

EXPLAINING REAGAN'S OBSESSION WITH NICARAGUA

by

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Scholars argue that Reagan was obsessed with Nicaragua, but the nature of this obsession is a matter of debate. The purpose of this study is to explain the true causes of President Ronald Reagan's obsession with Nicaragua. This research was derived through process tracing of declassified documents, campaign papers, presidential speeches, news reports, and scholarly analyses. This study finds that Reagan's focus on Nicaragua was of his own making, and not a manipulation by his advisors as some contend. This study also argues that Reagan's obsession was to control his public perception. This obsession was the driving force behind U.S. intervention in the region and Reagan was completely aware and approved of all activities in Nicaragua. His obsession remained prominent after Reagan's re-election as he was unwilling to be characterized by the public and the Soviet Union as a weak leader who allowed an anti-religious, communist government to take power so close to the American border.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“If such a story gets out, we’ll all be hanging by our thumbs in front of the White House until we find out who did it,” stated President Reagan in a top secret meeting on June 25, 1984 while discussing the implications of covert actions in Nicaragua.¹ Scholars continue to debate the true nature of Ronald Reagan’s obsession with Nicaragua throughout his presidency as his reasons for intervention do not match the reality of the conflict. Some like Richard Pipes and Martin Anderson argue that Reagan was manipulated by his advisors and they were the driving force behind intervention in Central America.² Others like Jeane Kirkpatrick argue that he was out of touch with his administration and that Reagan became obsessed as he believed he was genuinely combatting a Soviet Communist threat.³ This study finds that Reagan was not specifically obsessed with stopping the spread of the ideology and control of the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime as a Soviet threat as there is not enough credible evidence to validate that Soviet influence was at all present after 1981. Reagan was actually obsessed with appearing strong in the eyes of the Soviet Union and the American people. This caused him to ensure that the anti-Sandinista, Contra movement would continue as Reagan thought the removal of Sandinista leadership from the Nicaraguan government would be the ultimate display of strength. Reagan’s fear of impeachment shaped his actions from the start of his administration so that his obsession would not be exposed. He chose to hide his obsession by allowing his underlings to

¹ NSC Minutes. “NSC, National Security Planning Group Minutes, ‘Subject: Central America,’ June 25, 1984.” *National Security Archive*, 25 June 1984, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22302-01-nsc-national-security-planning-group-minutes>.

² Petersen, Tore T. “Ronald Reagan: Leadership Style And Foreign Policy.” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, no. 8 (2004): 136–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41406711>.

³ Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. “Marxist Totalitarianism in Our Hemisphere: Nicaragua.” *World Affairs* 170, no. 2 (2007): 89–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672797>.

appear to make decisions without his approval so that he could later invoke the policy of plausible deniability. Through process tracing of declassified documents, campaign papers, presidential speeches, news reports, and scholarly analyses, this study argues that Reagan's desire to control his public perception was the main reason for U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and that he had complete awareness of all activities in the region.

Reagan's insatiable need to appear strong fueled his actions in Nicaragua. Jimmy Carter's policies in Nicaragua had caused the United States to look weak to the Soviet Union and Reagan refused to be portrayed in a similar manner.⁴ This thesis finds that Reagan's interest in Nicaragua originated from the public attack by religious leaders, led by the Maryknoll Sisters, before his inauguration in December 1980. Reagan could not allow himself be portrayed as condoning human rights violations or as sacrilegious. He was compelled to address the specific claims made against him, but he needed to frame his response in such a way as to not alienate the conservative Christian base who had just elected him.⁵ Through a combination of chance and circumstance, a conflict had already started that would allow Reagan to achieve his strategic goals in both foreign and domestic politics.⁶ His answer to this attack was to discredit the authors, specifically the Maryknoll nuns. By attacking their religious commitment, Reagan provided the justification for his supporters to find fault in the Maryknoll Sisters' credibility and the arguments they publicly proposed. Reagan hoped to distance himself from their critiques as

⁴ DeYoung, Karen, and Washington Post Foreign Service; Contributing to this story were Washington Post foreign correspondent Christopher Dickey in El Salv. "El Salvador: Where Reagan Draws the Line." The Washington Post, March 9, 1981. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/03/09/el-salvador-where-reagan-draws-the-line/b63052cd-91a9-42df-b924-3f87b99d5d24/>.

⁵ Clergy and Laity Concerned. "Text of Religious Leaders' Human Rights Statement; Dear President-Elect Reagan,." The New York Times, December 18, 1980. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1980/12/18/111837766.html?pageNumber=49>.

⁶ DeYoung, *Where Reagan Draws the Line*.

he wanted to continue providing aid to the U.S.-backed government of El Salvador to uphold their control. Reagan originally claimed he was concerned about the spread of the Nicaraguan Sandinista's ideology, Liberation Theology, to El Salvador. He chose to provide aid to the Contra (anti-Sandinista) army and to the government of El Salvador to help guard against the possibility of the Sandinistas gaining more control in the region. Over time Reagan's obsession to showcase his strength became apparent when his policy shifted to attempt to remove the Sandinistas from the Nicaraguan government completely.

In his first major foreign policy initiative on February 19, 1981, Reagan claimed that the Sandinistas had received military aid from the Soviet Union and their ally, Cuba.⁷ While no evidence was found to support Reagan's statement that military equipment was shipped from the Soviet Union, this was the start of the justification that allowed him to continue his actions and policies in Central America by framing the Sandinistas as a Soviet Communist threat. Reagan would publicly voice the need to combat Soviet influence in Nicaragua incessantly throughout his presidency. His Christian and conservative Republican bases had a well-known hatred for communism. Reagan was able to expand his support for re-election in 1984 by also aligning the critics of his Central American policy with communism. "It was from that steamy, little-known Central American republic that Reagan would send a message to Moscow."⁸ Reagan's obsession continued after re-election as he had just spent years advocating against the Sandinistas and refused to be perceived as taking a more lenient approach with his policies.

⁷ Kaiser, Robert G., and Washington Post Staff Writer; Karen DeYoung of The Washington Post Foreign Service contributed to this report. Lewis H. Diuguid. "White Paper on El Salvador Is Faulty." The Washington Post, June 9, 1981. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/06/09/white-paper-on-el-salvador-is-faulty/e17adfa2-3763-42b4-a1f6-1c641ecfd72f/>.

⁸ DeYoung, *Where Reagan Draws the Line*.

Reagan's underlings helped him justify his policies in Central America by creating documentation and false chronologies to support the idea of Soviet influence long after aid had diminished.⁹ Because his advisors' reports helped to frame the Sandinistas as anti-religious, Soviet allies, they became integral to preventing the exposure of his obsession. By publishing reports where his advisors appeared to make decisions without presidential approval, Reagan was allowed to rely on the use of plausible deniability. Reagan's fear of impeachment, if his obsession were to be discovered, controlled his actions for his entire presidency. Section one will outline Reagan's framing of the conflict in Nicaragua, section two will show that Soviet influence was minimal from the start and had completely dissipated by late 1981, and section three will explain that Reagan's underlings were acting according to his will to avoid his potential impeachment. These three sections will prove that Reagan went to extreme lengths to hide his obsession with appearing strong to the Soviet Union and to the American public.

⁹ Booth, John A., *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), 138-144.

