

Culture of Terrorism

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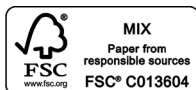
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The Challenge

The scandals that erupted in the Fall of 1986 and the reaction to them cast a revealing light on the political system and the intellectual culture that interprets and sustains it. As we shall see in detail below, these events demonstrated that the United States remains dedicated to the rule of force, that political elites agree and indeed insist that it must remain so, and that, furthermore, the commitment to violence and lawlessness frames their self-image as well, barely concealed beneath deceptive rhetoric. These conclusions can readily be drawn from the actual record, if we face it honestly and without illusion. They have serious implications for the future, just as the same conclusions in earlier days, no less readily established, no less regularly suppressed, have had profound consequences in the past.

With regard to Central America, the scandals disrupted a tacit elite consensus, troubled by some tactical disagreements over generally shared goals. They imposed new demands for the ideological system, which must control the domestic damage and ensure that it is confined within narrow and politically meaningless bounds while dedicating itself anew to the major and continuing task: to fashion an appropriate version of the real scandals of the 1980s so as to place U.S. actions in a favorable light and thus to ensure that similar policies can proceed without serious impediment when they are considered necessary.

This task gained new urgency in June 1986, as the World Court issued its long-expected judgment condemning the United States for its attack against Nicaragua, and Congress voted aid for the contras, endorsing the illegal use of force while “asserting that it was the only way to get the Sandinistas to negotiate seriously”—five days after Nicaragua had accepted the latest draft of the Con-tadora treaty, rejected by the U.S. and its clients.¹ “This is for real. This is a real war,” a U.S. government official commented, confirming the judgment of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega that the congressional vote “amounted to a declaration of war.”²

The media and the general intellectual community had largely accepted and internalized the basic framework of government doctrine throughout, but with the virtual declaration of war, under these circumstances, it became necessary to pursue the task of imposing a suitable doctrinal structure with renewed vigor. Specifically, since we have declared war against Nicaragua and established a functioning terrorist state in El Salvador, it must be true—and therefore it is true—that Nicaragua is a brutal one-party dictatorship devoted to torture and oppression while the resistance who courageously fought “the *former* dictator” Somoza³ now fight for freedom and democracy against the new dictator Ortega imposed by Soviet imperialism; correspondingly, it is necessarily the case that El Salvador, like Guatemala and Honduras, is a “fledgling democracy” marching forward towards the Four Freedoms thanks to our fervent love of liberty. If the facts show otherwise, then so much the worse for the facts.

The task of constructing a usable version of history and the current scene confronted further obstacles in the summer of 1987. Despite a substantial military effort by the United States, the much-heralded Spring Offensive of “the sons of Reagan,” as the marauders of the proxy army announce themselves when swooping down on barely defended farms and villages to kill and destroy, achieved no military victories that could be flaunted to

convince wavering legislators that the exercise of violence might succeed; organizing achievements among the Nicaraguan populace are not even a topic for consideration. What was worse, the disarray caused by the scandals encouraged U.S. allies, Costa Rica in particular, to risk the wrath of Washington and proceed in the course of diplomacy.

The Reagan administration had succeeded in undermining the initiatives of the major Latin American governments, expressed through the efforts of the Contadora nations, to find a way to a political settlement, and the commitment to obstruct these efforts persisted through 1987. Nevertheless, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, with the support of Guatemala, continued to press a plan unacceptable to Washington, which responded by repeated efforts to undermine it to which we return, and direct punishment of Costa Rica for its transgressions. U.S. assistance to the ailing Costa Rican economy was suspended in March 1987 as Arias proceeded with his plan over Washington's objections, along with commercial U.S. bank loans to Costa Rica, as Washington refused, for the first time, to intervene on Costa Rica's behalf, prejudicing Costa Rican efforts to obtain other international loans as well; Costa Rican exports to the U.S. were cut by government bans and restrictions; and U.S. diplomatic pressures forced the resignation of an adviser to President Arias who had been instrumental in formulating the peace plan, according to Costa Rican officials. While Costa Rica was lined up in Washington's crusade to overthrow the Sandinistas, two reporters in San José observe, "U.S. aid soared to more than \$200 million annually. 'Costa Rica has not received a penny [of U.S. aid] since almost the beginning of the peace plan effort. That, of course, is purely coincidental,' one Arias insider remarked sarcastically." The Council on Hemispheric Affairs reports that "According to Costa Rican officials, the Reagan Administration's delay in recently appointing a new ambassador for more than

