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COVERT GUN-RUNNING BY GOVERNMENTS

THE SECOND major channel for clandestine arms transfers to Latin America is covert deliveries by foreign governments—usually by their intelligence agencies—to friendly guerrilla and insurgent groups. Both of the superpowers engaged in such activities during the Cold War as part of their efforts to undermine each other's allies in the Third World. By providing arms in this fashion, they sought to build insurgent organizations that would be capable of overthrowing a hostile regime or causing it great damage. The United States, for instance, supplied arms to the rebel forces of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in Guatemala in 1954, and to the Cuban exile forces involved in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961.¹ Similarly, the Soviet Union—aided, in most cases, by Fidel Castro's Cuba—provided arms to a number of Marxist guerrilla groups in Latin America.²

The superpowers initiated covert supply operations of this sort early in the Cold War. Under National Security Directive number 10/2, signed in 1948, President Harry Truman authorized the CIA's Office of Special Projects (later renamed the Office of Policy Coordination) to engage in "subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas, and refugee liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world."³ By 1953, according to the "Church Report" on U.S. intelligence activities (named after its principal author, Senator Frank Church), the CIA had initiated covert programs—consisting of propaganda, arms aid, and covert political action—in 48 countries.⁴ Like the United States, the Soviet Union engaged in a wide variety of covert operations during this period, although most of its efforts in the early years of the Cold War were concentrated in areas closer to home (notably in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia).

In the 1980s, Central America became one of the principle battlefields in this subterranean struggle between the superpowers. Both Washington

and Moscow sought to undermine each other's power and influence in the region by supporting insurgent groups seeking the overthrow of governments backed by their opponent. To further strengthen its position in the region, the United States also forged covert links with special intelligence units in a number of these countries. In pursuit of these various efforts, both governments supplied substantial quantities of light weapons to various insurgents in the region—weapons that, in many cases, remain in circulation in Latin America today.

The "Reagan Doctrine" and the Iran-Contra Affair

Probably the most documented covert arms-supply operation ever undertaken by a U.S. administration was the "Iran-contra" affair of the mid-1980s. This effort was initiated in 1981, when President Reagan signed a classified "finding" to the effect that U.S. security would be enhanced by providing covert support for paramilitary operations against "the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support infrastructure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America."⁵ Ultimately, this operation resulted in the delivery of millions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition to the anti-Sandinista insurgents in Nicaragua and, when the scheme was finally uncovered, in felony charges against senior officials of the Reagan Administration.⁶

The delivery of arms to the Nicaraguan contras was but one of several covert supply operations conducted by the CIA during the Reagan era. Under the rubric of the "Reagan Doctrine," senior administration officials sought to diminish Soviet power and influence in the Third World by supporting anti-communist insurgencies against pro-Soviet, Marxist regimes in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Libya, and Nicaragua. The formulation of the Reagan Doctrine began during Reagan's first term in office, when senior policymakers warned that the "global correlation of forces" (a term borrowed from Soviet strategists) would turn against the West unless the United States bolstered its efforts to combat Soviet inroads in the Third World. Recognizing that the American public—still traumatized by the Vietnam War—would not favor direct U.S. military intervention in such areas, these policymakers called for a campaign of indirect intervention.⁷ Although most of these endeavors were conducted in secret, Reagan alluded to them in his 1985 State of the Union address, when he said that the United States "must not break faith with those who are risking their

lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours since birth."⁸

In applying this principle, the Reagan Administration placed particular emphasis on efforts to cripple the Sandinista regime of Nicaragua—described, in administration rhetoric, as constituting a major threat to U.S. security. To counter this threat, the White House instructed the CIA to organize, arm, and support the small bands of anti-Sandinista insurgents operating from outside Nicaraguan territory. These insurgents, known as *contrarrevolucionarios* ("contras"), were primarily composed of former members of the late Nicaraguan dictator Antonio Somoza Debayle's repressive National Guard. In the fall of 1981, the CIA merged this group with a small group of non-Somoza militants to form the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) and, in accordance with the finding signed by Reagan, began to supply this force with arms. These efforts were stepped up over the next two years, as the Reagan Administration attempted to create a guerilla army capable of defeating or seriously weakening the Sandinista government.⁹

