

Remarks to the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance

June 9, 1986

Thank you very much, and good evening. It's an honor to speak to you today before the members and guests of the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, an institution whose work so directly affects the security of our nation. I want to commend your founders, Admiral Arleigh Burke and Ambassador David Abshire, and your president and chief executive officer, Joe Jordan, for all they've done to make this institution so worthy of respect. And permit me to commend as well those of you today who are present from the private sector. In supporting CSIS, you do yourselves and your nation a service.

And greetings to Bud McFarlane, Jim Schlesinger, and Zbig Brzezinski [former Assistants to the President for National Security Affairs], men who demonstrate that in its essentials our foreign policy can indeed remain bipartisan. And, by the way, Bud, thanks for the invitation. [Laughter] And, of course, warm regards to your honoree, Anne Armstrong, Counselor to two Presidents, Ambassador to Great Britain, Chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. No one has set a higher standard of service to our nation than Anne. Congratulations, my friend.

This evening I would like to speak briefly on a matter of central importance to the security of our nation and hemisphere, but a matter, above all, of central importance to the cause of human liberty. I refer to aid for the democratic resistance forces of Nicaragua. Now, I know that each of you is a foreign policy expert and that you've studied this issue, each of you, in detail; and I value that. But in a complex of politics, in the midst of all the twistings and turnings, one can sometimes discern a moment of impending decision, a moment to reduce the issue at hand to the plain facts and submit, if you will, the closing argument. With your permission, I would like to submit that argument this evening before you and the Nation.

After the nearly 7 years during which the Nicaraguan Communists have held power, there can no longer be any legitimate doubt about the nature of their regime. There is a brave man in Nicaragua, a man who courageously opposed the Somoza dictatorship. And listen for a moment to that man, to the words of Cardinal Obando y Bravo, Archbishop of Managua, as they recently appeared in the Washington Post: To consider the Sandinista regime democratic, as Cardinal Obando y Bravo asserts, is ``to ignore the mass exodus of the Miskito Indians, who on numerous occasions fled in the thousands. It is also to ignore the departure of tens of thousands of Nicaraguan men and women of every age, profession, economic status, and political persuasion. It is to ignore that many of those who are leaders or participants in the counterrevolution were once leaders or members of the Sandinista front or were ministers in the Sandinista government. It is to ignore the lack of any justification for the most terrible violation of freedom of the press and of speech in the history of our country. It is to ignore the progressive and suffocating restriction of public liberties under the cover of an interminable national emergency law and the continual violation of human rights. It is to ignore the expulsion of priests and the mass exodus of young people eligible for military service . . . None of this is true of a government that has the sympathy and general support of the people." Well, I might add that not long after Cardinal Obando y Bravo wrote that statement for the Washington Post, the Sandinista regime cut off electricity to his office -- just one more act of harassment among many scores of such acts visited upon him.

Yet despite the brutal and totalitarian nature of the Sandinista regime, the struggle for freedom inside Nicaragua continues. By the thousands, men and women have moved into the countryside and taken up

arms. Indeed, today these democratic resistance forces number some 20,000 -- four times the number of troops the Sandinistas had in the field when they themselves seized power. In full knowledge, the members of the resistance have chosen to separate themselves from their families and homes, to live in conditions of immense hardship, often with scant water and food, and to expose themselves to the dangers of battle. They fight to liberate their country from a regime that is loyal only to Communist powers. They fight for freedom.

Just as the men and women of the resistance have decided what they must do, so, too, have Gorbachev, Castro, Arafat, and Qadhafi. Soviet military advisers in Nicaragua number in the hundreds. The Sandinistas possess at least six Soviet-built HIND attack helicopters -- helicopters that represent, in effect, flying tanks. Cuban troops swarm the streets of Managua by the scores, and the PLO has established an embassy there. Links between the Sandinistas, the PLO, the Libyans, and others are extensive. And let no one forget the photograph of Libya's Qadhafi and the Sandinistas' Ortega. In that photo there they stand, their fists clenched in a salute of solidarity.

The Communists have made their decision; the resistance has made its decision; and now we must make ours. The choice is stark; the choice is unavoidable. We can help our neighbors in their struggle for freedom, or, by doing nothing, we can abandon them to a Communist dictatorship. Over 3 months ago, I submitted to the Congress a plan to provide the resistance forces of Nicaragua with \$100 million in urgently needed support. More than 2 months ago, the Senate approved the plan. Now, at last, a new vote in the House is scheduled to take place. I want the House -- I want the country -- to know how much is riding on this decision.