Chapter 2: The Start Of Conflict In Nicaragua

Reagan's public opinion of the Sandinista's ideology and intentions was drastically different than his predecessor, Jimmy Carter. General Somoza took power in Nicaragua on June 9, 1936 and had been supported by the U.S. from that point on.¹⁰ In 1961, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was created with the goal of making a socialist state. They were a Marxist-Leninist organization inspired by the Cuban revolution, and were formed in opposition to the Somoza regime.¹¹ In 1974, the Somoza government had declared a state of siege in light of attacks from the Sandinistas.¹² By the time Carter was inaugurated in 1977, the state of siege had not been lifted and throughout the three year period, Somoza's human rights violations had increased as his government acted more aggressively to end the uprising. The synthesis of the losses of the Vietnam War and international pressure to address Somoza's harsh tactics caused Carter to cut off aid to the Somoza government in 1977. When Somoza lifted the state of siege later in 1977, Carter resumed aid to Nicaragua's government as he believed Somoza was changing his policies.¹³ By the summer of 1978, the Broad Opposition Front (FOA) was formed including moderates and the more intense Sandinistas who continued their battle against the Somoza leadership. Because Carter believed that Somoza's government had improved their human rights violations, he thought that sending aid to support Somoza, not the recently created FOA, was in the best interest of the United States. However, this opinion

¹⁰ Cavendish, Richard. "General Somoza Takes over Nicaragua." History Today, June 2011. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/general-somoza-takes-over-nicaragua>.

¹¹ Booth, The Nicaraguan Revolution 138-144.

¹² "Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs." Nicaragua and Iran Timeline." Brown University, 2019. https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/timeline-n-i.php.

¹³ Shaw, Terri. "Nicaragua Lifts State of Siege." The Washington Post, September 20, 1977. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/09/20/nicaragua-lifts-state-of-siege/5634d76e-834e-4a82-891f-696dda4f751d/>.

changed in early 1979 when the Somoza government refused to accept mediations to settle conflict.¹⁴ Carter subsequently reduced aid in February of 1979 but chose not to stop all support because he did not want to completely sever the relationship between the U.S. and Nicaragua and wanted the conflict to end.

Carter made the U.S. look weak to the Soviet Union by changing his loyalties between the Somoza Nicaraguan leadership and the Sandinistas. Unlike Reagan, Carter viewed the Sandinistas as the cure to Somoza's human rights violations when they took control of the Nicaraguan government on July 19, 1979. Carter believed the Sandinistas would be a better alternative than the Somoza leadership after almost two decades of conflict between the two groups, but his opinion would shift again over the following year. "The Sandinista victory in Nicaragua became ground zero for containing communist threats in the western hemisphere."¹⁵ Carter promptly sent \$99 million in aid to the Sandinistas in July 1979 hoping their leadership would become pro-U.S. However, by early 1980, it became clear to Washington officials that the Sandinistas had radical views that could also be potentially problematic.¹⁶ As a result, Carter approved resistance forces in Nicaragua with the intention of organizing forces and providing propaganda to pressure the Sandinistas. These forces would be supported by the CIA, but Carter did not approve of any military action against the Sandinistas in hope that they would cooperate and change their positions. Carter's ultimate goal to keep peace in Nicaragua caused his shifts in opinion about which leadership to support so that the U.S. could maintain a positive relationship

¹⁴ Goshko, John M. "U.S. Retaliates against Somoza, U.S. Cuts Back Aid to Nicaragua." *The Washington Post*, February 9, 1979. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/02/09/us-retaliates-against-somoza-cuts-back-aidus-cuts-back-aid-to-nicaragua/0dedf7f9-6dbc-401c-9101-e5c4479d19e1/>.

¹⁵ LeoGrande, William M. "The United States and Nicaragua," in *Nicaragua: The First Five Years*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger, 1985), 426-427.

¹⁶ Brown University, *Nicaragua and Iran Timeline*.

with whoever was in control. These shifts caused Carter to be depicted as a weak leader who also failed to actually address human rights violations.¹⁷

¹⁷ DeYoung, *Where Reagan Draws the Line*.

Chapter 3: Reagan's Domestic Political Strategy To Hide His Obsession

The following section will explain that Reagan intervened in Nicaragua for domestic political purposes as he needed to fulfill his insatiable desire to be perceived as a strong leader. Reagan stole Carter's religious base in 1980 and needed the public to view him as the devout Christian that he had presented himself to be throughout his campaign. Because Reagan was not actually religious, his judgement was clouded by the threat of losing such a large constituency if this were to be exposed. When Reagan was publicly attacked in December 1980, one month after he had been elected, his religious credibility and the support of his conservative Christian base were threatened. The authors of the published letter questioned whether Reagan could be viewed as a true Christian if he failed to address human rights violations and if he would have shifting policies like Carter had. Reagan viewed the conflict in Nicaragua as the perfect opportunity to secure his base's support while proving that he was a credible religious leader whose policies were based on Christian values and should be followed without question. Reagan's obsession grew as he was determined to contradict the religious leaders who attacked him and to prove that he was a strong leader who did not falter like his predecessor. By silencing the critiques of those opposed to his Central American policies by claiming that they were anti-religious political activists, Reagan could earn justification from his religious base that his policies were in their best interests. With his constituents' support, Reagan would be capable of immediate intervention in Central America once he was sworn in as president. Reagan's obsession is outlined as follows as he maneuvered to become an enticing candidate to conservatives, in his response to the public attack that threatened his constituency, in his lack of religious devotion in his response, and how he tied Soviet communism to anti-religious activities to justify continued intervention in Nicaragua.

Reagan worked tirelessly to be perceived as a deeply religious man throughout his political career and in doing so, he was able to steal Jimmy Carter's religious vote in the 1980 presidential election.¹⁸ The socially conservative, white evangelical movement was sparked during Carter's administration but they disapproved of his shifting policies, especially those in Central America.¹⁹ Reagan was the ideal candidate for white evangelical voters as he advocated for limited government and argued against communism.²⁰ Reagan's upbringing in the church helped him to appeal to Carter's base as he had a deep understanding of what these individuals believed and wanted to hear.²¹

Because Reagan's mother Nelle had such a close personal relationship with their minister, Ben Cleaver, Reagan had spent years learning the best strategies to draw on one's religious values. Nelle Reagan was a deeply religious woman who had encouraged Reagan to engage in as many church activities as possible.²² She served as a Sunday school teacher for many years and often asked Reagan to host events for their church, the Dixon Disciples of Christ. Nelle and Ben provided Reagan with public speaking training at a young age through his participation in Church activities, often with acting holding a central role. These factors allowed Reagan to fit right in with the conservative Republicans. With religious ideology present throughout his campaign rhetoric and promises, Reagan successfully captured two-thirds of Carter's white evangelical voters in the 1980 election. It would later become apparent that Reagan was not as religious as he claimed to be and when he was publicly attacked by religious

¹⁸ Riley, Knott. "Lyn Nofziger Oral History." Miller Center, University of Virginia, March 13, 2023. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/lyn-nofziger-oral-history>.

¹⁹ Haberman, Clyde. "Religion and Right-Wing Politics: How Evangelicals Reshaped Elections." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/religion-politics-evangelicals.html>.

²⁰ Haberman, *How Evangelicals Reshaped Elections*.

²¹ Vaughn, Stephen. "The Moral Inheritance of a President: Reagan and the Dixon Disciples of Christ." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1995): 109–127. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551378>.