In arming the contras, U.S. operatives generally sought weapons of Soviet or Eastern bloc manufacture—thereby allowing the insurgents to employ ammunition captured from the Sandinista army, which was largely equipped with Soviet-type weaponry. (The use of Soviet-type weapons also made it easier for the contras and their backers to claim that they were obtaining their arms from defectors or fallen Sandinista soldiers, rather than from the United States.) To obtain such arms, the CIA drew on a variety of sources. In May 1983, for instance, retired Air Force Major General Richard Secord—acting on behalf of CIA Director William Casey—secretly obtained several tons of Soviet-type munitions that had been confiscated from PLO forces by the Israelis in 1982. These weapons, and additional ex-PLO munitions acquired from Israel in March-July 1984, were then transferred to the CIA and, through a variety of clandestine channels, passed on to the contras.¹⁰

This transaction marked the inauguration of a major covert arms-supply operation managed by General Secord and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North (then on the staff of the National Security Council) and using various "third" countries to provide the contras with arms, funds, and supplies once Congress voted to bar the use of U.S. funds for this purpose. In October 1984, after it had been revealed that the CIA had had a direct hand in the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, Congress adopted the second "Boland Amendment" (named for Rep. Edward Boland of Massachusetts) which prohibited the CIA

and other agencies from using U.S. funds to support operations "which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement, or individuals."¹¹ To circumvent the Congressional restriction, North sought the aid of a number of countries, including Brunei, China, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, South Korea, and Taiwan. Some of these countries, namely Brunei, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Taiwan, were asked to supply funds; others, including China and Israel, to provide arms; still others, notably the Central American countries, to provide bases and logistical support.¹²

Most critical to the success of the contra support operation was the cooperation of Honduras and El Salvador—Honduras to physically house the rebel bases and to provide logistical support, El Salvador to serve as the main supply base and arms depot for the contras. To secure the assistance of these countries and others in the region, the Reagan Administration offered their leaders a significant increase in U.S. military assistance. According to documents filed with the U.S. District Court in Washington during the Oliver North trial, senior White House officials had first discussed the idea of offering this sort of "quid pro quo" to cooperating governments at a meeting of the National Security Planning Group on June 25, 1984. CIA Director William Casey reportedly indicated that El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and one additional country (presumably Costa Rica) were considered by the CIA as possible sources for contra support, especially if they could be provided with additional economic aid from the United States.¹³ Secretary of State George Shultz further suggested that the U.S. government provide increased military aid to these countries, which in turn would be expected to supply the insurgents with military equipment already in their possession.¹⁴

By November 1984, Honduras and El Salvador had begun supplying arms to the contras and were helping to ship arms and equipment to rebel base camps along the Nicaraguan borders. Honduras was also allowing the contras to establish base camps within its territory, was lending the guerrillas ammunition when their stocks ran low, and was providing end-user certificates to cover their arms acquisitions. Guatemala and Costa Rica also supplied end-user certificates or otherwise assisted in the acquisition and transportation of arms and supplies, although on a smaller scale. In return for all this support, President Reagan authorized the Defense Department to accelerate the delivery of previously ordered military supplies to El

Salvador and Honduras and to assist all four countries in other ways.¹⁵

As a result of these, and similar arrangements, U.S. military aid and arms sales to cooperating nations in Central America soared (see chapter 3). Outright military aid to El Salvador jumped from \$33.5 million in fiscal year 1983 to \$176.8 million in 1984, \$124.8 million in 1985, and \$120.4 million in 1986; similarly, aid to Honduras rose from \$27.5 million in fiscal year 1983 to \$76.5 million in 1984, \$66.3 million in 1985, and \$80.1 million in 1986. In addition, Washington provided these countries with increased credits for the purchase of arms through the Foreign Military Sales program. Costa Rica and Guatemala were also awarded increased military aid and FMS credits, although at lower levels. (To provide such aid to Guatemala, the Reagan Administration had to apply great pressure on the U.S. Congress to overlook evidence that the Guatemalan military was involved in a systematic campaign of terror against opposition political forces, often involving the abduction, torture, rape, and execution of dissidents.¹⁶) All told, these four countries received \$1.1 billion in U.S. military aid and credits in 1982-1987,¹⁷ much of which was devoted to transfers of light and medium weapons. Were it not for Iran-contra, these countries would have received but a tiny fraction of this amount.

