “possibly significant.” With a mixture of approval and skepticism, *Current Foreign Relations* reported, “Romero is trying to edge closer to his moderate opposition and isolate the radical left,” though acknowledging that the president’s “ability to accommodate such changes, and the opposition’s willingness to settle for peaceful, gradual change, remain very much in

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<sup>186</sup> For a detailed accounting of the tumultuous month of May 1979 in San Salvador see the series of situation reports (sitreps) from Devine to the State Department between U.S. State Department, “El Salvador: Beginning of Dialogue,” *Current Foreign Relations*, Issue no. 20, May 23, 1979, DNSA, Document EL00145; Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, “After Nicaragua, Anxiety

question.”<sup>187</sup>

Indeed, the opposition was largely unmoved by the president’s “conciliatory” speech. The Forces of Popular Liberation promptly and publicly called for “war on Yankee imperialism and freedom for political prisoners.” The Archbishop, in his homily two days hence, called for the radical left to end the occupations but charged the Romero government with continued persecution of Salvadoran Church. While the prelate commended the other Romero for not calling for increased repression, he also insisted that president’s “speech [must] be translated into concrete deeds.” One peasant union leader told the media that while Romero’s government “talked about reform and liberty...they were still out killing people.”<sup>188</sup>

On the political front, the all-important Christian Democrats immediately rejected the president’s call for dialogue – the so-called National Forum – citing a “lack of confidence in the sincerity” of the Romero government. Throughout the weekend, the violence continued and, within a week, President Romero reinstated the state of siege in El Salvador. When the president convened his anticlimactic National Forum a few days later, the Christian Democrats, along with other opposition elements, announced the formation of an alternative Popular Forum, which included less moderate elements of the opposition, which the president had explicitly excluded from his proposed

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Increases in El Salvador,” p. A1.

<sup>187</sup> U.S. State Department, “El Salvador: Beginning of Dialogue,” *Current Foreign Relations*, Issue no. 20, May 23, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00145; Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, May 21, 1979, “Sitrep No. 14,” *DNSA*, Document ES00142.

<sup>188</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, May 21, 1979, “Sitrep No. 14,” *DNSA*, Document ES00142; Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, “After Nicaragua, Anxiety Increases in

dialogue. While the opposition undoubtedly intended to undermine Romero's political position, it nevertheless left open the possibility of a broad-based dialogue, predicated on "specific objectives" and a "genuine democratic climate." As one Christian Democratic leader explained to the media, "The elections themselves are not the basic problem." Rather, he argued that the Salvadoran government had to first "create a climate...in which [the opposition] can campaign and organize."<sup>189</sup>

While the Christian Democrats formally refused to come to the negotiating table, President Romero, to his credit, elicited off-the-record input from some of the party's influential members. The U.S. embassy reported one such conversation with Abraham Rodriguez, one-time candidate for the Christian Democrat's presidential ticket. Rodriguez told the president that "genuine dialogue" could not occur until "concrete actions" had been taken by the Salvadoran government." Without this, he claimed, "all talk of dialogue lacks substance." Specifically, Rodriguez called for "meaningful reform" to the electoral system, the return of political exiles, and acknowledgement that the government held political prisoners and would "be prepared" to release at least some of these. "Only deeds, insisted Rodriguez, "would suffice to diffuse the building crisis."<sup>190</sup>

Indeed, Rodriguez had pulled no punches, telling the president that his "leadership

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El Salvador," p. A1.

<sup>189</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, May 23, 1979, "Sitrep No. 17," *DNSA*, Document ES00148; Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, May 24, 1979, "Sitrep No. 18," *DNSA*, Document ES00150; Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, "After Nicaragua, Anxiety Increases in El Salvador," p. A1.

<sup>190</sup> Frank Devine, Memo of Conversation, June 15, 1979, "Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC)

was universally criticized by all sectors of society and that his government had totally lost support even among traditional friends” in the business community and military, the latter of which “seemed to tolerate the government out of necessity rather than for any positive reason.” Surprising Rodriguez and Ambassador Devine, Romero had accepted the “tough and devastating criticism without any visible sign of surprise or disagreement,” although he placed the blame for the failed dialogue on the Christian Democrats and the Church. Ambassador Devine was optimistic that at least the Salvadoran president “recognized and was considering actions that could promote a democratic political approach, which could offer an alternative to growing extremism on the right and left.” Nevertheless, Devine acknowledged that Romero had “thus far had seemed vacillating and incapable of the strong and positive leadership that would be required to promote a democratic political opening.” The ambassador concluded on an ominous note, “The time for effective action is growing short because events in Nicaragua were moving very rapidly and [were] boosting the morale and potential strength of the extreme left in El Salvador.” This could cause the “already doubtful prospects for a political rather than a violent solution” in El Salvador to “quickly evaporate” leading to a “national crisis of unpredictable depth and proportions.”<sup>191</sup>

In Washington, Carter administration officials were beginning to realize the full extent of the challenge faced by Somoza in Nicaragua. The Policy Review Committee

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Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene,” *DNSA*, Document EL00614.

<sup>191</sup> Frank Devine, Memo of Conversation, June 15, 1979, “Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC) Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene,” *DNSA*, Document EL00614.

(PRC) convened on June 11 to review U.S. policy in Central America, informed by a set of recommendations emanating from a Christopher-led study. As was customary when the high-level policymaking agenda touched on Latin American affairs, Robert Pastor prepared a brief for the National Security Advisor in advance of the PRC meeting. The regional specialist identified two points of emphasis for U.S. policy in general, “a strengthening of centrist groups” and “a swing toward democratization.” In El Salvador, he elaborated in a passage highlighted by the National Security Advisor, “our peg is free legislation and municipal elections in March 1980, but we should be prepared to explore the possibility of earlier elections.”<sup>192</sup>

Pastor also noted, “Increasing aid will be important to serve our objectives, but not so much as making our objectives public and clear, extending and intensifying our contacts, and relying on the astuteness of our ambassadors.” This latter issue was of particular concern to Pastor, who posed the question, “Do we have our best foreign service officers and ambassadors in Central America?” He offered his own assessment, “Our representation in the area is our weakest, and we are paying the price for it.” In his opinion, U.S. ambassadors in the region had “lacked purpose in their communications with government officials, and this had necessarily made [U.S.] policies seem scatter-

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<sup>192</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, David Aaron and Henry Owen, June 8, 1979, “PRC on Central America – Monday, June 11, 1979,” *DDRS*; Summary of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL01325. Chaired by the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense, the PRC was the highest-level policymaking apparatus in the administration. For a description of the function and architecture of the PRC see: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981*, p. 57-63.

shot, incoherent, and inconsistent.”<sup>193</sup>

Early in the June 11 meeting, an interesting debate emerged on whether democracy would follow order or vice versa. While most agreed with the high-level objectives outlined in the State Department’s report, Defense Department Deputy Secretary Charles Duncan suggested giving primacy to the passage calling for “the reduction of violence and instability in the region.” Only after establishing this “stable foundation,” he reasoned, could U.S. policymakers “begin to talk about moving ‘toward more open political systems.’” Brzezinski “took exception,” emphatically arguing that the passage calling for a move “toward more open political systems” provided “an appropriate chapeau, which incorporated all of the other objectives.” Assistant Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Lt. General Smith sided with Duncan, claiming that an “important philosophical question” was at stake, a choice “between the need for orderly change, or just change for the sake of change.” The National Security Advisor ultimately carried the day, building consensus around the primacy of democratization. Having established the “chapeau” of the administration’s policy, mindful of pressing issues like the upcoming SALT II negotiations in Vienna, Brzezinski excused himself from the meeting after the Nicaraguan crisis was discussed.<sup>194</sup>

In El Salvador, Warren Christopher proposed that there was an urgent “need to seek free and fair elections and greater commitment to human rights.” This translated to a

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<sup>193</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski, David Aaron and Henry Owen, June 8, 1979, “PRC on Central America – Monday, June 11, 1979,” *DDRS*.

<sup>194</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*.

need to “encourage [President Romero] to take the necessary reforms and to show him that the United States “really cared about” human rights. Noting that Romero headed a “relatively weak government in Salvador,” Viron Vaky pointed out that the Salvadoran president had nevertheless initiated “dialogue with key [opposition] elements” and had stated his intention to “move toward free elections” and “recreate a national consensus.” Therefore, the assistant secretary reasoned, the United States should seek to strengthen Romero. The looming question, as it had been in Nicaragua, was how to acknowledge the progress of Romero’s government without alienating the opposition or removing the president’s incentive to continue moving toward liberalization. Robert Pastor agreed with Vaky in suggesting that the administration “err on the side of the positive and lead with the carrot.” Nevertheless, the United States “should match words with words, and steps with steps” argued Pastor, and should “only respond when it is clear that more than just words are coming from the Salvadoran president.”<sup>195</sup>

Pastor argued that the administration’s “strategy should be guided to a certain extent by the views of certain opposition groups.” He warned of the dangers of “getting in front of these opposition groups or taking steps which would...diminish the credibility” of either the U.S. government or the Salvadoran dialogue. On several occasion Christopher emphasized the importance of Archbishop Romero and the church in any such dialogue. Vaky, on the other hand, warned of the dangers of allowing U.S. policy to become “hostage to any of the opposition groups.” President

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<sup>195</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*.

Romero, Vaky argued, “needs some indication of our support before he can go forward any more.” He proposed a “public statement of [the U.S.] position, in favor of dialogue,” reasoning that the opposition would be more likely to respond to a dialogue that was explicitly supported by the United States.<sup>196</sup>

While most agreed that such a statement would be constructive, there was considerable disagreement over the appropriate venue and preconditions for this show of support. Acting Director of USAID Robert Nooter noted that there were pending AID loans to El Salvador, the signing of which could provide an appropriate platform for a public statement. Pastor argued instead for a high-level visit, observing that the administration could defer AID loans until the fiscal calendar expired in October, thereby preserving its leverage over the Romero government. Under Secretary David Newsom pointed out that either the loan or the visit would be “difficult” for the administration as long as the state of siege and other human rights violations continued. General Smith argued that the United States must help the Romero government bring the violence under control before the dialogue could proceed, while Vaky countered that the dialogue would help bring the violence under control. Pastor, while sharing Vaky’s belief in the cathartic nature of dialogue, worried that any unreciprocated show of support for the repressive regime would damage the prospects for said dialogue. Sensing that consensus was not in the works, Christopher made an equivocal decision:

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<sup>196</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*. In response to Pastor’s question about the composition of such a dialogue, Vaky noted that while the Church and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) were already in dialogue with the government, the Christian Democrats (PDC) had not yet come to the table.

the United States would “make a statement on the signing of the AID loan,” the timing of which the deputy secretary left open. The administration’s statement should give the Romero government no doubt what Washington expected and should “encourage [it] to take more steps forward.”<sup>197</sup>

Throughout the month of June the downward spiral of violence continued. While leftist extremists killed eleven military and government officials, providing pretext for the Salvadoran government to continue the state of siege, the archdiocese in San Salvador reported that more than ten times that number of Salvadorans perished at the hands of security forces, nearly equaling the number during the turbulent events of the previous month. As Somoza’s military situation deteriorated and regional foreign leaders turned up the heat on the caudillo, policymakers in Washington focused on Nicaragua – pursuing a flurry of multilateral and unilateral gambits to moderate the impending succession to Somozan rule. Salvadorans across the political spectrum were equally preoccupied with Nicaragua. “The very serious and volatile situation in Nicaragua,” Christian Democratic Party leader Abraham Rodriguez stressed to the U.S. ambassador, was “likely to have early and adverse repercussions on the politically tenuous situation in El Salvador.” He insisted that tangible reforms must be “set in motion before Somoza was compelled to leave,” warning that failure to act immediately could “result in...a disaster of greater proportions than what was occurring in Nicaragua.” Rodriguez insisted that the “situation in El Salvador,” where the

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<sup>197</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*.

accelerating “polarization” was based on an “antipathy toward the entire civilian and military establishment,” was “potentially worse than the crisis in Nicaragua, where dissent was...focused on one man and his family dynasty.”<sup>198</sup>

Ambassador Devine reported the great “pains” to which the Romero regime in San Salvador had gone to inform Washington that it did not support Somoza. Nevertheless, the Salvadoran government considered the Nicaraguan strongman “infinitely preferable to a Sandinista alternative.” Devine reported many of Somoza’s neighboring leaders viewed “the kingpin of Central American politics” as the “single greatest local force for stability in the face of a changing world” and could only view his “plight and prospective downfall” as a “harbinger of things to come.” The ambassador spoke of a “long...sense of foreboding” in El Salvador, noting that for those who had “direfully predicted” the “automatic and traumatic...local consequences of a violent change of government in Nicaragua...prospects were indeed alarming.” Of course, not all sectors of Salvadoran society shared this sense of alarm. As the Nicaraguan revolutionary government was consolidating power in Managua, Devine later reported that the government and other conservative elements tended to “anticipate the worst,” while “radical...elements” and those “disadvantaged...classes who seek relief from the status quo... saw the Nicaragua experience a basis for optimism.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, “After Nicaragua, Anxiety Increases in El Salvador,” p. A1; Frank Devine, Memo of Conversation, June 15, 1979, “Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC) Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene,” *DNSA*, Document EL00614.

<sup>199</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, June 29, 1979, “Possibility of Capitalizing upon Plight of Somoza to Influence Policies Elsewhere in Central America,” *DNSA*, Document ES00615 (Appendix); Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza

Devine also saw a silver lining in the dark clouds gathering beyond Salvador's southeastern frontier. On June 29, days after the OAS foreign ministers voted 17-2 to call for an end to Somoza's rule, the ambassador cabled Foggy Bottom suggesting that it might be "useful and appropriate" for the United States "to provide a bit of *shock therapy* to the Romero administration." He suggested that U.S. policymakers could "play upon [San Salvador's] stated fears that a Sandinista Nicaragua might" provide the "extreme left" a base of moral, operational and significant support." Perhaps the "cataclysmic events in the neighboring country" would "demand a thoroughgoing reconsideration" of the Salvadoran government's position and prompt it to take "concrete political and economic action to reform the status quo before it's too late."<sup>200</sup>

Over the coming weeks, as U.S. officials busied themselves trying to obtain Somoza's resignation – trying in vain to moderate the successor regime and preserve the Nicaraguan Guard – Ambassador Devine's cable appears to have received little attention. On the day that Somoza tendered his resignation to the Nicaraguan congress, Patricia Derian returned to the cable, attaching it to a memorandum to Warren Christopher. "There *is going* to be change in El Salvador," declared the assistant secretary. "The only question is whether the process occurs through an evolutionary means" or "one that unravels as in Nicaragua."<sup>201</sup>

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Period," *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>200</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, June 29, 1979, "Possibility of Capitalizing upon Plight of Somoza to Influence Policies Elsewhere in Central America," *DNSA*, Document ES00615 (Appendix).

<sup>201</sup> Patricia Derian, Memorandum to Warren Christopher, July 17, 1979, "El Salvador," *DNSA*, Document EL00615; Derian attaches: (1) Ambassador Devine's cable of June 29 (previously

Derian was concerned that there were “some who are reacting to Nicaraguan events by urging an embrace of the Romero regime” in what she considered a misguided attempt to “enhance political and economic stability in El Salvador.” She was convinced this approach would “subvert its own goal,” by “engendering increased anti-American sentiment” and by providing a “stimulus...for greater repression and...polarization.” Employing the familiar lexicon of carrots and sticks, the head of the Human Rights Bureau urged the deputy secretary to embrace the “reciprocal approach,” in which the administration would “begin with a distanced posture,” and would extend support only *after* the Romero Government had taken steps toward liberalization. Derian argued that the competing “encouragement approach” would “risk [not only the administration’s] objectives in El Salvador, [but] the credibility of its policy in the region, and the political support for that policy here at home.” It is interesting to note that the assistant secretary took her “credibility” argument chapter and verse from the cold warrior’s hymnal.<sup>202</sup>

Indeed, advocates of the “encouragement approach” were employing the more orthodox version of the ‘credibility’ cant, Carter having now “lost Nicaragua.” The erstwhile Central American anticommunist bulwark was now a “second Cuba,” and the administration’s early hopes of normalized relations with Havana were distant memories in the face of increased Cuban activism, first in Africa and increasingly in the

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referenced); (2) An excerpt from a draft policy paper which she refers to as the ‘game plan’ for El Salvador; (3) An excerpt of a draft cover letter for the PRC on Central America; and (4) the 1979 country report on human rights practices in El Salvador (not included in the digital archive).

<sup>202</sup> Patricia Derian, Memorandum to Warren Christopher, July 17, 1979, “El Salvador,” *DNSA*,

Caribbean Basin. One CIA report speculated that while the speed of the Sandinista victory seemed to have surprised Havana, the Cubans “believed that the Sandinista method...is the correct one for Central America.” Building on these “lessons of Nicaragua,” Havana was “urging local communist parties to cooperate with insurgent groups and develop their own guerrilla capabilities.” The report cited an “unspecified number” of Cuban advisors in the region believed to be providing military and logistical advice to insurgents to augment the material support that Havana was either providing or facilitating. In preparation for an early August PRC meeting on Central America, Robert Pastor warned the National Security Advisor of “ominous” intelligence reports of “Cuba’s strategy for promoting revolution in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.” Pastor told Brzezinski that El Salvador could be “headed for a full-scale insurrection...perhaps as early as...fall.” U.S. Southern Command, in a cable to the Joint Chiefs, argued for the “expeditious implementation” of certain “key” security assistance initiatives in order to “send quick signals of reassurance” to the remaining military regimes in Central America.<sup>203</sup>

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Document EL00615.

<sup>203</sup> Juan de Onis, *New York Times*, July 20, 1979, “Democratic Latin Countries Seek to Block ‘Second Cuba’ in Nicaragua,” p. A4; Central Intelligence Agency, Situation Report, August, 1979, “Cuba – Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL00006; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL1328. Although he undoubtedly read the contemporary intelligence reports, Pastor may have also gleaned his assessment of an impending Salvadoran insurrection from a recent cable from Ambassador Devine: Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618; Lt. Gen McAuliffe of the U.S. Southern Command, Cable to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 12, 1979, “Security Assistance Initiatives for Central American Countries,” *DDRS*. For a good analysis of growing concerns that Cuba was “exporting revolution” in the wake of the Nicaraguan revolution: Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p. 346-9.

