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Schmidli, W.M.; Pee, R.

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Recreating the Cold War Consensus: Democracy Promotion and the Crisis of American Hegemony

William Michael Schmidli

Have you ever in your reading of history heard of a Communist regime that just couldn't wait to negotiate itself into a democracy? I'm afraid it's a little like a skunk negotiating itself into a rose; it doesn't happen a lot.

—Ronald Reagan, *Remarks at a White House Briefing for Private Sector Supporters*, March 14, 1986. Public Papers of the Presidents [PPP], 353

Flanked by solemn beefeaters brandishing eight-foot spears, on June 8, 1982, Ronald Reagan delivered a landmark foreign policy address to 500 members of the British Parliament. Speaking in the majestic Royal Gallery of the Palace of Westminster beneath massive paintings of British military victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo, Reagan called for a “crusade for freedom” in the Cold War struggle against communist totalitarianism.

W. M. Schmidli (✉)

Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

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75

Emphasizing both the weakness exposed by the Soviet Union's moribund economy and the threat posed by communist subversion across the globe, Reagan championed democracy as the defining strength of the United States and its allies. In ringing tones, the president asserted that "day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower." Revising Sir Winston Churchill's famous 1946 declaration that Eastern and Western Europe stood divided by an "iron curtain," Reagan asserted that "from Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none—not one regime—has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root."

Reagan's Westminster address contained the seeds of a democracy promotion initiative that would grow to become a defining feature of the administration's approach to international affairs. Overshadowed in the press by Reagan's pronouncement that "the march of freedom and democracy ... will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history," the president also emphasized the need "to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, [and] universities."¹ More concretely, the following January, the president signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 77, mandating increased "aid, training and organizational support for foreign governments and private groups to encourage the growth of democratic political institutions and practices."² These efforts bore fruit; after a prolonged and rancorous debate, lawmakers on Capitol Hill legislated annual Congressional funding for a National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a bipartisan, non-profit, private organization to aid democratic groups overseas.

The Reagan administration embraced the NED and the broader project of American democracy promotion with enthusiasm. By mid-decade, the democracy promotion initiative had emerged as the defining feature of the Reagan administration's human rights policy and the lynchpin of the administration's effort to recreate the bipartisan Cold War consensus that had foundered in the late 1960s on the shoals of the Vietnam War. By simultaneously aligning the United States rhetorically behind democratization processes abroad and ratcheting up the pressure on the communist

¹ Reagan, address to the British Parliament, June 8, 1982, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1982/60882a.htm>.

² National Security Decision Directive 77, January 14, 1983, Secret, Subject: "Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security," Digital National Security Archive [DNSA], Iran-Contra Affair, ID: IC00088.

world, the Reagan administration sought to seize the political high ground with a project that would protect national security without losing sight of moral considerations.

Reagan's Westminster address was thus a foundational moment in the rising significance of democracy promotion in US foreign policy. But *another* Westminster address also deserves mention in this context. In October 1983, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William J. Casey received an honorary Doctor of Laws Degree at Westminster College—the tiny liberal arts institution in Fulton, Missouri, where Winston Churchill had delivered his Iron Curtain speech 37 years earlier. In *his* Westminster address, Casey eschewed Reagan's optimism, focusing instead on the "creeping imperialism" of the Soviet Union. "The Kremlin uses a variety of techniques to exploit economic, racial and religious divisions around the world and to destabilize and subvert other countries by fostering internal insurgency," the CIA Director warned. "The Soviet Union then supplies weapons, training and advisors to bring in radical governments which will extend Soviet power and further Soviet interests." Rising Soviet military power over the previous decade, combined with the adventurism of dozens of proxies including Cuba, Libya, and East Germany, Casey continued, posed a clear and present danger to US national security. "If the adverse shift in the strategic balance of recent years is permitted to go far enough, it will become easier for the Soviets to exploit soft spots around the world," Casey declared. "It will seem to have become less risky for the Soviets to involve themselves in smaller conflicts especially in less developed parts of the world."

Echoing Reagan, Casey lauded the rising number of democracies on the world stage. Yet the CIA Director also called for increased US interventionism to halt Soviet subversion, particularly in the Middle East and Central America. "It is past time for the American government—Executive branch and Congress—to take the Soviet challenge in the Third World seriously and to develop a broad, integrated strategy for countering it," Casey asserted. "The less-developed nations of the world will be the principal U.S.-Soviet battleground for many years to come."³

Casey's grim appraisal of Soviet adventurism was widely shared inside the Washington beltway by cold warriors on both sides of the political aisle. By mid-decade, the so-called Reagan Doctrine had developed into a

³William J. Casey, 'What We Face,' address at Westminster College, Fulton, MO, October 29, 1983, William J. Casey Papers, 1928–1996, Box 25, Folder: '9—1983,' Hoover Institution Archives [HIA].

concerted US effort to roll back communist gains in the developing world by supporting anticommunist wars of national liberation.⁴ Ground zero for the Reagan Doctrine was Central America, where US-funded counter-revolutionary forces, known as the “contras,” waged a brutal guerrilla war throughout the 1980s against the leftist government of Nicaragua.