Next most important, in terms of aiding the contras, was the acquisition of funds—especially after Congress voted to cut off all U.S. support in 1984. Initially, much of the needed money was supplied by Saudi Arabia, which had agreed to work with the Reagan Administration in supporting covert anti-Soviet activities in Afghanistan and several other countries.¹⁸ Between May 1984 and April 1985, the contras were provided with a total of \$24.5 million—most of it supplied by the Saudis—of which more than \$17 million was spent on arms, ammunition, and combat operations.¹⁹ Colonel North also diverted funds obtained from Iran (in payment for TOW missiles and other munitions supplied to Teheran by the CIA as part of a separate covert operation) to secret Swiss bank accounts used to finance covert arms shipments to the contras.²⁰

To assist North in these efforts, General Secord and his business partner, Albert Hakim, established an underground network of supply organizations and banking mechanisms known as "the Enterprise." This network was described by North in his Congressional testimony as an "off-the-shelf," self-sustaining entity that could be called upon to conduct covert actions around the world without the restrictions imposed by Congressional oversight. In essence, this was a large, multinational arms-supply agency, organized along

the lines of a private, profit-making black-market entity, but operated on behalf of a government agency. Once U.S. government funding for the contras was cut off in 1984, this entity was primarily responsible for managing the steady flow of arms and equipment to the Nicaraguan rebels.²¹

The Enterprise consisted of a complex conglomeration of "front" organizations, including: Stanford Technology Trading Group International, the corporate base of the operation, which accepted checks from Enterprise dummy corporations, issued checks to contractors, and oversaw contra resupply operations; Hyde Park Square Corporation, a front used to serve as a conduit for profits from the Iranian arms sales to the contra resupply operation; Compagnie de Services Fiduciaires, S.A., a Swiss company responsible for setting up shell companies for the Enterprise, transferring funds, and managing several secret bank accounts; Defex, S.A., a front organization formed by Hakim that laundered payments to arms dealers and distributed profits accruing to the Enterprise; Dolmy Business, Inc., the official owner of the *Erriea*, a freighter used to transfer arms to the contras; Amalgamated Commercial Enterprises, which managed the purchase and maintenance of aircraft used for the resupply operations; and Lake Resources, Inc., which handled over \$32 million in payments from the Iranian arms sales and \$1.7 million in private donations to the contras.²² North and Secord also used a number of small airlines with CIA connections, including Southern Air Transport, to ferry arms and equipment to rebel base camps in Honduras and Costa Rica.

In addition to these organizations, the Enterprise employed a number of private arms companies to procure weapons for the guerrillas. These included: Energy Resources International, the principal agent for at least six arms shipments to the contras conducted between late 1984 and August 1986; Transworld Arms, Inc., a Montreal-based company that arranged for at least two shipments of arms to the Enterprise in 1984 and 1985; Defex-Portugal, Lda., a Portuguese arms brokerage firm that sold weapons to Richard Secord and his agents; and GeoMilitech (GMT), another arms brokerage firm that purchased \$5 million of arms for the contras from Poland. These firms used a variety of methods to hide the actual destination of their arms shipments. Defex-Portugal, for instance, used fake end-user certificates signed by a Guatemalan general to facilitate covert arms deliveries.²³

Although the full extent of covert arms aid to the contras has never been established, the available documentation suggests that it was substantial.

In one memo sent to CIA Director William Casey in July 1986, retired Major General John Singlaub (a key figure in the covert supply operation) discussed a pending delivery of 10,000 Kalashnikov AKM assault rifles, 200 RPG-7 rocket launchers, 200 60 mm mortars, 50 82 mm mortars, 60 12.7 mm machine guns, 50 SA-7 portable surface-to-air missiles, and related ammunition.²⁴ Other evidence of large arms shipments comes from the transcripts of radio communications between the contras and their contacts at the CIA. On April 12, 1986, for instance, a rebel field commander radioed a CIA official to acknowledge that his forces had just received an airdrop of 20,000 pounds of military equipment, including German-type G3 assault rifles, rifle magazines and ammunition, RPG-7 rockets, grenades, and grenade launchers.²⁵ Because supply operations of this type were conducted on a regular basis for several years, it is clear that substantial quantities of small arms and other light weapons were given to the contras during this period.

