Defenders of the Faith: Neoconservatives in Reagan’s Central America Policy

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The U.S. election of 1980, subject to increasingly divergent and politicized evaluations over the past twenty-eight years, is identified by many as a watershed moment in American politics. American conservatives welcomed the return of classical liberalism and hailed the election as an historic restructuring of the U.S. electoral map, while American liberals pointed to Reagan’s victory as a catalyst for a massive upward redistribution of wealth and bemoaned the final dismantling of the New Deal consensus in place since the end of World War Two. These evaluations have their respective merits, and are not on their surfaces mutually contradictory. Perhaps the most lasting and globally important development of 1980, however, was the ancillary cast of characters – and their (then) peculiar political convictions – that made up the new administration. By the 1980s, ideological neoconservatism had existed for some time, and could trace several different roots to thinkers and politicians as diverse as Irving Kristol (the first to assume the normative mantle) and Daniel Moynihan, statesman, sociologist, and politician. However, despite being able to count among its adherents these and other prestigious thinkers, precisely what the term “neoconservative” meant in 1980 was in flux. The election of Ronald Reagan changed this.

At a glance, the very composition of Reagan’s administration drew a line in the sand, establishing an intellectual primacy in a movement led by a man who was anything but. In an address to the Centro Studi per la Conciliazione Internazionale in 1981, Jeane Kirkpatrick, then ambassador to the United Nations, self-referentially noted “how relatively many academics are present in [Reagan’s] administration at relatively high policy-making levels.” Reagan had indeed surrounded himself with a remarkably well-educated group of advisors. From thinkers such as Kirkpatrick (Ph.D., Columbia), Bill Kristol (Ph.D., Harvard), and Ken Adelman (Ph.D., Georgetown) several strains of political thought combined to produce what is today known as

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neoconservatism. The group was divided domestically, but had initially remained recognizably liberal: they were not opposed to the welfare state, though they began to note some of its more intrinsic flaws; most were pro-labor; and they were by no means proponents of the deregulation undertaken by Reagan during his tenure in office. The common strand that tied the movement together was the fact that at its most fundamental it was a reactionary pushback against what these academics saw to be an intellectual abandonment of basic Cold War principles by the Democratic party. The idea that “American power is necessary for the survival of liberal democracy in the modern world,” was, as Kirkpatrick put it, “the most important development in U.S. foreign policy in the last decade.” If it was a controversial idea at the time, history has certainly vindicated the evaluation. Briefly stated, the idea put forth in Kirkpatrick’s speech in Rome serves as an honest synopsis of neoconservatism’s basic principle: to defend American-style liberal democracy, the American hegemony of power must be maintained, extended and, when necessary, used.

By the time they were voted into power with Reagan in 1980, the neoconservatives had consolidated their foreign policy goals into an exportable doctrine. This process was catalyzed by their prior partisan detachment, which had allowed them to focus on forming a cohesive ideology without the worry of having to put it into practice. Now, after years spent wandering in the desert, the neoconservatives had reached their political Canaan, only to find it suspiciously bereft of milk and honey and dangerously fraught with compromise. Nevertheless, neoconservatism managed to leave an indelible footprint on the face of American foreign policy, so much as to lead several scholars, Fareed Zakaria and James M. Scott among them, to deal with neoconservatism as a major component in what has been termed the “Reagan Doctrine” or “Reagan Strategy.” But what was the first manifestation of this new, uniquely American worldview? When was neoconservatism first

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2 Ibid., 14.
used to justify military intervention? The neoconservative faction in Reagan’s cadre of advisors, even before they were appointed to several high-ranking positions within the administration, were obsessed with what they perceived to be failures in Carter’s foreign policy in Central America. And although the Reagan administration intervened in the region numerous times, including in both Grenada and El Salvador, the attempted subversion of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua represented the first true manifestation of the new neoconservative influence on American foreign policy.

Until 1976, most members of the emerging political subgroup hoped that the Democratic party might return to its ideological roots, re-embracing containment and an unwavering commitment to American strategic interests in foreign policy. With the accession of Carter to the presidency, however, John Ehrman argues that the neoconservatives saw the party as “too far gone to be saved.”4 This neoconservative disillusionment with the Carter branch of the Democratic party informs an understanding of their actions once in office. To the extent that Carter, a foreign policy tyro, enunciated his views on relations abroad at all, he focused his rhetoric on generic bromides aimed at assuring Americans that he would pursue moralistic policies overseas as well as at home. Ehrman notes that the new president’s neoconservative critics took a much more pessimistic tone in response to this promise: instead of looking “forward to the birth of a new world order and a consequent reordering of foreign policy principles, they were more alarmed than ever about what they saw as the growing Soviet menace and America’s weak response.”5 The neoconservatives duly linked this pessimism to Carter’s moralizing and its growing influence on American policy abroad that seemed to neutralize what had traditionally been America’s strength: its military might. A divided and timid America could never hope to display the power necessary to turn back Soviet

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5 Ibid., 104-5.
gains in the Western hemisphere – and communism had certainly gained during Carter’s four year Washington residency. The 1979 overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua by the Sandinistas was the most obvious manifestation of this pattern of communist expansion, and according to Laurence Whitehead birthed two important changes in United States foreign policy.

