



1984

The Fear of Communism in Central America

Ronald Reagan

A popular uprising led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) overthrew the U.S.-backed dictator of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, on July 19, 1979. The front's platform for radical social and economic reforms, its Marxist-nationalist ideology, and its assertion of a foreign policy independent of the Cold War policies of the United States, made the FSLN's leadership of the new government an unwelcome development for Washington. The United States had not confronted a similar challenge to its hegemony in Central America since the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (see Document Nos. 73 and 74). By spring 1984 the Reagan administration was deeply committed to removing the Sandinista government. It was supporting the Honduran-based military force known as the *contras* (see Document No. 113), had imposed a crippling economic and financial embargo on Nicaragua, and was seeking to convince the U.S. public that Nicaragua posed a national security threat. Excerpted below is a transcript of a televised speech by President Reagan on May 9, 1984.

Source: U.S. Department of State, "President Reagan: U.S. Interests in Central America." *Current Policy* No. 576 (May 9, 1984): 1-5.

... I asked for this time to tell you of some basic decisions which are yours to make. I believe it is my constitutional responsibility to place these matters before you. They have to do with your national security, and that security is the single most important function of the Federal Government. In that context, it's my duty to anticipate problems, warn of dangers, and act so as to keep harm away from our shores.

Our diplomatic objectives will not be attained by good will and noble aspirations alone. In the last 15 years the growth of Soviet military power has meant a radical change in the nature of the world we live in. This does not mean, as some would have us believe, that we're in imminent danger of nuclear war. We're not.

As long as we maintain the strategic balance and make it more stable by reducing the level of weapons on both sides, then we can count on the basic prudence of the Soviet leaders to avoid that kind of challenge to us. **They are presently challenging us with a different kind of weapon: subversion and the use of surrogate forces—Cubans, for example.** We've seen it intensifying during the last 10 years as the Soviet Union and its surrogates moved to establish control over Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, and recently, closer to home in Nicaragua and now El Salvador. It's the fate of this region, Central America, that I want to talk to you about tonight.

The issue is our effort to promote democracy and economic well-being in the face of Cuban and Nicaraguan aggression, aided and abetted by the Soviet Union. It is definitely not about plans to send American troops into combat in Central America...

The defense policy of the United States is based on a simple premise: we do not start wars. We will never be the aggressor. We maintain our strength in order to deter and defend against aggression—to preserve freedom and peace. **We help our friends defend themselves.**

Central America is a region of great importance to the United States. And it is so close—San Salvador is closer to Houston, Texas, than Houston is to Washington, D.C. Central America is America; it's at our doorstep. **And it has become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.**

When half of our shipping tonnage and imported oil passes through Caribbean shipping lanes, and nearly half of all our foreign trade passes through the Panama Canal and Caribbean waters, America's economy and well-being are at stake...

What we see in El Salvador is an attempt to destabilize the entire region and eventually move chaos and anarchy toward the American border.

As the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, chaired by Henry Kissinger, agreed, **if we do nothing or if we continue to provide too little help, our choice will be a communist Central America with additional communist military bases on the mainland of this hemisphere and communist subversion spreading southward and northward. This communist subversion poses the threat that 100 million people from Panama to the open border on our south could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes.**

If we come to our senses too late, when our vital interests are even more directly threatened, and after a lack of American support causes our friends to lose the ability to defend themselves, then the risks to our security and our way of life will be infinitely greater. . . .

We can and must help Central America. It's in our national interest to do so; and, morally, it's the only right thing to do. But, helping means doing *enough*—enough to protect our security and enough to protect the lives of our neighbors so that they may live in peace and democracy without the threat of communist aggression and subversion. . . .

But making this choice requires a commitment from all of us, our Administration, the American people, and the Congress. So far, we have not yet made that commitment. We've provided just enough aid to avoid outright disaster but not enough to resolve the crisis; so El Salvador is being left to slowly bleed to death.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is not that Central America isn't important, but that some people think our Administration may be exaggerating the threat we face. Well, if that's true, let me put that issue to rest. . . .

The Sandinista rule is a communist reign of terror. Many of those who fought alongside the Sandinistas saw their revolution betrayed; they were denied power in the new government; some were imprisoned, others exiled. **Thousands who fought with the Sandinistas have taken up arms against them and are now called the *contras*. They are freedom fighters.**

What the Sandinistas have done to Nicaragua is a tragedy. But we Americans must understand and come to grips with the fact that the Sandinistas are not content to brutalize their own land. They seek to export their terror to every other country in the region. . . .

The role that Cuba has long performed for the Soviet Union is now also being played by the Sandinistas. They have become Cuba's Cubans. Weapons, supplies, and funds are shipped from the Soviet bloc to Cuba, from Cuba to Nicaragua, from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas. . . .

The simple questions are: will we support freedom in this hemisphere or not? Will we defend our vital interests in this hemisphere or not? Will we stop the spread of communism in this hemisphere or not? Will we act while there is still time? . . .

We Americans should be proud of what we're trying to do in Central America, and proud of what, together with our friends, we can do in Central America, to support democracy, human rights, and economic growth, while preserving peace so close to home. Let us show the world that we want no hostile, communist colonies here in the Americas: South, Central, or North.