These supply operations would have continued had not an Enterprise-owned Fairchild C-123K cargo plane been shot down on October 5, 1986, while dropping guns and ammunition over southern Nicaragua. The sole surviving crew member, Eugene Hasenfus, was captured by the Sandinista army, and, under interrogation, told his captors that the contra resupply flights were part of a CIA-sanctioned operation. His statements, along with documents found in the plane's wreckage plus phone records from El Salvador showing calls to the offices of Secord and North, established the connection between the U.S. government and the resupply routes. This, in turn, led to further revelations regarding the Iran-contra affair, and the ultimate demise of the entire operation.²⁶

Covert U.S. Aid to Intelligence Units in Guatemala and Honduras

In addition to aiding the contras, the United States provided covert assistance to special intelligence organizations in Guatemala and Honduras during the 1980s and (in the case of Guatemala) the early 1990s. These units—the D-2 branch of the Guatemalan military and Battalion 316 of the Honduran military—were responsible for identifying and, in many cases, liquidating members of opposition political movements. Typically, the victims of these agencies were beaten, tortured, and then "disappeared"—that is, executed in secret, with their remains hidden in unmarked burial sites. While condemning such behavior in public, the Reagan and Bush Administrations secretly approved the transfer of CIA funds and equipment

to these units on the premise that their assistance was needed in the struggle to wipe out communism in Central America.²⁷ Later, when the Cold War drew to a close, the United States continued its support—estimated at \$3-5 million per year—for the Guatemalan D-2, in order (it was claimed) to obtain information on illicit drug trafficking in the region.²⁸

The existence of covert U.S. links with the two intelligence agencies was not disclosed until the spring of 1995, when Rep. Robert G. Torricelli of New Jersey, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, released a number of classified documents on CIA operations in Central America. The documents showed that senior U.S. officials were aware that a paid CIA informer, Colonel Julio Roberto Alpirez of the Guatemalan army, was implicated in the 1990 slaying of Michael DeVine, an American innkeeper living in Guatemala, and in the 1992 execution of a Guatemalan guerrilla married to an American lawyer, Jennifer Harbury.²⁹ Subsequent investigation revealed that Alpirez had been associated with the secret intelligence unit, and had received extensive training in the United States.³⁰ This, in turn, generated a flood of revelations about secret U.S. ties with intelligence agencies in Guatemala and Honduras.

It is not possible, at this time, to determine whether small arms were among the items directly furnished to these agencies by the CIA. Given Washington's desire to boost their effectiveness, however, it is likely that the CIA provided them with arms and ammunition or with the funds to acquire them. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that Washington helped to subsidize the activities of these organizations and, in so doing, contributed to the environment of violence and terror in these societies.

Covert Soviet Arms Transfers to Latin America

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union generally eschewed support for armed struggle in Latin America, favoring instead "the peaceful road to socialism" via elections and political activity. Indeed, the rise to power of Fidel Castro in Cuba seemed to take Moscow by surprise. However, after the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende in Chile and the decision by Peru's supposedly pro-Soviet military leadership to permit significant U.S. investments in the country, Soviet policy began to shift toward greater support for armed revolutionary movements. This shift gained momentum in 1979, when the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) ousted Anastasio Somoza from power in Nicaragua.³¹

Prior to 1979, the Sandinistas had been armed by supporters in several Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica; a small amount of assistance was also provided by Cuba. When the various factions operating inside Nicaragua unified against Somoza, Havana increased its military support and created a logistical network for channeling arms to the FSLN. This network shipped arms from Cuba to Panama, and then to the airport in the northern Costa Rican city of Liberia, where they were transferred to the guerrilla forces.³² The Soviet Union joined Cuba in providing arms to Central American insurgent groups in the early 1980s, when it began supplying the FMLN of El Salvador. Even then, however, it did not send arms directly to the insurgents but acted as a sort of broker, arranging for allies like Vietnam, Ethiopia, and the Eastern European countries to actually supply the weapons.³³

In January 1981, the FMLN launched what it called the "General Offensive" against the government of El Salvador. Although ultimately unsuccessful, this offensive showed that the FMLN had been able to acquire fairly sophisticated light weapons in a relatively short period of time. Prior to 1980, the FMLN had been poorly armed with a motley array of pistols, shotguns, and military rifles. By the time of the General Offensive, however, the guerrillas were equipped with Belgian FAL assault rifles, German G3s, U.S. M-1s, M-16s, and AR-15s, and Israeli *Uzis* and *Galils*. Their arsenal also included U.S. M-60 machine guns and M-79 rocket launchers, U.S. and Russian hand grenades, Chinese RPG grenade launchers, and U.S.-manufactured light anti-tank weapons and mortars.³⁴ According to cables and reports released by the U.S. Department of State, some of these weapons were included in arms shipments arranged by FMLN leader Shafik Handel with officials of the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and a number of Eastern European countries during an overseas trip in June and July 1980. Handel made an additional trip to Lebanon in March 1981, presumably to obtain arms from *al Fatah*, a branch of the Palestine Liberation Organization.³⁵