First, the Carter administration was forced to respond to the 1979 Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) coup in El Salvador by shoring up support for the military junta that emerged, undercutting its commitment to human rights in the process: “The Sandinistas were unpalatable enough . . . but the FMLN were considered even worse – i.e. more explicitly communist and committed to class conflict. Even had this not been so, from Washington’s viewpoint, two revolutions in Central America would be much more than twice as bad as one.”

At least on the surface, this pragmatism in the final year of Carter’s administration paved the way for a foreign policy less concerned with human rights and more concerned with U.S. hemispheric interests such as curbing direct Soviet influence.

Second, Whitehead noted that “The Carter administration’s failure to prevent an outright victory by the Sandinista revolutionaries gave the ideological right a promising new issue.” This second point was of particular import to the neoconservatives. Kirkpatrick seized on the revolutionary overthrow as an opportunity to publish what would become a representative piece of neoconservative thought. Her essay in the November 1979 issue of Commentary magazine, “Dictatorships & Double Standards,” drew a nuanced distinction between friendly authoritarian dictatorships and the totalitarian Marxist regimes that were increasingly in vogue among previously unaligned Third World countries. Kirkpatrick’s attitude towards Carter’s foreign policy was much less diplomatic. She faulted Carter directly for the revolutions earlier that year in both Iran and

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7 Ibid., 327.
Nicaragua, asserting that “In each country, the Carter administration not only failed to prevent the undesired outcome, it actively collaborated in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion.” But it was not just in Iran and Nicaragua that the neoconservatives faulted Carter for caving to revolution.

Neoconservatives took issue with almost the entirety of Carter’s foreign policy, and as such designated the early years of the Reagan administration as a time for a strategic realignment, questioning basic assumptions that the American foreign policy community had taken for granted in the previous four years and striking some down entirely. “What makes the inconsistencies of the Carter administration noteworthy are, first, the administration’s moralism, which renders it especially vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy; and, second, the administration’s predilection for policies that violate the strategic and economic interests of the United States,” wrote Kirkpatrick in her 1979 essay. The charge that Carter’s foreign policy paid undue attention to morality at the expense of the national interest was a common one, and along with the frequent accusation that victory in the Cold War had been declared prematurely, this allegation formed the foundation on which neoconservatives based their attacks on the reigning strategic consensus.

Before turning to the first demonstrable impact of neoconservative thought on American foreign policy, however, it is instructive to examine the military excursions on which the ideological right did not leave their tracks. Throughout his administration, Reagan was faced with several compromising situations in Latin America, but two of these, along with (more importantly) Nicaragua, would come to truly define his hemispheric policy. As Whitehead notes, by the end of Carter’s tenure the situation in El Salvador was rapidly deteriorating, and his foreign policy there over the past year had been largely contingent on the situation in Nicaragua. One of the first tasks

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9 Ibid., 42.
for the new administration was to clean up the revolutionary spillover into El Salvador, which was threatening to destabilize the entire region.

Reagan’s administration did not initiate the new and more aggressive stance towards El Salvador, however. On January 22, 1981, just two days after Reagan’s inauguration, a cable from the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, arrived at the State Department. Three days earlier – the day before the new president’s inauguration – White claimed that he was presented with two telegrams by a Salvadoran commander that recommended “introducing into this country 55 military advisors and supplying the Salvadorean military with huge amounts of lethal military equipment” – a move that would constitute “a total change in United States foreign policy towards El Salvador.”

When the commander revealed to White that the order had come directly from the Pentagon, it became clear to the ambassador that “certain high Dept. of Defense officials were attempting to change our policy toward El Salvador.” In the confusion wrought by the administrative switch, the Pentagon was taking advantage of the absence of State Department authority to craft unilaterally a new policy towards El Salvador.

Clearly then, Reagan’s stepped up military aid to the Salvadoran government represented an enhancement of previous policy, not an abandonment. The change in policy was directly attributable to the FMLN offensive in January, and only obliquely so to the switch in administrations. In response to the Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan concatenation that had helped arm and then subsequently stage the insurgents, “On January 14 the Carter administration lifted a hold placed earlier on U.S. military assistance. On January 17, for the first time in three years, the U.S., in response to a GOES [Government of El Salvador] request, provided some small arms and ammunition to replace

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11 Ibid.
dwindling GOES stocks.” In an ironic twist, the Carter administration had decided, in the waning days of its potency, to forego the hands-off approach it had taken towards Latin America throughout its presence in office. As such, neoconservatives did not conceive of, nor initially implement, the new policy of U.S. involvement in El Salvador.

Despite the absence of neoconservatives at the genesis of the El Salvador policy, they were certainly in favor of it. The stepped up military aid had played a large part in turning back the FMLN rebels after they launched a January offensive explicitly designed to destabilize and overthrow the Salvadoran government. But, as Walter Lefaber points out, instead of seizing upon the opposition’s weakened state to pursue negotiations, the new administration pushed to completely eliminate the rebels, allowing for an ideological retrenchment while solidifying the latter’s unwillingness to compromise. This oppositional ossification, however, was not contained to America’s critics abroad.