On July 20, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner and a coterie of deputies and regional specialists from these departments as well as Defense and Treasury convened an SCC meeting to explore the U.S. posture toward the increasingly assertive island nation ninety miles off the Florida Keys. Within six weeks, the nations of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) would convene in Havana, their sixth summit since the 1955 Bandung Conference, which would usher in Fidel Castro's tenure as Secretary General of the NAM, whose 118 member nations comprised two thirds of the voting members of the United Nations General Assembly. These senior administration officials sought a policy line that would contain Cuba's growing political influence and military activism in the Caribbean and throughout the so-called 'Third World.' Among the measures discussed were "ways in which the United States can increase its military presence in the Caribbean in order to...enhance the security and the stability of the nations of [that region] and to send a message of caution to Cuba."<sup>204</sup>

The same members of the Special Coordination Committee had just reviewed the administration's post-Somoza Central American policy. "The issue," spelled out in the summary of that meeting, was "whether El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala could gradually and peacefully broaden their support by making the kinds of reforms necessary to deal with the inequities and inadequacies of their socio-economic and political structures." The "alternative was revolution," most present believing that

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<sup>204</sup> Special Coordination Committee, Meeting Summary, July 20, 1979, "Cuba after the Summit,"

support for the “status quo” was both untenable and “too sharp a departure from the overall foreign policy objectives of the Carter administration.” Committee members realized that the remaining military regimes in Central America would be “nervous about the possibility that the Nicaraguan revolution could spread.” Accordingly, they concluded, the United States should offer “reassurance” as well as “some economic and military assistance,” but should seek reciprocity by “pressuring [these repressive regimes] very hard to...begin implementing, with all deliberate speed, a program of meaningful reforms.” In support of these goals, the administration officials elected to dispatch Vaky on a mission to Central America to “explore what kinds of reforms [these leaders] would be willing to take if [Washington] supported them with economic and military aid.”<sup>205</sup>

In addition to the “object countries,” the committee also chartered Vaky’s mission to visit the “framework countries” – which included Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama and Mexico – to seek their opinions on the “nature of the problems in these Central American countries and to seek ideas about what should be.” Just as it had in Nicaragua, the Carter administration “sought multilateral solutions to the problems in the area,” preferably “with the Latin Americans taking the lead.” Unlike the early Nicaraguan policy, however, the committee declared that if the multilateral approach

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*Declassified Documents Reference System.*

<sup>205</sup> Special Coordination Committee, Summary of Conclusions, July 20, 1979, “Central America,” DNSA Document EL01326; Representatives of the Department of Defense argued that the United States should immediately resume security assistance to the Central American regimes (Lt. Gen McAuliffe of the U.S. Southern Command, Cable to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 12, 1979, “Security Assistance Initiatives for Central American Countries,” *DDRS*).

proved elusive, Washington “would be prepared to lead.” Acknowledging the new regional player, the committee members called for “added precautions to make sure that the new government of Nicaragua does not perceive this mission as hostile or confrontational.” To that end, U.S. policymakers resolved to be “forthcoming in discussions” with the new regime in Managua on humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.<sup>206</sup>

Reflecting a sense of urgency, the assistant secretary’s staff worked into the weekend to pull together a five-country-in-five-days itinerary for his mission, all within twenty-four hours of the Friday afternoon SCC meeting. First stop, San Salvador. Vaky cabled Devine and the other chiefs of mission near midnight on Saturday. He told Devine, “I am basically coming to speak to Romero,” to whom he hoped to speak privately. Vaky’s primary objective was to “probe Romero’s post-Somoza analysis, his current perceptions of threats, problems, and the near future.” Most importantly, the senior ambassador wanted to understand “how much the [Salvadoran president] would be willing to do or not to do.”<sup>207</sup>

Vaky’s government jet touched down in San Salvador on Tuesday evening, where the embassy staff whisked him to dinner at the Presidential Palace with Romero and a host of local plenipotentiaries, after which the assistant secretary and the Salvadoran president retired to the latter’s study for a private conversation. In Tegucigalpa on

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<sup>206</sup> Special Coordination Committee, Summary of Conclusions, July 20, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA Document EL01326*.

<sup>207</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to U.S. Embassies in San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, Panama City, Bogotá, Caracas

Thursday, Vaky left a detailed account of his Salvadoran consultations, which had extended into Wednesday morning and afternoon. The Honduran embassy cabled the assistant secretary's report to Christopher as the assistant secretary was en route to Panama City.<sup>208</sup>

I examine this particular cable in some detail, first, because it provided policymakers in Washington with an important first-hand account of the situation in El Salvador from a trusted colleague. Moreover, the language of Vaky's dispatch is rich in symbols, providing a veritable cornucopia of subtle and persistent ideas that Michael Hunt has shown to infuse U.S. foreign policy from the beginning. Vaky called for an activist U.S. policy, on behalf of a benighted Salvadoran client government, to stave off a revolutionary outcome. I examine this not to portray a caricature of Vaky as a crusading, bigoted, reactionary, because he most certainly was none of these things. Vaky's rhetoric is all the more telling because he clearly enjoyed the respect of his peers, many of whom describe him as the consummate professional; because of his impressive resume and deep knowledge of regional affairs, having recently served as the U.S. ambassador to Caracas; because he was neither the most conservative nor the most liberal in the Carter administration's policymaking circle, but one whose views could accurately be described as moderate. Recognizing that Vaky's cable was hurriedly drafted, quite possibly relying on the notes of others or even drafted by

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and Mexico City, July 21, "Consultations on Central America," *DNSA*, Document EL00616.

<sup>208</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

another, it nevertheless contained a set of meaning-making symbols, acknowledged by and attributed to the influential diplomat.<sup>209</sup>

Vaky's dispatch began on an ominous note, "The situation in El Salvador is grim. The advanced state polarization has induced rigidity that will make an evolutionary process extremely difficult." The assistant secretary found a government in San Salvador that was "weak [and] not very purposeful." He noted that events in Nicaragua seemed to have "heightened tensions" in San Salvador without having "stimulated political imagination," an assessment that did not bode well for Devine's "shock therapy" proposal. The assistant secretary noticed a "disturbing tendency," that was "reminiscent of Somoza." Romero seemed to believe that his domestic opposition and Washington would "have no choice but to rally around" the Salvadoran government as the situation deteriorated, "rather than risk the Marxists."<sup>210</sup>

Vaky did not "sense" that Romero or his government had "really comprehended the nature of the issues they faced" or "what [was required] to cope with them." Rather, the Salvadoran government "still tended to be manipulative," charged Vaky, "thinking of gimmicks and instrumental measures rather than comprehending the true change in electoral processes and credibility that must occur if polarization and radicalization are to be arrested." The Salvadorans seemed not to "understand the difference between

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<sup>209</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

<sup>210</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," *DNSA*, Document EL00617; Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, June 29, 1979, "Possibility of Capitalizing upon Plight of Somoza to Influence Policies Elsewhere in Central America," *DNSA*, Document ES00615 (Appendix).

critics and enemies or how to distinguish between subversion and dissent.”

Notwithstanding this vexing fog of Salvadoran incomprehension, Vaky could begin to make out the “stirrings of an understanding of the deeper issues,” presumably owing in no small part to his patient tutelage. The assistant secretary held out “some hope that his mission may have created the beginnings of a realization” on the part of the Salvadorans, “that dramatic and persistent crash efforts are needed to review and make credible an electoral process that can change current political dynamics.”<sup>211</sup>

Having enumerated the shortcomings of the Salvadoran government and opposition, Vaky still saw the “electoral process as a way out of this polarization,” the all-important institution of democracy “weakened” but not “destroyed.” If the answer was the “electoral process,” as Vaky had suggested, the problem was that “both government and moderate opposition seemed trapped in a cycle of mutual suspicion and intransigence.” Owing to government repression, the “moderate democratic opposition...had been so circumscribed and hampered that they are divided and weakened in their own planning, appeal and forcefulness.” Though “uncertain” and “somewhat dispirited,” the assistant secretary concluded, the “moderate opposition” was “still hopeful” and needed to be “encouraged...to take initiatives [to] meet the government half way.” Vaky noted, during their private conversation, President Romero seemed “determined to have free municipal elections in March [1980],” was “convinced that a civilian should be the next president [in the 1982 election],” and that

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<sup>211</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*,

the “military should return to the barracks.” The president seemed confident that many in the officer corps shared these views. Nevertheless, when the U.S. envoy pressed the Salvadoran to make a public announcement of these intentions and to consider holding the elections earlier, neither suggestion elicited an enthusiastic response from Romero.<sup>212</sup>

Apart from the growing chasm between the government and its “moderate” opposition, fueled by the “cycle of mutual suspicion and intransigence,” Vaky also worried about the cycle of violence fueled by acts of “terrorism” from the left and “official and quasi-official repression” from the right. The U.S. envoy qualified his observations with something sounding very much like a cultural stereotype, “Violence is a way of life in El Salvador.” Notwithstanding this apparent natural tendency, the “current situation,” reported Vaky, was not only “close to being out of control,” but more importantly was a “major factor undermining both the credibility of the government and the feasibility of moderate initiatives.” The assistant secretary noted that government repression had “stepped up over the last two months under the cover of the state of siege” and that this was indeed a “critical problem.”<sup>213</sup>

In sharp contrast to the “uncertain...dispirited...democratic opposition,” Vaky described a “radical revolutionary left” that was “growing in size and popularity” and

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Document EL00617.

<sup>212</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

<sup>213</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

full of “confidence.” This “organized, well-financed and Marxist-led extremist sector” had been “legitimized...through the government’s lack of reforms” and “expected to be boosted and materially helped” by the events in Nicaragua and by “Sandinista elements.” Vaky worried about reports that the Popular Revolutionary Bloc and its “terrorist organizations” were “planning a series of demonstrations and labor actions as a direct challenge to the government.” While the assistant secretary acknowledged that the planned demonstrations would be “largely nonviolent,” he also noted that they were both “illegal and conducted with a conscious intent to provoke government violence.” Nevertheless, if the government were to respond “indiscriminately” to any such provocation, as it had “in the Cathedral steps shootings” in May, it was “very likely” that any opportunity “to arrest the polarizing dynamic would vanish and the total political deterioration could accelerate to the point of insurrection.”<sup>214</sup>

Vaky’s tactical prescription for this dilemma was curious coming on the heels of his condescending criticism the Salvadorans’ propensity for “gimmicks and instrumental measures.” The assistant secretary “earnestly recommended” that the Carter administration adopt an immediate measure that he “believed to be urgent and important,” though it was also most certainly instrumental if not a gimmick. “The commercial sale of tear-gas is perhaps the single most important means available,” he told the Christopher, “to help keep our options open” in El Salvador.” Vaky related a conversation with the Secretary General of the Christian Democratic Party Rey Prendes

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<sup>214</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*,

that, in essence, attributed the Salvadoran government's repressive tactics, at least in some measure, to its lack of modern crowd control equipment. This deficiency had evidently compelled the security forces to "control demonstrations...with machine guns rather than with tear-gas and shields."<sup>215</sup>

Of course, the assistant secretary was not suggesting that non-lethal crowd control technology was a panacea, but rather this 'instrumental measure' was a tactic to buy time. The question in Vaky's mind was *not whether* the Nicaraguan insurrection would bleed over into Salvador, but "*how long* revolutionary impulses and assistance from Nicaragua would take to reach El Salvador?" The question was *not whether* Havana would exploit this opportunity, but "*what sort* of deliberate subversive push Cuba would lend?" The Salvadoran government was "neither competent nor purposeful enough to warrant unconditional support," but the U.S. envoy saw "no ready alternative." Notwithstanding the "weaknesses of the Romero government and the rigidities of the situation," the United States must "do everything [possible] to prevent more blood from flowing," in order to buy the "time to create better conditions."<sup>216</sup>

One hour after Vaky's dispatch left the Honduran embassy, Ambassador Devine dispatched his assessment of the consultations in San Salvador to the assistant secretary, now in Panama. There is a high degree of resonance in the symbols deployed in the concurrent dispatches from the ambassador and the bureau chief. While they no

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Document EL00617.

<sup>215</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," DNSA, Document EL00617.

<sup>216</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," DNSA, Document EL00617.

doubt influenced one another's thinking and could well have referred to common notes, their respective dispatches drew from a larger lexicon of symbols of shared meaning, again betraying a widely-held set of assumptions about the role of the United States in hemispheric affairs, the state of Latin American 'development,' and the nature of revolutions.<sup>217</sup>

The U.S. ambassador to San Salvador paints a similarly dire picture, the "political situation in El Salvador had continued to deteriorate and the state of polarization was now at an advanced stage," making it "difficult if not impossible for the opposing factions to talk to each other in meaningful terms." In contrast to his hopeful observation one month earlier – that Nicaragua might provide a form of constructive "shock therapy" – Ambassador Devine saw only signs of "spreading sense of disillusionment, dismay and pessimism." While the "ruling groups" sought solutions to their dilemma, they were not yet "persuaded...of the need for fundamental change." Failure to acknowledge this need, in the ambassador's assessment, would constitute an "act of national suicide."<sup>218</sup>

It is interesting to observe the use of language used to characterize the opposition in both Vaky's and Devine's cables. The ambassador, in particular, draws strikingly sharp contrasts. On one hand, he refers to the "*decent democratic left* [emphasis mine]," which he also describes as "circumscribed and hampered...a very uncertain quantity in terms of spirit, competence and operational capability." On the other hand, he referred to the remainder of the opposition, throughout his cable, not as the *radical left*, not as

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<sup>217</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period," *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>218</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period," *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

the *revolutionary* left, not as the *extremist* left, but repeatedly as the “radical revolutionary extremist left,” as though no single epithet were sufficient. In contrast to the “circumscribed and hampered” nature of the “decent democratic” elements, the “radical” elements were “growing in size, boundless in confidence and enthusiasm, and had multiplied their effectiveness through control of the ‘popular organizations.’”<sup>219</sup>

Ambassador Devine acknowledged, “there can be little question but that the government of El Salvador is an egregious offender” of human rights. This fact had been corroborated by “too many” international bodies and “first-hand observation” to be “open to much doubt.” Nevertheless, the “radical revolutionary extremist left” had also been “guilty of serious violations of human rights” in its “application of counter-violence.” The ambassador saw no sign that this “vicious circle” would be broken.<sup>220</sup>

Moreover, Devine asserted that the extremists in El Salvador “hoped to draw upon events in Nicaragua for a renewed and heightened revolutionary action in this country.” Like Vaky, the ambassador believed that time was the enemy. “How long,” he rhetorically asked, would “the revolutionary impulse and assistance from Nicaragua take to reach El Salvador?” The country team had “reason to believe that at least some of them may be aiming at a target date of September to begin armed insurrection in this country.” Ominously, Devine conveyed the team’s consensus, “The survivability period of El Salvador’s armed forces,” were the Sandinistas to turn their attention to El

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<sup>219</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>220</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*,

Salvador, might even be lower than an earlier estimate of “four to six weeks.”<sup>221</sup>

The image of an uncomprehending and incompetent Salvadoran government was prevalent in Devine’s dispatch as well, “The government of Romero and its natural allies of the right display an abysmal lack of comprehension of the pressures building against them as well as a disturbing incapacity really to know and identify their true enemies.” They “cling to the hope that the United States will somehow save them...feeling that [Washington] had erred badly in letting the Sandinistas come to power, but hoping that [the Carter administration] may yet see the error of its ways.” The ambassador posed the “very real question whether the Romero government is in any way capable of comprehending, let alone effecting, the human rights improvements.”<sup>222</sup>

Yet for all of its shortcomings, though “not an attractive” option, Devine concluded that the “Romero government...may have been better than any of the conceivable alternatives” in El Salvador. In light of the gravity of the situation and the shortcomings of the Salvadorans, the ambassador suggested that the Carter administration “de-emphasize the impossible,” while “maintaining reasonable pressure for a somewhat lesser level of improvement.” Most importantly, he argued the administration should take the necessary “steps...to assist the present government of El

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Document EL00618.

<sup>221</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>222</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

Salvador [avoid] being displaced violently by internal or external forces inimical to [U.S.] interests.”<sup>223</sup>

While Vaky traveled throughout the region, others in Washington were preparing a strategy paper on Central America, outlining what came to be known as the *quid pro quo* policy, a plan “to encourage reforms in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in exchange for U.S. assistance.” A Policy Review Committee meeting on Central America was scheduled for August 2 to “hear Vaky’s report and balance packages of [desired] reforms [in each country] with possible economic and security” assistance. As always, regional specialist Robert Pastor, who had collaborated on the strategy paper, briefed the National Security Advisor. “El Salvador is clearly the most urgent case,” he told Brzezinski. Pastor was “more and more convinced that if we (and Romero) don’t try something dramatic soon, El Salvador will go down the tubes very quickly.”<sup>224</sup>

No doubt having read Ambassador Devine’s cable, Pastor told Brzezinski, “Salvador is headed for a full-scale insurrection by perhaps as early as fall.” He believed “early elections may be [Romero’s] only hope,” a suggestion which the Salvadoran president had “deflected” when Vaky “broached” the subject in San Salvador. Pastor argued that accelerating the elections offered the only means to “halt

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<sup>223</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>224</sup> Special Coordination Committee, Summary of Conclusions, July 20, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA* Document EL01326; State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL01327; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC

polarization in its tracks” and “give a rapid injection of legitimacy to the Salvadoran government.” Applying the ‘lessons of Nicaragua,” Pastor asserted that Romero must “move quickly” to avoid “losing the middle to the radicals.” Time was critical; the Christian Democratic Party was “already beginning to split.” Nevertheless, there was a window of opportunity while the Cubans were preoccupied hosting the Non-Aligned Movement conference in September and the Sandinistas were consolidating their position in Managua. Pastor outlined multiple diplomatic channels to apply pressure on Romero to accelerate the election timetable.<sup>225</sup>

The strategy paper outlined four clear policy objectives for the United States in Central America. Heading the list was “the containment of Cuba,” which also meant “preventing the consolidation of extreme left regimes in Nicaragua or in other Central America countries.” After containment, the paper listed human rights as the second policy objective, “reducing the repression in El Salvador and Guatemala and encouraging moves toward broader political participation and democracy throughout Central America.” Third, the strategy was designed “prevent armed conflict within or among countries,” placing a special emphasis on consolidating the peace settlement of the 1969 armed conflict between El Salvador and Honduras, the country that provided a critical geographic buffer between Nicaragua and Salvador. Rounding out the list, the strategy sought to “stimulate growth with equity so as to increase social justice and

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Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01330.

<sup>225</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “Central America,” DNSA, Document EL01328.

reduce vulnerabilities to extremisms of either the right or left,” considered by many to be critical to answer the Marxist calls for social justice.<sup>226</sup>

Of the three countries, the strategists considered “El Salvador to be the most ‘ripe’ for political polarization and revolution.” In contrast, “Honduras had a much better human rights record and its leadership seemed more committed to development programs.” Robert Pastor agreed with “State’s strategy” and told Brzezinski, “Honduras should be an easy case. All we need to do is step up our aid and make Honduras a showcase.” U.S. intelligence sources had indicated that Cuba was already providing material support to the Salvadoran insurgents through the Honduran Communist Party, and policymakers wanted to prevent Honduras from becoming staging area for insurgency, as Costa Rica had been in the Nicaraguan struggle.<sup>227</sup>

As for the other Salvadoran neighbor, Pastor believed Guatemala might be a “hopeless case,” citing reports of “considerable violence and dissatisfaction.” Nevertheless, he agreed with State’s assessment that “there is much less chance of a revolutionary situation emerging” in Guatemala. As long as the Guatemalan government remained “effective” in “co-opting” the moderate elements of society and “repressing” the remainder, the Carter administration could live with a less than “absolute” commitment to human rights. While it did not condone Guatemalan

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<sup>226</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327.

