

Reagan

South of the border, down Nicaragua way, the Contras are finally to get \$100 million (U.S.) of badly needed cash, arm-twisted out of a reluctant Congress by Ronald Reagan.

This means that the sputtering guerrilla war should intensify in the fall.

Americans opposed to aiding the anti-communist Contras charge that doing so means stumbling into another Vietnam. In a way they are right — but for the wrong reason. The Marxist Sandinista regime in Managua has no million-man Vietnamese regular army to back it.

There is no doubt that a sufficiently determined U.S. could squash the Sandinistas and contain any ensuing guerrilla war. A Vietnam-style military defeat is not in the cards in Central America.

Yet there is a deeply troubling analogy to Vietnam that pro- and anti-Contra forces have not widely noted: The vital question of timing. In war, victory frequently goes to the side moving fastest. Time is one of the most important elements in combat — and the most often overlooked. In Central America, as in Vietnam, the U.S. seems to have lost the battle for time.

Vietnam became a military defeat for the mighty U.S. largely because of the arrogance and stupidity of one man — Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, who fathered the policy of "gradual escalation." Instead of directing maximum force against North Vietnam early in the war, the U.S. adopted a gradualist policy of slowly increasing military pressure that was supposed to drive Hanoi to negotiate.

The very opposite occurred. Thanks to massive Soviet

buys time in Nicaragua



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and Chinese aid, Hanoi was able to counter each American escalation so that Washington was never able to profit from its military superiority. Precisely the same strategic error is now being made in Central America — once again by politicians frightened of angering voters by doing the unpleasant, but necessary.

Contra forces will not get major new arms shipments until late in the year. By then the Sandinistas will have received more Soviet helicopter gunships, more guns, more Cuban and East German advisers — more of everything. For every gun that the U.S. buys the Contras, Moscow will give five to its useful clients in Managua.

Such gradual escalation ensures that by early 1987 the Contras will be no more likely to win their guerrilla war than today.

Neither can they hope for a popular uprising in Nicaragua. Communist nations, with their omnipresent police and security forces, just do not have real revolutions. Nicaragua's East German police advisers will ensure that the regime stays safe from internal dissent.

If the Contras have little chance of beating Managua's

fast-growing, Soviet-equipped army, what then? More inconclusive fighting in the country, more wrangling in Congress as the Contras come back for more money. Alas, the latest \$100 million will not win this little war.

By squeezing cash out of Congress, Reagan has only postponed the inevitable day of reckoning when the U.S. must either accept the Sandinista regime or throw it out by force of American arms. Acceptance means allowing another Cuba in the Americas — in peacetime, a base for communist subversion; in wartime, a deadly threat to NATO supply lines, oil routes and to North America's exposed underbelly.

The alternative, sending in the Marines, will be even more politically unattractive, particularly for the mere mortal who succeeds the Olympian figure of Ronald Reagan. Can one imagine a squeaky-voiced George Bush convincing America to send troops to Nicaragua? Or, even more improbably, liberal Democrat Mario Cuomo?

So \$100 million buys time, keeps the fighting going and makes it more likely that the Central American Marxists will eventually win. What America really needs now is a foreign legion made up, like the famous French unit, of tough, homeless expendables who could be sent south to deal with Sandinistas regardless of casualties or cruelty. Ten thousand well-armed legionnaires would do the job — if they existed.

Instead, America will dither while Marxist roots creep deeper. And Nicaragua may only be the beginning of America's problems south of the border, a mere base camp on the way to the ultimate goal of Soviet strategists — that smoking volcano, Mexico.