Though they may not have had a direct role to play in crafting U.S. policy towards El Salvador, the neoconservatives’ commitment to finishing the job again foreshadowed attitudes that would seize hold of the administration during the later Nicaragua crisis. Support for José Napoleón Duarte’s government fell sharply and remained low, as the media continued to stream reports of the infamous right-wing death squads terrorizing the countryside in El Salvador to Americans back home, while official overtures to other Latin American countries similarly failed.

When [Secretary of State Alexander] Haig dispatched top officials to plead with West Europeans and Latin Americans for cooperation, they returned empty-handed . . . Reagan had little better luck at home. Despite his use of tried-and-proved cold war rhetoric, despite the media’s failure to show the complexities and causes of the Salvadoran revolution, the White House admitted in March 1981 that public opinion opposed the president’s policy.

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14 Ibid.
In light of this skepticism on the part of the American public, a deft hand at public diplomacy would prove indispensible in maintaining an acceptable modicum of support for the intervention.

In December 1980, four American churchwomen working in El Salvador were killed by government agents near the El Salvador International Airport: according to an independent report done by the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, “the women had each been shot once or twice in the head,” and other details revealed by those present at the investigative disinterment suggested that the crime may have been of a sexual nature.\(^{15}\) Understandably wishing to disassociate itself from a situation in which a U.S. ally stood accused of murdering American churchwomen, the State Department moved quickly, releasing a memo on March 3, 1981 reiterating Kirkpatrick’s explanation for the situation.

All but one of the murdered women were members of the Maryknoll Society, which has earned a reputation for championing radical politics and “liberation theology.” Two of the nuns were killed when returning from Nicaragua, where another member of the Maryknoll Society, Sandinista Miguel D’Escoto, is Foreign Minister . . . It is unknown what the women were doing in Nicaragua at a time when vast quantities of arms were being sent through Nicaragua to the guerillas in El Salvador.\(^{16}\)

Ostensibly, then, the nuns had brought their deaths upon themselves by not only believing the wrong things (“radical politics”), but by being in the wrong place at the wrong time (during an arms shipment). Though Kirkpatrick later backtracked, saying that her assertion had been taken out of context and was more of an explanation than a justification in the first place, the idea fit into the larger narrative the neoconservatives were spinning: one, that Nicaragua was actively working to undermine democracy in El Salvador, and two, that excesses and rule-bending were sometimes justified in the fight against international leftism. Both of these principles would play important roles


in the later Nicaraguan intervention. Working in surprising synchronicity with Kirkpatrick, Haig issued a similar statement placing the responsibility for the situation on the nuns themselves, asserting that they had run a governmental road block, and in doing so had (supposedly) invited scrutiny up to and including the use of deadly force. Though a later Department of State memo clarified the Secretary’s position, saying that the claim that the nuns had run a roadblock was “only a theory,” the public diplomacy initiative undertaken by the U.S. foreign policy apparatus was another clear foreshadowing of later efforts to better explain and “sell” American involvement in Nicaragua.18

Aside from the lack of neoconservative presence in the initial ratcheting up of U.S. military involvement in El Salvador, there was another important difference that separated the fight against the FMLN from that against the Sandinistas: in El Salvador, the U.S. was able to claim that it was legitimately supporting the right of the people to choose their leaders. The FMLN represented an insidious threat to a government that was making genuine steps towards holding free and fair elections, whereas in Nicaragua the Sandinistas were deeply entrenched in society and represented a more-or-less generally held desire for revolutionary “reform.” John Bushnell, the acting Secretary of State for Latin American affairs, testified to this fact in February 1981: “the situation in El Salvador is very different from that of Somoza’s Nicaragua. The Salvadorean [sic] people rejected the Dru’s call for an insurrection in El Salvador. Unlike in Nicaragua, the government forces were not faced with entire cities rising up and workers striking in support of the Marxists.”19 The reason for this lack of revolutionary spirit, Bushnell noted, was that “the revolutionary civilian/military government

17 The two had a well-publicized dislike for each other that manifested itself in (among other ways), Kirkpatrick being assigned as U.S. ambassador to the U.N. as opposed to a more prestigious and highly sought-after post in the State Department – namely, Haig’s job.
of El Salvador, headed by Christian Democrat Jose Napoleón Duarte, has given El Salvador the hope for peaceful change.”

Though human rights activists in the United States would unceasingly question Duarte’s commitment to peaceful change – or even his commitment to not murdering his own citizens – governmental momentum and the increased political capital brought on with the Reagan administration managed to marginalize the real effects of such protests. The laws of political inertia, in this case on Duarte’s side, dictated that shoring up support for a beleaguered government in El Salvador would be wholly different and less complicated than overthrowing a political movement in Nicaragua.

Before turning to Nicaragua, however, another example of projected U.S. power under Reagan may be instructive. One obvious manifestation of Reagan’s hard line towards Latin America was the invasion of Grenada that overthrew the socialist/military junta in place since the execution of the nominally Marxist Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. But to credit neoconservatives with the rationale behind putting troops on the ground assigns credit (or blame, depending on one’s evaluation) where none is due. Several factors combined to make Grenada an entirely different case from that of Nicaragua. First, and most obviously, a large number of U.S. citizens were involved, having been trapped on the island since the military takeover. The issue was one of protection more than it was one of ideological combat. In a national security directive written in the weeks leading up to the invasion, Reagan pointed out that “the coup and subsequent disorders on Grenada have created a situation that could seriously jeopardize the lives and safety of American citizens,” and that, given these conditions, “All prudent measures should be taken to protect the lives and safety of American citizens on Grenada, should the situation so require.”