<sup>227</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on

excesses, it chose to pick its battles.<sup>228</sup>

The strategy paper elegantly captured the situation in El Salvador, “A weak and frightened government, representing and resting upon a controlling alliance of military and economic oligarchy that refuses to yield power, faces a radicalized opposition with a terrorist nucleus against a backdrop of serious socio-economic inequities and human rights violations and class hatreds.” Concise and accurate, the question was what to do about it. The paper posed provocative and strikingly prescient questions, “Was it realistic to believe that [Washington] could effect necessary changes by external pressure or persuasion? Was what the moderate middle now required to participate in the electoral process practically possible or likely for the governing elite? Might the United States reap the worst of all worlds, [as had been the case in Nicaragua] – press for some changes but find them unacceptable or ineffective as far as the moderate middle” was concerned?<sup>229</sup>

Realistic or not, the *quid pro quo* strategy was adopted by a consensus decision during the August 2 Policy Review Committee meeting and signed off on by President Carter the following day. The administration sought to “effect necessary changes by external pressure and persuasion,” in hopes that the “moderate middle” would find

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Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL01330.

<sup>228</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01330; State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327.

<sup>229</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327; Policy Review Committee, Summary of Conclusions, August 2, 1979, “Policy Review

“acceptable” those changes the “governing elite” was able to and willing to make. Nevertheless many questions remained. “How many and what kind of reforms should [the administration] ask Romero to undertake?” Should the administration give priority to persuading the Romero government to reform or should it give priority to helping it combat “external subversion?” Should the administration lead with the carrot or the stick? The answer to the easiest question posed in the strategy paper must have been obvious to all, “Were there any contradictions between [the administration’s] objectives in El Salvador’s case?” In theory, the application of carrots and sticks in a *quid pro quo* strategy seemed clear – positive steps by the Salvadoran government would beget commensurate rewards and negative steps would evoke a thrashing. In practice, these “instrumental measures” were less straightforward.<sup>230</sup>

When it came to the question of whether to give priority to “reform” or “stability, we see the subtle assumptions the sources of violence and instability in Central America. First, the language of the strategy paper narrowly characterized threats to “stability” as “external subversion,” effectively ignoring the domestic sources of violence – violence fueled both by the rising tide of popular demands for broader socio-economic and political participation and by an intransigent status quo that would rather “fight than switch.” Seen in this light, the Salvadoran government “would have the

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Committee Meeting,” *DNSA*, Document EL01331.

<sup>230</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 3, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01332; Policy Review Committee, Summary of Conclusions, August 2, 1979, “Policy Review Committee Meeting,” *DNSA*, Document EL01331.

most difficulty...dealing with Category I human rights violations [of the integrity of the person],” reasoned the State Department strategists, therefore the administration “should not seek the impossible.” We see the fingerprints of both Vaky’s and Devine’s dispatches from San Salvador. “Violence was a way of life in El Salvador,” the assistant secretary had reported. Drawing similar conclusions, Devine had urged the administration not to “seek the impossible.” Rather, just as Brzezinski had argued at the June 11 PRC meeting, the administration strategists had concluded, “Political openings and the electoral process offered the best possibility...to arrest polarization and avoid a violent confrontation.”<sup>231</sup>

The strategy paper complacently noted that the “economic and social measures” already in progress were “fairly reasonable and there is probably little more for us to feasibly push here.” Pastor disagreed, telling Brzezinski, “The only problem with State’s strategy is that it places too much reliance on military assistance and too little on economic aid.” He argued that if the United States was “niggardly in its approach to assistance to Central America, all other threats and inducements would ring “hollow.” While this would “not have that much impact on [short-term] development,” Pastor claimed, “It would have a significant – perhaps critical – impact on political perceptions in the region.” Working behind the scenes, Pastor later reported that “after

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<sup>231</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327; Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*, Document EL00617; Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618; Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*.

considerable give and take,” he and others had “developed options” to increase economic aid to El Salvador, Honduras and to Central America as a whole. As Lars Schoultz observed in his comprehensive work on the subject of human rights in U.S. foreign policy published shortly after the Nicaraguan revolution, “There are few principles more self-evident than that which asserts the human right to be free from torture at the hands of one’s government. But there is at least one. It is that people have basic needs: to eat, to have shelter, to receive medical care, to read and write.”<sup>232</sup>

Nevertheless, the advancement of political rights carried the day at the August 2 PRC meeting, followed closely by the prevention of internationally sponsored subversion. Indeed, seven of the nine measures in the proposed démarche to the Salvadoran government dealt with political rights and electoral reform. An eighth fell into the socio-economic domain but also provided some relief from potential violent conflict – the revision of labor law, regulation and procedures “in such a way as to offer workers a greater alternative to illegal strikes.” Only the ninth addressed the endemic violence that was crippling the social, economic and political fabric of Salvadoran society – and only in the vaguest of terms. The United States would ask for “a pledge to avoid violence and paramilitary killing,” a laudable request to be sure, but one that left the specifics of this intractable problem to the Salvadorans, for whom, if one was to

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<sup>232</sup> State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01327; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01330; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 3, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01332; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press,

accept Vaky's assessment, "violence was a way of life."<sup>233</sup>

The strategy enumerated seven possible inducements that the United States would be prepared to offer the Salvadorans in return for these reformist steps, preponderantly political and electoral reforms. Of these, four related directly to security military assistance – Vaky's non-lethal crowd-control equipment made the list. Two were soft measures, negatively framed – the United States would be prepared to "temporarily suspend public denunciations and pressure" and would be prepared to assume a "general posture of greater cooperation than [the Salvadorans had believed to be the case] over the past two years." The sole inducement dealing with economic development targeted the business establishment: Washington was prepared to lift the travel advisory that had crippled the vital tourism industry, a measure that undoubtedly trickled down to the benefit of the poor but hardly one that expanded economic participation.<sup>234</sup>

There were those in the administration who felt that the proposed policy did not go far enough to prop up the embattled Salvadoran regime with military assistance. On the front page of the *Washington Post*, John Goshko reported "a major debate" brewing in the Carter administration over "whether the United States should resume military aid to the rightist regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala." Citing "reliable sources," Goshko alleged that defense and intelligence officials at the "high-level White House meeting"

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1981, p. 378-9.

<sup>233</sup> Policy Review Committee, Summary of Conclusions, August 2, 1979, "Policy Review Committee Meeting," *DNSA*, Document EL01331.

<sup>234</sup> Policy Review Committee, Summary of Conclusions, August 2, 1979, "Policy Review Committee Meeting," *DNSA*, Document EL01331.

had “argued strongly” that “both countries, but particularly El Salvador, are in imminent danger of increased, Cuba-assisted warfare.” Goshko acknowledged that the “main thrust” of Carter’s administration was to “seek friendly relations” with the “Sandinista-dominated government” in Managua. Nevertheless, “Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials remained concerned that Cuba will use the momentum generated by the Sandinista victory...to try to breathe new vigor into the guerrilla movements stirring” elsewhere in Central America and that “Nicaragua would become a Cuban satellite and a springboard for exporting revolution throughout Central America.” These officials purportedly had argued that the administration “should hedge its hopes for good relations with the Sandinistas...even if that meant reverting to the discarded policy of close U.S. ties with rightist military regimes.”<sup>235</sup>

Goshko also reported Vaky’s late July visits to Central America, describing El Salvador as “the most important part of his mission.” Sources indicated that Vaky spoke of a “siege mentality” in the “ultra-rightist” Romero government, which was “unwilling to make any concessions toward liberalization,” and of a “polarization” in the Salvadoran political landscape that “made unlikely a moderate solution involving middle-road forces acceptable to both sides.” While Vaky was reported to have “concluded that the situation [in El Salvador] was rapidly becoming a carbon copy of what happened in Nicaragua,” he was also “understood to have been among those cautioning against jumping back into close U.S. ties with the Salvadoran...armed forces.” Sources indicated that Vaky and other “ranking State Department officials” argued that such a move would “undermine” relations with Managua, “create suspicion and hostility among Latin America’s democratic governments, and provoke fierce new

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<sup>235</sup> John Goshko, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, “U.S. Debates Aid to Latin Rightists to Bar Takeovers,” p. A1.

opposition from congressional liberals.” Their views carried the day, reported Goshko. “Renewed military aid should be extended to El Salvador...only in exchange for *efforts* [italics mine] to disarm tensions...by easing up on repression and denial of political rights.” Nevertheless, Goshko’s sources had stressed, “although the military aid proposal was in abeyance, it was still under consideration.”<sup>236</sup>

Meanwhile, conservative and moderate factions in Salvador were also hedging their bets. The CIA had been reporting a steady stream of coup plotting since early 1979. As an early August report indicated, the Salvadoran “military officers had long wanted stricter control of leftist terrorism [and] now appear increasingly dissatisfied with Romero’s fence-straddling.” While earlier intelligence reports had focused on the threat of a reactionary coup, the August report focused on plotting by a cadre of “middle grade” officers who had attracted the support of former President Molina and key members of the senior Salvadoran military leadership. These new “dissidents” also “espoused a need to suppress terrorism, but reportedly professed a much broader set of proposals aimed at eliminating corruption and restoring civilian rule.” Most importantly, these would-be military reformers had been cultivating “civilian allies,” which would increase their “clout,” purportedly having “approached the opposition Christian Democratic Party,” with which their reformist agenda would find resonance. Whether or not the PDC explicitly supported a coup, “a political alliance between military and civilian reformers,” which U.S. analysts believed was “not out of the question,” might force Romero “to pay more attention to the center-left opposition” and “to resume the currently stalled dialogue with moderate opposition.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> John Goshko, *Washington Post*, August 2, 1979, “U.S. Debates Aid to Latin Rightists to Bar Takeovers,” p. A1.

<sup>237</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Report, August 1979, “El Salvador: Coup Plotting,” *DNSA*, Document EL00005.

Elsewhere in Latin American, for the first time in nearly a decade, the Ecuadorian military was preparing to return control of the Andean state to a democratically elected civilian government. The inauguration of President-elect Jaime Roldós Aguilera in Quito provided an auspicious occasion for Vance to pursue the administration's preferred multilateral approach to the Central American crises, albeit a multilateralism where the hegemon exerted a preponderant influence, a nostalgic brand of multilateralism that had proven so elusive during the Nicaraguan crisis. During his late July consultations, Vaky had laid the groundwork for a meeting between Secretary Vance and regional foreign ministers to "seek agreement on a common approach."<sup>238</sup>

During Vaky's consultations, Colombian President Julio César Turbay – whose own human rights record had received considerable scrutiny – proposed a "high-level summit" to explore "new dimensions in inter-American relations." Robert Pastor had advised Brzezinski that the administration should "avoid such dialogue like the plague" because it would unrealistically "raise Latin American expectations about a new-styled 'special relationship,'" while the "vague dialogue" would "go nowhere." Rather, Pastor recommended that the United States "structure" the dialogue around the burning issues of the day: First, "What should the democracies of the hemisphere do to keep Nicaragua from becoming another Cuba and the rest of Central America from becoming another Nicaragua?" More generally, "What should the democratic nations do about Cuban expansionism?" Vaky had reported to Pastor, "The Latins were increasingly worried about this problem," and, in keeping with the assistant secretary's recent image of the uncomprehending Latin American, were "bewildered" by it. Notwithstanding his reservations regarding unrealistic Latin American expectations,

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<sup>238</sup> Warren Hoge, *New York Times*, August 11, 1979, "New Ecuador President Vows to Champion Democracy," p. A1; Special Coordination Committee, Summary of Conclusions, July 20, 1979, "Central America," *DNSA Document EL01326*.

Pastor told the National Security Advisor that Carter should “seize” the opportunity and respond directly and promptly to the Colombian’s request with a “message...conveyed by Mrs. Carter...at the inauguration of the Ecuadorian President next week.”<sup>239</sup>

Indeed, Rosalyn Carter, the president’s confidante and personal envoy to Latin America from the early days of his administration, accompanied Secretary of State Vance to Quito for the August 10 inauguration of President Roldós. Taking a page from Carter’s hymnal, the new Ecuadorian president proclaimed, “The infringements of human rights and constitutional guarantees create pockets of resistance and threaten hemispheric peace. Because of that, Ecuador...will seek solutions to this political epidemic that violates the democratic instincts of the Latin American people.” With all due respect to “the principle of nonintervention in the affairs of other nations,” Roldós declared that his government – like the Carter administration – “reserved the right to conduct its bilateral relations [on a] case by case” basis, according to each country’s “attitudes” toward human rights.<sup>240</sup>

Nodding to the American first lady, the new president of Ecuador praised the human rights policy of the Carter administration. Seated in the first row next to Mrs. Carter was Violeta Chamorro, wife of the late Nicaraguan dissident editor and by that time a member of the revolutionary junta in Managua. Acknowledging Ms. Chamorro, Roldós praised the Sandinista revolution. “I long for the dawning of more democracy for Latin America,” entreated the new civilian president. He divided the “Latin American political map” into “two antagonistic areas – democracies and dictatorships,” and promised that his government would “demonstrate that economic development and

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<sup>239</sup> Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01330; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 3, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01332.

<sup>240</sup> Warren Hoge, *New York Times*, August 11, 1979, “New Ecuador President Vows to Champion Democracy,” p. A1.

social justice are fruits of the orchard of democracy and not of terror." The front page of the *New York Times* carried the image the two impressive women together in Quito – both statespersons, both dignitaries at political ceremony with all the surreal, anachronistic, martial trappings of a Márquezian caricature, a ceremony in which the military was returning the government to civilian leadership. Anastasio Somoza García must have rolled in his grave.<sup>241</sup>

Vance and Ms. Carter used the occasion to shore up U.S. relations with the new government in Managua. Joining Ms. Chamorro in Quito was the Sandinista government's Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann – a U.S.-born son of a Nicaraguan diplomat, ordained a Maryknoll priest in the United States, proponent of Liberation Theology, and censured by the Vatican for his membership in the Group of Twelve and open support for the Sandinista cause. Rounding out the Managuan contingent of notables was Eden Pastora – Commander Cero, hero of the revolution and leader of the audacious Palace Raid – whose cultivated Guevarian image, replete with fatigues and beret, made him something of a celebrity with the youth in Quito.<sup>242</sup>

Although the revolutionary government in Managua had very publicly rebuffed initial U.S. overtures, criticizing "Yankee imperialism" and dismissing initial offers of humanitarian aid to the war-torn country as "insufficient," the meeting in Quito served

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<sup>241</sup> Warren Hoge, *New York Times*, August 11, 1979, "New Ecuador President Vows to Champion Democracy," p. A1; *Washington Post*, August 11, 1979, "Nicaraguans, Vance Agree to New Start," p. A1; For the classic Márquezian caricature: Gabriel García Márquez, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975; Colombian intellectual, author and dissident, Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 and, ironically, was exiled by Colombian President Turbay under the auspices of the Security Statutes – Turbay's own version of the *Law of Public Order*, in effect during the Vance negotiation in Quito: Phil Gunson, *The Guardian*, September 20, 2005, "Obituary: Julio César Turbay: An Unloved President, He became Colombia's Great Conciliator."

<sup>242</sup> *Washington Post*, August 11, 1979, "Nicaraguans, Vance Agree to New Start," p. A1; Charles Krause, *Washington Post*, August 6, 1979, "Nicaragua Unmoved by U.S. Overtures; American Aid Efforts Fail to Win over Sandinistas," p. A1. D'Escoto, who was elected president of the U.N. General Assembly in 2008, was a "fierce critic" of U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the Reagan and latter Bush administrations.

to thaw the chilly relations. “Whatever happened in the past, it is time for a new beginning,” proclaimed d’Escoto. State Department spokesperson Tom Reston agreed, the United States wanted to “put the past in the past,” was desirous of friendly relations with Managua, and did not rule out future military aid to the revolutionary government. The Nicaraguans publicly pledged to invite the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to their country and to honor their U.S.-brokered commitment to the OAS to guarantee the human rights of erstwhile Somocistas in Nicaragua.<sup>243</sup>

On the day of the Ecuadorian inaugural, Vance and the first lady lunched with President Turbay of Colombia to convey President Carter’s support for his “high-level summit proposal,” before the U.S. Secretary convened two days of meetings on the Central American with heads of state and foreign ministers from eleven nations in the region. While the Quito summit was symbolically rich, the administration continued to pursue its bilateral agendas in Central America, as articulated in the State Department strategy paper adopted on August 2.<sup>244</sup>

In San Salvador, before the United States had formally delivered its *quid pro quo* terms to Salvadoran President Romero, the General preemptively genuflected toward the U.S. démarche – the gist of which he could have gleaned from the front page of the August 3 *Washington Post* and had no doubt heard from the U.S. ambassador. In an August 16 address to the Salvadoran nation, he announced a “general amnesty” for all political exiles, inviting their return to El Salvador. Romero denied allegations that his

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<sup>243</sup> Charles Krause, *Washington Post*, August 6, 1979, “Nicaragua Unmoved by U.S. Overtures; American Aid Efforts Fail to Win over Sandinistas,” p. A1; *Washington Post*, August 11, 1979, “Nicaraguans, Vance Agree to New Start,” p. A1.

<sup>244</sup> Warren Hoge, *New York Times*, August 11, 1979, “New Ecuador President Vows to Champion Democracy,” p. A1; *Washington Post*, August 11, 1979, “Nicaraguans, Vance Agree to New Start,” p. A1; State Department, “Central American Strategy Paper,” attached to Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, DNSA, Document EL01327.

regime was holding political prisoners and invited the Red Cross to inspect and verify these claims. In a nod to the desired “democratic opening,” he called for the Organization of American States (OAS) to oversee the upcoming March 1980 elections.<sup>245</sup>

The carrot was forthcoming. A State Department spokesperson told the *Washington Post* the following day, “We consider these positive measures, which should reduce tension and establish credible democratic processes.” However, at least one unnamed State Department source was less sanguine, telling the *Post*, Romero’s measures may have come “too late,” adding, “The administration is very concerned about increasing polarization in El Salvador and has engaged in intensive diplomatic efforts to try to encourage the Romero government to liberalize.”<sup>246</sup>

The coverage in the *New York Times* was terse but spoke volumes. It reduced the president’s speech to one sentence, “President Romero of El Salvador offered amnesty to political prisoners last week and promised free elections next year.” Ominously, the news brief offered a word of caution to any Salvadoran exile considering “catching the first plane back,” noting, on the day of Romero’s speech, an “ultra-rightist ‘death squad’” lined up eight workers against a wall and summarily executed them. Meanwhile, striking Salvadoran textile workers occupied their plant and took hostages including one U.S. executive with a heart condition. Such was the climate in which

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<sup>245</sup> Katherine Ellison, *Washington Post*, August 18, 1979, “El Salvador Leader's Granting of Amnesty Is Welcomed by U.S.,” p. A17; Karen DeYoung, *Washington Post*, August 24, 1979, “El Salvador Lurches toward Eruption,” p. A17. For a more detailed account of the measures promised by Romero in his August 16 speech, see William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, August 5, 1979, “Conversation with President Romero, DNSA, Document EL00620.

