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The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy

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Ronald Reagan never planned to announce what became known as the Reagan Doctrine. Two months after Reagan declared in his 1985 State of the Union address that the United States should not “break faith” with anti-Communist resistance groups, a political commentator called that declaration the Reagan Doctrine. The Reagan administration’s policies toward anti-Communist resistance groups varied far more than the term “Reagan Doctrine” suggested. This article shows that differences in local conditions and U.S. security interests as well as sharp disputes between administration policy makers produced divergent policies toward “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Angola, and Cambodia during Reagan’s presidency.

The Reagan Doctrine emerged in an unusual manner, as it was discovered rather than proclaimed. When he delivered his State of the Union message on February 6, 1985, Ronald Reagan did not plan to announce a guiding principle of his administration’s foreign policy. After he finished his address, no one recognized that the speech contained a Reagan Doctrine until weeks later, when a political commentator declared that he had found a grand statement of foreign policy hiding in plain sight. What Reagan said that February evening on his seventy-fourth birthday was a version of what he had said many times before: that anti-Communist resistance movements deserved U.S. support. That idea had shaped his thinking since the beginning of his presidency and, indeed, from the time that he became involved in national politics in the mid 1960s. “Reagan Doctrine” nevertheless became a common and convenient term, although one that administration officials rarely used in public rhetoric or policy memoranda. “That was something you people [in the media] talked about,” declared one staff aide on the National Security Council (NSC). “It wasn’t a phrase we used.”¹ The president only twice referred to

1. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 323.

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the Reagan Doctrine in public remarks. Just once, in a speech at the National Defense University in 1988, did he actually use that precise term to describe the administration's "stand with ordinary people who have had the courage to take up arms against Communist tyranny."²

The Reagan Doctrine expressed one of the president's important ideas, but administration policies toward anti-Communist resistance groups varied considerably. The mujahideen who fought against Soviet troops in Afghanistan got substantial U.S. military aid, including sophisticated weapons, but the anti-Communist resistance in Cambodia got only small amounts of nonlethal supplies. The guerrillas who struggled against a Marxist regime in Angola eventually received U.S. help, but a similar movement in Mozambique that opposed a leftist government got no assistance from the Reagan administration. Differences in local conditions, U.S. security interests, and political circumstances accounted for variations in policy. So, too, did divisions between administration policy makers. Sharp disputes arose over how—or whether—to help local "freedom fighters," as national security officials disagreed over how to balance the goal of rolling back communism with some of Reagan's other principles, such as promoting democracy or reaffirming U.S. commitments to freedom and liberty that could inspire people around the world. As National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane recollected, policy emerged on a case-by-case basis, not through the application of "a comprehensive plan . . . or . . . set of standards to determine which insurgencies were deserving of U.S. aid."³ The Reagan Doctrine was a convenient term for a clear and simple idea that the president embraced. The policies it produced were complicated and controversial.

The Reagan Doctrine in *Time*

It was Charles Krauthammer who first gave the Reagan Doctrine its name in his regular column in the April 1, 1985 issue of *Time* magazine. No one had previously attributed such significance to Reagan's pronouncement, but Krauthammer was not playing an April Fool's joke. He thought that the president's "prudence" and "modesty" accounted for the Reagan Doctrine being "buried" in the State of the Union address rather than "launched" with "fanfare." For Krauthammer, the Reagan Doctrine was the president's assertion that "we 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 from birth." Krauthammer maintained that these words proved once more that the president was "the master of the new idea." Like supply-side economics, which had "changed the terms of debate" on economic theory, and the Strategic Defense Initiative, which had challenged conventional wisdom on nuclear strategy, the Reagan Doctrine inverted "accepted thinking on geopol-

2. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1987*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), 2: 977-92; *ibid.*, 1988, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 2: 1381-84.

