

What Reagan Faced

[O]nce we have Latin America, we won't have to take the United States, the last bastion of capitalism, because it will fall into our outstretched hands like overripe fruit.

—Ronald Reagan, quoting Lenin

Imagine it is 1980, and you have gathered a random selection of five hundred people, made up of political scientists, historians, members of Congress, geopolitical experts, and the first hundred individuals listed in the Boston telephone directory. You have told them that in eleven years' time, the Cold War would be over, that there would be a clear winner of the Cold War, and that one of the two antagonists would no longer exist and then asked them to predict which superpower would be the winner. The overwhelming majority would have predicted the Soviet Union.

The world that Ronald Reagan faced when he ran for president in 1980 seemed to be increasingly hostile to the continued existence of the United States as a free and independent country. As overly dramatic as that statement sounds today, twenty years after the end of the Soviet Union, a look at the world as it existed in 1980 will serve to illustrate just how daunting the geopolitical challenges were for America as its citizens prepared to elect a president.

Among these challenges, a couple of small-scale and low-intensity guerrilla wars in Central America may not appear to loom large. Yet this region would become the site of the first serious effort to roll back the area of Soviet influence in the world, and as such, it would become a vital part of the drama that ended the Cold War in the 1980s and early 1990s. The significance of Central America in 1980, however, was obscured by other

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contemporary events that seemed more immediate and more threatening to the United States.

On the surface, Latin America, and Central America in particular, would not seem to be a promising area for Soviet intervention. Given Central America's proximity to the American mainland, interference by the Soviets could be expected to bring an immediate and decisive American response that would almost certainly result in an embarrassing Soviet retreat. In 1962, just such an outcome had followed the Soviet attempt to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba. On other occasions, the U.S. government had used military force to reverse, or forestall, what American officials saw as threatening encroachments by outside powers. (Such uninvited forays by countries outside the Western Hemisphere were exactly what the Monroe Doctrine was designed to prohibit.)

Since the Soviet Union could hardly compete with America at such a geographic disadvantage, the Communist superpower spent the first fifteen years of the Cold War doing not much more than waiting for an indigenous leftist revolution to provide it with an opportunity, a policy that bore fruit with the alliance with Fidel Castro in 1960. While the Cuban Missile Crisis had resulted in the withdrawal of missiles from the island, ending the ability of the Soviets to directly threaten the United States from Cuba, the Castro regime emerged from the crisis with a guarantee that the U.S. government would not try to overthrow it. Thus, Cuba still provided many opportunities and possibilities for the Soviets to threaten U.S. interests indirectly, using the Communist island as a base.

The region had other conditions besides its susceptibility to Cuban interference that recommended it as a suitable place for the Soviets to challenge the United States. In 1978, Latin America boasted only two democratic countries, Venezuela and Colombia. Every country south of the Rio Grande was plagued by poverty, disease, illiteracy, and the despair that comes from decades of wide and seemingly unbridgeable gaps between the tiny wealthy elite and the vast poor majority. Nearly every country in Latin America suffered from chronic political instability. Every country in Latin America contained an intellectual elite and a large percentage of the general population who blamed the United States for its problems. In many cases Latin American countries had recent memories of American military or economic intervention. Many had dictators in power who repeatedly proclaimed their allegiance to the United States.

Societal institutions that had stood for decades as anti-Communist bulwarks in Latin America were growing weaker in the 1970s. Landed

aristocracies in several Latin American countries were shrinking in size and waning in political influence, thanks in part to the land reform programs that were a significant (and well-intentioned) part of President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. Large business owners, as they grew closer and closer to American business interests, also grew less and less influential in their own capital cities. In fact, American-linked businesses grew vulnerable to punitive legislation from governments unwilling to challenge American businesses directly but more than willing to pursue their proxies.

At the same time, reform-minded, non-Communist politicians found themselves the first victims of military dictatorships. Latin American Communists had long experience with acting in secret and going into hiding, an experience that moderate political leaders did not share. Thus, the latter were much more vulnerable to repressive actions. Their vulnerability was heightened by the Communists' practice of betraying their less radical comrades to the military authorities. Military governments in Latin America also found centrist politicians more amenable to taking positions in military governments. For the most part, the centrists were well-intentioned, and in some cases they did serve to soften the harshness of dictatorial rule, but their presence in regimes that menaced human rights discredited them and the parties that they represented. Another anti-Communist bulwark was weakened.

Finally, the Roman Catholic Church in much of Latin America was also sharply divided. While the old-style right-wing Catholic cleric was almost a thing of the past in the 1970s, some specimens still existed. They were opposed by a much larger number of priests, nuns, and hierarchy who were willing to challenge those in power with demands for greater religious freedom and more economic opportunity. A small percentage of activist clergy and religious embraced "liberation theology," an attempt to merge the Gospel with the writings of Karl Marx. Liberation theology would have a great impact on U.S. foreign policy in Nicaragua, where the presence of Marxist priests in the government would confuse, and often totally paralyze, American policy makers. Elsewhere, the new theology divided the Catholic Church so that the institution's voice in the public sphere became garbled, confused, and ineffectual.