If the House chooses to deny to the Nicaraguan resistance the help it needs and deserves, this will, in effect, grant permission to the Sandinistas to ignore any negotiated settlement and pursue a military victory instead. The final outcome is only too predictable. Backed by a steady supply of arms from the Soviets and Cubans, the Sandinistas will be able to pin down the freedom fighters, surround them, and, in time, crush them. Whatever is left of free institutions in Nicaragua will be utterly destroyed. And upon the ruins of Nicaragua's best yearnings and aspirations, upon the mutilated hopes of her people, a second Cuba -- indeed a second Libya -- will have been ruthlessly built. We can be certain that tens of thousands of Nicaraguan refugees will seek to inundate our Southern States. More than a quarter of a million Nicaraguans, nearly 10 percent of the entire population, have already fled the country.

But none of this need take place. If the House votes to give the Nicaraguan resistance the support we've proposed, democracy in that nation can be given a chance. Again and again, the freedom fighters have proven their commitment to just this hope. Last month they took steps to broaden their political base and increase their support among the Nicaraguan people. With adequate training and supplies, they could mobilize the oppressed people of their country and win untold new recruits. If only the House votes yes.

Our goal is not -- and repeat not -- a military solution. Instead we seek to help the freedom fighters achieve only the leverage they need to bring the Communists to the table and negotiate a political and democratic solution. Three times the resistance has already offered to put down its arms and go to the table. Three times the Communists have said no. The Catholic Church in Nicaragua supports an internal reconciliation aimed at achieving democracy. The Communists have rejected this plan. The Contadora nations have backed a negotiated peace based, again, upon internal reconciliation and democracy. The Sandinistas have refused to grant these proposals serious consideration.

The Communists are intransigent because they believe they can afford to be. Each day the military situation in Nicaragua twists another dangerous degree in favor of the Communists. In the months since we made our initial request for assistance, Soviet-supplied weapons in Nicaragua have mounted, censorship and other human rights violations have increased, and human suffering has grown. And now those who oppose aid must ask searching and painful questions. Can we bear responsibility for such anguish? Can we permit ourselves to acquiesce in the Sandinista tactic of delay, delay, delay?

Again, I must repeat that there is hope. Just 10 years ago, less than one-third of the people of Latin America lived in democracies. Today that figure is 90 percent. Many had written off El Salvador. Others claimed there was no hope in Honduras and Guatemala. Today those nations have their freedom, and today democracy in Latin America constitutes a swelling and life-giving tide. It can still flood its powerful, cleansing way into Nicaragua -- the Communist wall against it is high, but not yet too high -- if only the House takes action. And I appeal here to Democrats and Republicans alike: The issue is human freedom, and it towers above all partisan concerns. What it comes down to in the end is the matter of witness, of choosing whether to believe those whom we know to be providing us with accurate reports about Nicaragua, or to listen instead to the whispering voices within our own minds that say there is no trouble there. Not because this is the truth, but because we don't want to be inconvenienced [inconvenienced] by the need to risk action.

Once again that good man Cardinal Obando y Bravo, that foe of tyranny, whether Somoza's or the Sandinistas', has put the case before us. He writes to the editor of the Washington Post: ``Your message asking me for an article arrived on Sunday, just as I finished celebrating Mass. During the Mass I read the pastoral letter which we, the bishops of Nicaragua, had written for Holy Week. The pulpit was now our only means of disseminating information, because the letter was totally censored and pulled from the pages of the newspaper La Prensa, the only private newspaper left in the country."

The Cardinal goes on to relate that church offices had been appropriated by government order; that a church printing press had been confiscated by the state security police; that the government had shut down Radio Catolica, the only Catholic radio station; and that even the Sunday bulletin, with the prayers and texts for the day, had been confiscated. ``It was at this point," the Cardinal writes, ``when the Church was gagged and bound, that your request arrived. The reading for the day pricked my conscience. The Sanhedrin sent for Peter and John, intending to force them into silence. `But Peter and John said to them in reply, is it right in God's eyes for us to obey you rather than God? Judge for yourselves. We cannot possibly give up speaking of things we have seen and heard.'" Those were the Archbishop's words.

My friends, let us give heed to those in Nicaragua who, like Cardinal Obando y Bravo and so many others, speak to us of the things they've seen and heard. And let us, pray God, move to help them.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 5:14 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Mayflower Hotel at the Center's annual dinner.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/60986b.htm>