<sup>246</sup> Katherine Ellison, *Washington Post*, August 18, 1979, “El Salvador Leader's Granting of Amnesty Is Welcomed by U.S.,” p. A17.

Romero tendered his “political opening.”<sup>247</sup>

In order for the “political opening” to be successful, U.S. policymakers assumed that President Romero had to draw the moderate opposition into the political process and to solicit their participation in the March 1980 legislative and municipal elections. Administration officials assigned a great deal of importance to two opposition segments in particular: The Christian Democrats and the Catholic Church. Both groups remained openly hostile to the president’s overtures. The leader of the Christian Democrats, former San Salvador Mayor Jose Antonio Morales Ehrlich, had recently returned from exile in Costa Rica. In a televised speech, exactly one week after the Salvadoran president’s address to the nation, Morales declared, “Repeated electoral fraud and official corruption” had led to the “total illegitimacy of the government” and “its repudiation by the people.” Referring to Romero’s pledge to return the government to civilian rule in 1982, Morales countered, “It was not a long-term question of waiting until 1982,” he insisted. “Thousands more...would be dead by then.”<sup>248</sup>

Previously, on August 11 Archbishop Romero had summoned members of the clergy in San Salvador to protest the August 4 slaying of a Salvadoran priest by a right-wing terrorist group, the sixth such murder since President Romero’s inauguration and the second in as many months. Three days after the other Romero’s speech to the nation, on August 19, following the Archbishop’s televised mass at the National Cathedral, 150 priests, in a symbolic show of solidarity, joined nineteen metalworkers who sought higher pay in their hunger strike. In his homily, broadcast throughout the nation, the Archbishop called on “the people of El Salvador to support the fasting of

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<sup>247</sup> Other World Events, *New York Times*, August 19, 1979, “El Salvador’s Troubles,” p. E3; Associated Press, *New York Times*, August 21, “U.S. Officials Fearful for an American Held at a Salvadoran Plant,” p. A6.

<sup>248</sup> Karen DeYoung, *Washington Post*, August 24, 1979, “El Salvador Lurches toward Eruption,” p. A17.

these religious people, who demanded justice and symbolized [the people's] hunger for freedom."<sup>249</sup>

To deliver the administration's formal *démarche* to the Salvadoran president, the State Department once again dispatched ambassador at large William Bowdler, the department's Director of Intelligence and Research who had represented the United States in the ill-fated Nicaraguan mediation effort. Formerly the U.S. ambassador to San Salvador during the Salvadorans' 1969 'Football War' with Honduras, Bowdler probably had more regional experience than did any member of the Foreign Service. The political officer in the U.S. embassy in Havana during the Cuban Revolution and a Cuban desk officer in Foggy Bottom during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bowdler had carried the "lessons of Cuba" with him on his mediation mission to Nicaragua ten months earlier. Now, as one of many who drew analogies between the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, Bowdler arrived in San Salvador on August 24 armed with the "lessons of Nicaragua."<sup>250</sup>

President Romero received Bowdler and Ambassador Devine in a "friendly fashion," listened "attentively" as Bowdler outlined the U.S. *démarche*, "seemed receptive" to its fundamental ideas, and expressed "great satisfaction" with what the envoy had to say. He was, of course, eager to recount his August 16 speech, and then proceeded to iterate a list of promises made by his government. The Salvadoran

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<sup>249</sup> Associated Press, *New York Times*, August 12, 1979, "Salvador Clergy Protest Killing," p. 21; Karen DeYoung, *Washington Post*, August 24, 1979, "El Salvador Lurches toward Eruption," p. A17; Associated Press, *New York Times*, August 21, "U.S. Officials Fearful for an American Held at a Salvadoran Plant," p. A6.

<sup>250</sup> Bowdler also served as U.S. ambassador to Guatemala during the Nixon administration following his stint in El Salvador. When Viron Vaky resigned in December of 1979, citing personal reasons, Bowdler was the natural choice to become Carter's third Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, although conservatives in the Senate, such as North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms, opposed his nomination because of alleged communist sympathies.

president had indeed initiated a number of steps to reform the electoral process and to expand domestic political participation and invite international oversight into that process. He had also begun to facilitate the return of political exiles, had invited international inspection of Salvadoran prisons, and had promised to return the government to civilian rule and the “military to the barracks” in the 1982 elections.<sup>251</sup>

Of the inducements iterated in the U.S. *démarche*, Romero was keenly interested in two: U.S. assistance in obtaining bilateral and multilateral financial assistance and “preventing the clandestine shipment of arms into El Salvador.” To the latter end, he was interested in exchanging intelligence information and in receiving technical assistance to train his intelligence forces, making it clear that he was not referring to the “anti-democratic” tactics for which some of his authoritarian counterparts were known. Ambassador Bowdler reminded the president that continued violence from the right would hamper efforts to provide such assistance.

President Romero had already promised a complete reorganization of the paramilitary National Democratic Organization (ORDEN) designed to “clarify its mission,” and presumably curb the escalating instances of violence, which many believed the government had sanctioned, whether tacitly or explicitly. Nevertheless, Bowdler concluded, “Finding ways of cutting back on” the “high and continuing level of violence emanating from both sides of the political spectrum,” and of “isolating the extreme left” was a “particularly thorny point” with which the Salvadoran “did not come to grips.” Indeed, the Salvadoran president seemed to be moving to increase the government’s capacity to repress, as Romero worked with his party-controlled Salvadoran legislature to increase the defense budget. This could not escape the

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<sup>251</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, August 25, 1979, “Conversation with President Romero,” *DNSA*, Document EL00620.

scrutiny of Archbishop's nationally televised homily the following Sunday: the increases in defense spending, noted the prelate, came at the expense of social and economic programs.<sup>252</sup>

Two events in early September heightened public anxiety in the United States about Soviet and Cuban expansionism in the Western Hemisphere, creating domestic political pressure on the Carter administration. On September 1, a news story broke that U.S. intelligence services had confirmed the existence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba. While U.S. intelligence analysts had been aware of these troops for more than a decade and did not consider them a threat to the United States, it came as a surprise to many, including some in the administration, and soon became a heated issue in both U.S. domestic politics and East-West relations. One State Department official immediately told the press, "This is no Cuban missile crisis." His protestation reflected that natural tendency of most Americans to draw reference to the 1962 crisis with any incident involving Cuba. Moreover, as one of the principal actors in the drama, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Newsom, observed in his insightful book on incident, every administration since 1962 has been loath to appear weaker or less decisive than the Kennedy administration in dealing with Cuba, regardless of the stakes involved.<sup>253</sup>

Once the State Department had briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Frank Church on the intelligence findings, the Idaho Democrat surprised the

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<sup>252</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, August 25, 1979, "Conversation with President Romero," DNSA, Document EL00620; Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, August 30, 1970, "Increase in Defense Budget," DNSA, Document ES000200; Cable from Devine to DOS, August 30, 1979.

<sup>253</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, September 1, 1979, "U.S. Reports Soviet has Combat Troops Stationed in Cuba," p. A1; David Binder, *New York Times*, September 6, 1979, "Data Long Implied Soviet Units in Cuba," p1 A9; David Binder, *New York Times*, September 13, 1979, "Soviet Brigade: How the U.S. Traced It," p. A16; David Newsom, *The Soviet Brigade in Cuba: A Study in Political Diplomacy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, p. 328-46.

administration by publicly demanding that Moscow withdraw its troops, immediately souring the tenuous East-West relationship. Another Senate Foreign Relations Committee member, Florida Democratic Richard Stone – whose state’s frontier lay ninety miles from the Cuban coast and whose constituency contained a significant number of politically active anti-Castro Cuban exiles – played a prominent role in ‘uncovering’ the troops in Cuba and freely speculated on their purpose when the story broke. The front-page of the September 1 *New York Times* carried the Senator’s speculation that “the Soviet forces might be a vanguard aimed at helping insurgents overthrow the governments of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.” On cue, conservatives in the Senate began to demand that the United States condition its ratification of the newly signed Strategic Arms Limitations Talks agreement on the Soviet troop withdrawal. Still others reminded President Carter of an early promise made while wooing conservatives to support the Panama Canal Treaty, “It will continue to be the policy of the United States to oppose any efforts, direct or indirect, by the Soviet Union to establish military bases in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>254</sup>

Two days after the Soviet brigade story made national headlines, Havana convened the summit of nonaligned nations. Although the emerging nations of the world had founded the movement as expression of solidarity in resistance to Cold War spheres of influence, many in the West believed that Fidel Castro, who would begin his three-year tenure as the Secretary General of NAM, was unabashedly seeking to move the organization into Moscow’s orbit.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, September 1, 1979, “U.S. Reports Soviet has Combat Troops Stationed in Cuba,” p. A1; David Binder, *New York Times*, September 6, 1979, “Data Long Implied Soviet Units in Cuba,” p. A9; David Newsom, *The Soviet Brigade in Cuba: A Study in Political Diplomacy*; Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, p. 328-46.

<sup>255</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 8, 1979, “Havana Conferees Reach Compromises,” p. A6.

Alan Riding of the *New York Times* reported that the Havana conference “marked a *de facto* end to Cuba’s isolation in the area and the growing desire of Latin American governments to assert independence from the United States in international affairs.” While only eleven regional nations were participating members of the Non-Aligned Movement, twice that number sent delegations to Havana, eight of which had not yet established diplomatic relations with Castro’s government. “Although Havana was regarded by Washington as little more than an instrument of Soviet foreign policy,” observed Alan Riding, “Cuba was perceived in different, albeit more romantic, terms by Latin Americans.” While few Latin American governments identified with Cuba ideologically, many expressed “admiration for a country that survived enormous hostility from the United States and has greatly improved the living standards for its people.”<sup>256</sup>

Representing the Nicaraguan revolutionary junta in Havana, Sandinista Daniel Ortega declared in Havana that his government would not “export” revolution to El Salvador and Guatemala, because “revolutions could not be exported.” He warned, however, that the forces of “imperialism” had underestimated “the people” in the Nicaragua crisis. It was “the people” who would “give answers” to the “political situations” in El Salvador and elsewhere. Riding postulated that Havana also “seems to have concluded that revolutionary processes have their own dynamics which can only be affected by domestic circumstances.” The Cuban government professed to be “waiting for oppression and poverty...to do their work” throughout Latin America.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 9, 1979, “Castro No Longer Frightens the Rest of Latin America,” p. E3.

<sup>257</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 8, 1979, “Havana Conferees Reach Compromises,” p. A6; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 9, 1979, “Castro No Longer Frightens the Rest of Latin America,” p. E3; Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, p. 332, 346-51.

There was no shortage of repression or poverty in El Salvador, where the violence continued. On September 6, four masked gunmen assassinated President Romero's brother, a 59 year-old school teacher, also wounding the president's niece in the hail of machine gun fire that took her father's life. Although no group claimed credit for the slaying, the perpetrators left behind flags of the Salvadoran guerrilla organization, the Popular Unified Action Front (FAPU), and of the Sandinistas. In an apparent act of retaliation, seven leftist students died in an ambush at the hands of masked gunmen presumed to be a right-wing death squad. In what had become an all-too-common state of affairs in San Salvador an additional dozen lives were lost in the cycle of violence and counter-violence in the weekend following the personal tragedy that befell the Salvadoran president.<sup>258</sup>

The long-awaited "dialogue" between President Romero and key elements of the opposition had been scheduled to occur on September 10, three days after the president's tragic personal loss, which understandably precluded any meaningful dialogue on that date. Standing in for the president two days later, Vice President Astacio engaged the opposition in a dialogue that one delegate later told the U.S. ambassador was "unproductive." He characterized the vice president as "discouraged, irritated," and sharply critical of the Christian Democrats for rebuffing the government's earlier call for a "National Forum." Unsatisfied, the opposition continued to push Romero for a dialogue, but the president was no longer returning their calls. While the grieving process provided an adequate explanation for postponing the

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<sup>258</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, September 7, 1979, "Informing the Private Sector about U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua," *DNSA*, Document ES00206; Frank Devine, Cable to the State Department, September 11, 1979, "Incidents of Violence, September 7-8," *DNSA*, Document ES00208; Associated Press, *New York Times*, September 7, 1979, "Gunmen Kill Brother of El Salvador's President, p. A9; Associated Press, *New York Times*, September 11, 1979, "Eleven Die in Violence in El Salvador; Leftists Vow to Topple Regime," p. A1.

dialogue, it did not suffice indefinitely. Rather, Romero's apparent loss of interest suggests that his perception of his government's relative negotiating position or interests had changed; or, as many in the opposition concluded, that he had never intended to engage in a good faith dialogue.<sup>259</sup>

Ambassador at large Bill Bowdler returned to San Salvador on September 14, less than three weeks after having delivered the U.S. *démarche* to Romero. Salvadoran security forces were securing the capital for Independence Day the following day; a day that many feared would inspire more violence than celebration. Bowdler had come to Central America to discuss U.S. policy toward Nicaragua and the implications of the recent revolution, and was targeting broad cross-sections of society rather than simply the heads of state and high-level bureaucrats. The ambassador's consultations in San Salvador were in line with this goal as his marathon sessions encompassed discussions with a broad spectrum of the non-radicalized political spectrum and some government ministers, although Bowdler did not meet with Romero.<sup>260</sup>

Bowdler reported that while his interlocutors had a high level of interest in and varied opinions regarding U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, they were most interested in discussing the crisis in their own country. What Bowdler found "most discouraging and frustrating" at the end of his consultations, was the "totally different lenses through which [the crisis in El Salvador] was viewed." While the conservative elements and the government were "convinced they had made entirely reasonable bona fide efforts to bring about free elections," the opposition had "dismissed these out of hand" because

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<sup>259</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, "Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming," *DNSA*, Document EL00623.

<sup>260</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, September 14, 1979, "Conversations with Salvadoran Leaders about Nicaragua," *DNSA*, Document EL00622; Viron Vaky, Cable to Central American Embassies, September 5, 1979, "Informing the Private Sector about U.S. Policy toward Nicaragua," *DNSA*, Document ES00205; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 15, 1979, "Salvadoran Police Fire on Protesters," p. A3.

the government had failed to “come to grips with the real problem of continuing violence.”<sup>261</sup>

Bowdler met with the leadership of the major opposition parties and representatives of the Church, the factions that U.S. policymakers deemed most critical to a legitimate “democratic opening.” The leaders of the Christian Democratic Party and the National Revolutionary Movement, Antonio Morales Ehrlich and Guillermo Ungo, as well as representatives of Archbishop Romero expressed their “deep pessimism” that Romero’s government had either the “willingness” or the “ability” to “deal effectively with the violence,” which they considered critical to “creating a propitious atmosphere” for any “democratic opening.” They interpreted Romero’s apparent unwillingness to resume the aborted dialogue as a “hardening of his position and a deliberate effort to...avoid coming to grips with basic aspects of the political climate.”<sup>262</sup>

At the conservative end of the spectrum, Bowdler met with government ministers as well as leaders in the Salvadoran business community and press. Unlike Nicaragua, where the business community and opposition press aligned with the Broad Opposition Front in opposition to Somoza, much of the Salvadoran business community and press, though critical of Romero, tended to identify more closely with the government and the status quo. Bowdler lamented this group’s “tendency to blame the crisis more on outside factors than internal conditions.” The extreme left, his conservative interlocutors tended to argue, was “an extension of the worldwide communist offensive” and the Carter administration’s human rights policy “played into the hands

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<sup>261</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, September 14, 1979, “Conversations with Salvadoran Leaders about Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Document EL00622.

<sup>262</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, September 14, 1979, “Conversations with Salvadoran Leaders about Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Document EL00622.

of these extremists.” Many in the U.S. policymaking community shared these views.<sup>263</sup>

Many of Bowdler’s conservative interlocutors also felt that the international press, some referring specifically to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, were “creating a false image of El Salvador,” which weakened the Salvadoran economy by contributing to the flight of investment capital and crippling a vital component of the nation’s economy, the tourism industry. During the coming weeks, representatives of the predominantly conservative Salvadoran business community traveled throughout Latin America hoping to counter these negative perceptions, hoping to head off formal censure at the October General Assembly of the Organization of American States in La Paz, where charges of human rights abuses against the Salvadoran government were on the agenda.<sup>264</sup>

Many in the U.S. press, and to a lesser extent the State Department, were indeed painting a grim picture of El Salvador. In the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, on the day after Salvador’s Independence Day, Alan Riding spoke of “confident predictions of imminent insurrection.” He reported, “Millions of dollars have fled the country, foreign tourists and investors have vanished, wealthy families have moved to Miami and the United States Embassy has built a wall to protect its first floor windows in anticipation of more unrest.” During that same week, Vaky told a congressional subcommittee, “The central issue is not whether change would occur [in El Salvador,] but whether change would be violent and radical or peaceful and evolutionary and [would] preserve individual rights and democratic values,” although chances for the

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<sup>263</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, September 14, 1979, “Conversations with Salvadoran Leaders about Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Document EL00622.

<sup>264</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, September 14, 1979, “Conversations with Salvadoran Leaders about Nicaragua,” *DNSA*, Document EL00622; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, “Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming,” *DNSA*, Document EL00623.

latter were “rapidly dimming.” These dire accounts were not isolated to the U.S. press, however. As one Salvadoran justice of the peace told the local media that in El Salvador, “everything increases in price; only the value of life has gone down.”<sup>265</sup>

Earlier that week, the State Department disclosed that during Viron Vaky’s consultation with President Romero in July, the U.S. assistant secretary had suggested that the Salvadoran head of state move up the 1982 presidential elections in El Salvador. In the Sunday *New York Times*, Riding reported that rumors were circulating among the Salvadoran opposition that the “United States might either urge President Romero to resign or even promote a coup by centrist military officers who would carry out some basic reforms before organizing free elections.” This stands in sharp contrast to the spring of 1978 when the State Department so doggedly refused to acknowledge that it was applying pressure to the Somoza regime.<sup>266</sup>

Yet despite this growing official and unofficial pressure from the United States, Romero was indeed digging in for a fight. A variety of explanations have been offered for the Salvadoran President’s change of heart, if indeed he had ever intended to make good on his August 16 promises. At least one opposition source told the U.S. embassy that many Salvadorans believed that Ambassador Bowdler’s visit was either an explicit or a tacit signal that Romero’s prior gestures were sufficient to satisfy Washington, and there is evidence to suggest that the Salvadoran government cultivated this narrative. Some U.S. analysts concluded that, like Somoza, Romero believed that when push came to shove Washington would have no choice but to back his regime. Moreover,

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<sup>265</sup> Alan Riding, “U.S. Wary after Rebellion in Nicaragua, Weighs How to Act in El Salvador as Violence Mounts,” p. A8; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 11, 1979, “Incidents of Violence on September 7-8,” *DNSA*, Document ES00208.