As the 1970s progressed, what was surprising was not that there was strong Soviet interest in the continent and the geopolitical opportunities that it contained but that a concerted effort by the Soviets to gain allies in the Western Hemisphere had taken so long to appear. The Soviet Union

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had never entirely ignored the region, as evidenced by its embrace of Fidel Castro, and its efforts to promote or support revolutionary activity in Guatemala in the 1950s, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic in the 1960s, and Chile in the 1970s. But these earlier Soviet efforts had been halfhearted and tentative. Often, the Soviets seemed more risk-averse in Latin America than elsewhere. Soviet officials evidently considered Latin America an area where they would have to be completely reactive and opportunistic.

But there is another possibility. Soviet geopolitical planners might have seen Latin America as a place where significant intervention would have to wait until the U.S. government was completely preoccupied with crises in other parts of the world. As Reagan prepared to run for president in 1980, America had reached exactly that level of preoccupation, as a tour of the world of 1979–1980 shows.

The World in 1980

Southeast Asia and the “Vietnam Syndrome”

American foreign policy after 1975, when the remaining U.S. forces were driven from Saigon, was dominated by the defeat in Vietnam. No American living in 1975 could remember a time when the United States had even had to settle for a draw in a major military conflict. By 1975, there were no Confederate veterans left, the only Americans to have experienced wartime defeat. The dominant wartime memories of adult Americans in 1975 were the triumphant images of World War II. When Americans thought of how wars ended, they thought of ticker tape parades for returning soldiers, of vanquished enemies, and of grateful, liberated populations. Thus, the photos of Americans fighting for a place on the last helicopter out of Saigon became indelible.

Nor did the nightmare end with the melee on the roof of the American embassy in April. By the beginning of May, Laos and Cambodia had been taken over by Communist forces, and South Vietnam had ceased to exist as an independent country. Even to refer to the largest city in Vietnam meant honoring the founder of Vietnamese Communism, since his heirs renamed Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City. The often-ridiculed domino theory seemed to be coming true, as Thailand and even the Philippines, usually a staunch U.S. ally, found it worthwhile to limit their ties to the United States, and especially to the U.S. military.

Even those who respected and honored the sacrifice of American soldiers in Vietnam were wary of any more such overseas military commitments, no matter how just or urgent the cause seemed to be. For the dominant voices in the American media, in Congress, and in academia, the relevant lesson of the Vietnam disaster was broader and deeper than the mere advent of caution in committing American forces abroad. The “Vietnam Syndrome” became the name for the firmly held belief that the use of American military power, anywhere in the world, would almost certainly lead to failure. Moreover, the nature of the American government and the American military was such that any use of American military force was not only doomed to fail but also bound to be immoral.

The long shadow of Vietnam loomed over all the debates about Central America in the 1980s. Of all the arguments that Reagan’s critics used to try to derail his Central America policy, none was repeated more frequently than the charge that Reagan was leading America into “another Vietnam.” A popular bumper strip at the time read, “El Salvador Is Spanish for Vietnam.” It often seemed that to confront the Soviets effectively in Central America in the 1980s, Reagan had to refight, and try to win, a war left over from the 1960s and 1970s.

Hostages in Iran; Soviets in Afghanistan

As humiliating and tragic as were events in Southeast Asia at the end of the 1970s, events at the other end of Asia seemed to be far more frightening in the short run and more threatening in the long run. The Soviets allied themselves with the Arab states demanding the destruction of Israel and provided states such as Egypt and Syria with weapons and money to attack Israel. In October 1973, the Soviets brought about a nuclear alert by threatening to intervene in the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Egypt.

The U.S.S.R. also seemed to see in the Middle East an opportunity to overturn a fundamental U.S. foreign policy. Since the end of World War II, the core of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union had been “containing” its imperial ambitions behind a wall of military installations and political alliances. An essential part of the containment strategy was preventing the Soviet Union from gaining access to a warm water port. With the new Vietnamese regime permitting Soviet naval access to the American-built port facilities in Cam Rahn Bay, the Soviets had acquired access to a year-round port, but only indirectly.

In the late 1970s, the leadership of the U.S.S.R. took determined actions to acquire an outlet to the Indian Ocean. This was a goal that had fascinated leaders in the Kremlin since before the October Revolution. In January 1978, the Soviet government sponsored a coup that replaced a neutral government in Afghanistan with one more friendly to the Soviet Union. The coup went largely unnoticed in the West. In 1978, Afghanistan was arguably one of the least familiar countries in the world to Americans, who were blissfully unaware of the fact that the country would rarely leave center stage for the succeeding three decades.

Also in 1978, a popular uprising in Iran threatened the thirty-year-old regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi. The shah had come to power with the aid of the U.S. government and had been returned to power after a 1953 coup, also with U.S. government assistance. Like many client rulers preferred by American policy makers, the shah had limited popular support. Thus, he had to rely heavily on American assistance, both financial and military, to survive. (This situation is what makes clients like the shah attractive to some Washington policy makers in the first place, as we will see in chapter 2.)

Under the Carter administration, U.S. military assistance to the shah's government was significantly reduced. By cutting off aid to a long-time American client, whose regime was in genuine danger, Carter kept a campaign promise to put human rights at the top of America's foreign policy list of priorities. At the same time, the aid reduction also alerted the shah that some of his recent actions, such as joining the oil boycott against the West in 1973 and 1974, were unacceptable to the United States. The cut-off had the desired short-term effect; the shah promised to be more respectful of human rights.

For Iranians who wanted to be rid of the shah, his promises to be more humane did nothing to make the shah seem less autocratic. They did, however, make the shah look like someone willing to take orders from the American embassy. Increasingly, the shah was caught on the horns of a dilemma. Whatever actions he took to appease American policy makers concerned with human rights worsened his image in Iran and crippled his regime. Whatever actions he took to effectively fight the insurgency alienated his only overseas source of support.