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20 Ibid., 4.
Owing at least partially to this involvement of U.S. citizens, the invasion of Grenada enjoyed another advantage that Reagan’s Nicaragua policy did not – high levels of public support, both in the United States and in Grenada. An ABC News-Washington Post poll taken three weeks after American combat boots hit the ground showed that “63% of Americans approve the way Reagan is handling the presidency, the highest level in two years”; moreover, the significant gain was attributed “largely to the Grenada invasion.” In Grenada, an overwhelming 91% of those polled expressed support for Reagan’s policies, according to a CBS News poll taken on November 3. Conversely, in a poll published in TIME magazine four months prior, not only did 52% of respondents evaluate themselves as knowing “very little” or “nothing” about why the U.S. government was involved in Nicaragua, a depressing 25% supported aid to those battling the Sandinistas, while 44% judged Reagan’s policy to be flat wrong.

Finally, and most importantly, the ideological imperative present in Nicaragua was, for the most part, absent in Grenada. Despite strong connections with both Moscow and Havana, the true revolutionary intent of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) remained unclear in the early 1980s. Since 1979, when the NJM initially took control of the governmental apparatus in St. George, there had been, according to Cole Blasier, a disconnect between rhetoric and action. Despite a stated commitment towards establishing a socialist economy on the island,

Grenada remained in [a] reformist, capitalist mode. . . . Similarly, the leadership’s ambitions for Grenada, especially in the economic field, contrasted sharply with the nation’s continuing poverty. Much-needed capital accumulation seemed dependent on a defense of existing capitalist institutions, at least in the near term; radicalization was a sure recipe for capital flight and a decline in output.

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The NJM had even gone so far as to turn initially to the United States and other western, democratic powers for military backing against a possible coup. It was only after this rebuff, and amidst growing fears that a counterrevolution was imminent, that Grenada turned to the USSR: “The NJM lacked resources to arm itself, and the western governments turned down requests for such help from the start. The only possible sources were the USSR and other socialist or pro-Soviet governments.”

And so armed they were. With Soviet backing, Cuba was able to quickly transform Grenada into a regional military power. By the time of the invasion, “tiny Grenada had more men under more arms and more weapons and military supplies than all of its Eastern Caribbean neighbors combined – with plans to give Grenada one of the largest military forces in proportion to population of any country in the world.” With an American student population not so gently evoking memories of the Iranian hostage crisis and a disproportionately large military armed primarily by the USSR or Soviet client states, Grenada had quickly become a strategic liability for Reagan. In this context of a security crisis birthed from a power struggle, the United States went into Grenada. If for no other reason than for the company it was forced to keep, Grenada’s government was easily overthrown in October 1983. While neoconservatism might have slightly influenced the decision to land troops in Grenada – in the sense that the overthrow of a Soviet-aligned government did fit into the larger neoconservative narrative – such an ideological justification was not the main impetus behind the invasion.

The first, truest manifestation of the neoconservative commitment to the combat of international communism came in Nicaragua. While neoconservatives might have applauded Carter’s rationale for stepping up military and economic aid to El Salvador and thus grudgingly bestowed credit upon his late change of heart, his compliance in the loss of Nicaragua was seen as

26 Ibid.
grounded in a weak, maudlin appeal to the bleeding-heart isolationist wing of the Democratic party. Thus, what the neoconservatives saw as excessive moralizing by the Carter administration became closely tied up with the loss of Nicaragua to the communists. For several reasons – chief among them a revival of truly progressive liberalism – the tolerance of leftism generally had become a popular motif among Carter’s cadre of advisors. In “Dictatorships & Double Standards,” Kirkpatrick underlined the basic tenets of the political modernization thesis and its impact on this newly-minted American attitude: “Because left-wing revolutionaries invoke symbols and values of democracy – emphasizing egalitarianism rather than hierarchy and privilege, liberty rather than order, activity rather than passivity – they are again and again accepted as partisans in the cause of freedom and democracy.”

This simplistic bastardization of the American liberal tradition was to Kirkpatrick both proof of the Democratic party’s philosophical betrayal and a nearly self-refuting double standard. Amidst a morally-driven hubristic excess and Carter’s eagerness to appear enlightened, he had trampled his own commitment to human rights “seem[ing] to accept the status quo in Communist nations (in the name of ‘diversity’)...but not in nations ruled by ‘right-wing’ dictators or white oligarchies.” This belief that a “republic” had been lost to the communists – in America’s own backyard, no less – in service of a New Left buzzword left a dirty taste on the neoconservatives’ collective palate. With the country now worth its weight in symbolic gold, later U.S. intervention would take on all the trappings of an ideological crusade – and would carry the commensurate baggage as well.