²² Vaughn, *Reagan and the Dixon Disciples*, 109-127.

leaders in December 1980, he risked being exposed as a president who made false campaign promises.

It is imperative to evaluate Reagan's pre-election claims to gain a proper understanding of the shift in his attitude toward religious leaders working abroad. Reagan first mentioned his concern over those in service abroad in his "A Strategy for Peace in the '80s" speech on October 19, 1980. Reagan stated, "We can restore pride and effectiveness in our foreign policy establishment by putting an end to the kidnapping and murder of our public servants in service abroad."²³ Reagan reiterated this the night before he was elected to his first term as president on November 3, 1980. In that speech, he stressed America's commitment to aiding those who were persecuted or alone in foreign states.²⁴ "For those who seek the right to self-determination without interference from foreign powers, tonight let us speak for them. For those who suffer from social or religious discrimination, for those who are victims of police states or government induced torture or terror... Tonight let us speak for them." Reagan clearly expressed his desire to support individuals facing injustices throughout the world on both October 19, and November 3, 1980, but his actions would quickly contradict those claims after he was publicly criticized by religious leaders even before he was inaugurated.

Reagan believed that he could achieve his goal of appearing strong if he immediately intervened in Nicaragua. This caused him to discredit those who questioned his future policies in Central America, specifically the Maryknoll Sisters. These nuns were members of a Catholic organization, based in El Salvador, who had witnessed firsthand the human rights violations that

²³ Reagan, Ronald. "Televised Address by Governor Ronald Reagan 'A Strategy for Peace in the '80s.'" The American Presidency Project, October 19, 1980. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/televised-address-governor-ronald-reagan-strategy-for-peace-the-80s>.

²⁴ Reagan, Ronald "Election Eve Address 'A Vision for America.'" Ronald Reagan Presidential Archive, November 3, 1980. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/election-eve-address-vision-america>.

continued to occur in U.S. allied countries following Carter's maneuvering in the region. The Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic was founded in 1912 by Mother Mary Joseph Rogers and is based in Ossining, New York.²⁵ The Maryknoll Sisters became the first order of Catholic nuns in the United States focused on foreign service after receiving approval from the Vatican in 1920.²⁶ They were committed to prioritizing the poor, voicing instances of injustice, and advocating for basic human rights. On December 2, 1980, two Maryknoll Sisters were returning from a Maryknoll gathering in Nicaragua. They were met at the airport in El Salvador by another nun and a lay missionary. On their drive home they were kidnapped, raped, and murdered by members of the Salvadoran National Guard.

Reagan was publicly attacked even before he was inaugurated as President. With the understanding that the previous administration, under President Carter, had changed their alliances with Nicaraguan leadership to best suit U.S. interests, the Maryknoll Sisters wrote to President-elect Reagan on December 17, 1980 in the hope that he would act differently in Central America. Seventy-two religious leaders representing eight colleges and eighteen religious denominations, including the Maryknoll Sisters, published an open letter to President-elect Ronald Reagan in the New York Times as a result of the murders of their fellow nuns. They claimed his decision not to speak out on events in the Central American region would be viewed as support of such repression.²⁷ The authors stated that there was increasing evidence that military governments were characterizing Reagan's election as a "green light" for the

²⁵ Maryknoll Sisters. "Mother Mary Joseph Our Foundress." Maryknoll Sisters, March 12, 2018. <https://www.maryknollsisters.org/about-us/our-foundress/>.

²⁶ Maryknoll Sisters. "Martyrdom in El Salvador." Maryknoll Sisters, December 7, 2022. <https://www.maryknollsisters.org/40thanniversary/>.

²⁷ Mooney, Mark. "A Group of Religious Leaders Warned President-Elect Ronald Reagan... - UPI Archives." UPI, December 17, 1980. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1980/12/17/A-group-of-religious-leaders-warned-President-elect-Ronald-Reagan/7808345877200/>.

suppression of opposing views and for further imprisonment, torture, and murder in countries that were allied with and supported by the United States.²⁸ At the end of the open letter, the authors asked Reagan to take responsibility by speaking out against these inhumane acts.

This letter posed a particular threat to Reagan's base as the authors aligned themselves with those who had just elected Reagan while simultaneously questioning if he was a weak leader who would allow atrocities so close to the American border. "From your record and stands we judge that you would not condone such erosion of democratic rights, nor would the great majority of those Americans who elected you..."²⁹ They then specifically mentioned the religious groups, and the greater American population as a whole, who should be furious about the ongoing problems in Central America. "These crimes against humanity outrage every value that we hold dear as Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Jew - yes, as Americans. Now is the time and yours the responsibility." This letter served as the starting point of Reagan's shift to the defensive as it was delivered on such a large platform, undoubtedly viewed by his supporters, thereby requiring him to address the situation so that he would not appear weak or sacrilegious.

These public critiques in December 1980 called Reagan's character and his core values into question. The attributes that the nuns questioned were important to his supporters and he could not afford to alienate his base even before he was inaugurated. Reagan came into office with the intention of intervening in Nicaragua to appear strong by defeating the Sandinistas, and he needed conservative Christian support from the start of his presidency to justify the immediate implementation of his Central American policies. He feared the loss of their support so quickly

²⁸ Clergy and Laity Concerned, *Open Letter to Reagan*.

²⁹ Clergy and Laity Concerned, *Open Letter to Reagan*.

after being elected because he realized he would be unable to intervene and appear strong if his base questioned his motivations.

The number of religious individuals in America had increased greatly in the years before Reagan was elected and he framed his response to the public attack in a manner that would appeal to their values not only to gain their support, but out of fear of having so many constituents turn against him.³⁰ An article by the *Washington Post* shows just how much these bases had grown in size throughout the period, alluding to the potential disaster that could have occurred for the administration had Reagan approached Nicaragua differently. “The previous two decades had witnessed an explosion in the number of self-identified Evangelical Christians. The number of Americans who identified as ‘born again’ increased from 24 percent in 1963 to nearly 40 percent in 1978. While mainstream church membership dropped between 1965 and 1980, the number of Southern Baptists grew from 10.8 million to 13.6 million.”³¹ With such a massive number of religious voters in the American population, Reagan could not allow his intentions in Central America or the nature of his religious devotion to be subject to skepticism.³²

Because of their standing as nuns, it was difficult for the administration to portray the Maryknoll Sisters as atheistic Communists.³³ After the open letter was published, a divide began to grow among Catholics in the United States. Reagan and the conservative Catholics in his administration felt the nuns should be held responsible for the murder of their sisters as they

³⁰ Gillon, Steven. "Perspective | Reagan Tied Republicans to White Christians and Now the Party Is Trapped." *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/22/reagan-tied-republicans-white-christians-now-party-is-trapped/>.

³¹ Gillon, *Reagan Tied Republicans to Christians*.

³² Huevo, Stephanie M. "The Murdered Churchwomen in El Salvador." *Origins*, December 2020. https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/murdered-churchwomen-el-salvador?language_content_entity=en.