In the end, the contradiction became irreconcilable. On January 16, 1979, the shah fled the country. Two weeks later, exiled religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini returned from France to establish the Islamic revolutionary government of Iran. To expedite the shah's departure, the Carter

administration promised that he would eventually be allowed to enter the United States, ostensibly for medical treatment. This promise enraged the shah's Iranian enemies, who wanted him returned to Iran for trial. Their anger would explode into the crisis that destroyed the Carter presidency.

In November 1979, demonstrators in Teheran attacked the U.S. Embassy, the visible symbol of American power. The militants made it clear they were prepared to hold the embassy personnel as long as it took for the U.S. government to turn over the shah. The American hostages were paraded through Teheran blindfolded, and the militants threatened to place them on trial for "war crimes."

President Carter responded by closing the Iranian Embassy in the United States and freezing Iranian government assets in American banks. But he made the unfortunate statement a few days after the embassy seizure that "the most important concern for all Americans at this moment is safety of our fellow citizens held in Teheran. . . . None of us would want to do anything that would worsen the danger in which our fellow Americans have been placed. . . . All Americans, public officials and private citizens alike, [should] exercise restraint, and keep the safety of their countrymen uppermost in their minds and hearts."

By stating that securing the release of the hostages, safe and unharmed, would be his top priority in dealing with the crisis, Carter alerted both the militants at the embassy and the Iranian government that no forceful or punitive U.S. military action would be forthcoming. Under the circumstances, the dispatch of an American aircraft carrier battle group to the Persian Gulf seemed almost comically impotent. In April 1980, comedy turned to tragedy when a rescue attempt was aborted, and eight American Marines were killed in the Iranian desert.

Certainly the presence of the American military was no deterrent to the Soviets, who continued their advance toward the Indian Ocean. With the U.S. government paralyzed by the actions of a third-rate power such as Iran, the way seemed open to secure Afghanistan once and for all. On Christmas Eve, 1979, tens of thousands of soldiers from the Soviet Red Army invaded Afghanistan, supposedly at the "invitation" of the country's pro-Soviet leader. Within weeks, the Soviets seemed in control of most of the country. In retrospect, this turned out to be the last advance of the Red Army, but at the time, all that was clear was that the Soviet leadership had achieved a new level of daring and confidence.

Carter's options were extremely limited. The United States would have required the cooperation of Pakistan, at the least, to mount a direct

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military response to the Soviet invasion, even if Carter had had the luxury of assuming that such direct military confrontation would not have led to a wider superpower war. (The most dramatic option available, the dispatch of American military forces to contest the Soviet invasion, would have put U.S. and Soviet troops in direct confrontation for the first time in all the years of the Cold War.)

Still, Carter's response seemed particularly weak. He announced a boycott of grain sales to the Soviet Union and declared that Americans would not participate in the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Not surprisingly, neither of these actions induced the Soviets to call off their occupation. Later, Carter would state emphatically that an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region would be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault would be repelled by any means necessary, including military force. But with the U.S. military seemingly unable even to free fifty-two hostages from Iran, Carter's threat rang hollow.

In the spring of 1980, resistance among the Afghans was stiffening, but the Soviets' hold on the country in 1980 seemed secure enough to permit the Kremlin leaders to make plans to either neutralize or invade Pakistan and finally acquire their warm water port. A major shift in the superpower balance of power seemed imminent, even as the American hostages languished in Teheran.

A statement often attributed to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev runs: "We will take the two great treasure chests upon which the west depends: the strategic oil reserves in the Middle East and the strategic minerals in South Africa." The quotation is apocryphal but did not seem outlandish as Reagan prepared to run for the presidency.

Taking Advantage of Upheaval in Southern Africa

Meanwhile, Brezhnev's other "treasure chest" in southern Africa was also undergoing potentially cataclysmic upheavals of direct import to the United States. In 1974, the new socialist government of Portugal announced that it would move to grant its African colonies independence as soon as possible. By 1976, two of these former Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique, were governed by Marxist governments that established friendly relations with the Soviet Union. Both Mozambique, on the east coast of Africa and Angola on the west coast bordered South African territory. (Angola abutted what was then called "South West Africa," a colony of South Africa. It is now the independent country of Namibia.)

South Africa itself was, and remains, one of the world's only two major sources of many minerals vital to both the U.S. defense industry and the U.S. economy. Among South Africa's assets are gold, platinum, iridium, titanium, and diamonds. Since South Africa had the only extensive port facilities in the region, and since virtually all of southern Africa's rail links ran to South African ports, the country was also a major source for cobalt, copper, and uranium from neighboring countries. To make the strategic situation even more serious, the Soviet Union itself was the only source outside of southern Africa for some of these strategically vital minerals.

The whites who ran South Africa in the 1970s reacted to the independence of Angola and Mozambique, and their subsequent embrace of Communism, by helping to fund insurgencies in both countries. The South Africans did not give either UNITA (the Union for the Total Independence of Angola) or RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance) enough to win their wars against their Marxist rulers. Instead, they gave only enough to keep the wars going, to keep both former Portuguese colonies from rising above the level of abject poverty. This would prevent either country from becoming an example, or a refuge, for South Africa's black population. As an example of cynical statecraft, this South African policy has few equals.