The tree that had borne the final, bitter fruit of Nicaragua’s political defection, however, was the growing belief in the foreign policy community that the Cold War was, for all intents and purposes, over. The neoconservatives sought to educate the American public as to why this belief was fundamentally mistaken. Commentary, the magazine in which Kirkpatrick had published the

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 41.
article that propelled her into the Reagan administration, quickly became recognized as a mouthpiece of neoconservatism, and its editor-in-chief, Norman Podhoretz, established himself as one of its most outspoken and forceful adherents. Podhoretz took careful aim at what he perceived to be the neutering of American power abroad in the period directly before Reagan’s election. An important pillar of Carter’s foreign policy was for Podhoretz “the idea that no great risk was entailed by the retrenchment of American power.”30 Within the American zeitgeist, this was simply untrue. There was a growing fear among academics – ranging from political scientists to economists – that Soviet nuclear capabilities could overwhelm Western arsenals and that drastic measures were needed simply to regain parity. In his post-Cold War (1997) review of the surprising durability of this idea, John Lewis Gaddis points to this monodimensional threat of nuclear annihilation as key to prolonging the conflict – while at the same time identifying the general tenor of the Reagan administration as paramount in changing American answers to some basic Cold War questions:

Not until the Reagan administration would anyone seriously question these orthodoxies [regarding the efficacy of the Mutual Assured Destruction doctrine or frivolous arms reduction treaties] – whether it did so out of ignorance or craft is still not clear. What is apparent is that the United States began to challenge the Soviet Union during the first half of the 1980s in a manner unprecedented since the early Cold War. That state soon exhausted itself and expired – whether from unaccustomed over-exertion or Gorbachev’s heroic efforts at resuscitation is also still not completely clear.31

And perhaps it never will be. But what is clear is that neoconservative obduracy toward Soviet interference in Latin America dovetails with Gaddis’ identification of the early 1980s as a tipping point for American attitudes towards the Cold War. While intervention in Nicaragua was but one example of projected U.S. power, manifest in its execution were stock principles of neoconservatism: anti-communism, the use of American power for a moral good (defined so explicitly in terms of the first principle as to be tautological), and a willingness to do whatever

31 John Lewis Gaddis, _We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 292.
necessary to ensure that the first two principles were followed. Jeane Kirkpatrick diplomatically noted in 1981 that Jimmy Carter “was not the only political leader in America to have lost his ‘inordinate’ fear of Communism” along with “his appetite for East-West competition” – but she did endeavor to ensure that he would be the last to do so.\footnote{Jeane Kirkpatrick, “U.S. Security & Latin America,” \textit{Commentary} (Jan. 1981): 30.} The idea put forth by the Carter administration of the decreasing utility of U.S. power was for the neoconservatives both militarily and ideologically nonsense.

Simply put, the neoconservatives saw the four years prior to 1980 as disastrous in every sense of the word. Carter had done his best to euthanize American military superiority, did everything but run the Shah out of Tehran himself, and had come no closer to solving the crippling economic crisis gripping the country. But in the wonkish view of Reagan’s new foreign policy advisors, the loss of Nicaragua was truly the crown jewel in Carter’s litany of failures, not least because it involved a positive transgression by the president. “What did the Carter administration do in Nicaragua?” Kirkpatrick asked in her 1981 essay on Latin America. She had the answer:

\textit{It brought down the Somoza regime.} The Carter administration did not “lose” Nicaragua in the sense in which it was once charged Harry Truman had “lost” China, or Eisenhower Cuba, by failing to prevent a given outcome. In the case of Nicaragua, the State Department acted repeatedly and at critical junctures to weaken the government of Anastasio Somoza and to strengthen his opponents.\footnote{Ibid., 36.}

This betrayal not only of the remnants of the Monroe Doctrine but of supposedly American principles such as self-determination and anti-communism were, to Kirkpatrick, unconscionable and represented a fundamental ideological shift that mainstream America had missed. The reclamation of Nicaragua was then, and indeed had to be, not only priority number one for the neoconservatives, but quite nearly their raison d’être within the Reagan administration.

Perhaps the most pressing issue in Nicaragua was the rapid military buildup pushed by the Soviets and Cubans. The situation in Nicaragua differed from both El Salvador and Grenada, most
notably in its intent: the militarization of El Salvador had been largely a result of the preceding armed radicalization of its larger, southern neighbor that had recently been supporting anti-government forces within its borders, whereas the military forces placed in Grenada had been insurance (at least ostensibly) against a counterrevolutionary power grab. In Nicaragua, Soviet military support was more or less a blatant attempt at revolutionary export across the Central American isthmus. This distinction is key, as the neoconservative obligation was to strike at the source of the communist indoctrination of the hemisphere; and, with Cuba too explicitly linked to the Soviet Union, Nicaragua provided the next best opportunity.

Despite bordering countries with either unprofessional (Honduras) or non-existent (Costa Rica) armed forces, Nicaragua’s military saw an incredible increase in the years surrounding Reagan’s inauguration. From a guerilla force of 5,000 in 1979, the Sandinista army, once institutionalized boasted by 1985 some 62,000 active duty members along with 57,000 in reserve and militia – a number swelled by the first-ever Nicaraguan conscription law, instituted in 1983. The Soviet-sponsored buildup also saw the sale to the Sandinistas of 110 T-55 medium tanks and 30 PT-76 light-issue tanks – both mainstays of the Soviet force employed in Eastern Europe. With this equipment added to the equipment seized from the Somozan government after the 1979 overthrow, Nicaragua possessed by the mid-1980s “the largest, most powerful armed forces in the history of Central America.”