3. Cannon, *President Reagan*, 323.

itics.” Krauthammer explained that the Reagan Doctrine extended “unashamed American support,” on the basis of “justice, necessity and democratic tradition,” for “all armed resistance to Communism.” The president, according to Krauthammer, had reconciled principle with realism, ideals with self-interest. “Support for freedom fighters is self-defense,” Reagan insisted in his address. Once Krauthammer coined the term “Reagan Doctrine,” other journalists began using it. Never before had a columnist announced a presidential doctrine in foreign policy.⁴

Yet Reagan never intended, modestly or otherwise, to proclaim a foreign-policy doctrine in his State of the Union address. Most of his speech concerned what he said were the achievements of his first term as president—the renewal of national strength and purpose—and his hope for the beginning of a second American Revolution during his final four years in office. The revolution that Reagan envisioned consisted mainly of implementing reforms that he had long advocated—repealing government regulations, simplifying the Internal Revenue Code and reducing marginal tax rates, and expanding the freedom of entrepreneurs and consumers. At the end of his address, Reagan predicted that the coming revolution would also include “the golden promise of human freedom in a world of peace.” He pledged that the United States would “nourish and defend freedom and democracy” by promoting freer international trade, assisting economic development in poor nations, standing by “all our democratic allies,” and keeping faith with anti-Communist revolutionaries. Reagan did not elaborate that last point, except to urge Congress to resume the military aid it had halted to the contra forces fighting against the Nicaraguan government. What Krauthammer understood as a general statement of geopolitical principle—“support for freedom fighters is self-defense”—was instead a specific attempt to counter congressional objections that aid to the contras violated the charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States.⁵ Before and after the speech, White House officials made no special effort to draw attention to Reagan’s declaration of solidarity with anti-Communist rebels. One aide did explain that the president hoped to advance peace and freedom, but emphasized the importance of Reagan’s arms control proposals in achieving that legacy.⁶ Krauthammer, in short, found a Reagan Doctrine that the president had not known he was announcing.

Krauthammer also interpreted the Reagan Doctrine as a fundamentally anti-Communist strategy, even though the president and other high administration officials linked it to the broader goal of promoting democracy. Krauthammer noted that Reagan harnessed moral purpose to geopolitical necessity in both the State of the Union message and in a radio address ten days later that appealed for resumption of aid to the Nicaraguan contras as a continuation of the U.S. tradition of supporting freedom fighters from Simón Bolívar to the French resistance during World War II. Reagan’s rhetoric suggested, however, that pushing back communism and extending democracy were equally important reasons for aiding the contras. Those counter-revolutionaries, the president said in

4. Charles Krauthammer, “Essay: The Reagan Doctrine,” *Time*, 1 April 1985, pp. 54-55.

5. *Public Papers of the President of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1985*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 1: 130-36.

6. *New York Times*, 6 February 1985, p. 1.

his radio address, fought against a “Marxist-Leninist clique” that had turned Nicaragua into “a satellite of the Soviet Union and Cuba” and that planned to spread communism throughout Central America. Yet Reagan also maintained that the contras were committed democrats—ideological “brothers”—who were part of a worldwide movement “against communism and toward democracy.”⁷ Secretary of State George Shultz took Reagan’s arguments an important step further on February 22 in a speech which he later claimed enunciated what became the Reagan Doctrine. Shultz, too, maintained that a democratic revolution was sweeping the world. Anti-Communist resistance forces in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia, and Poland were part of that revolution, but so were advocates of democratic liberties and human rights in the Philippines, South Korea, South Africa, and Chile. Shultz favored support for “the forces of freedom in communist totalitarian states.” But he also insisted on an even broader and more basic obligation. “As a matter of fundamental principle,” he declared, the United States should champion “human rights and peaceful democratic change throughout the world, including in non-Communist, pro-Western countries.”⁸ Krauthammer, in short, not only found a doctrine that the president had not intended to issue, but also understood it in more limited terms than either Reagan or Shultz said they favored.

Krauthammer was also wrong that the Reagan Doctrine was a “new idea.” Rolling back communism had been an important objective of the U.S. strategy of containment since the beginning of the Cold War. The administration of President Harry S Truman implemented aggressive programs of psychological warfare and covert operations aimed at undermining Communist governments in Eastern Europe and exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Soviet system.⁹ Krauthammer detected echoes of these earlier attempts at rollback, but maintained that the Reagan Doctrine established a new kind of containment that consisted of challenging “Soviet expansionism at the limits of empire.” Yet Truman did something similar when he provided U.S. aid to counter Communist threats in Iran, Turkey, and Greece. So did President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who authorized covert action—sometimes effective, sometimes disastrous—to topple neutralist governments in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia that he thought were leaning toward Moscow.¹⁰ Unlike his predecessors, Reagan openly declared support for anti-Communist revolutionaries that Truman and Eisenhower had only expressed behind closed doors. Yet despite this rhetorical difference, the Reagan Doctrine as a strategy for dealing with Soviet expansionism was an updated version of the oldest forms of containment.

