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Paper tiger's blunt claws

America's highly publicized efforts to neutralize the Marxist government of Nicaragua have proven a resounding flop. This failure is particularly galling since it represents Washington's first major attempt in years to reverse the tide of communist insurgencies.

Depending on who you ask, there are between 6,000 and 11,000 anti-communist "contras" operating against Nicaragua from bases in neighboring Honduras. This amalgam of four opposition movements is being armed, funded and directed by the CIA. After a year of inconclusive border skirmishes, the contra forces have failed to seize any appreciable portion of Nicaraguan territory or to place the Marxist regime in Managua on the defensive.

Why can't the CIA, after all its guerrilla-warfare experience in Southeast Asia, seem to mount a successful operation against the former banana republic of Nicaragua? There are a number of answers to this disturbing question.

The most important reason involves will. When the communists launch guerrilla operations, no one doubts that they will be ruthlessly and single-mindedly pursued. Nor is there any doubt that Russia will support these operations whatever the cost.

When the Central Americans look at Washington, they see an administration that denies the intent to really overthrow the communist regime in Managua. In describing its aims, the Reagan administration uses terms such as "counter-pressure" or "blocking the flow of arms to El Salvador." No administration official dares to say that the United States is really bent on crushing the Sandinistas.

Half-hearted effort

This reticence is caused by the growing public and Congressional opposition to this half-hearted effort to match the Russians at their own game. Now the Democrats, sensing a much-needed election issue, are doing everything possible to hamstring support of the contras and the besieged pro-American government in El Salvador.

The Americans, who have, without any doubt, the military capability to eradicate the Marxists in Nicaragua, simply lack the evident will and determination to do so. The manifest uncertainty and dithering in Washington is all too evident to the contra soldiers who are being asked to risk their lives in a war without objective or coherent strategy.

We have seen this same problem in Vietnam. American soldiers were asked to put their lives on the line so that President Johnson could achieve a politically comfortable "negotiated settlement." Soldiers, unlike politicians, fight to win; no one wants to risk his life or limbs as a bargaining chip. When American soldiers in Vietnam realized that they were in a no-win war, massive demoralization swept through the army. The same thing is now happening to the contra forces.

In addition to a failure of will and morale, the contra forces appear to have been getting some very bad advice from the CIA. Poorly conducted military operations, lack of co-ordination, and generally wretched battlefield performance have characterized the contra efforts. The CIA, having trained and directed these forces, bears a great deal of responsibility for their doleful performance against the Nicaraguan militia and army, themselves hardly feeble fighters.

Lack of effectiveness

During the war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the CIA demonstrated a startling lack of effectiveness in mounting and sustaining guerrilla operations. The U.S. Army has long demanded, and been refused, the role of running these insurgencies. Perhaps now the U.S. government will consider allowing its professional military men — rather than its Ivy League intelligence officers — to run these little wars.

Today, there are only two successful anti-communist insurgencies — in Afghanistan and Angola. While neither has any major CIA backing, both are examples of genuine popular resistance to the communists. Even many conservatives are now asking if the contras, in spite of strong CIA backing, really do have much popular support among Nicaraguans.

Washington is facing a growing predicament in Central America. If it fails to win the campaign against the Sandanistas, the Nicaraguan communists — and their Soviet and Cuban backers — will, by default, win a very significant victory. Having committed itself to do something against Nicaragua, Washington cannot now afford to fail lest it be faced by growing insurgencies through Latin America.

If little Nicaragua can thumb its nose at the United States and win, then who will not be emboldened to do the same? Today, after massive land and naval "exercises" off Central America, after spending tens of millions of dollars on the contras, Washington has very little to show for its efforts. In fact, the United States is coming to look more like a blustering paper tiger than the nefarious, omnipotent imperialist portrayed by its leftist enemies around the world.

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