Of course, the justification for intervention based on military buildup could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as is argued by many Latin American scholars. Heraldo Muñoz makes the point in his essay on Reagan’s American policy: “the United States first antagonizes and attempts to isolate the revolutionary countries, thus forcing them, in order to overcome isolation, to such alternative political ties; later, the new linkages are used as the explanation for an interventionist policy decided

well in advance.”

Though Muñoz might be more hard-pressed to prove his following point – “that U.S. interventionist behavior in Latin America anteceded the emergence of the ‘communist threat’” – in the particular case of Nicaragua, the numbers do seem to bear out his argument more generally:

as U.S. involvement in Nicaragua increased, so did Soviet support of the Sandinistas. The causal chicken-or-egg assumptions may be impossible to prove either way, but assuming that Nicaraguan military buildup was in any way predicated on a response to U.S-sponsored subversion, American regional involvement certainly facilitated the Moscow-Managua link (see Table 1; note that in the years neoconservative intransigence increase, that is, throughout the Reagan administration, so does Soviet-bloc military aid). In fact, Fareed Zakaria has noted this reinforcement of Nicaraguan paranoia as a stumbling block for the U.S. effort to “sell” their Central American policy:

When the State Department pointed to Soviet arms shipments, the Nicaraguan government would argue that it was defending itself against the contras, the American mining of its harbors, and a potential U.S. invasion. By constantly shifting the terms of the debate, Washington was never able to muster enough support on any one goal in its policy towards Nicaragua.

Whatever the reason behind the Soviet-fueled military buildup, however, Nicaraguan military supremacy and ideological meddling continued apace throughout the early years of the Reagan administration. Nicaragua’s neighbors, as the canaries in the regional coal mine, first inhaled the communist fumes, as “the regime in Nicaragua pos[ed] both a real and psychological threat to the

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36 Ibid.

countries of Central America.” A Gallup International poll taken in 1983 found that “Nicaragua’s growing military strength and support for subversive movements in other countries was a source of concern throughout the region,” and in Honduras specifically, located directly to the north of Nicaragua, 80% of “respondents saw Nicaragua as the principal cause of instability and as the primary military threat faced by their country.”

The simple fact that a Nicaraguan arms buildup existed might not have been a point of interest for the neoconservatives had the Central American country not been so intent on sowing discord throughout the region. The Honduran perception of Nicaragua as a destabilizing force was, in fact, borne out and reinforced by both words and deeds. In early 1981, Honduran police discovered a massive shipment of arms in transit from Nicaragua to El Salvador containing “over 100 M-16 automatic rifles, fifty 81 mm mortar rounds, approximately 100,000 rounds of 5.56 mm ammunition, machine gun belts, field packs, and first aid kits.” Other shipments intercepted during the early 1980s contained similar quantities and quality of material, all aimed at generally the same objective: shoring up revolutionary movements in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Since “the same clandestine smuggling techniques and routes” were used for shipments to all three countries, it was often impossible, in absence of captured smugglers willing to talk, to know precisely where any specific arms were headed.

Though such secretive smuggling routes might imply a desire to downplay its aspirations for revolutionary export, the Sandinista regime was surprisingly forthcoming in stating its intentions – a fact which irked the neoconservatives. Several instances, documented in a joint paper by the Departments of State and Defense, demonstrate: the Sandinista Minister of Defense, Humberto Ortega, was quoted in 1983 saying “Of course we are not ashamed to be helping El Salvador. We

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38 “The Soviet-Cuban Connection,” 23.
40 Ibid., 6.
would like to help all revolutions”; earlier the same year, Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto
“admitted Nicaraguan support for Salvadoran guerillas”; and according to an official in the Ministry
of the Interior, profits from the sale of illegal narcotics reputedly “would be used to finance the
Ministry’s international espionage and propaganda activities.”

There was, then, no doubt that the Sandinista regime, installed with Carter’s compliance, was
both closely allied with the Soviets and intent on spreading communist revolution throughout the
region. But, in true Cold War fashion, simple military invasion by the United States was too risky:
one, it risked igniting a larger, global conflagration vis-à-vis the Soviet Union; and two, it would have
no doubt been untenable domestically in the long-term (or even medium-term). As such, the Reagan
administration responded largely in
two ways – one
negative and one
positive.

Immediately, whatever economic aid still on the books from the Carter administration was
completely cut. In fact, as late as 1980, after the revolution, economic aid to Nicaragua had been
outpacing that sent to several other Central American countries (see Table 2). But by the time
Reagan’s first budget was implemented in 1982, monetary aid to Nicaragua had settled at the grand
total of 0 USD per year and was not scheduled to change in the short-term future. It is interesting to
note that at the same time Nicaraguan aid was cut to nothing, American aid to Honduras and El
Salvador jumped 252% and 131%, respectively.