7. *Public Papers of the President: 1985*, 1: 172-74.

8. George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Tradition: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 525-26; “America and the Struggle for Freedom,” *Department of State Bulletin* 85 (April 1985): 16-21.

9. Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

10. Chester J. Pach, Jr. and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, rev. ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 87-93; Robert J. McMahon, “‘The Point of No Return’: The Eisenhower Administration and Indonesia, 1953-1960,” in *Managing an Earthquake: The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War*, edited by Andrew L. Johns and Kathryn C. Statler (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

Keeping Faith and Making Policy

Nor was keeping faith with those who resisted communism a new idea for Reagan, but one he embraced from the beginning of his presidency and even long before he came to the White House. One of Reagan's fundamental beliefs was that the Soviet Union was an implacable foe. He expressed that view at the time he emerged as a significant figure in national politics, when he gave a televised speech for Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater during the campaign of 1964. Reagan attracted attention for his ardent advocacy of conservative convictions that were as much his as Goldwater's. In "the speech," as it became known, Reagan asserted that "we are at war with the most dangerous enemy ever known to man." He also condemned "appeasement" of the Soviet Union and supposed efforts to "buy our safety from the threat of 'the bomb' by selling into permanent slavery our fellow human beings . . . behind the Iron Curtain" and telling "them to give up their hope of freedom because we are ready to make a deal with their slave masters."¹¹ Aggressive anticommunism, along with steadfast opposition to "big government" and "high taxes," was a powerful influence on Reagan's political agenda for the rest of his public career.

By the time he sought the presidency in 1980, Reagan warned that expanded Soviet strength and declining U.S. power and prestige had allowed the Kremlin to extend its imperial ambitions "to the ends of the earth." In campaign speeches, Reagan claimed that the Soviets had conducted "the greatest military buildup in the history of mankind," while President Jimmy Carter had let U.S. forces atrophy. With advantages in both strategic and conventional strength, the Soviets made substantial gains in the developing world, taking over, Reagan said, in Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Yemen. When they did not act directly, as they had by invading Afghanistan in December 1979, the Soviets used Cuban proxies to achieve their objectives. Reagan blamed "the Moscow-Havana axis" for fomenting civil war in Central America and "stirring up trouble" in Angola. Instability in Africa, Latin America, or South Asia was not the product of oppressive governments, social conflicts, grinding poverty, civil wars, or other indigenous causes, he insisted.¹² "Let's not delude ourselves," Reagan told an interviewer in June 1980. "The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world."¹³

11. "A Time for Choosing (The Speech—October 27, 1964)," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California. Retrieved August 25, 2005, from <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html>.

12. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 184, 477, 480-81, 484; Chester J. Pach, Jr., "Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security," in *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies*, edited by W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 86-90; Chester Pach, "Top Gun, Toughness, and Terrorism: Some Reflections on the Elections of 1980 and 2004," *Diplomatic History* 28 (September 2004): 556.

13. James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 17; Marc Jay Selverstone, "Doctrines," in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, 2d ed., 3 vols., edited by Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns, and Fredrik Logevall (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002), 1: 536.

Carter had responded, according to Reagan, with “vacillation, appeasement and aimlessness.” Reagan had never approved of détente with the Soviet Union, even during the Republican presidencies of Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford, and he charged that Carter’s version of that strategy amounted to concessions to Soviet expansionism and acquiescence in the Kremlin’s effort to achieve military superiority. Although Carter finally discarded détente after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, “the humiliations and symbols of weakness” had taken their toll, Reagan asserted. “We apologize, compromise, withdraw, and retreat,” he complained. Although the Soviets had nothing to do with it, the Iranian hostage crisis symbolized for Reagan and millions of Americans the decline of U.S. power and the ineffectiveness of Carter’s leadership. Reagan thought Carter had also been a disaster at managing the economy, as the president’s inability to prevent soaring inflation, interest rates, and unemployment created what Carter himself called “a crisis of the American spirit” at home and diminished U.S. stature abroad.¹⁴