<sup>266</sup> Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 17, “U.S. Wary after Rebellion in Nicaragua, Weighs How to Act in El Salvador as Violence Mounts,” p. A8; Robert Pastor, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL1328.

there is little doubt that U.S. policymakers were keeping this option alive, having taken the necessary budgetary steps at the close of the fiscal year to resume military assistance to El Salvador if conditions warranted. Still others have pointed to Romero's mid-September consultations with Guatemalan and Honduran counterparts, Generals Paz and Lucas, many speculating that the three authoritarian heads of state had made a pact of solidarity against the rising tide of popular discontent. Whatever the reason, the president told his party faithful in a September 20 rally that his previously announced unilateral "electoral reforms" and the March 1980 elections would proceed with or without the opposition.<sup>267</sup>

This placed the leaders of the opposition in a difficult position. If they participated in the upcoming elections under terms dictated by the Romero government, they would be complicit in a continuation of the status quo. Not only did they lack faith in the proposed electoral process, but they ran the very real risk that by capitulating to Romero's terms they would lose their popular appeal and do poorly in the elections. Confronted with no good choices, many in the opposition, most notably the Christian Democrats, announced their intention to boycott the 1980 elections, as they had done in 1978. On September 25, Ambassador Devine warned, "The already fragile democratic opening was close to, or was in the process of, collapse." The chief of mission cited a trusted source who had been involved from the beginning of the opposition's efforts to establish a dialogue with the Romero government. "The Romero government's credibility with the progressive wing of the church, part of the business sector and middle class, opposition political groups and a large portion of the lower class has

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<sup>267</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, "Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming," *DNSA*, Document EL00623; Defense Department, Congressional Presentation, October 1, 1979, "Security Assistance Programs, FY 1979," *DNSA*, Document ES00218.

seemingly reached a new low, marked by growing cynicism about President Romero's professed support for genuine democratic elections."<sup>268</sup>

"To complicate this picture still further," continued the U.S. ambassador, "groups on the extreme left are gearing up for a renewed assault against the government." While Devine was skeptical of "talk about a 'popular uprising' in early December or January," there was "little doubt" in his mind "that the far left was gaining strength" and would soon be able to "confront the government with a formidable challenge." The prior week, the Popular Revolutionary Bloc – the dominant political organization on the Salvadoran left – convened its third annual congress hosting delegations from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. The publicly stated purpose of this conference was baldly, "The overthrow of the Romero government and the establishment of a socialist state." The conference culminated in a march that ended at the gates of the U.S. embassy, chosen because it "symbolizes all that is wrong with El Salvador." The ambassador was increasingly concerned about the safety of embassy personnel, Peace Corps workers, and other U.S. citizens in El Salvador.<sup>269</sup>

Two weeks later, following the abduction of two executives from the U.S.-based Bechtel Corporation, the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers took out a full-page ad in the front section of the *New York Times*. The ad denounced the "blood bath in El Salvador," the "brutal repression" of the Salvadoran government, and the "fallacy of the democratic opening that has been lately announced." The ad contained graphic photos of torture victims as evidence of "bestial sadism" employed by

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<sup>268</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, "Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming," *DNSA*, Document EL00623.

<sup>269</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, "Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming," *DNSA*, Document EL00623; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 20, 1979, "BPR Conference: Reported March to Embassy Planned." *DNSA*, Document ES00214.

“Salvadoran capitalists and the dictatorship that sustains them” in their “vain...attempts...to detain the advance of the popular struggle.” The manifesto applauded the targeting of U.S. companies, as “enemies of the Central American revolution,” the “North American Imperialists [and their] lackey dictatorships...who support the system of ‘free zones’ as a new modification to make more effective the cruel and voracious exploitation [of] our people.”<sup>270</sup>

On September 25, the day Ambassador Devine had warned of the impending “collapse” of the democratic opening in El Salvador, the *Washington Post* reported that the Carter administration was rolling out the “red carpet” for three members of the five-person Nicaraguan revolutionary junta. En route to a United Nations General Assembly meeting, the three Sandinistas, including Daniel Ortega, met with Carter, Mondale and Brzezinski at the White House. From there, the Nicaraguan contingent proceeded to the opposite end of Pennsylvania Avenue to meet with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Edward Kennedy. While the Nicaraguans undoubtedly received the red-carpet treatment, they also received the fifth degree from some members of the Senate, despite Daniel Ortega’s repeated disavowal of any intent to “export revolution.” Committee member Senator Richard Stone, whose “vigilance” had “uncovered” the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, told the press that Ortega’s claims contradicted U.S. intelligence sources. The aftershocks of Stone’s “discovery” were still rocking the administration, the most recent tremor a surprising defeat, three days earlier, of legislation crucial to implementing the controversial Panama Canal Treaty. “I have my doubts,” the Florida Democrat told the press after questioning Ortega. “I think we should check carefully on

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<sup>270</sup> Karen DeYoung, *Washington Post*, September 27, 1979, “Leftist Attacks Escalate Turmoil in El Salvador,” p. A24; *New York Times*, October 10, 1979, Full page advertisement, “To the People: Proclamation of the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers,” p. A18.

what happens down there before we commit ourselves too heavily to assisting the Nicaraguan junta.”<sup>271</sup>

The Central Intelligence Agency was indeed reporting information that suggested, “Cuban military advisors were training Nicaraguans and Salvadoran guerrillas at camps in Nicaragua.” The Cubans, the Agency had concluded, were “building on the lessons of Nicaragua,” citing reports of a “unspecified number of Cuban ‘military advisors’ in El Salvador.” A State Department intelligence assessment concurred, “A marked flare-up in guerrilla activity...in late September strongly suggests the influence of Cuban and Nicaraguan training and advice.” The “increasingly aggressive” Salvadoran insurgents were employing tactics that were “quite similar” to those employed by the Sandinistas against Somoza. With hundreds of guerrillas believed to have received training in both Cuba and Nicaragua, some of whom had been battle-hardened in the Nicaraguan Revolution, State Department analysts estimated that as many as two thousand trained insurgents were “available for combat in El Salvador” and predicted that this cadre would “mount a major effort to seize power by early 1980.”<sup>272</sup>

Ambassador Devine’s cable of September 25 concluded, “Against this somber back-drop it is little wonder that the current prospects for a genuine democratic opening with broad political participation were seen by many observers as increasingly dim.” It is no more surprising that this cable and the conditions that prompted it sparked a reassessment of the administration’s *quid pro quo* strategy toward the Romero government. Assistant Secretary Vaky received the results of the Department’s policy

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<sup>271</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, “Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming,” *DNSA*, Document EL00623; John Goshko, *Washington Post*, September 25, 1979, “Three from Nicaraguan Junta Get Red-Carpet Welcome Here,” p. A6.

<sup>272</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Situation Report, October 1979, “Cuba – Central America,” *DNSA*, Document EL00006; State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Memorandum for Brewster Hemenway, October 5, 1979, “Outside Assistance to Guerrillas in El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document EL00625.

review on Thursday, October 4. Two days later, he told Warren Christopher, “Both the government of President Romero and its sponsored ‘political opening’ were in trouble.”<sup>273</sup>

The State Department policy paper listed a litany of reasons why the assumptions “underlying” the administration’s August 2 *quid pro quo* strategy were “no longer valid.” It recommended that the administration “recognize that Romero is a dead horse who cannot be ridden to an effective democratic opening.” Meanwhile, by all “indications...leftist terrorists had made a quantum [leap] in tactics and capacities,” making open insurrection a very real possibility in the near future. Department analysts believed that the “status quo” would devolve into a “civil war,” one that Romero would likely lose. Given the General’s unwillingness or inability to stem official and quasi-official abuses of human rights, the U.S. Congress would effectively shackle the Carter administration’s ability to lend assistance, even if it so desired. In short, while the *quid pro quo* policy rested on the assumption that a Romero-brokered opening offered the “best hope [at the time] of avoiding insurrection and the emergence of a radical regime,” this was now not necessarily “the only hope.”<sup>274</sup>

U.S. intelligence agencies had been privy to rumors of coup plots against Romero since at least early 1979. By August, readers of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were privy to the same rumors. By mid-September, many Salvadorans were openly discussing the possibility of a coup against the Romero regime. As U.S. policymakers considered the possibilities in early October, the only alternative to the

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<sup>273</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, September 25, 1979, “Prospects for Meaningful Democratic Opening Judged to be Dimming,” *DNSA*, Document EL00623; Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document EL00624.

<sup>274</sup> State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” attached to Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00624.

seemingly untenable “status quo” of the Romero regime was a coup – one that was equally likely to be reactionary as it was to be reformist. While a coup from the right seemed tantamount to a continuation of the Romero regime, U.S. intelligence, military and embassy sources were well aware of a possible “golpe by progressive officers whose purpose would be to create a democratic opening and reestablish the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government.” This was the sole outcome, concluded Department analysts, that was “consistent with” U.S. policy objectives and would “offer the possibility of U.S. action to advance its own interests.” The members of Salvadoran military had already floated the idea of a progressive officers’ coup with the U.S. Defense Attaché, while the members of the Christian Democratic Party and representatives of the Church had similarly probed the U.S. embassy on the topic. As attractive as this option was in relative terms, it was going to require considerable finesse.<sup>275</sup>

The problem, of course, was that it “seemed impossible” for Washington to “actively encourage a coup.” For one thing, the policy paper noted, “It would be disastrous to be associated” with a failed coup. Moreover, it would be equally damaging – given the unpredictable character of the successor regime, the current domestic political climate in the United States, and the administration’s vocal stance against intervention – “to be identified with its success.” First, the Department analysts recommended putting some distance between the administration and the Romero regime without burning bridges, acknowledging the very real possibility that General Romero might be the last man standing when the dust of any attempted coup settled. The second recommendation involved the role of the Christian Democrats and of the

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<sup>275</sup> State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” attached to Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00624.

progressive wing of the Church, still considered by most in the administration to be key to any legitimate democratic solution in El Salvador. In particular, since the Christian Democratic Party “appeared to be already committed to the course of compelling a challenge to Romero from somewhere in the military,” administration policymakers ran the risk of “being left on the sidelines in a situation that threatens [U.S.] interests.” The only “good alternative,” concluded the Department analysts, was to “signal” that any “alternative internal solution enjoying a broad popular consensus,” whether “extraconstitutional” or not, “would receive the support of the United States.”<sup>276</sup>

The fact that such a course of action would “implicitly support a move against a legally constituted government,” argued the policy paper, was little cause for concern. The countervailing fact that the Romero regime remained in power “through fraud and repression in a democratic façade,” the argument went, gave it “no greater claim to legality and legitimacy than would a successor government that would move dramatically to open the political process.” Herein was the elegance of this solution. By ringing in the new regime with an “announcement that the human rights abuses of the previous Salvadoran government would end,” the legislative shackles would fall from the Carter administration’s ankles, “freeing up many possible vehicles for U.S. policy,” enabling the United States to move decisively to “prevent the coming to power of a Marxist government.”<sup>277</sup>

Elegant solution notwithstanding, there were certain appearances that had to be maintained. “To protect ourselves from U.S. political considerations,” the policy paper noted, the administration “would have to continue to press Romero on opening the

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<sup>276</sup> State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” attachment to: Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00624.

<sup>277</sup> State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” attachment to: Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00624.

political process and hold out the possibility of U.S. assistance if he succeeds.” Accordingly, on the day following the Monday, November 8 Inter-Agency Group meeting in which these policy amendments were discussed and apparently agreed upon, Vaky cabled Ambassador Devine in San Salvador instructing the ambassador to flog the “dead horse” one last time. Devine was to carefully probe the Christian Democrats and the Church to provide Washington with as much situational awareness as possible and to ascertain, once and for all, if they had irrevocably foreclosed on President Romero’s “democratic opening.”<sup>278</sup>

The “young officers’ coup” did indeed evict the Salvadoran general from the Presidential Palace in San Salvador on October 15, replacing his government with one headed by a reformist junta consisting of three civilians – two progressive reformers and one from the business sector – and two officers. A number of documents relating to U.S. policy during the week between the Inter-Agency Group meeting on October 8 and the coup the following week remain classified. Just how much, if any, direct encouragement, counsel or logistical support the U.S. government lent to the coup remains an open question, but there can be little doubt that the events of that week played out under the careful scrutiny and with the tacit approval of the U.S. government. On script, the newly formed junta immediately issued a sweeping proclamation of reform, providing the pretext for Washington’s recognition and assistance. After a sufficiently discreet period, the Carter administration recognized the new government in San Salvador and moved swiftly to provide economic assistance.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, “U.S. Policy toward El Salvador,” attachment to: Brewster Hemenway, Memorandum to Viron Vaky, October 4, 1979, *DNSA*, Document EL00624; Viron Vaky, Cable to Ambassador Frank Devine, October 9, 1979, “Situation in El Salvador,” *DNSA*, Document EL00628.

<sup>279</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, October 15, 1979, “Status of Coup d’Etat in El Salvador as of 1:30 p.m.,” *DNSA*, Document EL00632; Frank Devine, Cable to State Department, October 13, 1979, “Coup Plans,” *DNSA*, Document EL00631; Central Intelligence Agency, Situation Report,

Unfortunately, as students of history know, this was but the opening chapter in a tragic and bloody civil war that would engulf this tiny Central American nation for more than a decade and claim tens of thousands of lives. As had been the case with President Romero's promising words of August 16, proclamations are more easily made than made good on. As Lars Schoultz has noted in his comprehensive examination of the Carter administration's human rights policy published during the first year of the Reagan administration, "There will be neither peace nor stability in Latin America until the basic needs of the people are met, not by another welfare program reminiscent of the Alliance for Progress, but by a fundamental restructuring of privilege, so that the right of the minority of Latin Americans to spend their vacations in Disneyworld is made subordinate to the right of peasants to eat." Salvadorans have paid an extraordinarily high price in their struggle for peace, prosperity and self-determination – the presumed fruits of the rule of law, the free market and democracy and the evidence of the realization of the full spectrum of the Carter administration's regime of human rights.<sup>280</sup>

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October 15, 1979, "Details of Coup d'Etat against Government of Carlos Humberto Romero," *DNSA*, Document EL00010.

<sup>280</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, p. 378-9.

## DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

I began this venture with a reflection on the abstract themes of empire, hegemony and nationalism, themes prevalent in the writings of Michael Hunt, who has argued that a remarkably persistent, sometimes subtle, exceptionalist ideology has infused U.S. foreign policy from its earliest days, making it a preponderantly proselytizing, patronizing and antirevolutionary. Hunt posits an intimate relationship between these ideas and an American nationalism imbued with a “strong millennial strain...that has cast and kept the nation” in a “redemptive role... that Americans have increasingly understood... in active, missionary terms.” I have tried to remain detached from these themes in the preceding case studies, hoping to observe their function at close quarters in the petri dish of the Carter administration’s human rights policy as applied in Central America. Indeed, human rights, U.S. policy toward Latin America, the U.S. domestic political culture during the 1970s, and the unblinking commitment of Carter and many in his administration to the exceptional role of the United States in world affairs have provided rich auger for this venture.<sup>281</sup>

Historians have scrupulously documented the Nicaraguan Revolution and the Salvadoran Civil War. My intended contribution to this collective venture is to examine the role that ideology played in the formulation and reception of U.S. policy leading up to these events. That notwithstanding, I will resist the temptation to assert a direct causal relationship between ideology and policy, for surely this is folly. Nevertheless, the question before us remains: in what ways did U.S. exceptionalism – subtle and persistent ideas about our nation’s proper historical and contemporary role in

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<sup>281</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; The themes of nationalism, empire and hegemony were the topics of a graduate colloquium taught by Professor Hunt, to whom I am indebted for both the reading list for this colloquium and for his insight and guidance.

world affairs – influence the formulation, reception and deployment of Carter’s human rights policy in Central America? The language of human rights, as deployed by the Carter administration – grounded in the underpinning assumptions of U.S. and Western exceptionalism – provides a useful vessel for the examination of this subject matter.

Historian Michael Adas has demonstrated that U.S. exceptionalism is far from exceptional, most Western-European “settler colonies” having exhibited similar ideological predilections, convinced of their own unique role in a Hegelian conception of history and of the superiority of their shared Western values and institutions. Adas has argued that the only thing exceptional about U.S. exceptionalism has been the fortuitous string of geopolitical and geographical coincidences that has facilitated the unprecedented and meteoric rise of the United States from settler colony to global hegemon. Adas also points out the inherent contradictions that arise from a belief system that posits both a nation’s unique place in the dialectic of history and its moral authority to propagate its own presumed universal values and institutions.<sup>282</sup>

Many scholars have noted that the values that animate contemporary human rights discourse have roots in Judeo-Christian traditions as well as other non-Western pre-modern societies. Nevertheless, few would dispute the inflection represented by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in the French Revolution as well as the Napoleonic crusading that ensued. While both the English Bill of Rights and the U.S. Declaration of Independence can lay competing claims to watershed moments in Western liberal thought, their claims on the universality of human rights were decidedly more circumscribed and presented a less overt challenge to the Westphalian

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<sup>282</sup> Michael Adas, “From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Experience of the American Experience into World History,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, December 2001, p. 1697-1711; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 1840, T.M Knox, ed., Oxford.

construction of national sovereignty than did the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.<sup>283</sup>

The age of empire has been depicted both as a Napoleonic crusade to bring liberal Western values and institutions to the less enlightened or oppressed peoples of the world and as a self-interested land-grab to secure the markets and raw materials necessary for the scions of capital to stave off what Marx predicted to be capitalism's fate. There is undoubtedly truth in both interpretations. Many have acknowledged that the United States at least flirted with formal empire, many suggesting that the United States took up Kipling's yoke more than a decade after the European powers carved up the African continent at the Congress of Berlin. Most point to the "splendid little war" of 1898 when the nascent superpower relieved Madrid of certain strategically located vestiges of its once-dominant empire.<sup>284</sup>

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the young North American republic had grappled with what Fredrick Pike has termed its "internal colonials" and had only just completed a rather impressive land-grab of its own as Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893. With the onset of depression early in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the burgeoning industrial power looked for new markets and sources of raw materials to fuel the rising social, economic and political demands of an increasingly urban society. As Anders Stephanson has observed, having encountered the Pacific Ocean, the presumed "manifest destiny" of Jefferson's "empire of liberty" shook off the geographic shackles of westward expansion and took up its

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<sup>283</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007; Geoffrey Best, "The French Revolution and Human Rights," *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 101-2.

<sup>284</sup> Secretary of State John Hay, Letter to Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, 1898.; Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," *McClure's Magazine*, Vol. 12, February 1899; LaFeber, Walter. *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

presumed destiny in the ‘march of history’—the ultimate midwife in the Hegelian dialectic.”<sup>285</sup>

The subtle brilliance of William Appleman Williams’ 1959 critique of U.S. foreign policy lies not in its assertion that the U.S. had been an imperial power since Secretary of State John Hay’s ‘open door’ proclamation in the opening days of the American Century. While this contested claim has indeed come to define one of the historiographical and polemical fault lines of U.S. diplomatic history, Williams’ more subtle claim was the intertwining between a crusading foreign policy, aimed at spreading presumed universal U.S. values and institutions, and a self-interested foreign policy, calculated to advance U.S. interests. The rhetoric of U.S. exceptionalism, claimed Williams, was not a cynically conceived whitewash to obscure the self-interested thrusts and parries of U.S. foreign policy. Rather, it reflected a deeply held set of beliefs, an “ideology,” that both mediated the perception of interests and provided a justification for their pursuit. Williams’ seminal work challenged the predominant contemporary belief that the U.S. policymakers employed a “realistic” calculus of national interests to determine policy. Acknowledging Williams as the inspiration for his own work on ideology, Hunt claimed that realism was itself an exceptionalist ideology, resting on the assumption that somehow U.S. interests were monolithic and discernable by a presumably omniscient cadre of ‘wise men’ in the foreign policy establishment.<sup>286</sup>

Two world wars having consolidated the United States’ rise to hegemony, these

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<sup>285</sup> Fredrick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, p. 1-153; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, p. 66-111; Frederic Jackson Turner, Address before the American Historical Association, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Chicago, 1893.