But cutting off aid was only the first step. The administration next responded positively,
actively intervening in Central American politics in a move that would eventually come to be

\[ \text{Table 2: Economic Aid to Central America, 1977-1984} \]

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41 Departments of State and Defense. *Background paper: Central America* (27 May 1983) [available from
*Digital National Security Archive*], 23.
regarded by many as the biggest (and for some only) stain on Reagan’s Teflon varnish. Even within
the positive action of Central American intervention, however, U.S strategy was comprised of both
“weak” and “strong” strains. The “weak” reaction was pursued within the spirit of containment that
had held sway in Washington for so long: it sought not to undo past communist gains, only to
prevent future ones. On March 9, 1981, six weeks after taking office, Reagan issued a presidential
finding pursuant to Section 662 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, in which he directed the
Central Intelligence Agency to “Provide all forms of training, equipment and related assistance to
cooperating governments throughout Central America in order to counter foreign-sponsored
subversion and terrorism.”42 This accounted for the massive increases in foreign aid to Honduras
and El Salvador – the money was aimed at buying political and ideological stability in the
governments still friendly to the United States by staunching the communist spillover.

But American activity in Central America would soon assume its “strong” stance, shedding
old-fashioned containment in favor of communist rollback; that is, instead of working to prevent
communist gains, U.S. policy would actively pursue democratic victories in areas previously held by
communism – specifically, they spoke of Nicaragua. By September 1983 (a month before the
Grenada invasion), the rollback policy was in full swing. A secret memo detailing covert activities in
Nicaragua described the specifics, directing the CIA to “provid[e] financial and material support to
democratic Nicaraguan leaders who have become disillusioned with growing Cuban predominance
in Nicaragua and with the increasing totalitarian nature of the national FSLN leadership.”43

Furthermore, the memo pledged to

create a paramilitary potential to punctuate [FSLN] resolve to effect changes in Nicaraguan
government policies. This assistance will be in the form of funding, arms supply and some
training [REDACTED]. This activity is to enable the democratic leaders and organizations

42 Ronald Reagan. *Finding Pursuant to Section 662...* (1 March 1981) [available from Digital National
Security Archive, no. TS 0095/2-85], 1.
43 Central Intelligence Agency. *Scope of CIA activities in Nicaragua* (12 July 1982) [available from Digital
National Security Archive, no. NI01541], 1.
to deal with the FSLN leadership from a position of strength. The democratic Nicaraguans would be encouraged to focus the paramilitary operations primarily against the Cuban presence in Nicaragua and to view these paramilitary forces as a rallying point for the dissident elements of the Sandinista military establishment.\textsuperscript{44}

This encouragement of paramilitaries constituted the basic formula for support of the contras in Nicaragua, an issue that would plague Reagan’s second term in office. Nicaragua was indeed a major regional liability in terms of security and ideology, and given the intellectual framework the neoconservatives had constructed within the administration, intervention was absolutely justified. The White House was clear, however, on the fact that the spread of such lofty principles as democracy and, more importantly, anti-communism might not be so generally accepted by the American populace writ large, particularly if the cost was to be paid in American blood and treasure. For this reason, arriving at decisions as to what was released to the public was a highly polished process designed to disseminate information on a strictly need-to-know basis. Further, the method by which this was accomplished again proved the depth of the neoconservative influence on the Nicaragua policy.

The public diplomacy initiative regarding Washington’s Central American policy generally focused on two major points, emphasizing first (specifically to residents of the Southeast) that radicalism in America’s continental neighbors could be fought abroad or in its own backyard – and that the question was only one of timing; and second (to American citizens more generally) that Latin American communism is inherently antagonistic to freedom and democracy, and that as a freedom-loving country, the United States was morally obligated to spread its principles wherever the opportunity arose. President Reagan emphasized both of these points in an address to the International Longshoreman’s Association in Hollywood, Florida in September 1983. Speaking from a town “closer to Nicaragua than it is to Washington, D.C.,” Reagan emphasized the economic importance of the Central American and Caribbean region, using examples from World War II:

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
“... in early 1942, a handful of Hitler’s submarines sank more tonnage in [the Caribbean] than in all of the Atlantic Ocean... If the Nazis during World War II and the Soviets today have recognized that the Caribbean and Central America are vital to our interests, don’t you think it’s about time that we recognized that, too?" An emotional appeal to an undisputed evil – Hitler – coupled with a geographic appeal to the longshoremen’s personal security constituted a brilliant explanation of the necessity of Washington’s policy.

Opinion articles in major newspapers were another key method by which the administration garnered public support for their foreign policy. A strong private neoconservative faction, operating mostly outside of the government, was pressed into service for this purpose. Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, headed up an entire family of neoconservative intellectuals: Podhoretz himself was married to Midge Decter, a right-wing author in her own right, and was the father-in-law of Elliot Abrams, a leading neoconservative within the Reagan administration. In a confidential Department of State memo listing possible authors of favorable opinion pieces, these three were listed as contacts no less than twelve times on a list containing approximately thirty topics. Key points to be addressed were accusations of anti-Semitism within the Central American communist ranks (aimed at Jewish audiences, a constituency of which Podhoretz was a member), the efficacy of fighting the communists before “the confrontation is closer to our borders,” and the overarching theme that “the guerillas are led by communists committed to violence and destruction.” Further, Kirkpatrick, as UN ambassador, was tapped to discuss the fact that “The Nicaraguan voting record at the United Nations [was] not merely that of a third world country but that of a Soviet client

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state.”\textsuperscript{47} Never did the neoconservative policy apparatus miss a chance to hammer home the point that the fight was against communism more so than it was against any particular group or country.