seven months is a sign of its displeasure with Arias's diplomatic moves in the region. One Arias aide said that for Washington 'this embassy is not here for dialogue or political development in Costa Rica. It's still here with the aim of creating a southern front [for the *contras*]'."⁴

These topics are generally ignored, despite their obvious significance, in conformity with the principle that the state sets the agenda of concern for respectable opinion. Within that framework, tactical debate is legitimate, but the bounds must not be transgressed. This principle is a corollary to the requirement that the public must be deceived, if it is not quiescent. We shall see many further instances as we proceed.

Despite extreme U.S. hostility, the efforts to achieve a diplomatic settlement persisted through 1987. With the support of the *Contadora* nations, serving as crucial intermediaries, the Central American presidents reached a tentative peace agreement in August 1987, shocking the administration and threatening to undercut its efforts throughout the past years to prevent a diplomatic settlement. Given that the comparative advantage of the United States lies in its unparalleled means of violence, while it lacks any political appeal in the region apart from favored military and wealthy elites to whose rule and privilege it is committed, it is natural that the U.S. government should consistently prefer the arena of force to that of diplomacy, and so it has. In contrast, Nicaragua has sought throughout to pursue the path of diplomacy, calling for international monitoring of borders, elimination of foreign bases and advisers so as to reduce security concerns, etc., while accepting proposals for a general (*Contadora*-initiated) treaty, taking the conflict to the International Court of Justice and the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly as required by international convention, and so on.

We return to the specifics, but there is no real question that these are the essential facts, and they are plainly unacceptable.

To face the task of purification of history posed by the Central American accords of August 1987, it was necessary to adopt a new stance, outlined with precision by Robert Hunter, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, consultant for the National Bipartisan (Kissinger) Commission on Central America, and respected commentator on international affairs. We must regretfully concede that the contras proved an inadequate instrument for “forcing pluralism on the Sandinistas” and that the “price of democracy in Nicaragua” can only be paid “by sacrificing American lives,” too great a sacrifice even for a state so caring and benevolent as ours:

By contrast, the contras seem to have been instrumental in achieving another, less noticed goal of US policy: acceptance by Nicaragua of a peace process that can be used to reduce security threats in the region. This goal, less ambitious than a Sandinista overthrow, has the virtue of broad support across the US political spectrum.⁵

This explanation of the virtues of the less noticed-goal, however, overlooks one slight flaw in the argument: the goal could readily have been achieved at any time in the preceding years by accepting the diplomatic options urged and pursued by the Nicaraguan enemy, adamantly rejected at every turn by the Reagan administration. This perception being entirely unacceptable, it must be exorcised, and a more fitting history must be enshrined along the lines that Hunter outlines. As explained by James Rohwer in the *New York Times*, it was “America’s pugnacity over the last several years” that compelled Nicaragua to accept the conditions of the peace settlement (namely, those it had been requesting for six years against unceasing U.S. opposition), conditions that will secure borders and remove security threats and thus will prevent Nicaragua from overrunning its neighbors, if not threatening the United States itself, and will compel these Hitlerian aggressors to “keep Nicaragua’s miseries to itself”—these miseries,

of course, being entirely their responsibility, having nothing to do with “America’s pugnacity.”⁶ This “pugnacity” and its effects merit only admiration and approval, within the culture of terrorism.