<sup>286</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Cleveland: World Press, 1959; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 4-12.

‘wise men’ seized the opportunity to construct a new world order, fashioned around predominantly western values and institution – the ultimate hegemonic projects fashioned at Dumbarton Oaks, Bretton Woods and Nuremberg. In December 1948, the member states of the United Nations signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris, positing the universal applicability of liberal Western conceptions of human rights. This historic treaty provided both the framework and the international legal justification for both the Helsinki Accords’ basket-three provisions and the Carter administration’s human rights policy, which the president proclaimed to be the “soul” of his foreign policy on the thirtieth anniversary of the signing.<sup>287</sup>

The Carter administration’s human rights policy undoubtedly exhibited the characteristic that Michael Hunt has termed the “keystone” of a long-standing, nationalistic strain in U.S. foreign policy – “the pursuit of national greatness” through a proselytizing foreign policy. It posited the universality of liberal Western values – of human rights – and sought to export those values to less enlightened societies through its own institutional norms. The administration was motivated in this pursuit both by its sense of moral obligation and by self-interest. It was at once an attempt to restore the moral authority of the United States and to advance the more tangible economic and geopolitical interests of the United States. While it was undoubtedly an idealistic attempt to right the wrongs a century of imperial policy toward Latin America – that had been in recent decades dominated by the “realistic” calculus of the Cold War – it

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<sup>287</sup> Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005; Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, New York: Random House, 2001; Daniel Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001; Jimmy Carter, Remarks at a White House Meeting Commemorating the Thirtieth Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 6, 1979, *The American Presidency Project*, John T. Wolley and Gerhard Peters, University of California at Santa Barbara.

was simultaneously a means of waging the Cold War by propagating its own institutional norms and “containing” those of its adversaries.<sup>288</sup>

In this sense, the Carter administration’s human rights policy was at its core a hegemonic project, built on the foundations laid in Dumbarton Oaks, San Francisco and Nuremberg. As with most hegemonic projects, the policy inspired both admiration and resentment – collaboration and resistance. To those on the receiving end of the policy, it often smacked of warmed-over empire – of Western cultural imperialism, of inappropriate moralizing, of self-serving hypocrisy, or of various combinations of these. Call it a hegemonic project, call it cultural imperialism, the human rights policy of the Carter administration was at its core a proselytizing policy.

The long-standing missionary impulse in U.S. foreign policy has been to spread exceptional U.S. values; values conveyed in the core institutional tropes of a Fukuyaman conception of modernity: the rule of law, democracy and the free market. It should come as no surprise that these were the presumed institutional guarantees of three corresponding tranches of human rights – rights to the integrity of the person, political rights and economic rights. Most U.S. policymakers have assumed these normative institutions – like the human rights that they purveyed – to be universal. The articulation of these rights in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – reiterated in Vance’s April 1977 Law Day Speech – was a hegemonic project, laying claim to the moral high ground, while at the same time seeking to prescribe the institutional norms of the international system. Moreover, the presumed universality of human rights provided the basis in international law for one nation to intervene in the sovereign affairs of another state that refused to respect those rights.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 19-45.

<sup>289</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992; United

The great irony is that the recurring sin in U.S. policy toward Latin America has been a compulsion to intervene in the sovereign affairs of Latin nations, more often than not to protect perceived U.S. interests. Though sensitive to this legacy, the Carter administration replaced the gunboats and sawbucks of Roosevelt and Taft with human rights commissions and foreign assistance. This is neither an indictment nor an endorsement of the administration's policy, *per se*, but a recognition that its policy flew in the face of its vocal disavowal of intervention. The cognitive dissonance between the rhetoric of non-intervention and reality of the Carter administration's human rights policy invited charges of both confusion and cynicism and engendered the same.

As we have noted, many in the Carter administration were acutely sensitive to the legacy of U.S. intervention in Latin American affairs; recall that Zbigniew Brzezinski had written that the Monroe Doctrine had become a pretext for U.S. meddling in the name of containment. Through much of 1978, the administration went to tortured ends to avoid giving the appearance intervening in Nicaraguan affairs. Nevertheless, from his unique perspective as a bureaucratic outsider in Managua, Ambassador Solaún has noted the absurdity of labeling U.S. policy toward Somoza's government as non-interventionist: "The human rights activist defined non-intervention to mean no U.S. involvement or assistance in the process to plan a change in government." The Carter administration's policy toward Nicaragua and El Salvador was an activist policy bent on prescriptively installing the aforementioned institutional guarantors of human rights, with a strong emphasis on democracy. While the United States stopped short of demanding the resignation of either Somoza or Romero, it delivered increasingly strong

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Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, available online: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>; Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977, in David D. Newsom, *The Diplomacy of Human Rights*, Latham, MD: University Press of America, 1986, p. 207-12.

“suggestions” to that effect, in the latter case making it public knowledge that it had called for Romero to step aside before the 1982 elections. Moreover, it was actively applying political and economic pressure to both regimes and demanding prescriptive action as terms for the relief of that pressure and eventual support of the United States.<sup>290</sup>

Solaún has summarized his impressions of his “mission” upon receiving his instructions in Foggy Bottom prior to taking up his post in Managua in late 1977; it was simply “the democratization of Nicaragua.” The ambassador minced few words when he delivered the February 1978 demarche to the Nicaraguan strongman. Solaún played the ‘good cop’ to the ‘bad cop’ of the popular forces building against Somoza – popular forces in Nicaragua, in the United States and internationally. Somoza was leaving office in 1981 if not sooner and he could be remembered either as a reforming democratizer or otherwise. If he cooperated, the United States would help him secure the former legacy; if not, Washington could do little to help him. While Solaún’s meddling was clearly beyond the pale of Foggy Bottom’s level of comfort in many respects, the use, tone and structure of that demarche remained a staple in the continued policy toward Nicaragua and El Salvador.<sup>291</sup>

Like the demarche that Washington would deliver to Romero eighteen months later, this was in essence a *quid pro quo* strategy, support in return for reforms. While this seemed straightforward, it was not. Both dictators assumed that if they embarked on the instrumental measures prescribed by Washington, which they did with a

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<sup>290</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*, New York, Viking Press, 1970, p. 279, 288; Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005, p. 93-6.

<sup>291</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, p. 93; Mauricio Solaún, Dispatch to the State Department, February 8, 1978, “Demarche to President Somoza,” DNSA, Document NIOO55.

surprising degree of enthusiasm, then U.S. support would be forthcoming. Both expressed strong doubts that the so-called moderate opposition would accept these measures in good faith. In both cases the United States responded with tacit, if not explicit, assurances that Washington could help bring their disenchanted political center to the table and help stave off international pressures building against the strongmen. This proved to be a bridge too far. Both regimes had so alienated the political center in their respective societies that their respective genuflections toward the altar of democracy inspired more cynicism than hope.<sup>292</sup>

In reality, short of draconian measures at huge political costs, U.S. policymakers wielded decidedly less capacity to influence the outcome of these Central American succession crises than most assumed, including themselves. Enrique Baloyra has called this one of the most prevalent “American fantasies” regarding its policy toward Central America: that “given its status as a superpower and the resources at its command, the United States can dictate the outcome of a crisis like that in El Salvador.” This state of affairs had less to do with waning U.S. power and more to do with the inherent limits of hard power and with ascendant Latin American power and solidarity. Cuba was flexing its muscle on two continents, while an unprecedented number of Latin nations had attending the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Havana; Brzezinski considered Brazil to be an “emerging superpower;” Venezuela and to a lesser extent other Andean nations were becoming important oil suppliers in an era of gas lines, and the Andean block was setting the agenda to a much greater extent in the OAS.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> William Bowdler, Cable to Viron Vaky, August 25, 1979, “Conversation with President Romero,” *DNSA*, Document EL00620; Compare the following: Wade Matthews (approved by Terrance Todman), Dispatch to the U.S. Embassy in Managua, February 5, 1978, “Proposed Initiatives with Somoza and the Opposition,” *DNSA*, Item no. NIOO50; Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, “PRC Meeting on Central America, *DNSA*, Document EL01327. See attachment: “Central American Strategy.”

<sup>293</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, p.

Gone were the days when Washington could dictate terms and turn to the OAS to rubber-stamp a fig leaf of multilateralism to cover its blushing imperial agenda. This is not to suggest that the Carter administration's objectives in Central America were naked imperialism – far from it. In fact, its goals were for the most part noble, as were Wilbur Platte's, in an anachronistic (ok, racist) sort of way. Righteous or not, the Carter administration's options were limited and true multilateralism was going to take some getting used to (in fact, true multilateralism has remained elusive to the present day). For better or worse, the administration turned to the logic of carrots and sticks, enumerated by Vance in his Law Day Speech – the alternate use of public praise or opprobrium, the alternate loosening or tightening of the purse strings of foreign assistance, and private cajoling – the diplomatic demarche. At the risk of getting ahead of the analysis, it is worth noting that there is something very paternal in the language of carrots and sticks.<sup>294</sup>

Of the three forms of carrots and sticks, many have been quick to dismiss public rhetoric – praise or opprobrium – as “mere window dressing.” Patt Derian was more perceptive than most in realizing that public rhetoric mattered. “We ought not to minimize the value of talking about human rights. Countries are just like individuals,” she claimed, “They are exquisitely sensitive to the opinions of others.” We see strong evidence across the board that the early rhetoric of the Carter administration produced early results: moves toward reform in some of the most repressive regimes as well as

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75-77; Alan Riding, *New York Times*, September 9, 1979, “Castro No Longer Frightens the Rest of Latin America,” p. E3; Zbigniew Brzezinski, Memorandum to President Carter, April 1, 1977, “Weekly National Security Report #7,” *DDRS*. Brzezinski refers to Brazil as an “emerging superpower;” Alan Riding, *New York Times*, June 18, 1979, “Rebels in Nicaragua Name Five to Form Provisional Junta,” p. A1. .

<sup>294</sup> The Platt Amendment: U.S. Congress, *Statutes of the United States of America Passed at the Second Session of the Fifty-Sixth Congress, 1900-1901*, Washington GPO, 1902, p. 897-98; Orville H. Platt, “The Pacification of Cuba,” *The Independent*, Vol. 53 (June 27, 1901), p. 1467; Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

hope of reform on the part of those who had begun to lose hope. It also produced ferment and reaction on the part of proponents of radical reform and defenders of the status quo. Overall, Mark Schneider's sanguine report to Congress in the fall of 1977 on the positive impact of the nascent human rights policy seems well founded, despite some charges that the administration beat a hasty retreat on its initial public rhetoric. Nevertheless, the rhetorical flourishes that reflected this commitment played well on Main Street and on both sides of the aisle in Congress. Moreover, it resonated with many in the transnational community, struggling to advance various commitments to the cause of human rights, who looked to the United States to live up to its professed ideals and who often drew legitimacy from nothing more substantial than the rhetorical articulation of those ideals. While there was undoubtedly a natural attenuation in the initial frequency and intensity of the rhetoric, the administration's vocal advocacy of human rights was largely unapologetic until 1980 when the election, the hostage crisis and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sucked most of the political oxygen from the room.<sup>295</sup>

Derian was also quick to recognize that the cognitive dissonance between rhetoric and actions mattered. This is why the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs opposed the dispensing of carrots in return for nominal gestures toward reform on the part of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran governments. Powerful though they were, public words could go only so far, and the administration turned to the other forms of carrots and sticks to put the wood behind the arrow. Foreign assistance, the

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<sup>295</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 15; *New York Times*, March 8, 1977, "State Department Aides Testify Rights Are Key Concern in Carter Foreign Policy," p. 3; Mark Schneider, Testimony before Congress, in U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Hearings before the Subcommittees on International Organizations, "Human Rights and United States Foreign Policy: A Review of the Administration's Record," October 25, 1977, 95<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1st Session, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978.

most tangible means of ostensibly exerting leverage over the repressive regimes in Nicaragua and El Salvador, presented a number of complications to the administration. First, the U.S. Congress had effectively hamstrung the executive branch in its ability to exercise discretion in matters of foreign assistance. Second, security assistance – the most effective lever in dealing with a military regime – was both unwieldy and counterproductive. Finally, humanitarian assistance, while a bit more malleable, resulted in a muted response to popular demands for socio-economic justice and led to an “irrational exuberance” for democracy.<sup>296</sup>

The goals of the Harkin Amendment and other congressional measures to curb past executive excesses were admirable. By aligning the hard power of the United States – its considerable military and economic might – with its core values, most notably respect for human rights, Congress sought to enhance the soft power – the moral authority – of the United States to create a whole greater than the sum of the parts. Nevertheless, few things in the workings of the United States federal government are simple and diplomacy is more an art than a formulaic science. Only in the halls of the U.S. Congress – and even then only in the wake of Vietnam, Chile and Watergate – could a majority decide that diplomatic finesse would be best served by linking it ever more tightly to the Byzantine workings of the U.S. federal budget.<sup>297</sup>

The annual country reports on human rights practices, also mandated by the Harkin Amendment, provided a highly visible platform for public praise or censure, a platform that mattered in its own right, a platform that lent the weight of the United States government to the burgeoning non-governmental oversight bodies like Amnesty

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<sup>296</sup> Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-7.

<sup>297</sup> Harkin’s 1974 amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 stipulates, “No assistance may be provided under this part to the government of any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”

International. However, by tying these reports to the administration's ability to offer fiduciary inducements to liberalizing governments, Congress had created a perverse incentive for Foggy Bottom to pull punches in the reports – to spend a disproportionate share of the department's diplomatic finesse on the U.S. Congress rather than on the objectives of its foreign policy.

Military assistance was neither a practical nor an effective lever to induce traditionally repressive military regimes to liberalize. Nevertheless, we have seen that this seemingly self-evident statement was a point of great contention in the administration. Given the history of the United States in creating and sustaining the repressive capacity of these regimes, it is easy to understand the disheartening effect of continued military aid on would-be reformers in Central America. We see an ongoing debate at the highest levels of the administration over whether democracy would follow order or whether order would follow democracy. Of course, this philosophical debate has its roots in liberal political discourse dating back at least as far as Burke's scathing critique of the French Revolution. Notwithstanding their historical grounding, these debates in the context of U.S. Central American policy often devolved into the surreal; from the philosophical (the beatings must continue until morale improves) to the practical (the Salvadorans need non-lethal crowd control measures so they can stop firing live ordinance to break up peaceful demonstrations.)<sup>298</sup>

Nevertheless, an equally evident truism is that one of the best ways to influence a military regime is to supply it with arms. The fact that the arms supply relationship was a juggernaut with an enormous amount of inertia only exacerbated this reality. Hardly something that would start or stop on a dime, arms supply was poorly suited to

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<sup>298</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, "Central America," *DDRS*.; Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, "El Salvador: A First Step," *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

diplomatic finesse. If the military supply relationship were to grind to a halt and be lost to another source, then the limited influence that the United States enjoyed in Central American affairs would further diminish. Given the logic of the Cold War, to keep your friends close and your potential enemies closer, the administration felt compelled to keep the supply relationship open, even though it effectively stanching the actual shipment of arms to Nicaragua or El Salvador until 1980. As we have previously noted, this need to keep open the arms supply relationship had the adverse effect of marginalizing the administration's public diplomacy options like the country reports, in order to justify to Congress the budget request to keep open this option. Of course, this also presented a perennial public relations challenge, viewed by repressive regimes and their opposition alike as signs of U.S. support for the established order.<sup>299</sup>

The provision of humanitarian aid more closely aligned with the administration's goal by promoting development as the institutional underpinnings of socio-economic human rights. This provided an answer to the Marxist ideological challenge, one that gave precedence to socio-economic justice in societies where justice was in short supply. Nevertheless, this fact is even more reason that humanitarian aid was poorly suited to a carrot and stick strategy. Under the logic of carrots and sticks, carrots without the threat of the stick provide little inducement and the withholding of humanitarian aid as a stick was problematic. In the few instances where the administration did indeed withhold previously committed humanitarian aid to punish human rights abuses, the effect seemed more negative than positive. Subjected to clumsy congressional oversight and the executive's logic of carrots and sticks,

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<sup>299</sup> Recall the need to approve economic aid to Somoza in October 1977 to preserve that option as a lever: Robert Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition, The United States and Nicaragua*, p. 46-7; John Goshko and Karen De Young, *Washington Post*, October 24, 1977, "U.S. Decisions Send Nicaragua 'Garbled' Rights Message," p. A1.

economic assistance was all but neutralized as an effective means of promoting socio-economic rights and as an offensive weapon the Cold War battle for hearts and minds.

In his April 1977 Law Day Speech, Cyrus Vance declared that the administration would give priority to protecting the integrity of the person in its human rights policy. This was indeed the case in its public rhetoric, with a great deal of attention to shedding light on and condemning torture, disappearance, arbitrary imprisonment and forced exile. It was less prominent, however, with the administration's private diplomacy, which had a decided emphasis on the promotion of political rights through the institution of democracy. This is due in part to the fact that democracy was the last man standing when it came to the institutional underpinnings of human rights. The inherent tension between maintaining order and respecting human rights dampened the impulse to promote the rule of law; while the quagmire of congressional oversight and of carrots and sticks muted the ideology of development – which under the best of circumstances offered no quick fixes to crises that were spinning out of control. With the radical opposition holding the initiative on these fronts, U.S. policymakers displayed an irrational exuberance for democratic institutions.<sup>300</sup>

Pragmatics aside, most U.S. citizens assigned a transcendent status to democracy in the nation's institutional pantheon, having been taught at an early age to believe that every society should have the right to choose its own government (at least those societies with the political "maturity" not to choose the likes of Ho Chi Minh, Jacobo Arbenz, Fidel Castro or Salvador Allende). Democracy was the essential institution from which all other public goods would flow. This was the argument advanced by Brzezinski that carried the day in the June 1979 Policy Review Committee meeting

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<sup>300</sup> Cyrus Vance, Law Day Speech at the University of Georgia, April 30, 1977.

giving democratic reform primacy over the heavy-handed restoration of order.<sup>301</sup>

Herein was the rub: democracy in Nicaragua and El Salvador was a leaky vessel and many in the so-called moderate opposition in both nations had reason to doubt that it could be made seaworthy before the rising tide of popular demands swept away their own vested interests. Moreover, the same opposition in Nicaragua and El Salvador had difficulty envisioning either Somoza or Romero as liberal reformers. They also had difficulty understanding how the government in Washington, which had so willingly acted to remove the democratically-elected, reform-minded governments of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 or Salvador Allende in 1973, would show compunction in brushing aside the governments of Somoza or Romero, so clearly devoid of legitimacy.<sup>302</sup>

Michael Hunt has argued that the second core tenet of a longstanding U.S. foreign policy ideology has been the implicit acceptance of a cultural hierarchy, one unabashedly grounded in constructions of racial superiority well into the early decades of the twentieth century. As the events and ideas of the twentieth century increasingly discredited the tenets of racial superiority, the discourse of racial hierarchy has retreated to the margins of political discourse, having gone below the surface of acceptable mainstream discourse. As overt constructions of racial supremacy receded, a cultural chauvinism has taken their place, one grounded in a hierarchy of cultures – the tropes of modernity – “traditional” societies in need of the patient tutelage of “developed” societies.<sup>303</sup>

Michael Adas speaks of the “civilizing mission ideology” – Kipling’s “White

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<sup>301</sup> Minutes of the Presidential Review Committee Meeting, June 11, 1979, “Central America,” *DDRS*.

