

Last Reel for Reagan's Nicaraguan Strategy

Latin Americans applaud the virtual defeat of the contras, and look forward a negotiated settlement.

In late 1986 the Reagan Administration considerably increased tension in Central America by spurring Honduran military operations against Nicaragua and even using U.S. transport facilities to rush Honduran soldiers to the conflictive border area, an obviously irresponsible provocation.

This sudden military escalation in the U.S. intervention took place in the context of the Democrats' victory in last November's congressional elections and in the midst of the highly conflictive Iran-Contra scandal. The specter

of generalized warfare in Central America unleashed through the direct intervention of U.S. troops looms closer than ever even though a lot of factors seem to indicate that such a move on the part of the U.S. would be hard pressed to meet with success. We could even go as far as to say that it's becoming increasingly obvious to Mr. Reagan that an intervention of this sort has no chance of succeeding and is therefore not an in-depth and realistic policy option; this, in turn, may explain the increasing aggressiveness of his Central America policy.

Both the Democrats' electoral victory and the Iran-Contra affair have led the press to speculate on the possible end of the so-called Reagan Era. At any rate, the administration's loss of face

and credibility over the Iranian affair and Democratic control of Congress, along with the fact that Reagan is now a lame-duck president, contribute to an overall weakness that cannot be significantly changed by trying to create certain effects and impressions.

The Reagan Administration has needed to show some force in politically sensitive Central America precisely because of the difficulties it faces. It has felt the need to demonstrate that neither the scandal nor the Democrats can tie its hands in matters of military policy, and this in fact seems to be the case. But rather than Central America policy being hindered by legal and political obstacles within the U.S., the real problem lies in the fact that the ongoing interventionist policy has little success to show for itself and seems headed toward an even dimmer future. In other words, reactions in the U.S. are basically dependent on the specific manner in which the intervention unfolds; if it's successful and promising it will surely enjoy Democratic support, and if it could take place without involving North American soldiers, the fear and rejection currently present in public opinion would disappear.

Yet the exact opposite seems to be true: the strategic defeat of the **contras** appears to be clearly outlined, as is the fact that the Reagan Administration has failed in its attempt to subvert the internal order of Nicaragua by either driving a wedge between the Sandinistas and the people or by gaining a politically and socially significant local ally. Nor has the administration managed to isolate the Sandinistas internationally. The bottom-line factor determining the overall situation is the impressive military strength of the Ejército Popular Sandinista (EPS, the Popular Sandinista Army) and the organization and arming of the masses. Nicaragua today is clearly in a condition to wage popular warfare, and the U.S. knows from experience rather than from any kind of "syndrome" (i.e. Viet Nam) what it means to try to reverse this kind of process. Conditions are such that no one in the Pentagon could even imagine the possibility of any kind of rapid decision in a war against Nicaragua, whatever the mode of intervention may be. Experience has also taught North Americans what to expect of prolonged warfare.

The Reagan government has made a permanent display of its military force, but this enormous factor of strength should not be allowed to mask underlying weaknesses. One of these is the lack of sufficiently effective or significant Central American allies.

The governments of both El Salvador and Honduras are willing instruments of Reagan's policy and they issue statements and carry out maneuvers of all sorts that include overt active support for the *contra* on up to Honduras' recent bragging provocation. Yet they seem incapable of going much further because neither government has the capacity to openly defy the Sandinista Army or the Nicaraguan people in arms. The Honduran army is the only available force in case of war, and it has neither



A 19 year-old Nicaraguan soldier recovers from his wounds in a hospital in Wiwili

Photo by Archivo Noveidades

latin american issues

the means nor the social or political strength to become a significant contender. For its part, the Salvadoran army is pinned to its own territory by the local armed opposition—which, incidentally, has progressively defeated all of the army's strategic plans—and is thus in no position to involve itself in a war against Nicaragua.

As for Guatemala, despite re-

whelming military superiority. Neutrality is a convenient policy for the Guatemala state based on existing political, economic and military interests. Despite the fact that the army has issued some aggressive statements and maintains a certain level of involvement in the play of pressure and threats against Nicaragua, it does not seem to be inclined toward taking part in a regional war.

effective military force, whether or not it is formally or institutionally revived. Thus, the U.S. cannot count on puppet armies to carry out an intervention or to at least take on the front-line fighting during a significant amount of time, meaning it would have to involve its own troops from the very beginning. The U.S. knows all too well what this means in terms of an ongoing intervention. President

and military aggression will cease, nor that increased regional armamentism, with its damaging effects for the Central American people, neighboring countries and all of Latin America, not to mention the international community in general, will come to a stop. Yet the intervention seems incapable of achieving a conclusive outcome, and increasingly takes on the form of a prolonged, large-scale war of attrition aimed at obstructing the development of the Sandinista Revolution and at showing the Central American people the high price they would all have to pay for revolution.

The Reagan Era has been one in which the abusive use of force has gone hand in hand with a lack of proposals and solutions to the great problems confronting the modern world: the arms race, the foreign debt, world trade, liberation struggles, conflict among nations and many others. As this era comes to a close, it seems that survival prevails over the arbitrary and despotic use of force, that the strength of life tends to prevail over the force of arms.

History will tell whether future U.S. administrations will be capable of finding ways of living with Central America's revolutionary process and with liberation struggles and the demand for sovereignty posed by all nations. It will tell us if they are capable of going beyond today's narrow point of view, or whether they will persist in their obstinate attempt to oppose the advancement of people and nations. The outcome will no doubt be determined in part by Nicaragua's battle against intervention and, on a different level, by the development of the ongoing armed struggle in El Salvador. Key factors of the American Continent and of the world's future are at stake in tiny Central America.★

Gustavo Porras



Photo Archivo Novedades

Honduran soldiers on patrol along the Nicaragua border

cent statements by the military in the sense that the country's policy of neutrality "might change", reactions in the local press to the fighting and renewed tension last December pointed to reinforcing neutrality. A well-known local columnist, noted for his anticommunism and anti-Sandinista positions, argued pragmatically in favor of Guatemala's remaining neutral. He based his position both on the need to avoid the disasters of war and on the need to take into account Nicaragua's over-

It's a well known fact that Costa Rica doesn't have an army, and despite the fact that President Arias has had no qualms about taking up a front-line position against the Sandinistas, he has taken care not to identify his political virulence with any kind of intention to increase involvement in military activities against his neighbor.

Given the situation, the Central American Defense Council, CONDECA (Consejo de Defensa Centroamericano), obviously doesn't exist as an

Nixon analyzed the shortcomings of the puppet force in Viet Nam as one of the main causes of defeat, and this despite the fact that the South Vietnamese army numbered over a million very well-armed men at the end of the war.

U.S. intervention in Central America is not going well, and this is the reason why the "Reagan Era" is nearing its end in the region, highlighting the intervention's failure. But this in no way means that intervention