It was also unparalleled in the opportunities that it gave to the Soviets to spread their influence in the region. The Soviet leadership knew it could give huge amounts of weaponry and other aid to Angola and Mozambique virtually without political cost. Any nation that raised objections to Soviet intervention in southern Africa could be accused of being proapartheid. In 1976, the Soviets airlifted Cuban troops to Angola, prompting belated but near-hysterical protests from American secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

It was in Angola that the "Vietnam Syndrome" appeared most obviously. In 1975, Kissinger warned of the danger of Soviet troops in Angola and suggested that the United States might be forced to confront the Soviet effort there. Congress not only rejected Kissinger's warnings but also responded by passing the Clark Amendment, which banned any use of American forces in Angola. The amendment's airtight language also banned financial support to anyone fighting in Angola. (As we will see, the Boland Amendments, which sought to impose a similar ban on aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, were not nearly as ironclad. This fact would lead to some grave political miscalculations during the Reagan years.) Absent American intervention, the main protagonists in southern Africa were Cuba, the Soviet Union, and South Africa.

By 1980, the Soviets had transported fifty thousand Cuban soldiers to Angola to fight alongside the country's Marxist army. A substantially smaller number of Cuban and Soviet troops supported the Mozambican government. With Soviet troops on both coasts of southern Africa, and the internal situation in South Africa becoming more unstable, the possibility of a long-term disruption of strategic mineral supplies loomed large. The Soviets had an enormous advantage in the fact that they did not need to place a pro-Soviet regime in power in South Africa. The Soviets could achieve their geopolitical goals merely by adding to the region's disruption. The danger of a prolonged interruption of strategic mineral supplies took its place alongside American policy makers' growing anxiety about oil supplies from the Middle East. Again, a major shift in the global balance of power was only a step away.

Western Europe: An Alliance in Trouble

As the United States found itself seriously threatened in many parts of the world in 1980, it could not even count on strong support from the members of the NATO alliance. Virtually every NATO country had a strong and growing "peace movement" in place by 1980. Even in Britain, there were calls for unilateral disarmament in the late 1970s. The alliance's resolve to deter and, if necessary, confront a Soviet attack on Western Europe seemed less and less certain. Matters were most serious in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany, as it was called at the time) where a succession of Social Democratic Party governments had pursued "Ostpolitik," an effort to improve relations both with the Soviets and with their Eastern European allies. In practice, Ostpolitik seemed invariably to mean a weakening of West German commitment to the NATO alliance.

NATO was weakening just as a new Eastern European crisis was brewing. Since the visit of Pope John Paul II to his homeland in June 1979, Poles had been constantly challenging the legitimacy of the Soviet-backed government and demanding more freedom. In December 1980, it seemed that Soviet patience with the Polish government's efforts to confront the "Solidarity" trade union and its adherents was being exhausted. Under the cover of "routine maneuvers," Soviet troops were moving ominously close to Poland, and the warnings from the Soviet government were growing more stern and uncompromising. The crisis passed without a Soviet military intervention, but not without disturbing questions about what, if anything, NATO could have done in the face of Soviet aggression.

Military Weakness at Home

The late 1970s saw unprecedented tensions in the NATO alliance and myriad threats to U.S. interests around the world. These difficulties were compounded by serious problems with the U.S. military. Yet another manifestation of the “Vietnam Syndrome” was the reluctance of Members of Congress to adequately fund the armed forces. Sharp cutbacks in defense spending from 1973–1979 had left every branch of the military in a precarious condition.

Among the areas in which Congress cut back was pay and benefits for soldiers, especially for enlisted men and women. By 1980, many soldiers’ families required food stamps to survive. Maintenance expenditures were also cut, leaving the Navy with ships barely able to leave port, and the other branches with tanks, trucks and planes often immobilized by repair problems and shortages of spare parts.

Even more worrisome, the fitness and morale of the troops were declining. With pay so low, all branches of the service found themselves lowering standards to fulfill recruitment quotas. Poor living conditions and a feeling of disdain from civilians left many soldiers bitter and inclined to direct their bitterness at their officers. In the navy, there were ships in which officers did not enter enlisted quarters without an armed escort. Racial strife and drug addiction, both holdovers of the Vietnam experience, also plagued the military in the 1970s. These signs of weakness were not lost on the Soviet leadership or on America’s increasingly nervous allies.

Domestic turmoil of such a prolonged and serious nature has a devastating impact on foreign and military policy, especially when those policies require, above all else, consistent application of principle. The dominant U.S. foreign policy of containment cannot exist without a more or less continuous American commitment to vigilance and determined action, coupled with a well-maintained American military to provide containment’s muscle when needed.

While still rhetorically committed to containment, America’s leaders in 1980 seemed to have redefined the term. When the word *containment* was coined in 1947, it meant leaving the Soviets in control of what they had already acquired but denying them any additional territory. By 1980, containment seemed to mean conceding to the Soviets all they already had, plus whatever they wanted next. Of all the areas in which the Soviets challenged the United States in the late 1970s, only the thrust into

Afghanistan, where the Soviets' role was absolutely undeniable, brought strong and bipartisan condemnation in the U.S. government. In every other region, the majority of American opinion leaders seemed determined to define Soviet adventurism as something else and to take refuge in the indirectness of the Soviet action to deny that there was any Soviet intervention in the first place.