<sup>302</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991; David Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 72-111.

<sup>303</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 46-91.

Man's Burden" – at once the animating and justifying discourse of Western empire since the capitals of Europe divided the African continent at the Congress of Berlin in 1885. Few would dispute that Western empire historically rests upon a constructed foundation of racial superiority. The United States was a colonial power in the nineteenth century but its empire – its manifest destiny – was a continental empire. The "colonials within" – the "wards" of its "civilizing mission" – were blacks under the institution of slavery, Native Americans and Latin Americans in its westward expansion, and European immigrants as it industrialized.<sup>304</sup>

With the closing of the frontier and a burgeoning industrial appetite for raw materials and markets for finished goods, proponents of formal empire easily transposed the existing constructions of racial hierarchy that had animated and justified the continental empire, and deployed them in service of the nation's "civilizing mission" abroad. Lars Schoultz has described the jingoes of the day as "disciples of a new Manifest Destiny, dressed up in the modern language of Social Darwinism." One of the outspoken proponents of formal U.S. empire in the closing days of the nineteenth century, Reverend Josiah Strong, predicted the "extinction of the inferior races," viewing the United States as "God's right hand" – a divinely ordained "*final...solution* [italics mine] to the dark problem of heathenism among many inferior peoples." Lest we think Strong a corner case, consider the words of U.S. Senator Albert Beveridge, another ardent champion of U.S. empire at the turn of the twentieth century and a fixture in the *American Historical Association*. Beveridge saw the United States as the "lords of civilization," part of "the Almighty's infinite plan [for]

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<sup>304</sup> Michael Adas, "Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2004, p. 31-63; Fredrick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, p. 1-153; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, p. 90-2.

the disappearance of...decaying races before the higher civilization of the nobler and more virile types of man.”<sup>305</sup>

To many, the pseudo-scientific crusading racism of Social Darwinism seems anachronistic today. It seems easy to dismiss the rhetoric of Reverend Strong and Senator Beveridge as quaint artifacts of bygone days, clearly out of place in the Carter administration. Yet before we remand the “civilizing mission ideology” to the dustbin of history, consider the words of John Burgess, Theodore Roosevelt’s law professor at Columbia: “Civilized states have a claim on the uncivilized populations, as well as a duty toward them.” This “transcendent right” carried with it a “duty to establish political and legal order everywhere” and to eradicate, “permanent instability on the part of any state.” President McKinley spoke of “obligations” which must be born by the exceptional nation, a “trust which civilization puts in” us to help “oppressed peoples...under the providence of God and in the name of human progress and civilization.” A practical man by nature, McKinley believed that “duty informed destiny.” The President spoke of a “new imperialism,” one that was “destined to carry world-wide the principles of Anglo-Saxon peace and justice, liberty and law.” This rhetoric, couched in the language of civilization and modernity, rather than racial supremacy, would be a fair representation of the Carter administration’s human rights policy as applied in Central America.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 133; Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and its Present Crisis*, American Home Missionary Society, 1885; Albert Beveridge, “The March of the Flag,” *The Meaning of the Times*, Albert Beveridge ed., Indianapolis, 1908, p. 47, 49-50, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898beveridge.html>; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, p. 79-83, 97-100.

<sup>306</sup> President McKinley, quoted in Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 38; Burgess and McKinley, quoted in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, p. 83-4, 89-90. McKinley, quoted in Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982, p. 91-120.

In his historiographical work on the history of nationalism, historian Lloyd Kramer asserts, “The meanings of nationalism and national identity typically depend on various dichotomies that define the nation in terms of its differences from other places or people” – on a “dynamic process of identity formation.” Accepting the definition of Peter Sahlins, Kramer agrees, “National identity is a *socially constructed* and *continuous process* [emphasis mine] of defining ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’...National identities...do not depend on the existence of any objective linguistic or cultural differentiation but on the subjective experience of difference.” Liah Greenfield describes the “nation” as the “constitutive element of modernity” and argues that we should view “modernity as defined by nationalism.” Kramer elucidates, “Social modernization and nation-building seem to be inseparable...Nationalism has reflected certain transitional historical processes (e.g., changes in political institutions, economic systems, and ideas about religion), but it also contributed decisively to the modernizing political, cultural, and social structures that helped to produce it.”<sup>307</sup>

At the dawn of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt extended the Monroe Doctrine, asserting his nation’s right to “exercise an international police power” in the Western Hemisphere. Those Latin American neighbors who “knew how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters...need not fear interference from the United States.” However, the “chronic wrongdoing, or the “impotence, which result in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society,” which to Roosevelt seemed endemic in Latin America, would “ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation.” This was the problem in Nicaragua and El Salvador as seen

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<sup>307</sup> Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 58, No. 3, July 1997, p. 525-545; Kramer cites: Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 270-71; Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 18.

by many in the Carter administration: the “chronic wrongdoing” and “impotence” of these Central American governments demanded tutelage, if not direct intervention, from the United States. The challenge for the Carter administration, in the post-Vietnam and post-Allende United States, of course, was that the domestic political consensus on this “destinarian duty” was decidedly more circumscribed than in Roosevelt’s era. The jingos of the late twentieth century lay dormant, discredited by Watergate, soon to be awakened by the Great Communicator.<sup>308</sup>

Wilber Platt wrote in his 1901 article on the “pacification” of Cuba, “In many respects, [the people of Cuba] were like children.” Rough Rider and later Governor-General of the Cuban protectorate, General Leonard Wood, optimistically confided to Roosevelt his plans to “turn [his Cuban charges] from possible bandits, and educate them into Americans.” Others like Senator John Proctor of Vermont speculated that it would take “centuries of patient self-development” to bestow the “priceless privilege of Anglo-Saxon freedom upon an illiterate alien race just emerging from bondage.” Proctor offered a prescription that would no doubt grow tiresome to Latin Americans as the century progressed, calling for freedom the old fashioned way, the freedom of the nation’s “fathers,” attainable only through “centuries of patient self-development.”<sup>309</sup>

As the twentieth century “progressed,” it became increasingly unacceptable to define the “other” in terms of race. Nevertheless, McKinley’s destinarian language of “duty” persisted. The “white man’s burden” became, instead, the “duty,” even the

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<sup>308</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, Annual Message of the President Transmitted to Congress, December 6, 1904, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1904*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905; Thomas Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet*, New York: Penguin Books, 2004. Mann traces the neoconservative core of George W. Bush’s administration back to the Nixon administration.

<sup>309</sup> Platt and Wood cited in Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*, p. 144-8. Proctor cited in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, p. 89-90.

“destiny,” of the *civilized* world, of the *developed* world, of the *modern* world to uplift these “uncivilized populations,” these “oppressed peoples,” in the name of “human progress and civilization.” Michael Adas has shown how the destructive waste of the Great War of 1914 called into question the tenets of “the civilizing mission ideology,” the heretofore-unquestioned racial and cultural superiority of the West. If the First World War had a corrosive effect on the tenets and institutions of formal empire, the Second World War blew the lid off it. Wilson’s League of Nations and the institutions founded at Dumbarton Oaks, Bretton Woods and Nuremburg – hegemonic projects all – were attempts to fill the breach in the crumbling ramparts of formal empire that separated the civilized world from the benighted, backward, traditional societies on the margins of modernity.<sup>310</sup>

We see this “dynamic process of identify formation” at a transnational level in the wave of decolonization that followed the Second World War with the coining of the term “Third World” – modernity’s collective term for the *uncivilized* other, the *underdeveloped* other, the *traditional* other. The common denominator between the racially and culturally defined “other” of Roosevelt’s day and the culturally defined “other” of 1970s was the inferiority of the “other” in relation to the exceptional “self.” As Lars Schoultz has shown, whether Latin Americans exhibited childlike and violent tendencies as a result of their skin color or as a result of the litany of tacitly understood cultural defects, the assumptions persisted. In the subconscious assumptions of many North Americans, Latin Americans remained uncomprehending, credulous, mercurial, emotional, incapable, untrustworthy and any number of other stereotypes generally attributed to children or beasts of the field.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Michael Adas, “Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology,” *Journal of World History*, p. 31-63.

<sup>311</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*; For

Mark Phillip Bradley and Seth Jacobs have shown how U.S. policy in Vietnam reflected “innate suspicions of the Vietnamese capacity for self-government and the claims of the superiority of U.S. models of political, economic and social development.” After 1954, claims Bradley, “the idiom of modernization, rather than cultural hierarchies, informed U.S. discourse and policy towards the postcolonial world, including Vietnam.” Distinguishing “backward” from “modern,” these attitudes reflected many of the central assumptions” informing U.S. policy in the Third World. Not unlike Social Darwinism, Jacobs explains that modernization theory, while purporting to be an original and scientific means of interpreting global transformation, actually rested upon many of the same assumptions, portraying nonwhite peoples as primitive, untutored in the ways of democracy, and incapable of uplifting themselves without the help of a Western mentor. The Third World existed because of “arrested development rather than of innate racial inferiority.”<sup>312</sup>

Michael Hunt concurs: policymakers and academics alike deployed the catch phrases of development theory like “the modernization of traditional societies” or “nation-building.” Yet for all “these impressive new formulations,” notes Hunt, these were nothing more than warmed-over versions of the “old ethnocentric platitudes about uplift and regeneration formerly directed at the Philippines.” In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, U.S. Secretary of State characterized Fidel Castro as very much like a child in many ways...quite immature regarding problems of government.” Now on his

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evidence of cultural chauvinism toward Latin America, consult the contemporary work of a senior USAID official during the Kennedy administration: Lawrence Harrison, *The Pan-American Dream: Do Latin America's Cultural Values Discourage True Partnership with the United States and Canada?* Westview Press, 1997.

<sup>312</sup> Mark Phillip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Post-Colonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000, p. 106, 187, 45-106; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Race, Religion and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1959*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 94, 88-126.

eleventh U.S. administration, one can only assume that Castro has matured. As late as 1969, Latin American specialist Nelson Rockefeller delicately suggested, “Democracy is a subtle and difficult problem” for the majority of Latin Americans whom he considered better off under authoritarian governments that could deal more effectively with the ineluctable “forces of anarchy, terror and subversion.”<sup>313</sup>

Many in the Carter administration were acutely sensitive toward issues of race and cultural chauvinism, just as many had been cognizant the imperial legacy of U.S. policy toward Latin America. The nation’s civil rights struggle had left deep impressions on the southern president, as well as other southern civil rights activists that occupied prominent positions in his administration, most notably U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young and Assistant Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Patt Derian. Nevertheless, sensitivity toward issues of race and culture did not imply immunity from the ideological inertia of racial and cultural chauvinism; any more than had sensitivity toward past imperial policy exempted the administration from its imperial residue. Many of the attitudes that underwrote the U.S. protectorate in Cuba in the wake of John Hay’s “splendid little war,” were still prevalent in the Carter administration.<sup>314</sup>

Although the explanation for Latin American “inferiority” had morphed by the time that Jimmy Carter took office – constructions of racial inferiority now below the surface of acceptable political discourse – the assumptions of “inferiority” were strikingly similar, now firmly resting on the tropes of modernity. Latin Americans were assumed to be less capable of governing than their counterparts in “developed” nations (though many of the Latin American governing elite had been educated in the

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<sup>313</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 159-67.

<sup>314</sup> For the influence of the Jim Crow South and the Civil Rights Movement on Carter: Jimmy Carter, *An Hour before Daylight: Memoirs of a Rural Boyhood*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001; *New York Times*, June 23, 1977, Barbara Gamarekian, “The Human Rights Spokeswoman.” p. C1.

United States), in dire need of U.S. tutelage, slow to comprehend, and prone to corruption and violence. Consider the language of “carrots and sticks,” deployed by many the Carter administration to denote the strategy of alternately rewarding or punishing client states to assuage or coerce compliance with U.S. policy objectives. This is not a language of equals, but rather a tutelary discourse more at home in the classroom than in bilateral relations between sovereign nations – its objects assumed to be in need, alternately, of discipline and patient encouragement.

Many in the Bureau of Inter-American affairs – not least Todman, Solaún, Vaky and Devine – assumed that the governments of Nicaragua and El Salvador were unable to solve their problems without assistance from the United States. Consider the dispatches from the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs and the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador following their consultation with the Romero government in July 1979 days after the Nicaraguan Revolution. Secretary Vaky’s tone is exasperated and long-suffering, portraying his Salvadoran interlocutors as incomprehensibly uncomprehending. Thoroughly convinced that Romero’s government had not “really comprehended the nature of the issues they faced,” the assistant secretary also described the Salvadoran government as weak, lacking purpose, lacking imagination, tending to be manipulative, and enamored with gimmicks. Nevertheless, Vaky was no more sanguine about the qualities of the opposition in El Salvador. While Romero’s government was “neither competent nor purposeful,” Vaky saw “no ready alternative...Violence,” he explained, “was a way of life in El Salvador.” Nevertheless, the distinguished U.S. Foreign Service officer held out some hope that through his patient tutelage, in a mission lasting less than twenty-four hours, he may have “created the beginnings of a realization” on the part of the Salvadorans of the issues they faced in their country, if only the faintest “stirrings of an understanding of the deeper

issues.”<sup>315</sup>

The U.S. Ambassador to San Salvador, Frank Devine, viewed the same consultations in a similar light. Also a career Foreign Service officer, Devine reported, “There was a very real question whether the Romero government is in any way capable of comprehending, let alone effecting, the human rights improvements.” Yet for all of his government’s shortcomings, Romero also seemed to the ambassador, “better than any of the conceivable alternatives.” The ambassador’s prescription? Lower the bar. In the name of “national interest,” to prevent the Salvadoran government from being “displaced violently by internal or external forces inimical to U.S. interests,” Washington should risk being associated with the “unpalatable.” U.S. policymakers should deemphasize the impossible,” settle for a “somewhat lesser level of improvement” from such an uncomprehending and incompetent government, focusing only on “feasible political reform measures.”<sup>316</sup>

Such were the assumptions that informed many of the key U.S. policymakers in the Carter administration’s Latin American bureau. However, U.S. policymakers were not the only ones deploying tropes of Latin American inferiority. Ronald Robinson has noted that both formal and informal empire has historically rested on an indigenous collaborating class infused with the ideology of the metropole. This was undoubtedly the case with U.S. informal empire in Latin America. The ruling class in Central America justified and perpetuated its disproportionate privilege and power by deploying the tropes of Latin American inferiority with a facility that would have made the most ardent Social Darwinian blush. Somoza repeatedly insisted that Nicaraguans

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<sup>315</sup> Viron Vaky, Cable to Warren Christopher, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador: A First Step,” *DNSA*, Document EL00617.

<sup>316</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

were neither ready for nor capable of democracy and we see Romero deploying many of the same tropes. Although most in the Carter administration seemed unblinkingly convinced of the all-healing nature of democratic institutions, there is evidence that these tropes found resonance, evidence made all the more plausible by its own paternal attitudes toward the ruling class.<sup>317</sup>

While U.S. policymakers were unlikely to state that the Central American proletariat was “incapable of democracy,” most would readily accept that it was “susceptible” to specious ideologies like Marxism. This is not to suggest that most in the Carter administration were blind to the structural conditions that facilitated the Marxist appeal – they most certainly were not. Rather, it seems likely that deep-seated assumptions about Latin American cultural inferiority informed their suspicion that Latin Americans, left to their own devices, were prone to making bad political decisions. Nor was this lost on the Central American “collaborating class,” which saw Marxism as a threat to its own privilege and power. Red baiting was the order of the day for both Somoza and Romero, both of whom believed – not without cause – that Washington would go to great lengths to thwart communism.

This brings us to the third pillar of Michael Hunt’s ideological trilogy, a long-standing aversion to revolution, in a nation whose national mythology lays claim to a revolutionary founding. Hunt argued that this conservative tendency in U.S. foreign policy historically rests on a Burkean reaction, part of a collective gasp of the Western European status quo as it witnessed the destructive ‘Terror’ wrought by these revolutionary ideas and the subsequent Napoleonic affront to the Westphalian order animated by a crusading French nationalism. While Napoleon’s crusade ground to a

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<sup>317</sup> Ronald Robinson, “Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,” *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, London: Longman, 1972, p. 117-40.

halt on the Russian steppes, the seeds of its revolutionary ideas were left to ferment in the industrial cities of the West, a revolutionary genie pressing against a tenuous Metternichian cork.<sup>318</sup>

Out of this ferment was born a competing vision of modernity – Marx’s critique of the Western liberal political and economic order – and, equally important for the purposes of this venture, a competing Marxian narrative of universal human rights that challenged the Western liberal narrative which Marx considered to be the “rights of the few at the expense of the many.” Marx was promulgating an alternative vision of human rights – a vision that gave precedence to social and economic justice instead of John Stuart Mill’s vision of individual liberty. Thus was the Western intelligentsia digging the ideological trenches of the Cold War – or should we say erecting the barricades – in the capitals of Europe in 1848. The conflict between the Metternichian order and proto-Marxist popular movements was contested on the same ideological terrain as would be the defining ideological struggle of the twentieth century – that of Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” aligned against Sergei Bulgakov’s “empire of justice.”<sup>319</sup>

With the onset of the Cold War, it is unsurprising that the historic aversion to revolution in U.S. foreign policy would intensify. However, rather than overshadow the other elements of the historically nationalistic foreign policy, the messianic and patronizing tendencies in U.S. foreign policies heightened proportionally. Following

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<sup>318</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 93-124; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790, The Constitution Society, <http://www.constitution.org/eb>.

<sup>319</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 102-124; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 8-72; Jeremy Waldron, *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man*, London: Methuen: 1987; Karl Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” 1851; Karl Marx, “Capital, 1867, p. 525; Both in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, David McLellan, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; John Stewart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859, Elizabeth Rapaport, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978.