While the standard argument offered by Robert Hunter is transparently absurd, and the variant offered by James Rohwer merits somewhat harsher terms, one might imagine a more sophisticated version: “America’s pugnacity” compelled the totalitarian Sandinistas to accept terms that call for their internal democratization, along with a lessening of their threat to their neighbors, namely, the terms of the August 1987 accords, which previously they refused to accept. It is noteworthy that the argument is not offered, but that is for other reasons: no arguments are required during the incantation of state propaganda. But let us consider this argument nonetheless. It is readily tested. We simply inspect the diplomatic record to determine when the United States, or anyone else, offered Nicaragua the option of accepting a treaty which terminated U.S. support for its proxy army in return for the internal moves called for in the August accords in all countries of the region, and we ask when Nicaragua rejected this option, compelling the United States to resort to “pugnacity” to achieve these long-desired goals. We quickly discover, again, that the United States never contemplated such a proposal, and has undermined the diplomatic process from the start, and still does: the Reagan administration at once demonstrated the hostility towards the August 1987 agreements that is traditional when diplomacy or international law interfere with the preferred route of violence. The real reasons for “America’s pugnacity” lie elsewhere, and they are obvious enough, but, being unacceptable, they cannot be considered in the cultural mainstream.

There can be little doubt that this enterprise of historical engineering will succeed, just as similar ones have in the past. Its manifest absurdity is unlikely to prove an impediment for the dominant intellectual culture. We return to a closer look at how

these problems have evolved and have been addressed, and how the basis has been laid for assuring that they will be successfully solved, as in the past, with impressive consistency and a regular display of piety and self-righteousness.

The doctrinal truths must be driven home forcefully and incessantly, because more is at stake than merely providing a justification for what has been done. A basis must be laid for the continuing resort to violence in the likely event that a political settlement will not suit U.S. demands and will therefore be undermined—by enemy treachery, the required conclusion whatever the facts, therefore the one that must be established as doctrine. And what more fitting argument could there be than the “historical fact” that only through the use of force was it possible to drive the enemy to the bargaining table in the first place. Furthermore, similar situations are bound to arise in the future, and historical engineering must ensure, without delay, that the proper arsenal of lessons will be available, to be deployed when needed.

In pursuit of these objectives, the current situation may be obscured by the usual technique of selective focus and interpretation that adheres to approved principles, or simply by outright falsification or suppression of unacceptable fact. As for the past, it is plainly irrelevant, since we have undergone a miraculous conversion and have changed course—despite the fact that the institutional structures and planning system that lie behind past atrocities remain intact and unchallenged, and there is little recognition in the intellectual or popular culture of what has happened in reality, apart from those (not insignificant) sectors of popular nonelite opinion that remain stricken by the “Vietnam syndrome.”

The doctrine of “change of course,” which allows any past horror to be cheerfully dismissed, is highly functional within a terrorist culture. It is presented in its most vulgar form by 1987 Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Krauthammer, who assures us that “today’s America is not Teddy Roosevelt’s or Eisenhower’s or even

that imagined by Ronald Reagan, the candidate.” Now “democracy in the Third World has become, for the right as well as the left, a principal goal of American foreign policy.” While it is true that “liberty has not always been the American purpose,” now all has changed: “We believe in freedom,” and the past can be consigned to oblivion along with all that it teaches us about American institutions and the way they operate.⁷ As for the present, it will be rendered with the same scrupulous concern for accuracy and honest self-criticism that was exhibited during past eras when, we now concede in retrospect, there may have been an occasional blemish.