Reagan promised instead to challenge Soviet imperialism by restoring American strength and confidence. Revitalized armed forces and renewed determination would allow effective action against “the vast and expanding colonial empire of the Soviets.” Reagan suggested during the campaign that he favored aiding anti-Communist insurgents, and he asked in one speech, “Must we let Grenada, Nicaragua, and El Salvador all become additional ‘Cubas?’” He also rejected the idea that Marxism-Leninism was the wave of the future and declared that he “would like nothing better than to see the Russian people living in freedom and dignity.” To check or diminish Communist influence, conviction, Reagan believed, mattered as much as military muscle. Renewed national confidence would enable the United States to “do a better job of exporting Americanism,” he told the American Legion. “I believe that it is our pre-ordained destiny to show all mankind that they, too, can be free without having to leave their native shore.”¹⁵

Soon after Reagan became president, administration officials began translating into policy the idea of supporting resistance to communism. Many relevant documents are still unavailable, but interviews and memoirs suggest that the director of Central Intelligence, William Casey, was a particularly zealous proponent of covert assistance to anti-Communist insurgencies.¹⁶ The administration’s first comprehensive “U.S. National Security Strategy,” which Reagan approved on May 20, 1982, endorsed the principle that Casey—and Reagan—had advocated. That document established as a basic national objective “to contain and reverse the expansion of Soviet control and military presence throughout the world, and to increase the costs of Soviet support and use of proxy, terrorist and subversive forces.” The Reagan administration planned to exploit Soviet “economic shortcomings” to discourage Moscow’s “adventurism” in the Third World and to

14. Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 472, 477; *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981), 2: 1235-41; Pach, “*Top Gun*, Toughness, and Terrorism,” 551-60; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 205.

15. Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 471-86.

16. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 19-20; Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration’s Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 22-23.

weaken Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. The authors of this strategy document thought that the 1980s were likely to bring “the greatest challenge to our survival and well-being since World War II.” Yet they speculated that U.S. action “could result in a fundamentally different East-West relationship by the end of this decade.” They did not, however, provide specifics about that vision of the future.¹⁷

A subsequent policy statement about U.S.-Soviet relations contained provisions that even more closely resembled what Krauthammer later called the Reagan Doctrine. The principal author was Harvard University history professor Richard Pipes, who was the NSC’s expert on Soviet affairs. National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75, which Reagan approved on January 17, 1983, affirmed the established goal of containing and reversing Soviet expansionism and added that the United States should compete “on a sustained basis with the Soviet Union in all international arenas.” By taking advantage of “important weaknesses and vulnerabilities within the Soviet empire,” Pipes hoped to “loosen Moscow’s hold” on Eastern Europe and undermine Soviet links with Third World allies. NSDD 75 called for “active efforts” to help “democratic movements and forces” effect political change in developing nations that had aligned with Moscow. High priority went to exerting “maximum pressure” for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, while making sure that Moscow paid dearly for its continued military action. Also important was reducing Soviet and Cuban influence in Central America and southern Africa and easing “the current repression in Poland.” Supplementing these efforts would be “an ideological thrust” to affirm “the superiority of U.S. and Western values,” including political democracy. Expanded U.S. military capabilities, improved cooperation with allies, and substantial foreign aid were all essential to this broad effort to push back Communist influence and bring “evolutionary change in the Soviet system.” Because a “rapid breakthrough” was “unlikely,” administration officials had to assure Congress and the public that they sought not “open-ended, sterile confrontation” but “stable and constructive” long-term relations with the Soviets.¹⁸

NSDD 75 produced conflicting reactions in a divided administration. Hardliners such as Casey and National Security Adviser William Clark thought that the aggressive policies of NSDD 75 conformed to Reagan’s anti-Communist principles. Pragmatic conservatives, such as Secretary of State Shultz, worried that the “ideologues” who backed the document stood in the way of “real problem solving.” Shultz complained that Casey pursued an independent foreign-policy agenda and that Clark “didn’t comprehend the subtleties or the nuances” of some issues. Neither favored substantive negotiations with the Soviets for fear that they would lead to unacceptable U.S. concessions. Shultz, however, insisted that it was essential to engage the Soviets, and he persuaded the president to take quiet steps beginning in early 1983 “to turn our confrontational relationship” with Moscow “into something more constructive.” Shultz, however, agreed with Casey, Clark, and other hardliners that the administration should take a firm stand on

17. National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 32, 20 May 1982, Intelligence Resource Program, Federation of American Scientists. Retrieved August 25, 2005, from <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-032.htm>.