George Kennan's analysis, U.S. policymakers assumed that, like a "malignant parasite," the insidious and implacable forces of international communism would feed on the "diseased tissue" of the Third World taking advantage of the post-colonial decompression that was occurring in the backwaters of modernity around the world. Sounding like anything but a realist, Kennan, the quintessential realist and architect of containment, spoke of the "responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history had plainly" bestowed upon the United States.<sup>320</sup>

As Michael Hunt has noted, U.S. policymakers pursued a dual strategy; containment to counter the "shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy...along a series of constantly shifting geographic and political points;" and containment's "younger sibling," development, in order "to provide long-term immunity against the contagion of communism." The problem, however, with the "lower classes" in Latin America, observed Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, is that they could not be trusted to institute "democracy as we know it." Worse yet, added Dulles' Inter-American Bureau chief, their "antibodies" were often too weak to "repel an intrusion of the communist virus." Profoundly conservative, otherizing and millennial – the policy staples of containment and development, with their familiar underlying assumptions would remain strikingly persistent throughout the Cold War and beyond.<sup>321</sup>

Notwithstanding Carter's proclaiming his administration "free from that inordinate fear of communism," it would be a mistake to ignore the importance of the Cold War in his administration's human rights policy. As historian Nancy Mitchell has persuasively argued, the president "did not mean that he had transcended anticommunism...The Cold

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<sup>320</sup> George Kennan, Cable to the State Department ("The Long Telegram"), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946*, Vol. 6, 698-708; George Kennan (a.k.a. "X"), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, July 1947, p. 576.

<sup>321</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 153-70.

War permeated Carter's foreign policy;" The number one objective of the administration's August 2, 1979 Central American Policy paper, plainly stated at the outset, was "the containment of Cuba." The means to that end were a series of measures largely meant to induce human rights improvements in the repressive military regimes of Central America and, to a lesser extent, to promote economic development. In fact, the tagline justification for the inclusion of economic development as a policy objective was "to increase social justice and reduce vulnerabilities to extremism." There it was, front and center, there could be no mistaking the policy's top priority. The Carter administration did not see human rights – along with their institutional guarantors, democracy and development – as alternatives to the Cold War, rather, more effective means of waging it.<sup>322</sup>

While it is hardly a surprising revelation that superpower policymakers considered the strategic implications of their foreign policy in the context of the Cold War, there were more subtle ideological forces at work. Returning to Kramer's characterization of nationalism as an ongoing, dichotomous, socially constructed process of defining 'other' and 'self,' it is important to note that there were at least two important otherizing processes at work in the nationalistic foreign policy of the United States during the Cold War. We have already examined the process of identity formation along a North-South cleavage – the "underdeveloped other" in relation to the "developed self;" the "backward other" in relation to the "modern self." Equally important was the process of identity formation along the East-West cleavage – the

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<sup>322</sup> Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address, John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California; Nancy Mitchell, "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn Leffler, Cambridge University Press, 2009, forthcoming; Peter Tarnoff, Memorandum to Zbigniew Brzezinski, August 1, 1979, "PRC Meeting on Central America," Attachment: "Central American Strategy, DNSA, Document EL01327.

“communist other” in relation to the “capitalist self;” the “totalitarian other” in relation to the “liberal self.” These otherizing processes interacted in complex ways, not least because the superpowers, as a matter of survival, waged the Cold War, for the most part, on the periphery of “modernity” in the “backwaters” of the “Third World.” The battle for hearts and minds had become a battle for “backward” hearts and minds.<sup>323</sup>

We can see this otherizing language at work by returning to Ambassador Devine’s late-July 1979 dispatch from San Salvador. After the obligatory lamenting of his interlocutors’ “abysmal lack of comprehension,” the ambassador appeared to be particularly “disturbed to see [the Salvadoran] right’s inability to distinguish among the parties and forces of the political left.” Devine could see clearly the “contrast” between the “decent democratic left” – those inclined toward liberal reform – and the “radical, revolutionary, extremist left,” those with Marxist tendencies. Devine continued his pejorative overkill through out the memorandum. These factions were not merely radical, not merely revolutionary, not merely extremists – lest anyone misunderstand their nature – these factions were “radical, revolutionary extremists.”<sup>324</sup>

Ironically, only the “radical, revolutionary, extreme left” escaped the emasculating language of Latin inferiority. U.S. officials routinely characterized the radicals as had Devine, as “boundless in confidence and enthusiasm,” or “multiplying in effectiveness,” or “demonstrating their capabilities.” In contrast, the “decent, democratic left,” like their conservative counterparts, were “a very uncertain quantity,” lacking in “spirit,” lacking in “competence,” and lacking in “operational capability.” In so doing, however, the grudging respect that U.S. officials paid to Latin revolutionaries

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<sup>323</sup> Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” p. 525-6; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, p. 8-72.

<sup>324</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

– earned in no small part in the hills of the Sierra Maestra and along Nicaragua’s frontier with Costa Rica – was discounted in a sea of presumed Latin “ineptitude.”<sup>325</sup>

“Terrorist” was another epithet preponderantly reserved for the Marxist left. While there is no question that the left, particularly in El Salvador, employed the tactics of terror, neither is there a question that a greater number of people suffered at the hands of official and quasi-official terror during this period. Furthermore, while U.S. officials recognized the excesses of the right as a serious problem, more often than not they attributed this to an inappropriate response, from an inherently uncomprehending and violent people, to provocation from the insidious forces of the left. If only, so the narrative went, a “spirited,” an “effective,” a “capable” leader would emerge on the right or from the “decent democratic” center, then surely the “credulous” masses that constituted the “popular” organizations would turn from specious appeal of the “radical, revolutionary, extremist left.”

The point of this, of course, is not to illustrate that U.S. officials were overtly racist or that they lacked nuance – this was surely not the case. Rather, these examples illustrate the power of language to shape meaning. The use of tacitly accepted symbols conveyed meaning. Moreover, as is most often the case in otherizing language, these symbols were more likely to obscure than elucidate. There is no question that U.S. officials understood the deep structural issues underpinning these Central American crises. Few, if any, in the Carter administration would have overtly argued that these issues stemmed from inherent defects in “the Latin American character,” to use an absurd term.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>326</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*. Baloyra provides sound evidence of structural issues and U.S. official understanding of those issues.

Nevertheless, the dichotomies that have underwritten U.S. nationalism – between the “developed self” and the “underdeveloped other” and between the “liberal reformer self” and the “totalitarian subversive other” – have created a fog that has distorted the rationally discernable reality, to the extent that reality is ever truly rationally discernable. Trapped in this “cage” of language and inundated with a numbing load of issues that required daily attention, policymakers all too often defaulted to and deployed the socially constructed meanings implicit in this language, whether or not they would have consciously subscribed to these meanings upon reflection.<sup>327</sup>

This is the essence of ideology – it is a set of socially constructed shared meanings that historical actors, in this case policymakers and politicians, employ to mediate a complex reality. It serves as a prism that refracts the complex colors of reality into a small number of commonly understood tenets, the primary colors of reality. It is employed to understand and to be understood. It facilitates common understanding but often obscures true understanding. Michael Hunt has even argued, “The general direction American policies have taken is inexplicable, perhaps even inconceivable, without taking account of the influence of a constellation of [persistent] ideas... which have been tested, refined and woven into the fabric of the national consciousness.” Ideology matters.<sup>328</sup>

Rhetoric is the realization of ideology; it is our best means of studying ideology as a historical phenomenon. Rhetorical acts, of course, cannot tell us what a particular historical actor was thinking; this is unknowable. However, this is not the point of examining ideology, which is an ongoing *social* process of constructing *shared* meaning. Rhetorical acts are, for the most part, purposeful acts that can both reflect

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<sup>327</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” Cambridge: 1929. “Cage” of language.

<sup>328</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 171-2.

and convey shared meaning. They can reveal both tacit ideological commitments and calculated deployments of commonly held beliefs, both of which are interesting because each reveals shared meaning – ideology. Michael Hunt explains, “To be effective, public rhetoric must draw on values and concerns widely shared and easily understood by its audience.” Rhetoric matters.<sup>329</sup>

Language is the realization of rhetoric; it is our best means of examining rhetoric as a historical phenomenon. The language of most eras, geographies, cultures and disciplines is rich in symbols – symbols that convey shared meaning. As one examines the documentary records of U.S. diplomatic history, it soon becomes clear that U.S. policymakers employ a lexicon that is rich in symbols that conveys shared meaning. This serves a variety of useful purposes, as it does with most disciplinary lexicons: providing discursive shorthand to convey complex ideas economically; providing a filter to make sense of a complex and nuanced reality; providing a means to be understood, to persuade, to belong, and to distinguish one’s self. Conversely, the language and its implicit symbols can distort reality and circumscribe a discourse – the cage of language. Nevertheless, for better and for worse, as Hunt observes, “A rhetoric that ignores or eschews the language of common discourse...limits its own influence.” Language matters.<sup>330</sup>

Hunt’s thesis has held up well over the two decades since its publication in 1987; most historians accept that the arc of U.S. foreign policy reveals the presence of persistent strains of nationalistic ideas. Lloyd Kramer has characterized nationalism as “one of the decisive forces in modern history and that its significance demands careful, critical analysis. Nationalist ideas, asserts Kramer, are “a distinctive form of modern

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<sup>329</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 15.

<sup>330</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 15.

thought that shapes the political actions and cultural identities of individuals as well as groups.” In what ways, then, did these ideas “shape the political actions” of the Carter administration in Central America? This is, in essence, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question – Michael Hunt’s call to arms. Accepting that this long-standing nationalistic strain in U.S. foreign policy was alive and well in the Carter administration, in what ways did this matter and what is to be done?<sup>331</sup>

In an attempt to answer this call, I have posited the existence of *ideological inertia*, which has been a central claim of my thesis. The Carter administration was more self-conscious than most about the legacies of a historically nationalistic U.S. foreign policy – the legacies of empire, of racial discrimination and cultural chauvinism, and of an “inordinate fear of communism.” Nevertheless, nationalisms are socially constructed and, as such, are historical phenomena. They have an historic arc and an historic mass – in short, an ideological inertia, sensitivity to which is insufficient to arrest its momentum. The Carter administration, though more reflective than most, while self-consciously grappling with this legacy, was ultimately incapable of escaping the gravitational pull of these ideas and their historical residue.

Many in the administration were aware of the U.S. imperial legacy in Latin American and around the world. Carter’s rhetoric offered redemption “from the intellectual and moral poverty of Vietnam,” and his administration sought to end to the interventionist policies of the past in Latin America. Nevertheless, a key component of this redemptive, morally conceived foreign policy was its human rights component – at its core a proselytizing policy, which posited the right, under international law, to intervene in the sovereign affairs of other nations to enforce and impose purportedly universal values and institutions. This fit like a glove with the longstanding missionary

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<sup>331</sup> Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” p. 525-6.

impulse of a nationalistic U.S. foreign policy. So natural was this impulse that few in the administration seemed troubled by its implicit contradictions. The cognitive dissonance between rhetoric and reality seemed cynical to some and naïve to others; moreover, it disaffected some while confusing others.

Many in the Carter administration were equally sensitive to issues of racial discrimination. The president's rhetoric and as his commitment to nonintervention reflect a similar sensitivity to a legacy of U.S. cultural chauvinism. The legacy of European and North American empire in Central America had created profound structural issues that saddled the nations in the region, issues well understood by many in the administration. Nevertheless, when U.S. policymakers encountered this legacy of empire in Central America, more often than not they reflexively cast these in terms Latin American inferiority. This, in turn, reinforced their own innate missionary impulse to uplift "backward" peoples.<sup>332</sup>

Carter pronounced his administration "free from that *inordinate* fear of communism." While we have already noted that this was not tantamount to renouncing the strategy of containment, it most certainly reflected sensitivity to the excesses of past U.S. policy in the name of containment. Indeed, the Carter administration sought to pursue a more measured and effective approach to containment, in which its human rights policy played a central role. Nevertheless, the prescriptions of the Carter administration were hardly novel. The presumed universal institutional guarantors of social, economic and political rights – development and democracy – were standard Cold War fare – Michael Hunt's "younger siblings of containment."<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*. In addition to being one of the best contemporary works on the structural issues and political culture in El Salvador, Baloyra's work, commissioned by the State Department, provides a fine example that policymakers had access to insightful analysis.

<sup>333</sup> Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Inaugural Address; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*,

Under the best of circumstances, the ideology of development – in addition to being the ideology of Latin American inferiority recast in cultural terms – would be slow to remedy the structural inequalities at the root of these Central American crises. Moreover, the instrumental clumsiness and paternalism of carrots and sticks further muted its capacity to answer the ideological appeal of Marxism. This led to an “irrational exuberance” for the capacity of democracy to remedy all social ills – all the more irrational considering the tacit assumptions that the Latin American other was “an uncertain quantity” while the “radical, revolutionary, extremist other” was...well, radical, revolutionary and extreme. By focusing on the bourgeois opposition and failing to make a concerted effort to bring the so-called popular opposition under the tent, to many Latin Americans the Carter administration’s calls for democracy looked like more of the same, reinforcing the anticolonial appeal that Marxism had historically enjoyed in Latin America.<sup>334</sup>

Overall, historians have judged the Carter administration’s human rights policy harshly and it is fair to say that popular memory has been even less kind to what many have considered a ‘failed presidency.’ As we have noted, this is a polarizing subject with most critics gravitating toward one of two poles: the policy was either naïve or the policy was cynical. Yet there is considerable evidence to suggest that many in the Carter administration, including the president, understood the complexities and nuance of the policy lines they were pursuing as well as equally convincing evidence that many believed deeply that moral rectitude in foreign policy was both appropriate and effective.<sup>335</sup>

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159-67.

<sup>334</sup> Frank Devine, Cable to Viron Vaky, July 26, 1979, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period,” *DNSA*, Document EL00618.

<sup>335</sup> For good historiographical treatments of the Carter administration’s human rights policy: David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The

In short, these popular stereotypes do not comport with the historical record. Nevertheless, the policy was often both confused and confusing. Moreover, the cognitive dissonance between idealistic rhetoric and pragmatic policy inspired charges of cynicism and engendered cynical reactions. How then, does one reconcile policy lines that inspire confusion and cynicism with policymakers that seemed neither confused nor cynical? The notion of persistent, nationalistic ideological strains in U.S. foreign policy provides at least some explanation for this phenomenon.

This is not to say that ideas determined the Carter administration's foreign policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador. All in the administration seem to have been deeply committed to protecting what they perceived to be national interests. For many, as we have seen, human rights were a means to this end, rather than an end unto themselves. This Machiavellian calculus does not imply that the commitment to human rights was cynical. Rather, as German historian Peter Alter has noted, nationalism is "both an ideology and a political movement which holds the nation and sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values, and which manages to mobilize the political will of a people or a large section of the population." The values implicit in human rights were

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Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 2004); David Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 143-93. Schmitz judges Carter favorably, overall, crediting his administration with changing the foreign policy discourse, but acknowledges the confusion and contradictions inherent in such a policy. Critical assessments include: Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*. Vol. 68, No. 5 (November 1979). A political scientist who became Reagan's Ambassador to the United Nations, Kirkpatrick was one of Carter's earliest and harshest critics; Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. Smith provides the proto-critical scholarly work that, as Schmitz notes, "contained all the critics' main points (Schmitz, p. 144)." In Smith's final assessment, events, bureaucracy and inherent policy conflicts combined to make Carter's "vision appear naïve;" Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, Latham, 1986. Muravchik puts a scholarly veneer on Kirkpatrick's polemic; Burton Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993. Kaufman believes Carter was "extremely naïve;" Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 185-6. Hunt found Carter "unprepared" to conduct U.S. foreign policy, believing his analysis of the issues to be "shallow and unsystematic."

indistinguishable from the nation and, by implication, their preservation was indistinguishable from the national interest.<sup>336</sup>

As Michael Hunt has argued, it is virtually impossible to isolate nationalistic ideas from purportedly “tangible” national interests. Ideology forms the mediating lens through which policymakers grapple with the complex and nuanced realities that comprise the “national interest.” Ideology shapes and circumscribes the discourse that determines the “national interest.” It shapes and constrains both individual and group perceptions of reality, while shaping and circumscribing the ways in which that reality and its associated policy response gets communicated within the policymaking community and to the informed American public.<sup>337</sup>

Herein lies a source of much of the confusion and cognitive dissonance surrounding the administration’s human rights policy. The discourse surrounding that policy and the policy itself was proselytizing, otherizing and conservative; tapping into deeply seated ideological strains. They were deployed both to contain communism and to redeem the “intellectual and moral poverty” of past containment policies. They were both neo-imperialistic and deployed to remedy the vestiges of empire.<sup>338</sup>

We see the same ambivalence in the president and many of his senior advisors, at once idealists and hard-nosed realists. To Carter, and many in his administration, these were not contradicting values. To many, the nation, its interests and its ideals were virtually indistinguishable. Sadly, the coherence of these belief systems did not

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<sup>336</sup> Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, Stuart McKinnon-Evans, trans., London: 1994, p. 4. Cited in: Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” p. 525-6.

<sup>337</sup> Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 16-7; Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, Stuart McKinnon-Evans, trans., London: 1994, p. 4. Cited in Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” p. 525.

<sup>338</sup> Jimmy Carter, May 22, 1977, Notre Dame Commencement Address, *The American Presidency Project*.

necessarily lead to coherent policies, nor did it guarantee public resonance with policies that challenged national mythologies. The ambivalence of the Carter administration is reflective of the greater arc of U.S. foreign policy and the longstanding ambivalence inherent in the themes of empire and hegemony. As Williams and Hunt have shown, the inextricable intertwining of the nation's ideals and values with the pursuit and consolidation of its national interests has been present in its foreign policy since the nation's founding. We have noted how Jefferson, the consummate republican, presided over one of the most dramatic expansions in the "empire of liberty" in the nation's history.<sup>339</sup>

In effect, U.S. nationalism has been an ongoing attempt to round this square – a belief system that has constructed the nation as a paragon of republican ideals, the pinnacle of modern political, social and economic organization, ordained by providence or history to spread those ideals to the less exceptional peoples of the world. The Carter administration was more self-conscious than most in confronting this legacy but ultimately failed to escape the ideological gravity of U.S. nationalism. Vietnam was an immeasurable affront to the national mythology of exceptionalism. Carter offered a "way back," but also prescribed a more circumspect view of the limits and appropriate use of U.S. power. Ultimately, the body politic, including many in the Carter administration, rejected the transplant.

It should be self-evident to the contemporary reader that a nationalistic U.S. foreign policy is alive and well. Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis and its inherent exceptionalist bent seemed vindicated for a brief moment following the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the "shock and awe" of the first Gulf War. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>339</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*;

contemporary reader should also recognize that the events of the opening years of the twenty-first century have challenged this unilinear view of history and the tenets of U.S. exceptionalism with increasing frequency and intensity. Yet in spite of these challenges, the core tenets of U.S. exceptionalism remain remarkably resilient. In the face of this resiliency, it seems prudent to return the prescriptions of Clifford Geertz and Michael Hunt. We must bring our ideologies “into the light of day,” charged Geertz, challenge them critically, and “force them to come to terms with reality.” Otherwise, claims Hunt, we run the risk of indefinitely incurring the “costs and dangerous consequences.” Left tacit, this “constellation of ideas” will continue to “elicit great sacrifice, incur high costs and impose great pain,” seemingly without regard to whether it comports with reality.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*; Clifford Geertz, *An Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 172-4, 188-9, 191.

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