Latin America: The Cold War Moves Closer to Home

From this willful blindness, the Soviet leadership learned that using proxies, and especially Cuban proxies, was extremely useful in covering their own involvement. Ambiguity about Soviet involvement in the many trouble spots of the late 1970s was a major asset in the Soviets' efforts to overwhelm the U.S. with geopolitical challenges, while simultaneously preventing decisive American action. Since Cuban proxies were obviously of most use in Latin America, it became almost inevitable that Latin America would become a central front in the Cold War in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yet at the very time that the Soviet leadership was turning its eyes toward Latin America, the Carter foreign policy team was turning away. Memos from the early days of the Carter administration reveal that Carter's national security assistant for Latin America stated on March 14, 1977: "[W]e do not need a Latin American policy, and I hope that in the future, we will not have one." Nor was this view limited to one assistant. Summarizing the discussion of foreign policy principals for President Carter, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote on 31 March: "The participants agreed that we should *not* have a different policy for the hemisphere than we have for the rest of the world" (emphasis in original). Carter's top foreign policy advisors saw no special national security requirements for the region closest to the United States.

In 1978, the Soviet Union perceived yet another good reason for thinking that more intensive intervention in Latin America might bear fruit. President Carter's first important policy decision regarding the Western Hemisphere was to press for Senate ratification of the Panama Canal treaties. Carter used every public relations tool at his disposal to press wavering senators for a vote in favor of ratification. The treaties were ratified in the spring of 1978, by close votes, and the Panama Canal issue was one of the few foreign policy "successes" of the Carter years.

The initial reaction in much of Latin America to Carter's effort to disengage the U.S. government from the Panama Canal was positive. But in Havana and Moscow, leaders saw the American effort somewhat differently. The president of Panama in 1978 was Omar Torrijos, a dictator who had close ties to Fidel Castro. During the Senate hearings on ratification of the Canal treaties, it was disclosed that Torrijos had been involved in running guns to Marxist revolutionaries in Central America, smuggling drugs to the United States at the behest of Cuba, and laundering money for extremists of both the Right and the Left. Moreover, Torrijos and Manuel Noriega, his chief lieutenant, had crushed democratic movements in Panama. Even some Americans who supported the eventual restoration of the Canal to Panama resisted returning such a valuable asset to such an unsavory and potentially dangerous dictator.

The Carter administration's apparent lack of scruples about doing business with the thoroughly corrupt and dictatorial Torrijos regime induced Castro and Brezhnev to conclude that the U.S. government was determined to withdraw, at any cost, from its most important strategic asset in Latin America. Such determination indicated that less valuable allies and assets in the region would be jettisoned, too, if the pressure to do so were sufficient. In March 1979, the Soviets closely watched American reaction to the disclosure that a full Soviet combat brigade was stationed in Cuba. In spite of strong and urgent protests from congressmen and senators of both parties, the Carter administration minimized the importance of Soviet combat troops ninety miles from U.S. soil.

In the immediate aftermath of the Panama Canal treaty ratification, Castro got more directly involved in promoting revolution in Latin America, and especially in Central America. While the Castro regime had supported Marxist revolutionary movements in Latin America since the early 1960s, much of this aid had consisted of small amounts of money or weapons and was designed more to induce a repressive response from the targeted government than anything else. Castro himself had usually kept his regime's involvement an official secret. In 1978, however, Castro invited (some of the participants would later say that "summoned" was a better word) revolutionary leaders from El Salvador and Nicaragua to separate meetings in Cuba. In both cases, the revolutionary leaders had been active for more than a decade but had made little headway against the governments of the two Central American republics.

Among the reasons for their lack of progress was disunity. Nicaragua had three separate Marxist rebel movements in 1978; El Salvador had five. At the meetings with Castro, the Cuban dictator insisted that the separate guerrilla movements merge. According to some accounts, Castro threatened death to any revolutionary leader who did not go along. All accounts agree that Castro promised substantial military and financial assistance, once the merger was completed. (Given Castro's complete dependence on the Soviet government at the time, it is unthinkable that he would have made such commitments without Soviet acquiescence.) Soon after receiving Castro's "offer," the Sandinista factions merged, and the Faribundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) was formed in El Salvador. At the same time, both movements became more serious threats to the pro-American governments they opposed.

Grenada's Marxist Revolution

A combination of long-prevailing conditions, and Castro's intervention, culminated in three crucial revolutions in the Caribbean region in 1979. All of them altered U.S. foreign policy in the region, although this was not evident when they took place. The first revolution occurred in March on the island of Grenada. A Marxist movement overthrew the corrupt and increasingly erratic regime of Eric Gairy, who had ruled Grenada since the country's independence from Great Britain in 1974. Gairy was an almost perfect caricature of a right-wing dictator. He was personally corrupt and encouraged corruption among his subordinates. He sought to protect himself from criticism from democratic countries by professing anti-Communism and support for the United States.

The New Jewel Movement was founded in 1973 by Maurice Bishop, a British-trained lawyer and, later, a Cuban-trained Marxist. After forcing Gairy to flee the country, Bishop installed himself as president and implemented a relatively mild program of Marxist reform in Grenada. However, Bishop's ties with Castro and with the Soviet leadership grew closer very quickly. In early 1980, Bishop visited Castro in Havana and made arrangements to receive economic and military assistance from the Cuban leader. As captured documents later revealed, Bishop used the assistance he received to build a much larger army, capable of threatening his democratic neighbors. Bishop's regime also began work on a large new airstrip, capable of accommodating Soviet troop transports and heavy bombers. With Grenada alongside major sea lanes into the Caribbean,

the mere construction of such a large airstrip was worthy of concern. But with the other dramatic developments in other parts of the Caribbean, Bishop's nascent threat in 1979 went virtually unnoticed.

Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution

On July 19, the second Caribbean Marxist revolution of the year ended with the triumphal march of the Sandinistas into Managua, Nicaragua. The previous day, long-time dictator Anastasio Somoza had fled the country. His departure marked the end of forty-five years of Nicaraguan governments dominated by the Somoza family. Like Gairy in Grenada, the Somozas made much of their supposedly close relationship with the United States government, and the last of the Somozas was invariably referred to as a "pro-American" dictator. The reality was somewhat more complicated. While the Somozas did indeed support the United States, it was less clear that the United States supported the Somozas. It is more accurate to say that the U.S. government tolerated the Somoza family, as it had tolerated the shah of Iran, both for its strong anti-Communism and for pursuing economic policies that prevented genuine economic growth.

Somoza's rule began to unravel in December 1972, after a devastating earthquake hit the capital city of Managua. During the relief operations, Pittsburgh Pirates baseball player Roberto Clemente was killed. His death and the dramatic pictures of the ruined city focused American attention on the plight of Nicaraguans, resulting in large contributions of aid. It soon became clear, however, that Somoza was trying to make money from the disaster, by directing aid funds for reconstruction to areas where he and his friends owned land. There was considerable anger among American members of Congress and Nicaraguan businessmen, two groups that had formerly tolerated the human rights abuses and stultifying economic policies of the Somoza regime.

Somoza had made many other powerful enemies by the late 1970s. His country was the first to send a diplomatic mission to the new state of Israel in 1948, garnering the Somoza family the enduring hatred of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In 1961, Nicaragua was a staging area for the Bay of Pigs invasion, a fact that Fidel Castro did not forget. During the negotiations over the Panama Canal treaty, Anastasio Somoza tried mightily to interest the U.S. government in a new, sea-level canal through Nicaragua. This earned him the hatred of Omar Torrijos. Somoza continued to believe, however, that his anti-Communist rhetoric

and “friendship” with the United States would bring the Americans to his aid if his regime faced real difficulties.

In making this assumption, Somoza lost sight of the fact that, while his relationship with the United States was all-important to him, it was not a high priority for people in the U.S. government. In fact, the Carter administration came into office with plans to use Nicaragua and Iran as showcases for America’s new commitment to human rights as a foreign policy priority. Soon after taking the oath of office, Carter cut off military assistance to Nicaragua, citing the regime’s poor human rights record. At the same time, several committees of the U.S. House of Representatives began holding hearings on human rights abuses in Nicaragua. These hearings often provided a forum for the most radical opponents of the regime, including members of the Marxist FSLN.

Carter’s Nicaragua policy, however, was not consistent. Aid was restored in 1978, as the military threat from the Sandinistas grew more serious. On August 22, 1978, the Sandinistas made their boldest stroke in the war up to that time, an attack on the National Palace in Managua. Shooting their way into the seat of the Nicaraguan government, the guerrillas held 1500 people hostage, including many members of the Nicaraguan Congress. They demanded the release of fifty-nine colleagues from prison, \$1 million in cash, and safe passage out of the country. For all of his tough talk about standing up to Communists, Somoza gave in to the FSLN’s demands almost immediately. The attackers went to Cuba, where they received a hero’s welcome.

The spectacle of Somoza having to give in to the demands of the FSLN after a strike at the very heart of the Nicaraguan government made the dictator look weak, as did the tepid support he received during the crisis from the U.S. government. The following month saw the beginning of a general insurrection in the most populous departments of Nicaragua. Somoza responded with air strikes on civilian population centers suspected of supporting the FSLN. Somoza’s heavy-handed response to the insurgency brought another cut-off of U.S. assistance.

Also contributing to the American response was the success of the FSLN in presenting the world with a broad front of opposition to Somoza. While U.S. policy makers, both in Congress and in the Executive Branch, might have shied away from openly supporting a Marxist movement (indeed, the Somoza family had counted on exactly such reluctance for the previous forty-five years), they were reassured by the presence of non-Marxists in the anti-Somoza coalition. Business leaders, church

leaders espousing liberation theology, and other seeming moderates stood alongside the Sandinista leadership in denouncing Somoza and promising to work together to build a new government “of neither the right nor the left” for the Nicaraguan people. After Somoza’s departure, power rested in the hands of a five-person government of national reconstruction (GNR). The GNR featured prominent non-Communist moderates.

Within months of the Sandinista triumph, however, it was becoming clear that the FSLN leaders had no intention of keeping their promises to bring democracy to Nicaragua. In early 1980, prominent moderates were expelled from the ruling Council of State, and Eden Pastora, who had led the raid on the National Palace, was also in opposition to the Sandinista regime. The regime was increasing its pressure on the country’s independent newspaper, on the Catholic Church (in spite of the fact that the Church had supported the revolution, and the Bishop of Managua marked the Sandinista victory by saying a Victory Mass in Managua), and on independent businesses.

Much more ominously for the United States, the FSLN began to strengthen their ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union. The regime also made increasingly obvious efforts to export their revolution to other countries in Central America. Arms shipments and other forms of support began to flow from the Sandinistas to Communist revolutionaries in Honduras and El Salvador.