18. Christopher Simpson, *National Security Directives of the Reagan and Bush Administrations: The Declassified History of U.S. Political and Military Policy, 1981-1991* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 255-63.

human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and on reducing Soviet and Cuban involvement in a variety of regional conflicts.¹⁹ Policy emerged, however, not from strict adherence to any strategy document nor from the consistent application of the Reagan Doctrine before or after Krauthammer invented that term. Instead, the formulation of policy was “complicated and messy,” as Reagan’s chief advisors, sometimes at odds with each other, sought to deal with difficult issues and changing circumstances as they decided how and even whether to help “freedom fighters” in several different nations.²⁰

Implementing the Reagan Doctrine

Reagan was eager to keep faith with Afghan resistance fighters by continuing the aid that had begun flowing to them during the Carter administration. Carter had approved covert arms assistance to the mujahideen soon after Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan to prop up an embattled client government. Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, wanted the Soviets to pay “some price” for their military action, but intelligence estimates concluded that the mujahideen could do no more than harass the invaders. Similar CIA appraisals of the mujahideen’s capabilities helped persuade the Reagan administration during 1981-82 to keep aid at an annual level of \$30-\$40 million, slightly more than Carter had provided during his last year in office. Maintaining “plausible deniability” was also important, because U.S. funds were purchasing weapons that killed Soviet soldiers. During 1981-82, CIA officers handled covert assistance to the Afghan resistance, in the words of one intelligence official, “as if they were wearing a condom.”²¹

By the mid 1980s, the equivalent of “safe sex” thinking no longer influenced CIA activity in Afghanistan. Annual appropriations for Afghan aid soared to \$650 million, making support of the mujahideen more expensive than any previous covert operation. Congress, at times, took the initiative in boosting funding, mainly because of the efforts of Representative Charles Wilson (D-TX), who wanted to avenge U.S. losses during the Vietnam War.²² The most critical decision, though, was Reagan’s in March 1985, when he signed NSDD 166, a policy statement that established the goal of defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan. The CIA not only dramatically increased the flow of arms to the mujahideen but also provided Stinger surface-to-air missiles. If any deniability remained about CIA support of the Afghan resistance, it became implausible in September 1986 when mujahideen fighters began destroying helicopter gunships and low-level bombers with the Stingers. The neutralization of Soviet air power was yet another problem in a failed war that Mikhail Gorbachev described as a “bleeding wound.” At a Politburo

19. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 159-71, 265-71; Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 265; Beth A. Fischer, “Reagan and the Soviets: Winning the Cold War?” in Brownlee and Graham, eds., *The Reagan Presidency*, 113-20.

20. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 9.

21. *Ibid.*, 47-48; Pach, “Sticking to His Guns,” 197.

22. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 316-18.

meeting in November 1986, Gorbachev said that he wanted to end Soviet military involvement in a year or two so that the Red Army would not be fighting “for another 20-30 years.”²³ That is what Gorbachev did when he announced in February 1988 that Soviet troops would begin leaving Afghanistan, a withdrawal completed within a year.²⁴

Although there were many reasons for Soviet troubles in Afghanistan, Reagan justifiably concluded that he had achieved a major victory when the Red Army departed. Shultz maintained that the Reagan Doctrine had triumphed, although the policy of supporting the Afghan resistance preceded both the Reagan Doctrine and the Reagan administration. There were also limits to U.S. success. Even though Soviet troops withdrew, a Marxist government remained in power in Afghanistan when Reagan left office. And while they fought to be free of Soviet domination, none of the major factions that constituted the mujahideen embraced liberal democracy. They shared a common adversary with their U.S. patrons, but not common values.

The contras in Nicaragua, who got U.S. aid in an unusual, illegal, and—ultimately—scandalous fashion, also gained strong support from the Reagan administration. The contras waged guerrilla war against the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega, who had taken power in 1979 when his Sandinista National Front won a lengthy civil war against dictator Anastasio Somoza. Ortega favored sweeping changes in Nicaraguan society; his government maintained friendly relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union and supported a leftist insurgency in neighboring El Salvador. But whereas Ortega leaned to the left, he also tried to maintain the support of moderates in his ruling coalition. A few of them, however, left the government, insisting that Ortega had betrayed the revolution, and eventually became leaders of the contras. Yet the contras were a diverse group that included former members of Somoza’s National Guard as well as unsavory opportunists. As civil strife once again rent Nicaragua, many Americans, fearful of “another Vietnam,” opposed the commitment of U.S. military forces. Reagan keenly understood the limits of public support for U.S. military intervention, but he also thought that it was necessary to take strong action to prevent “another Cuba,” a leftist government that imported Soviet advisors and exported revolution. In December 1981, Reagan authorized the CIA to begin training the contras and supplying them with arms.²⁵