³³ Dodson, Michael and Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, Laura. *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

were “bad Catholics” and served as political activists rather than religious figures.³⁴ Progressive Catholics, on the other hand, viewed the murders as an opportunity to protest and call for the removal of aid to U.S. allies that supported such acts of violence.³⁵ Reagan chose to use this divide among Catholics to spark conservative support for his policies while working to minimize the protest movements.³⁶ “While the anti-communist New Right wanted to politically isolate the Sandinistas, conservative Catholics also wanted to do so for religious reasons. For conservative Catholics, Central America was integral to ‘determining the church’s future direction.’”³⁷ The Maryknoll Sisters served as the perfect villain in his battle against the supposedly communist Sandinistas, helping to validate his policies in Central America while securing support from this religious base. Ultimately this prevented Reagan’s obsession with appearing strong from becoming apparent in his public motivations for intervention.

Reagan had to address the situation discussed in the open letter to have the necessary support to be an effective president but needed to do so in a manner that maintained his religious and political credibility. His base had core values that were violated by the crimes in Central America and Reagan was concerned that his supporters might side with the authors of the open letter and their claims. Reagan argued that he wanted to continue to provide aid to the government of El Salvador as soon as he came into office in 1981 to prevent the Nicaraguan Sandinistas from gaining greater control in the U.S.-supported nation.³⁸ This directly

³⁴ Turek, Lauren. “H-Diplo Roundtable XXII-43 on Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns.” H-Diplo, June 7, 2021. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/7807090/h-diplo-roundtable-xxii-43-reagan%E2%80%99s-gun-toting-nuns>.

³⁵ Dodson, *Nicaragua’s Other Revolution*.

³⁶ Haberman, *How Evangelicals Reshaped Elections*.

³⁷ Keely, Theresa. “H-Diplo Roundtable XXII-43 on Reagan’s Gun-Toting Nuns.” H-Diplo, June 7, 2021. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/7807090/h-diplo-roundtable-xxii-43-reagan%E2%80%99s-gun-toting-nuns>.

³⁸ Kornbluh, Peter, and Malcolm Byrne, eds. *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., National Security Archive Documents Reader, 1993, 33-41.

contradicted the concerns outlined by the Maryknoll Sisters and religious leaders as they wanted to stop aid to El Salvador until the human rights violations had been addressed.³⁹ Because the Maryknoll Sisters persisted in questioning Reagan's actions in the region after he was inaugurated, Reagan centered his policy in Central America to hide his obsession and combat their critiques.⁴⁰ Reagan refused to allow himself to be perceived as not being committed to his religious beliefs or as weak by allowing such acts of violence to occur. His answer was to attempt to discredit the nuns. Reagan was comfortable criticizing the Maryknoll Sisters in this manner because he was actually not the devout Christian that he attempted to portray. Reagan and his administration engaged with the Maryknoll Sisters in the press well into his second term in office, displaying the influence their group had on Reagan's obsession with his public perception.⁴¹

Reagan's lack of religious commitment could not be discovered without the risk of being viewed as an untrustworthy leader who was willing to change public perception to meet his goals. Although Reagan was elected by a conservative, religious majority, he was not actually very religious himself. However, Reagan needed this base to believe he was religious so that he could appeal to their values in his intervention to hide his obsession with appearing strong. Despite growing up in a religious household, Reagan often maintained his religious responsibilities out of obligation.⁴² His facade to appear to be religious began early in Reagan's life as an attempt to please his mother, Nelle Reagan and their minister Ben Cleaver. A friend of

³⁹ Clergy and Laity Concerned, *Open Letter to Reagan*.

⁴⁰ Keely, *Roundtable on Reagan's Nuns*.

⁴¹ Ames, Lynne. "The View from: The Cloister at Maryknoll; Behind the Walls, Silence Is Golden." *The New York Times*, March 26, 1989. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/26/nyregion/the-view-from-the-cloister-at-maryknoll-behind-the-walls-silence-is.html>.

⁴² Vaughn, *Reagan and the Dixon Disciples*, 78.

the family reported that Reagan might not have been as committed to the Dixon Disciple's doctrine as he appeared to be. "Reagan, himself, admitted that he spent more time in the Dixon church looking at his fiancé than listening to the sermons."⁴³ Reagan used his understanding of the religious base to frame himself in a way that would allow his supporters to have faith in his policies.

The influence of astrology was present throughout the Reagan administration proving that Reagan was not as religious as he claimed to be. His lack of commitment to the religious values he campaigned on became apparent when he spoke out against the Maryknoll Sisters. Reagan attempted to discredit not only their personal values but also their religious credibility so that his intentions would not be questioned. If he could distance the Maryknoll Sisters from his religious base, their critiques would become irrelevant and Reagan could create policy to intervene in Nicaragua without opposition as soon as he was inaugurated. Reagan's pattern of distancing himself from religion in his personal life continued throughout his time in office. In fact, once Reagan had been elected president for his first term, he had to work diligently to hide any actions that would have been perceived as sacrilegious, specifically relating to his approval of Nancy's astrologer. Following the assassination attempt on the President on March 30, 1981, Nancy Reagan claimed to have turned to astrology for comfort but instances of astrological influence appear as early as 1967 when Reagan was elected as Governor of California.⁴⁴ Nancy argued that she used her relationship with her astrologer, Joan Quigley, as a crutch in the uncertain time after the President was shot, but after one to two years their communication had

⁴³ Vaughn, *Reagan and the Dixon Disciples*, 84-89.

⁴⁴ Cannon, Lou. "Astrologers Used by First Lady, Regan Book Says." *The Washington Post*, May 3, 1988. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/05/03/astrologers-used-by-first-lady-regan-book-says/1940492b-a6a6-4190-8347-3da1d27d62d1/>.

become a habit.⁴⁵ The presence of astrology dating as far back as Reagan's time as Governor helps to illustrate the inconsistencies in Nancy's story. This further proves their dedication to preserving the secret of their lack of religious dedication.

By supporting his wife's belief in astrology and allowing his schedule to be dictated by it, Reagan was actively going against the values of his conservative, religious base. Evidence later arose that Nancy had worked closely with a member of Reagan's administration, Michael Deaver, to coordinate the scheduling of the President's activities according to the advice of her astrologer.⁴⁶ Chief of Staff James Baker stated, "It was months before Nancy told her husband what she was up to. As in most things, he indulged her. 'If it makes you feel better, go ahead and do it,' Reagan said. 'But it might look a little odd if it ever came out.'"⁴⁷ This was one of the most closely held secrets of the administration with no reporting on the matter until Reagan neared the end of his Presidency.⁴⁸ He needed to keep the public from gaining access to such sensitive information so that they would not question his legitimacy and intentions.

Reagan was obsessed with showing his strength by supporting the fight against the Sandinistas and the Soviet communist threat he claimed they represented. By supporting the government in El Salvador and the anti-Sandinista army, the Nicaraguan Contras, he hoped to minimize Sandinista influence in the region. However, Reagan changed his policies in the build-up to his bid for re-election as he no longer believed that stopping the Sandinistas from gaining further control would be an adequate approach to appearing strong.⁴⁹ Reagan then became

⁴⁵ Linge, Mary Kay. "How Ronald Reagan's Wife Nancy Let Her Astrologer Control the Presidency." New York Post, October 18, 2021. <https://nypost.com/article/ronald-reagans-wife-nancy-astrologer-joan-quigley/>.

⁴⁶ Linge, *Nancy's Astrologer Controls the Presidency*.

⁴⁷ Linge, *Nancy's Astrologer Controls the Presidency*.

⁴⁸ Cannon, *Astrologers Used by First Lady*.