Much of the debate over Nicaragua in the 1980s revolved around whether the U.S. government, through its supposedly hostile actions, had driven the Sandinistas into the arms of Cuba and the Soviet Union. The actual events show anything but U.S. hostility. American Secretary of State Cyrus Vance himself negotiated Somoza’s departure. The U.S. government recognized the Sandinista government immediately. On September 2, 1979, Carter welcomed Sandinista President Daniel Ortega, along with other top-ranking Sandinistas, to the White House. By the end of their meeting with Carter, the Sandinistas had a commitment of \$118 million in U.S. aid.

The Sandinistas and their supporters would later contend that the Sandinistas’ embrace of Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union came only after Nicaragua was attacked by counterrevolutionaries in the pay of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This conclusion is not supported by the facts either. High-level contacts between the Sandinistas and Castro began even before the former had come to power. Then in March 1980, Ortega and Tomás Borge, head of Sandinista internal

security, traveled to Havana and received firm promises of support from Castro. By the end of 1980, the Sandinistas were supporting Communist guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Honduras, and their leaders were speaking openly of a "revolution without frontiers." The Sandinistas had adopted a policy of hostility to the United States and its allies before Reagan became president.

El Salvador's Democratic Revolution

The Sandinistas' interest in fomenting revolution in El Salvador was particularly revealing of their intentions, since El Salvador in 1980 was not ruled by a typical right-wing military dictatorship like that of Somoza. In October, El Salvador became the site of the third Caribbean revolution of 1979. Unlike the first two, however, the revolution in El Salvador was non-Communist and promised genuine democracy for the small Central American nation.

El Salvador's 1979 revolution was a nightmare for Americans accustomed to easily identifiable, black-and-white characters in stories from Latin America (evil landowners versus dedicated land reformers; evil military dictators versus progressive democratic reformers). The upheaval was, first of all, fairly peaceful, since the departing military regime was sufficiently corrupt and rotten to fall without much violence. But what was more confusing for many Americans, what followed can best be described as a leftist (or at least leftish) civilian-military junta, a seeming contradiction in terms.

The postrevolutionary Salvadoran government was led by José Napoleón Duarte, the former mayor of San Salvador, whose reform credentials were unimpeachable. Duarte had been elected president in 1972 but had been forced into exile by the military. As a political activist for the left-leaning Christian Democratic Party, he had opposed military governments in the past and had been jailed and tortured by members of the Salvadoran military. The junta that took power in 1979 included other reformers with similar antimilitary credentials.

But the junta also contained a number of high-ranking military officers, some of whom had opposed democracy in the past. The division in the Salvadoran military mirrored the divisions in Salvadoran society. Again, for many American experts on Latin America, military officers came in only one variety: right-wing, antidemocratic, personally corrupt caricatures.

Opposing the civilian-military junta was the Faribundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), an armed guerrilla group made up of the five revolutionary groups pressured and bribed into unity by Fidel Castro. In large part, it was fear of the progress of the FMLN that prompted a number of military officers to forsake their colleagues in 1979 and join the prodemocracy junta. For some of these defecting military men, support for democracy was merely a cynical tactic, designed to fool the U.S. government into providing military and economic assistance. For others, the motivation was the genuine belief that only democracy could effectively counter the promises of the Marxist FMLN.

By 1979, it was clear to most Salvadorans that if the country were forced to choose between a traditional right-wing military dictatorship and a leftist revolutionary movement such as the FMLN, the latter would be the winner. Thus, when a third option appeared in 1979, in the form of the center-left junta, most analysts expected the threat from the FMLN to diminish. Exactly the opposite occurred. The FMLN leadership, along with their backers in Havana, in Moscow and (after July 1979) in Managua, concluded that the 1979 coup was testimony to their strength and redoubled their efforts to overthrow the Salvadoran regime.

An important part of their effort was to discredit the junta by denying its democratic credentials. Propaganda from Moscow and Havana consistently referred to the government in San Salvador as a “military dictatorship,” as though there had been no change at all in October. It was this characterization of the Salvadoran government that dominated American newspaper accounts of events in the country well into 1980. As the visibility of the civilian President Duarte increased, the American media took to describing the government as “military-dominated.” Both designations had the effect of making Americans reluctant to support the anti-Communist side.

The Salvadoran government did little to help its own cause. Transforming the Salvadoran military from an instrument of repression for a tiny governing elite, which had been its role for decades, into a force capable of fighting a sophisticated and well-armed guerrilla insurgency was a slow and difficult task. It was made all the more difficult by the tenacity of corrupt generals who enriched themselves while refusing to take the field against the guerrillas. Even senior officers who were not corrupt were unused to the rigors of a full-scale guerrilla war. (Frustrated U.S. military advisors would complain about the “nine-to-five” mentality of the Salvadoran military.)

Also contributing to the cause of the guerrillas were stunning human rights outrages attributed to the military. On March 24, 1980, the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, was gunned down while in the act of saying Mass. Romero had been critical of both the Salvadoran government and the FMLN, but since his assassins wore military uniforms, the crime was generally attributed to the army. In December, four American church women, who had been working with Salvadoran peasants opposed to the junta, were raped and murdered. Again, both sides had a motive for killing the women, but the evidence linking the murders to members of the military was stronger.