The evaluation of neoconservative influence on Reagan’s foreign policy must end where it began: with the principles by which the Carter administration’s policy was so harshly criticized. The neoconservative movement spent much ideological capital in the process of formulating the rollback policy in Nicaragua, and the intellectuals found that in governing, philosophy often had to be compromised. After ridiculing the attention paid to human rights policy in the previous administration, the movement found it nearly impossible to convince the public of the wisdom or necessity of certain policies without couching them in such terms. Kirkpatrick had entered the administration claiming that “instead of viewing international developments in terms of the national interest, as national interest is historically conceived,” the Carter administration had “viewed them in terms of a contemporary version of the same idea of progress that has traumatized Western imaginations since the Enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{48} In this sense the contrast between the neoconservative conception of foreign policy and Carter’s reflected a genuine disagreement on the direction of history, or even the existence of such. For Kirkpatrick at least, Carter had espoused a watered-down version of historical determinism:

The Carter administration’s essentially deterministic and apolitical view of contemporary events discourages an active American response and encourages passivity...What is the function of foreign policy under these conditions? It is to understand the processes of change and then, like Marxists, to align ourselves with history, hoping to contribute a bit of stability along the way.\textsuperscript{49}

Having resigned the United States to a passive re-actor relegated to the sidelines, Carter’s foreign policy had revolved around the idea that America should function as a facilitator for this historical process; and a dedication to human rights was seen to lubricate the path to whatever teleological

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} “Dictatorships & Double Standards,” 39.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 40-41.
endpoint the blind machinations of history had foreseen. Kirkpatrick had initially rejected this idea outright, but soon found herself in an atmosphere where government policies were now expected to address certain human rights issues.

In this context, Kirkpatrick found herself testifying before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs in March 1982. In her testimony, she made a distinction between positive rights granted by the government – such as industrializing an economy, maintaining a high standard of living, or ensuring acceptable literacy rates – and negative liberties, which “depend on restraint in the use of power” and should not be “confused with wishes, or goals.” While vehemently denying the first group of rights as an area under the appropriate purview of government, Kirkpatrick, in true liberal fashion, upheld the negative rights as necessary to a free society and granted the possibility of provision in a non-coercive regime. The thrust of her speech was then aimed at ensuring that the subcommittee understood and recognized the transgressions of Nicaraguan citizens’ negative liberties – focusing specifically on the slaughter of the Miskito Indians in eastern Nicaragua. It would not be a stretch of the imagination to envision Jimmy Carter delivering the same address, focusing instead on the facts that the government “has succeeded in providing health care and mass education,” and that “significant progress has been apparent in the provision of low cost housing.”

This is not to over-credit the revolution, but rather to point out that a talented rhetorician could easily spin a concern for human rights either way. The important point, however, is that Kirkpatrick was addressing the issue, after nearly ridiculing the idea as a central concern of foreign policy just a few years earlier. And perhaps more saliently in demonstrating the philosophical connection between the neoconservative group and the Nicaraguan policy, the dogmatic shift in regards to the

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51 American embassy in Managua. Sandinista Revolution after three years (Telegram; July 1982) [available from Digital National Security Archive, no. 171800Z], 2, 6.
human rights aspect of the policy would not have been possible (or probably even necessary) but for the expenditure of neoconservative ideology in justifying the aid to the Nicaraguan contras.

The neoconservatives of the early 1980s bear, in many respects, little resemblance to those working within the George W. Bush administration. Kirkpatrick’s tacit admission in front of the Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs that human rights should be, or at least are, recognized as an important part of American foreign policy, started neoconservatism down a road fraught with political compromise – so much so that in the twenty-first century, it is in many respects indistinguishable from traditional Republican party thought, despite many of the movement’s early thinkers being ex-Leninists. By 2008, neoconservatism has become linked, probably irrevocably and possibly fatally, to the presidency of George W. Bush and what has been termed the “Bush Doctrine.” For many Americans, fairly or not, the word has come to represent as much a method of governance as it does a recognizable political doctrine, often conjuring visions of men and women secretly and nefariously plotting in smoke-filled rooms to overthrow American republicanism and institutions of global governance. But, as is the case when any ideology becomes overly politicized, a look at the origins of the philosophy yields an interesting case study into what neoconservatism aspired to be.

Originally conceived of as a hard-line reaction to the softening of the American public on communism, it is in some respects surprising that the movement survived the fall of its principal enemy: the Soviet Union. In a twenty-first century environment geared towards combating trans- and inter-national terrorism, neoconservatives have labored on as defenders of the faith, shifting their attention from threat to threat as security dictates. And, in the sense that Robert Kagan’s “Return of History” thesis seems to be proven more and more prescient with each passing day, the demise of neoconservatism as a significant strain of American political thought seems, for better or worse, unlikely in the near future. The belief in the ability of American military might to effect real
and lasting change in service of a moral good continues to hold true in many foreign policy minds today. But a contemporary examination of Latin America – where, despite elections having been held is still under the rule of Daniel Ortega (a Sandinista leader) in Nicaragua and, as of March 2009, the FMLN in El Salvador – is a powerful reminder of the limitations of the mindset. If neoconservatives are serious about continuing their powerful influence over the trajectory of American foreign policy, they would do well to remember the lessons of their first overseas adventure – lest the next be their last.
Bibliography


Item no. 5543072.