⁴⁹ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 47.

obsessed with fundamentally removing the Sandinistas from power in the Nicaraguan government to prevent being categorized as weak, like Carter had been.⁵⁰ Reagan was so determined to continue supporting the anti-Sandinista army that he persisted in his argument that Soviet influence was present in the region.⁵¹ Reagan's base, and the majority of the American public, felt deep hatred for the Soviet Union and for communism as a whole.⁵² Despite the fact that Soviet influence was minimal from the start, his base's hatred allowed him to use the illusion of Soviet influence to continue sending aid.⁵³ By connecting the anti-religious actions of the Sandinistas with the proposed threat of Soviet communism, Reagan was able to appeal to the more liberal Christians and conservatives who might have otherwise been opposed to his intervention. After re-election, this study finds that Reagan refused to regress in his policies by permitting the Sandinistas to remain in control as he had just spent years stressing the importance of defeating them and not allowing their ideology so close to the American border.⁵⁴ The following section will describe how Reagan tried to satisfy his obsession as he modified his policies to justify his attempt to remove the Sandinistas from power, despite Congressional sanctions barring these actions.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Schwartz, Thomas, Donaghy, Aaron, Johns, Andrew, Maar, Henry, Teague, Aileen. "Diplo Roundtable XXIV-1 on Donaghy. The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Politics of Foreign Policy." H, H-Diplo Round Table XXIV-1, Sept. 6, 2022. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/10684614/h-diplo-roundtable-xxiv-1-donaghy%C2%A0-second-cold-war-carter-reagan>.

⁵¹ Reagan, *Cuba and Central America*.

⁵² McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles*, 28.

⁵³ Edelman, Marc. "Soviet-Nicaraguan Relations and the Contra War." *International Journal on World Peace* 5, no. 3 (1988): 45–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20751268>.

⁵⁴ Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America." Ronald Reagan Library, May 9, 1984. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-central-america>.

⁵⁵ Hayes, Andrew W. "The Boland Amendments and Foreign Affairs Deference." *Columbia Law Review* 88, no. 7 (1988): 1534–74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1122739>.

Chapter 4: Nicaragua's Relationship With The Soviet Union

While Reagan argued that the Soviet Union was helping the Sandinistas by providing aid and troops through Cuban forces, there has been no clear indication of direct Soviet military aid to Nicaragua. This supports the idea that Reagan framed the conflict in a manner that would allow for his continued intervention to aid the anti-Sandinista movement so he that would appear strong. It was not in the best interest of the Soviet Union to divert military aid to the Nicaraguan government while facing hostile relations with the United States. The majority of information provided by Soviet analysts prior to 1979 argued that Nicaragua was one of the locations in Central America (if not the location) where U.S. domination was the strongest.⁵⁶ The Soviet Union recognized the Sandinista government of Nicaragua on July 20, 1979, and developed official diplomatic relations by the end of 1979.⁵⁷ "There was only one trade deal reported to have occurred, taking place in January 1980 for the sale of Nicaraguan coffee in exchange for unspecified Soviet technical assistance."⁵⁸ The Soviet Union provided humanitarian assistance in the form of medical supplies and children's food to the Sandinistas on two separate occasions, in August 1979 and March 1981, but was cautious in promising economic aid.⁵⁹ "Soon after, the most important aid received by Nicaragua from the Soviet Union was an emergency fund for the purchase of machinery, industrial equipment, agriculture supplies, the use of a Soviet repair shop to service the Atlantic Coast fishing fleet, and several million doses of various vaccines."⁶⁰ This

⁵⁶ Edelman, *Soviet-Nicaraguan Relations*. 72-73.

⁵⁷ Prevost, Gary. "The FSLN as Ruling Party, in Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua," ed. Thomas W. Walker. Westview Press, 1991, 102-103.

⁵⁸ Collins, Joseph. "What Difference Could A Revolution Make? Food and Farming in the New Nicaragua." *Food First*, 1986, 50-52.

⁵⁹ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of state, "Developing Soviet-Nicaraguan Relations," June 24, 1981, 1-4.

⁶⁰ Collins, *The New Nicaragua*, 50-52.

study corroborates the notion that there is not credible evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union provided direct military aid to the Sandinistas. Although the Sandinistas did obtain hardware manufactured in the Soviet Union, the shipment of military weaponry and subsequent materials through third countries had declined significantly by late January 1981.⁶¹

⁶¹ Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 249-256.

Chapter 5: Reagan Uses Soviet Communism To Hide His Obsession

Reagan's claims that Soviet communism was present in Nicaragua began in his first initiative relating to foreign policy published on February 19, 1981, in his attempt to provide documentation that justified his immediate intervention.⁶² In this white paper, Reagan aligned his religious critics with what he described as an impending Soviet Communist threat. Reagan specifically argued that Cuba had been involved in guiding the Sandinistas, and that the Soviet Union had in turn directly provided arms to Nicaragua.⁶³ The Washington Post highlighted Reagan's false statements and found no evidence to support Reagan's white paper. While there is proof that the Sandinistas desired a relationship with the Soviet Union when they developed diplomatic relations in 1979, the Soviet Union was not directly involved in providing military aid.⁶⁴

Just six weeks after his February initiative, in March 1981, Reagan issued a report calling for increased covert action in Central America.⁶⁵ President Reagan took part in an interview on March 3, 1981, with Evening News Anchor Walter Cronkite on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) explaining U.S. intentions in Central America. Reagan now claimed that the Soviet Union was not directly providing aid, but rather they were displaying their influence by acting through Cuba. Throughout this interview, Reagan addressed concerns about the spread of Soviet communism and drew direct connections between Nicaragua and El Salvador. Reagan stated, "The parallel would be that without actually using Soviet troops, in effect, the Soviets are, you might say, trying to do the same thing in El Salvador that they did in

⁶² Kaiser and DeYoung, *White Paper is Faulty*.

⁶³ Kaiser and DeYoung, *White Paper is Faulty*.

⁶⁴ Edelman, *Soviet-Nicaraguan Relations*, 84-86.

⁶⁵ LeoGrande, *The United States and Nicaragua*, 428.

Afghanistan, but by using proxy troops through Cuba and guerillas.”⁶⁶ It is important to note that while Soviet intervention was actively taking place in Afghanistan throughout the entirety of his presidency, Reagan ignored the implications of Soviet influence in this region and appeared to treat Nicaragua as a much more pressing matter.⁶⁷ This helps highlight his obsession with appearing strong as he used the conflict from the start of his presidency in Nicaragua to showcase his strength, when he could have combatted a genuine Soviet threat if he had shaped his policies around Afghanistan rather than Nicaragua. His pattern of altering public perception about the actions of the Sandinistas in Central America would become especially prominent in the build up to his re-election. Reagan created routes to ensure his support would continue and he would achieve his goal of defeating the Sandinistas and appearing strong.⁶⁸

Reagan’s obsession with his positive public portrayal over continued intervention was growing in his first term in office. He knew he must be viewed by his bases as properly addressing their concerns by reaffirming his policies. Reagan created a number of policies in his National Security Decision Directives between 1981 and 1983 to further his goal of prohibiting the Sandinistas from gaining access to greater control and resources. The National Security Decision Directive (NSDD-17) signed by President Reagan on January 4, 1982, explained that U.S. Policy would focus on assisting in the defeat of the rebellion in El Salvador, and would oppose actions by Cuba, Nicaragua, and other nations to provide weapons, outside troops,

⁶⁶ Office of the Historian. “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy.” U.S. Department of State, n.d. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v01/d33>.