What was supposed to be covert U.S. intervention in an increasingly nasty and sensational war quickly became an open secret that produced strong criticism in Congress. Reagan acknowledged the U.S. role, but insisted that the reason for helping the contras was to pressure the Sandinista government to reform and hold elections. Yet hard-

23. Transcript, meeting of the CPSU CC Politburo, 13 November 1986, Cold War International History Project. Retrieved August 28, 2005, from http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=342.

24. John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through Iranscam* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 357-67; Cannon, *President Reagan*, 322-23, 789; Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 60-63.

25. William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 125-46; Pach, “Sticking to His Guns,” 96-98; NSDD 17, 4 January 1982, Intelligence Resource Program, Federation of American Scientists. Retrieved August 28, 2005, from <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-017.htm>.

liners within the administration, including the president himself, were less interested in changing the Sandinista government than in driving it from power. After the CIA mined the harbor of Managua, an action that Reagan authorized in November 1983, administration claims about moderate objectives in Nicaragua became increasingly unpersuasive. Big majorities in Congress forced Reagan to sign legislation that proscribed U.S. military aid to the contras.²⁶

Yet Reagan wanted to maintain the contras “body and soul,” despite the congressional prohibition. Using a combination of guile and brazenness, NSC aide Oliver North carried out the president’s wish by using private donations and foreign subsidies to keep arms flowing to the contras through elaborate, clandestine channels. While North scorned Congress, Reagan courted legislators. He began his campaign for the renewal of military aid to the contras with his State of the Union address in February 1985, when he couched his appeal in a broader declaration to “not break faith” with anti-Communist forces—what Krauthammer later called the Reagan Doctrine. The president brushed aside sensational reports about contra atrocities and drug trafficking and lauded the “freedom fighters” for their democratic principles and personal courage. In one extravagant moment, he even exclaimed that the contras were “the moral equal of our Founding Fathers.” Congress, nevertheless, did not lift the ban on contra military aid until October 1986. Yet as it did so, information leaked about North’s dubious or illegal schemes for supplying the contras. A few weeks later, there was a sensational revelation that North had subsidized the contra supply operation with surplus funds generated by secret arms transfers to purported moderates in Iran, who were supposed to use their influence to secure the release of American hostages in Lebanon.²⁷

The Iran-Contra scandal halted U.S. military aid to the contras. Reagan complained that he had lost a critical source of leverage over the Ortega government. Near the end of his presidency, he even asserted that “genuine peace and freedom” had failed to take root in Nicaragua because of the U.S. failure to stand “unflinchingly” with the contras. Yet despite Reagan’s contention, a major step toward democracy occurred only *after* Congress stopped the flow of arms to the “freedom fighters.” A peace initiative sponsored by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez led to a cease-fire in 1988 and an election in 1990 in which Nicaraguans voted Ortega out of the presidency. Aid to the contras, along with Soviet assistance to the Sandinista government, contributed to a civil war that produced horrendous losses, including 30,000 deaths and 100,000 refugees. There was no victory for the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua.²⁸

In southern Africa, Reagan administration officials were often at odds with each other over who were the freedom fighters and how to support them. The State Department’s policy was constructive engagement, a diplomatic strategy that aimed at moderating apartheid in South Africa, gaining independence for Namibia, and negotiating

26. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 145-46, 330-40, 343-46.

27. *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan*, 1985, 1: 228-29; Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 27-93; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 414-17.