Much as the CIA sought Soviet-type weapons for transfer to the Nicaraguan contras (so as to ensure commonality in ammunition with government forces), the FMLN sought U.S.-type weapons for use against the Salvadoran military (which, of course, was armed with U.S.-supplied equipment). For this reason, an obvious source of supply for the Salvadoran guerrillas was Vietnam—which possessed huge stockpiles of U.S. military equipment that had been left behind when the United States withdrew from Saigon in April 1975. Evidently Handel obtained a commitment from

Vietnam to provide the FMLN with 60 tons of ex-U.S. arms, including 1,620 rifles, 210 machine guns, 48 mortars, 12 rocket launchers, and two million rounds of rifle and machine gun ammunition. Later, a truck carrying U.S.-made M-16s, presumably captured or abandoned during the Vietnam war, was intercepted while en route to the guerrillas in El Salvador.³⁶ In addition to the deal concluded with Vietnam, Handel was reportedly offered "several thousand weapons" by the Marxist government of Ethiopia (which had also inherited U.S.-type weapons from the previous, U.S.-backed government), including 1,500 M-1 rifles and 1,000 M-14 rifles.³⁷

During this period, the Soviet Union and Cuba are believed to have cooperated in the clandestine delivery of arms by its allies to other guerrilla organizations in Latin America, including those in Chile. In October 1986, for instance, the Chilean government (then ruled by General Pinochet) announced that it had located several large caches of arms in northern Chile that were said to be intended for leftist guerrilla forces. Included in the caches were some 3,000 used M-16 rifles and two million rounds of ammunition that had been supplied to South Vietnamese forces in the 1970s and later donated to the Chilean guerrillas (presumably at the behest of Havana and Moscow) by the current Vietnamese government.³⁸ Similar arms deliveries are thought to have been made to other guerrilla groups in Latin America, but little has been made public about such transactions.

Endnotes for Chapter 6

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6. See U.S. Congress, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987).
7. See Raymond D. Copson and Richard P. Cronin, "The 'Reagan Doctrine' and Its Prospects," *Survival*, January/February 1987, pp. 40-55.
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12. *U.S. v. North*, Stipulation.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17, 20.
16. For discussion see R. Jeffrey Smith and Dana Priest, "Covert Aid, Intelligence Ties Undermined Public Outrage," *Washington Post*, April 2, 1995.

17. DSAA, *FMS Facts 1990*, pp. 6-7, 12-13, 64-65, 70-71. Includes FMS Construction sales; excludes Direct Commercial Sales and military training grants.

18. See Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), pp. 404-6.

19. *U.S. v. North*, Stipulation, p. 9.

20. *Ibid.*

21. For background and discussion see Emerson, *Secret Warriors*, pp. 216-24.

22. Information drawn from the National Security Archives, *Iran-Contra Document Set*.

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24. Letter of John K. Singlaub to William J. Casey, July 7, 1986, accessed through the National Security Archives, *Iran-Contra Document Set*.

25. "UNO/FARN Lethal Airdrop to Combat Forces," CIA Intelligence Report on Enterprise Flight, Cable no. 825696, April 12 1986, accessed through the National Security Archives, *Iran-Contra Document Set*.

26. See U.S. Congress, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, Appendix B: Depositions, November 1987, p.144.

27. On Guatemala see Smith and Priest, "Covert Aid, Intelligence Ties Undermined Public Outrage"; Tim Weiner, "Tale of Evasion of Ban on Aid for Guatemala," *New York Times*, March 30, 1995; Weiner, "In Guatemala's Dark Heart, C.I.A. Tied to Death and Aid," *New York Times*, April 2, 1995; Wiener, "C.I.A. Director Admits to Failure in Disclosing Links to Guatemala," *New York Times*, April 6, 1995. On Honduras see Douglas Farrah, "Impunity Challenged," *Washington Post*, October 16, 1995; Ginger Thompson and Gary Cohn, "Honduras Charges Soldiers," *Baltimore Sun*, July 26, 1995.

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38. See Shirley Christian, "Chile Arms Caches Are Laid to Cuba," *New York Times*, October 19, 1986.