⁶⁷ Knapp, Alyssa. “Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989).” “Burning with a deadly heat”: Newshour coverage of the Hot Wars of the Cold War, n.d. <https://americanarchive.org/exhibits/newshour-cold-war/afghanistan>.

⁶⁸ Maddux, Thomas R., and Edward A. Lynch. “Maddux on Lynch, ‘The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America.’” H-Diplo, May 2012. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/30400/maddux-lynch-cold-wars-last-battlefield-reagan-soviets-and-central>.

trained subversives, or arms and military supplies for the Sandinistas.⁶⁹ By June of 1982 Reagan had announced the “Reagan Doctrine” further establishing aid for democratization in countries that were engaged in socialist revolutions.⁷⁰ The idea that Reagan was intervening to stop the spread of arms and ideology from Nicaragua to El Salvador was at the center of his policy in 1981 and 1982.⁷¹

Reagan changed his policy by the end of 1982 when he shifted from interdicting arms to calling for a change in government to gain support for his re-election. Byrne, in his review of the Reagan’s policies, highlights the National Security Decision Directive (NSDD-59) that was published on October 5, 1982.⁷² In this directive, Reagan’s policies called for Sandinista withdrawal with the intention to use U.S. forces to engage and repel their units.⁷³ Reagan knew his conservative religious bases had severe animosity toward the Soviet Union and would not support their control so close to the American border. His framing of the Sandinistas as a Soviet communist threat allowed him to advocate for the change in government in Nicaragua. Reagan’s subsequent policies continued to display his concerns about Soviet influence on the Sandinistas. By November 1982, Reagan had released another National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 71) where he explicitly stated that the U.S. would use its influence to promote the development of democratic institutions and human rights to facilitate U.S. public support for closer relationships with the involved governments.⁷⁴ Reagan hoped to paint his intervention in a

⁶⁹ Reagan, Ronald. “NSDD 17: National Security Decision Directive on Cuba and Central America.” NSDD 17- National Security Decision Directives, January 4, 1982. <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Brown University, *Nicaragua and Iran Timeline*.

⁷¹ Reagan, Ronald. “NSDD 59: Cuba and Central America .” NSDD 59 - National Security Decision Directives - Reagan Administration, October 5, 1982. <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-59.pdf>.

⁷² Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 52.

⁷³ Reagan, *Cuba and Central America*.

⁷⁴ Reagan, Ronald. “NSDD 71: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America In the Wake of the Falklands Crisis.” National Security Decision Directives, November 30, 1982. <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-71.pdf>.

positive light by pushing the idea that he was instilling democracy in the region, thereby satisfying his obsession to appear powerful by continuing to justify the support of the anti-Sandinista army.⁷⁵

Shortly after announcing his re-election campaign in 1984, President Reagan addressed the nation regarding Central America where he enhanced his argument when he stated that Nicaragua should be treated in a manner consistent with other Soviet allies, such as Cuba. This was a deliberate misdirection as there was not credible evidence to prove the existence of Soviet communism in the region after January 1981.⁷⁶ In this address, Reagan explained “The issue of our effort to promote democracy and economic well-being in the face of Cuban and Nicaraguan aggression, aided and abetted by the Soviet Union, is definitely not about plans to send American troops into combat in Central America.”⁷⁷ While it is true that Reagan did not have any intention of sending American troops to Nicaragua, by 1984 he had already constructed pathways to send aid, weapons, and training without public knowledge. Reagan chose to speak directly to his conservative base by stating, “San Salvador is closer to Houston, Texas than Houston is to Washington, D.C. It’s at our doorstep, and it’s become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the empire.”⁷⁸ Reagan wanted to unite his Catholic and conservative bases through their hatred of communism and the Soviet Union so that they would support his re-election and refrain from questioning his policies, which would have exposed his obsession as the true reason for intervention.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*.

⁷⁶ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.

⁷⁷ Reagan, *Address on Central America*.

⁷⁸ Reagan, *Address on Central America*.

⁷⁹ Turek, *Gun-Toting Nuns*.

Reagan continued to align Soviet influence with violence and anti-religious actions to expand the number of his supporters and to prove that he was the best candidate for re-election because he could provide assurance that he was committed to tackling the threat in Nicaragua. In the same speech delivered in 1984 on Central America, Reagan pointed out what he believed to be significant moral crises that he claimed were ongoing throughout the region. “In the meantime, there has been an attempt to wipe out an entire culture, the Miskito Indians, thousands of whom have been slaughtered or herded into detention camps, where they have been starved and abused. Their villages, churches, and crops have been burned.”⁸⁰ Yet, this was in complete opposition to Reagan’s vicious attack against the Maryknoll Sisters when they spoke out against clear human rights violations in Nicaragua because their perspective did not fit Reagan’s agenda.

⁸⁰ Reagan, *Address on Central America*.

Chapter 6: Reagan's Obsession After Re-Election

Reagan's obsession continued after his re-election because he had so heavily advocated his unwillingness to accept Sandinista rule and would not allow himself to be perceived as weak by regressing in his policies from the previous term. Because Reagan's obsession with appearing powerful in the eyes of his supporters and the Soviet Union had not been accomplished as he had not yet defeated the Sandinistas, he understood that he must maintain his Central American policies until this could be achieved. Reagan knew that he would have been perceived as weak, as Carter had been, if he changed his Central American policy to allow for leniency to the Sandinista regime.⁸¹ Reagan would have been unable to validate his previous actions and claims surrounding Nicaragua if he stopped supporting the anti-Sandinista army, the Contras, after he had secured re-election. Other scholars support this idea in their review of Reagan's foreign policy stating, "Policies can develop constituencies and a momentum that make it very difficult to change course."⁸² Reagan continued to push these policies in 1985, explaining the importance of continuing to provide U.S. support to thwart the Sandinistas.⁸³ Reagan wanted to confirm his perceived strength, so he persisted in creating the illusion of needing to defeat the Soviet influence in Nicaragua. These findings are supported by the arguments Reagan makes in his address to the nation on March 16, 1986. Reagan expressed that the danger of Soviet influence would only continue to grow if the U.S. did not take action. "Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and

⁸¹ Schwartz, *The Second Cold War*

⁸² Schwartz, *The Second Cold War*.

⁸³ Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua." Ronald Reagan Library, March 16, 1986. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-situation-nicaragua>.

South America.”⁸⁴ Reagan further justified his actions in Nicaragua by claiming that he was acting in the best interest of the United States to ensure their dominance over the Soviet Union.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Reagan, *Address on Nicaraguan Situation*.

⁸⁵ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 98-101.

Chapter 7: Reagan's Use Of Plausible Deniability To Frame His Underlings

When the covert actions taken on behalf of President Reagan were exposed, his administration attempted to enact “plausible deniability” by promoting the idea that his advisors were the cause of any criminal activity and Reagan could not possibly be personally invested in Nicaragua. With the understanding that Reagan held the primary interest in Nicaragua and was willing to go to extreme lengths to ensure aid was delivered, this study finds that to fuel his obsession, Reagan called for support on terms that were not entirely truthful so that he could continue his intervention in Nicaragua. Reagan appealed to his supporters by focusing on a topic that he knew they would not be able to ignore, Soviet communism, hiding his true motive to defeat the Sandinistas and appear strong. This thesis argues that Reagan's underlings were in fact operating on the wishes of the President as it was impossible for Reagan to show his involvement without the threat of impeachment. The following section will explore the specific ways Reagan's underlings created a paper trail and false timelines for plausible deniability.