28. *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan*, 1988, 2: 1383; Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 188-92; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 580-83.

solutions to regional conflicts. Shultz believed that a regional approach was essential because of the linkage of critical issues. The Reagan administration, for example, wanted the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, where they had supported a Marxist government that had seized power in 1975 during a civil war. Yet Namibian independence was closely related, because South Africa, which controlled Namibia, allowed the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA) to use that country as “a launching pad” for raids against Cuban and Angolan government troops. Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker took the lead in turning constructive engagement into regional agreements, but Shultz warned him that only “near-stealth diplomacy” could succeed because of the opposition of powerful “right-wingers” within the administration. Casey, for example, was an unrelenting foe of negotiations with the Angolans and Cubans and instead advocated arming UNITA and cooperating with South Africa. Casey had an ally in Patrick Buchanan, the White House communications director, who thought that Crocker and the State Department were leaning too hard on the South African government, which was reliably anti-Communist. Both Buchanan and Casey used their connections with conservative advocacy groups and Republican legislators to mobilize opposition against constructive engagement. They helped gain a victory in 1985, when Congress repealed a ban on CIA funding of the contending factions in Angola, a restriction enacted a decade earlier. Shultz hoped that the modest program of covert assistance to UNITA that Reagan approved in late 1985 would add some muscle to Crocker’s diplomacy. It probably did, but U.S. aid was small compared to South African assistance to UNITA and Soviet and Cuban assistance to their Angolan allies. In late 1988, Crocker finally secured the agreement he had long sought: the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola along with independence for Namibia. Constructive engagement rather than the Reagan Doctrine mainly accounted for U.S. success.²⁹

The Reagan Doctrine had an even smaller role in Mozambique, as the president’s advisors again disagreed over how to roll back Communist influence. Like Angola, Mozambique was a Portuguese colony that gained independence in 1975. The regime that took power advocated “scientific socialism” and got Soviet military and economic aid and advisors. With help from South Africa, the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) waged guerrilla war against the government. Casey and other administration hardliners advocated support for RENAMO because it fought against a Marxist government that was a Soviet client. Shultz disagreed, because he considered RENAMO “a creature of South Africa” that “engaged in terror and cruelty on a large scale.” The State Department’s preferred policy was to court Mozambique President Samora Machel and capitalize on his emerging discontent with Marxism. Reagan had his doubts, but British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was enthusiastic about the prospect of winning Machel’s friendship. The president’s reservations vanished after a White House meeting with Machel in September 1985. Machel regaled Reagan with stories about the shortcomings of the Soviet system, and the two leaders were on a first-name basis by the end of the visit. Casey continued to stoke conservative criticism of administration policy by

29. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1112-29; Prados, *Presidents’ Secret Wars*, 336-47; Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York: W. Norton and Company, 1992), 74-82.

doing such things as providing intelligence briefings on Capitol Hill that exaggerated RENAMO's strength. Yet the administration ultimately followed Shultz's diplomatic strategy rather than the Reagan Doctrine formula of aiding RENAMO.³⁰

In Cambodia, the Reagan administration tried to diminish Soviet influence through a modest aid program that eventually expanded because of congressional pressure to implement the Reagan Doctrine more vigorously. U.S. aid went to non-Communist resistance forces who fought against the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). That government came to power at the end of 1978, when Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and overthrew the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations worried that the PRK, which the Vietnamese dominated, was a gain for Soviet influence because Hanoi was aligned with Moscow. A variety of resistance movements organized against the PRK, and in 1982 the Reagan administration provided the non-Communist factions with limited covert aid. All of the U.S. help consisted of non-lethal supplies—vehicles, food, and uniforms, rather than weapons or ammunition. Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia provided far more assistance to the resistance fighters, and China aided the Khmer Rouge. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations tried to negotiate an agreement for Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. The Reagan administration supported these diplomatic efforts, but opposed any settlement that allowed the Khmer Rouge to regain power. In February 1985, Representative Stephen Solarz (D-NY), citing the president's recent State of the Union message, called for more U.S. aid to the non-Communist Cambodian resistance as a way of speeding a political settlement. Both the State and Defense departments at first opposed this proposal, but Solarz used his position as chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs to build strong congressional support for legislation that provided funds for additional assistance. The Reagan administration eventually dropped its objections to Solarz's initiative, and the result was a tripling of U.S. aid to an annual level of \$15 million. In 1987, the Vietnamese started to withdraw their troops from Cambodia. While the Cambodian resistance partly accounted for the Vietnamese decision, a bigger reason was a decline in Soviet support arising from Gorbachev's concerns about the economic "strain" of aiding Hanoi and his objections to the Vietnamese leadership's "expansionist ambitions." Negotiations led to a peace accord in 1991 and elections in 1993. The Reagan Doctrine, invigorated by the initiative of a liberal Democratic member of Congress, contributed to these results, yet the U.S. role was still quite limited.³¹

Democratic change in the Philippines did not require rolling back communism yet still was connected to the Reagan Doctrine. The government of President Ferdinand Marcos faced a crisis after the assassination on August 21, 1983 of exiled opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., as he stepped off an airplane when he returned to the Philippines. Domestic protests and international condemnation grew stronger as official investigations covered up military involvement in the killing. Shultz took the lead in persuading Reagan that the United States had to press Marcos to reform rather than

30. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1111-17; Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 193-212.

31. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 82-111; Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 62.

tighten his grip on power and risk an explosion that would benefit a growing Communist insurgency. The secretary, however, soon concluded that “Marcos was the problem, not the solution,” but he had trouble persuading Reagan, who wanted to stand by a longtime U.S. friend and staunch anti-Communist leader. Events reached a culmination in February 1987, after Marcos claimed victory over Corazon Aquino, the widow of the murdered opposition leader, in a presidential election in which U.S. and other international observers found widespread government fraud. Shultz spoke for practically all major foreign-policy advisors when he told the president that the administration had to push for Marcos’s departure. Reagan, according to Shultz, agreed intellectually, if not emotionally. Marcos left the Philippines, and U.S. recognition of Aquino’s government followed swiftly. Shultz realized that his pressure for a break with Marcos had strained relations with Reagan. But he later insisted that “the Reagan Doctrine could not hold up if the freedom fighters we would support were only those fighting Communist regimes.” Shultz also advocated democratic reforms in Chile and South Korea, but complained that he “was not really on the same wavelength of the president and many of his advisers” who were inclined to support reliably anti-Communist leaders despite their democratic deficiencies.³²

The Reagan Doctrine and U.S. Foreign Policy

Charles Krauthammer thought that he had found a new idea in U.S. foreign policy when he discovered the Reagan Doctrine, but in some ways he was quite mistaken. Rolling back communism both as an idea and a policy was as old as the U.S. strategy of containment. Truman and Eisenhower had challenged Communist or leftist regimes, albeit with mixed results. Reagan’s national security policies, of course, were different from those of his immediate predecessors, who advocated détente with the Soviet Union. But there were still significant continuities between Carter’s policies and Reagan’s—at least at the beginning of the latter’s administration—concerning some anti-Communist movements, such as the mujahideen in Afghanistan and the resistance groups in Cambodia. Krauthammer also was wrong when he asserted that the Reagan Doctrine established “a new, firmer—a doctrinal—foundation” that made “equally worthy” U.S. support for “all armed resistance to Communism.”³³ Casey may have thought in those terms, but Shultz surely did not. Despite Krauthammer’s conclusion, the Reagan Doctrine did not ensure equal treatment or similar assistance to “freedom fighters.”

The results of U.S. assistance also varied considerably. The Reagan administration achieved its greatest success in Afghanistan. Gorbachev ordered the withdrawal of Soviet troops because of domestic discontent with the war and because he wanted to free up resources for economic restructuring. Yet he worried that if the war continued, the Reagan administration’s next step might be to establish U.S. bases and airfields in

32. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 608-42, 969-82.

33. Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine,” 54.

Afghanistan.³⁴ In Nicaragua, a zealous commitment to the contras produced a scandal that raised fundamental questions about the president's judgment and his respect for congressional prerogatives. In southern Africa, aid to UNITA may have contributed to a settlement, but what mattered far more was the tenacity and effectiveness of Crocker's diplomatic efforts. In Cambodia, the U.S. role was small.

The Reagan Doctrine called both for challenging communism and extending freedom, and administration policy makers had trouble reconciling those goals. Most of the "freedom fighters" that the administration supported were allies of convenience, more appealing for what they opposed than for the values they espoused. The military success of the mujahideen was hardly a victory for democracy. The contras really were not the Nicaraguan equivalents of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, no matter how frequently the president praised their supposedly lofty principles. Shultz understood that the president was "a true proponent of democracy and individual liberty." Yet he also realized that "Reagan could be led to agree with the proposition that all freedom-fighters . . . deserved unquestioned support." Reagan was not the first—or the last—president to struggle with the difficulty of reconciling security interests and democratic principles.³⁵ That he did so makes the Reagan Doctrine and its implementation interesting and instructive long after the Cold War has ended.

34. Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, 90.

35. David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).