A more sophisticated version of this valuable doctrine is offered by the editors of the conservative London *Spectator*, who are able to perceive that “the sudden attachment of the United States to pluralist democracy in Central America in general, and Nicaragua in particular, may seem a little strange” in the light of the historical record, and that “this hypocrisy, as some see it, has deprived the Americans of credibility.” But, they continue, such a reaction is improper, because it “assumes no nation has a right to act unless it has been perfectly consistent through the ages”; “cases have to be decided on their own merits,” and the case for a war against Nicaragua is “apparent to all but western *marxist* visitors, dazzled as they always are by the glories of low-cost housing projects, women’s groups and universal measles vaccination.” In contrast, wealthy and privileged sectors of the West show proper contempt for such absurdities, preferring the wise reflections of Winston Churchill, who observed to his colleague Joseph Stalin in 1943 that

the government of the world must be entrusted to satisfied nations, who wished nothing more for themselves than what they had. If the world-government were in the hands of hungry nations, there would always be danger. But none of us had any reason to seek for anything more. The peace would be kept by

peoples who lived in their own way and were not ambitious. Our power placed us above the rest. We were like rich men dwelling in peace within their habitations.

Enjoying this happy state as a result of our virtue and good works, we are entitled to sneer disdainfully at ridiculous attempts to save children dying of disease, provide housing for the poor and starving, offer women the possibility of escaping from slavery and degradation, and other such childish nonsense in "hungry nations" unsatisfied with their proper lot.⁸

For all their astuteness, however, the editors still miss a few small points: (1) contrary to what they allege, the United States (along with "satisfied nations" generally) is quite consistent in its choice of targets of violence and its selective concerns, as the historical record shows, and the reasons are explained with sufficient clarity in internal documents; (2) ideological managers are equally consistent in concealing these striking regularities, which can readily be grasped once we escape the confines of convenient dogma; (3) the United States has no commitment "to pluralist democracy in Central America," but, rather, has dedicated itself, particularly in the 1980s, to demolishing any possibility that it might arise.⁹ It makes perfect sense for the United States to develop a "sudden attachment" to its particular conception of "democracy" in Nicaragua from the moment of the overthrow of the Somoza regime in July 1979, though not before, while undertaking programs of ruthless savagery to destroy popular organizations that might lay the basis for meaningful democracy in El Salvador in the very same years. There is no inconsistency, apart from the constructions of the commissars, striving to adapt to changing events.

One useful consequence of the doctrine of "change of course" is that all analytic work devoted to the study of American society and history is entirely irrelevant, no matter what it reveals. Since we have now changed course, we may dismiss the lessons

of history and begin afresh, unburdened by any understanding of the nature of American society or the documentary and historical record. All studies of these topics may be shelved, as now irrelevant, apart from their antiquarian interest. Furthermore, analysis of current developments may also be dismissed when the conclusions are unacceptable, since we can, after all, always change course once again and set forth anew on the path of righteousness when the truth about the world is too obvious to suppress. The highest value proclaimed in the intellectual culture, if it is to serve its functions, must be total ignorance about who we are and what we do in the world, for Ignorance is Strength. Given the facts and what they reveal, this is a doctrine of no little utility and significance.

The extraordinary efficiency of the doctrine of willful ignorance of ourselves, which allows a convenient "change of course" whenever it becomes necessary to dispose of inconvenient facts, is revealed at every turn. During the 1987 Iran-contra hearings, for example, the country and the media were exposed to a record of duplicity that demonstrated beyond any question that the Reagan administration cannot be trusted to adhere to congressional directives, and surely not to international agreements. The point was hammered home with particular intensity, day after day, with regard to its operations in Central America. This much, at least, is not even in dispute. The public hearings came to an end on August 3, and two days later, the Reagan administration proposed a "peace plan" for Central America. I will return to its timing and the background, but consider just its basic contents. The Reagan plan called for dismantling of the political system in Nicaragua along with the scheduled elections and suspension of emergency regulations instituted in response to U.S.-organized attacks, a "demobilization of Sandinista and insurgent forces," and a halt in arms shipments to Nicaragua from "Communist countries," which means a total halt in arms shipments, since the