It is possible to theorize that Reagan's advisors played a significant role in shaping his perspective about the importance of intervention in Nicaragua, causing Reagan to believe the problem required more attention than it actually needed. Scholars have also proposed that Reagan was either out of touch with his administration or was subject to the will of those closest to him, and cited Reagan's claims that he could not recall information about the routes taken to aid the anti-Sandinista Contras.⁸⁶ While Reagan's underlings were responsible for facilitating the shipments of aid to the anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua, they were acting according to the

⁸⁶ Fujii, George. “Diplo Roundtable XVII, 17 on Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power.” H-Diplo, March 16, 2016. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/116436/h-diplo-roundtable-xvii-17-iran-contra-reagan%E2%80%99s-scandal-and>.

President's wishes.⁸⁷ After careful evaluation of speeches, primary, and secondary sources it is clear to see that Reagan was the driving force behind the desire to continue supporting the Contra army, even when told that these acts would be characterized as illegal.⁸⁸ Comparing public and private accounts of Reagan's actions with the illicit behavior of his administration helps to display that his underlings were following Reagan's orders.

The actions of Oliver North, Robert McFarlane, and William Casey are outlined to show that Reagan's policies dictated their decisions. Oliver North was a key figure in forming the bank accounts to receive funding for the Contra army and remained a close advisor to the president until the affair was exposed. Oliver North's behavior and documentation is evaluated to display that while North was partially responsible for keeping Reagan informed about the conflict in Nicaragua, he was fulfilling the president's requests in his covert actions. North cannot be held responsible for fostering Reagan's obsession.⁸⁹ In November 1986, North was dismissed by President Reagan as he, "Helped created false and misleading chronologies about the Reagan administration's secret arms sales to Iran."⁹⁰ Reagan chose to dismiss North and allowed him to take the blame rather than risk personal exposure and possible impeachment. While Congressional investigations in 1986 led to North's dismissal, his 1988 indictment for conspiracy to defraud the government shows that his formulation of inaccurate chronologies began well before his interactions with Iran. North was convicted in 1989 after being found

⁸⁷ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 98-101.

⁸⁸ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 98-101.

⁸⁹ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 202-204.

⁹⁰ Shin, Annys. "When Oliver North Avoided Prison Time for His Role in the Iran-Contra Scandal." *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/when-oliver-north-avoided-prison-time-for-his-role-in-the-iran-contra-scandal/2018/06/22/c327bc6e-634c-11e8-99d2-0d678ec08c2f_story.html.

guilty of destroying evidence and obstructing Congressional investigations.⁹¹ Because Reagan's administration had accounted for the possibility of investigations into their illegal actions and documentation, Congress was unable to discover enough credible evidence to prove the president's direct involvement in impeachable activities.

Robert McFarlane was Reagan's National Security Advisor and was later named Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. McFarlane was born on July 12, 1937 in Washington, D.C. and served President Reagan from 1983 to 1985. McFarlane had a deep understanding of events in Nicaragua and was fully aware of the actions performed by members of the National Security Council (NSC). Robert McFarlane attempted to commit suicide in 1987, under suspicion of his involvement in the Iran-Contra Affair, and pleaded guilty to four misdemeanors of withholding information from Congress before being pardoned by President George Bush in 1992.⁹² William J. Casey was born on March 13th, 1913 in Elmhurst, Queens, New York and was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for President Reagan between 1981 and 1987 and was directly involved in covert operations in Nicaragua.⁹³ Casey was forced to resign in January 1987 when he discovered he had a brain tumor. He died later that year, in May 1987.

Before it is possible to analyze the specific ways Reagan's advisors supported his Central American policies with their false documentation, it is important to note the nature of these materials. North often conducted "shredding parties" where he disposed of sensitive or illicit

⁹¹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Oliver North". Encyclopedia Britannica, Oct. 3, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oliver-North>.

⁹² Brown University (author omitted). "Robert McFarlane, National Security Advisor ." *Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs - the Legal Aftermath*, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/profile-mcfarlane.php.

⁹³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "William J. Casey". Encyclopedia Britannica, May. 2, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-J-Casey>.

files that might be used later to prove the administration's involvement or wrongdoing.⁹⁴

Fortunately, some of the documents were closely monitored as part of the National Security Council's protocol for classified documents. North's deception was found when an investigator noticed the incorrect headings on a file from 1985. The heading had not been in use until 1986, alerting them to North's forgeries. The following is an account of major events where Reagan's underlings both alluded to the idea of continued Soviet influence in the region, and that they were making decisions without presidential approval.

1981

On December 4th, 1981, President Reagan signed an executive order stating that the CIA would be in charge of covert operations unless he dictated otherwise. By allowing the CIA to have apparent control over secret operations, Reagan was capable of claiming that he was not completely aware of all actions that they performed.

1982- 1983

The period between June of 1982 and October 1983 provides insight into the routes Reagan's advisors took to create public support of current Central American policies. In June 1982, Walter Raymond, Jr. was transferred from the CIA to the NSC but spoke with Casey about his intentions before accepting the new position. Casey approved of Raymond's goal to create a "public diplomacy" capability that would allow the U.S. government to "wage the war of ideas." Raymond would be promoted to special assistant to the president holding the responsibility of

⁹⁴ North, Oliver. "NSC, Memorandum from Oliver North to Robert McFarlane, 'Fallback Plan for the Nicaraguan Resistance,' March 16, 1985 (Original and Altered Versions)." NSC, Memorandum from Oliver North to Robert McFarlane, "Fallback Plan for the Nicaraguan Resistance," March 16, 1985 (Original and Altered Versions) | National Security Archive, National Security Archive , 1985, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16589-document-01-nsc-memorandum-oliver-north>.

public diplomacy affairs and director of international communication at the NSC on June 3, 1983. One month later, on July 1, 1983, NSC advisor William Clark sent “Public Diplomacy (Central America)” to U.S. intelligence agencies claiming that the President expressed his concern to increase the understanding and support of the administration’s policies in both Central America and the United States. By early August 1983, William Casey had met with public relations experts in the push orchestrated by the CIA and the White House to, “Strive for the creation of a genuinely bipartisan, centrist structure to generate public support around the issue of Central America.”⁹⁵ This corroborates Reagan’s change in policy and rhetoric to further bolster support. Robert McFarlane became the assistant to the president for National Security Affairs (NSA) on October 17, 1983 and would play a dominant role in creating false chronologies.

1984

On June 25, 1984, the National Security Planning Group held a meeting where Casey appeared to validate the presence of a Soviet threat but the sources used by the advisors to come to this conclusion are unknown and not included.⁹⁶ Casey estimated that there were approximately seven to eight thousand Cuban troops in Nicaragua at the time of the meeting and claimed that forty-five Nicaraguan pilots trained in the Soviet bloc had returned to Nicaragua. Casey’s information provided a perspective as to the pressure felt by Ronald Reagan in the period when he formed his public opinions for the best approach to the given issue. In this same June 25th meeting, Secretary of Defense Weinberger stated, “We need to hold Congress

⁹⁵ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, 202-204.