While President Duarte condemned these actions and promised swift justice to the guilty, he seemed powerless to even insure that the crimes would be investigated, let alone insure punishment for the guilty. Throughout 1979 and 1980, civilian deaths in El Salvador's civil war mounted. *Death squad* became the term commonly used for groups of off-duty military officers and other disgruntled right-wing Salvadorans who killed with impunity. The spectacle of a Salvadoran military unwilling to face armed insurgents, but willing to kill labor leaders, teachers, nuns, and social workers fanned the flames of Marxist revolution in the country and insured that the FMLN would have a strong base of support in the United States.

Preparing for Reagan

Meanwhile, the cooperation of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua made shipment of arms and material to the FMLN easier, and the guerrillas made significant advances in 1979 and 1980. The Carter administration responded to the near-crisis situation in the country with substantial military and economic assistance and increasingly strong statements of support for President Duarte. With the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980, the FMLN foresaw a much firmer U.S. response to its challenge to the pro-American Salvadoran government. The FMLN leadership decided to present the incoming anti-Communist president with a *fait accompli*. On January 10, 1981, the FMLN launched what it called its "Final Offensive" to overthrow the civilian-military junta. It did so with the full and vocal support of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. The latter's support prompted the Carter administration to suspend economic assistance to Nicaragua on January 17, 1981.

Thus, Ronald Reagan inherited a Central America already in severe turmoil. From the day that Reagan announced for president, to the day he took office, Nicaragua had gone from being a staunch American ally to being an even more staunch ally of Cuba and the Soviet Union. El Salvador changed from a stable, if not terribly valuable, American ally to a nation under siege from a Communist insurgency that was at least as radical as the Sandinistas. Both Guatemala and Honduras faced the harrowing choice between right-wing governments and left-wing insurgencies. Grenada, situated near the southeastern entry point of the Caribbean Sea, was also a Soviet ally.

And in the middle of 1980, in the midst of the Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, spreading leftist revolution in Central America and southern Africa, and double-digit inflation and gas lines, Fidel Castro unleashed a terrifying new weapon in his ongoing war with the United States. On April 22, Castro opened the port of Mariel to anyone desiring to leave the country. Within days, a flood of refugees was headed toward south Florida. Eventually, 120,000 Cubans would enter the United States. Even under the best of circumstances, such a sudden flood of refugees would have had staggering consequences for the communities bearing the brunt of the human tide.

But in addition to the tens of thousands of honest and freedom-loving Cubans who came to the United States, Castro sent thousands of violent criminals, mental patients, and terrorists. The dictator virtually emptied his prisons and insane asylums and sent the inmates to the unsuspecting, and totally unprepared, residents of south Florida. The impact was devastating and was made more so by the slow and hesitant response from the Carter administration. It was not until May 14 that Carter ordered a blockade of private boats from Cuba. The refugees continued to pour in until Castro closed the port of Mariel in September.

Breaks in the Clouds

In spite of the bleak picture presented above, there were signs of hope in 1980. By the time that Reagan was elected, it was plain that he would have other world leaders to work with who were every bit as anti-Communist as he was. In October 1978, Karol Wojtyła, a Polish cardinal, became Pope John Paul II. His election would sow the seeds of Communism's eventual implosion in Eastern Europe. In May 1979, Conservative Party leader

Margaret Thatcher became prime minister of Great Britain. Like Reagan, she used harsh terms to criticize Soviet Communism, and she foreshadowed in England the orthodox capitalist reform that Reagan brought to the United States.

There were also signs of weakness in the U.S.S.R. Given the aggressiveness and seeming confidence of the Soviet Union in 1980, it was possible to ignore the glaring weaknesses that were beginning to become obvious in that country. In 1981, President Reagan received a top-secret CIA assessment of the Soviet Union (a summary that I saw when I worked in the White House in 1984). The document described appalling conditions in the Soviet Union, including rampant alcoholism and sharply rising abortion rates. Alone among industrialized countries, Soviet citizens in 1981 actually had a declining life expectancy. Food shortages and long lines were becoming endemic. Shortages of medical supplies were so severe that hypodermic needles were delivered to hospitals with instructions for sharpening and derusting.

It is possible that the very seriousness of the problems the Soviets faced in the late 1970s and 1980s prompted their leaders to take such enormous risks as the invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was by no means doomed in 1981. While it managed to hide many of its weaknesses, its aggression and adventurism were very real. The Soviet leaders worked to provoke a crisis in the United States before their country's own internal crises overwhelmed them.

As he prepared to take the Oath of Office, President-elect Ronald Reagan could barely look at a globe without seeing an area of crisis for the United States or an area in which the country appeared to be in retreat. In his autobiography, Reagan described his first night in the White House: "I peeked into the Oval Office as its official occupant for the first time. I felt a weight come down on my shoulders, and I said a prayer asking God's help in my new job." Certainly few in Latin America doubted that he would need the help of the Almighty to tackle the challenges awaiting him in America's own hemisphere.

And Reagan would face two further challenges, which I will describe in the next chapter. First, Reagan would have to overcome daunting domestic obstacles to creating a strong anti-Soviet foreign policy. These would include a weakened military and devastating economic problems. Even more discouraging was the reluctance of many Americans to criticize the Soviet Union, or even to use the word *Communism*. Before Reagan

could act in Central America, he would have to reconquer the language of international relations.

The second challenge would be almost as difficult. For Reagan to impose his vision of a foreign policy based on freedom on his enemies, he would first have to impose that vision on much of the foreign policy bureaucracy of the United States. Throughout his eight years in the White House, Reagan faced not only the possibility of war outside the United States but also the daily reality of war within his own administration.