⁹⁶ NSC Minutes. “NSC, National Security Planning Group Minutes, ‘Subject: Central America,’ June 25, 1984.” *National Security Archive*, 25 June 1984, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22302-01-nsc-national-security-planning-group-minutes>.

accountable for not providing the resources needed to defend democracy. We should ask the Democrats whether they want a second Cuba.” This supported Reagan’s push against the Sandinistas throughout his re-election campaign as his advisors continued to make untrue claims about Soviet influence.

Because Reagan was focused on continuing aid to the Contras by any means necessary, but could not be personally implicated, especially in writing, his advisors began to create documentation of their routes organizing funds from other sources. It became clear that going to outside countries for financial support for the Contras was a punishable offense, as described by Secretary of State Shultz on June 25, 1984. By the end of the meeting, President Reagan delivered his infamous quote, “If such a story gets out, we’ll all be hanging by our thumbs in front of the White House until we find out who did it.” Reagan’s clear understanding of the consequences of his illegal activities and his push to continue anyway, shows that he was not working to please his advisors but rather cared deeply about achieving his goals regardless of the implications.

1985

In the memorandum from Oliver North to Robert McFarlane, on March 16, 1985, “Fallback Plan for the Nicaraguan Resistance,” North outlined his recommendations and requirements for a speech to be delivered by Reagan on April 2, 1985. North explained that Reagan must ask the American public to contribute funds to the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters to support liberty and democracy in the Americas.⁹⁷ North appeared to be dictating Reagan’s future actions by his supposed instruction to deliver a speech, while evidence has been shown that Reagan was in full control. North stated, “The name of one of several existing non-profit

⁹⁷ North, *Fallback Plan for Nicaragua*.

foundations we have established in the course of the last year will be changed to the Nicaraguan Freedom Fund. Several reliable American citizens must be contacted to serve as its corporate leadership on its board of directors along with the principle leadership of the Nicaraguan armed and unarmed resistance.”⁹⁸ While this information helps to display the ways in which North created paths to hide Reagan’s intentions, it remains clear that he was aligned with the president’s wishes by finding specific ways to continue aiding to the anti-Sandinista movement.

North was clearly very important in the planning that occurred when President Reagan attempted to gain public monetary support for the Contras. The casual nature of creating organizations without Congressional approval to carry out the wishes of the President displays the types of critical, national issues where Oliver North appeared to make decisions or have unchecked influence. It is clear that North had full knowledge and awareness of the requirements to uphold aid to the Contras, but his decision to seek outside legal counsel is considerably more useful to show his involvement in protecting President Reagan. On March 16, 1985, North wrote, “Informal contact several months ago with a lawyer sympathetic to our cause indicated that such a procedure would be within the limits of the law. Fred Fielding should be asked to conduct a very private evaluation of the President’s role in making such a request.”⁹⁹ North did not include any indication as to what the President’s request was, which corroborates the finding that he could not implicate Reagan in any way.

1986

⁹⁸ North, *Fallback Plan for Nicaragua*.

⁹⁹ Owen, Robert. “Memorandum from ‘TC ’(Robert Owen) to ‘BG ’(Oliver North), ‘Update,’ February 10, 1986.” National Security Archive, February 10, 1986. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16592-document-04-memorandum-tc-robert-owen-bg>.

The American public became aware of the connection between the exchange of arms for hostages in Iran and the illicit military aid that was sent to the Contra army in Nicaragua on November 25, 1986. Attorney General Edward Meese exposed the “diversion memo” written by North earlier that spring in 1986, where it was described that residual funds from the sale of U.S. weaponry to Iran was sent to support the covert actions in Nicaragua. Reagan was aware of and authorized all shipments of arms to Iran and subsequently watched as his underlings spun a cover story to prevent him from taking the fall. “It was the need to conceal the illegal November 1985 shipments, and protect the president from the impeachable offense of knowingly violating the law, that created a panic within the administration in November 1986.”¹⁰⁰ As the Iran-Contra Affair began to come to light, Reagan’s advisors, including Casey, McFarlane, and North, formed false chronologies. While this work is not intended to prove that the President had specific knowledge of these illegal shipments to Iran, the clear manipulation by Reagan’s underlings to distract from the president helps to shed light on their ability to control the public perception of Reagan’s involvement.

1989

In the Congressional questioning that occurred in 1989, Oliver North claimed that he was following the instructions of the Director of Central Intelligence, William Casey, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, and Deputy National Security Advisor, John Poindexter in his illegal activities.¹⁰¹ However, North testified that he believed the President had been aware of the diversion, supporting the finding that Reagan was in control of his underlings and they were acting upon his wishes. “It was the President’s policy—not an isolated attempt by Oliver North

¹⁰⁰ Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*.

¹⁰¹ Liman, Arthur. “Hostile Witness.” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1998. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/irancontra/contra3.htm>.

or Poindexter—to sell arms secretly to Iran and to maintain the Contras despite Congressional prohibitions, forming the conclusion that Reagan bears the ultimate responsibility.”¹⁰² North argued that he was following the advice of fellow members of the administration to attempt to offshore some of the blame without placing it on the president.

¹⁰² Kornbluh and Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal*.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

While scholars have long debated about the causes and origins of Reagan's obsession with Nicaragua, this study finds that Reagan's obsession stemmed from his ultimate goal of being perceived as strong by the Soviet Union and by the American public. Reagan was not obsessed with combating the Sandinistas as he proposed, but used this intervention to gain a different reputation from his predecessor who had been portrayed as weak for his wavering loyalties to Nicaraguan leadership. Reagan went into the Presidency refusing to be categorized as a weak leader by the choices he made in Central America after he was publicly attacked by the Maryknoll Sisters and other religious figures before his inauguration. He shows his obsession with being perceived as strong in four ways. First, this obsession is displayed by his desire to hide his lack of religious commitment which would have questioned his moral credibility. Second, it is present in his critiques of religious leaders who questioned him, to ensure his conservative Christian base supported his policies in Nicaragua. Third, his obsession is clear in his portrayal of a lasting Soviet communist threat even after Soviet aid had diminished in order to appeal to a wider base who he knew hated the Soviet Union. Lastly, this obsession is proved in Reagan's instructions to his underlings to create a paper trail, where they upheld his public claims and appeared to make decisions without his approval to avoid possible impeachment if his true intentions were ever to be discovered. Because Reagan had full awareness and approved of all activities in Nicaragua, this thesis argues that Reagan's underlings were acting in the interest of the President, not for their own personal goals. If Reagan had regressed in his intervention in Nicaragua and changed his policies once he had been re-elected, he would have directly contradicted years of statements stressing the importance of combating the threat in Nicaragua. This would have painted him in the same negative light as Carter who had changed his policies.

This is why Reagan appeared to be obsessed with Nicaragua, when in reality, his obsession was derived from his desire to be perceived as a strong leader who had thwarted any impending threats. This study helps to display the abuse of power of our leaders in the United States and highlights the importance of being skeptical of those with great influence. By focusing on this issue, I hope to encourage the next generation of scholars and voters to question their elected officials to see if their actions and motivations are honest, and if they are genuinely working in the best interest of their constituents. If we create a pattern of holding our leaders accountable, we become one step closer to creating a government that is run by the people, for the people.

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