The two Westminster addresses illuminate twin impulses of American foreign policy in the Reagan era. By mid-decade, the Reagan administration’s democracy promotion initiative had emerged as the defining feature of the 40th president’s human rights policy. The project won bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, as congressional legislators lauded Reagan’s withdrawal of support for US-backed dictators in Haiti and the Philippines, and supported the White House call for aid to anticommunist militants in Afghanistan, Southern Africa, Cambodia, and, to a limited extent, Central America. More broadly, by 1986, the democracy promotion initiative had succeeded in making steps toward recreating the bipartisan foreign policy consensus of the early Cold War.

Yet even as the administration was fashioning a new Cold War consensus, the interventionism at the heart of the Reagan Doctrine nearly destroyed the Reagan presidency. Beginning in late 1986, investigations of the Iran-Contra Scandal consumed the Reagan administration, distracting executive oversight of US foreign policy. Although the relationship between the illegalities at the heart of the scandal and the Reagan administration’s democracy promotion initiative were largely obscured as the congressional investigation unfolded, from the outset, Reagan’s intervention in Central America was undertaken in the spirit of a democracy promotion initiative that sought to orchestrate a regime change in Nicaragua. Indeed, it was no coincidence that National Security Council (NSC) staffer Oliver North—the architect of the Iran Contra initiative—referred to his expansive covert operations in Central America as “Project Democracy.”

When Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office in January 1981, the 40th president of the United States was intent on downgrading his predecessor’s emphasis on human rights, non-interventionism, and multilateralism. The

⁴The term “Reagan Doctrine” was originally coined by neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer. See Charles Krauthammer, ‘Essay: The Reagan Doctrine,’ *Time*. April 1, 1985. For a useful overview, see also, Dustin Walcher, ‘The Reagan Doctrine,’ in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 339–58.

Jimmy Carter administration, Reagan and his top advisors believed, had demonstrated the defeatism, isolationism, and self-abasement characteristic of liberal internationalists, whose efforts to redirect US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Vietnam War had eroded the power of the Executive branch and weakened the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Instead, Reagan administration hardliners championed a muscular US approach to the Cold War in which national security, not moral considerations, took center stage. “We’re not free to have relations *only* with the democratic countries of this world,” US Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick told a journalist in 1981. “And in governments, as in life, there are degrees of evil. To say that measles is less bad than meningitis doesn’t make you pro-measles, does it?” To be sure, the UN Ambassador concluded, the United States was “revolted” by torture. “But the central goal of our foreign policy should be not the moral elevation of other nations, but the preservation of a civilized conception of our own self-interest.”⁵

Over the course of early 1981, the “Kirkpatrick Doctrine,” as the UN Ambassador’s policy prescriptions came to be known, served as the blueprint for a concerted effort to shore up relations with authoritarian allies. Sidestepping evidence of state-sponsored human rights abuses, in the early months of 1981, leaders from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and South Korea were invited to Washington for meetings with top US policymakers.⁶ As President Reagan told Argentine General Roberto Viola in mid-March, there would be “no public scoldings and lectures” and “anything we ask for will be with a *por favore*” [sic].⁷ Similarly, at the July 1981 re-inauguration of Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, Vice President George H. W. Bush studiously ignored evidence of election fraud. “We love your adherence to democratic principles and to the democratic process,” Bush effused.⁸ On a six-nation Latin America tour the following month,

⁵ *U.S. News and World Report*, ‘Overhaul U.S. Policy on Human Rights?’ March 2, 1981.

⁶ Vita Bite, ‘Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy.’ Congressional Research Service [CRS], January 20, 1983, LASSIR, Box 11, HIA; Juan de Onis, ‘U.S. Improving Ties to Latin Rightists,’ *NYT*. March 8, 1981, 4.

⁷ White House Memo of Conversation, March 17, 1981, ‘Summary of the President’s Meeting with Argentine President-designate General Roberto O. Viola,’ Executive Secretariat: NSC, Subject File, Box 13, Folder: ‘Memorandums of Conversation, President Reagan, March 9–19, 1981,’ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library [RRPL].

⁸ *Los Angeles Times* [LAT], ‘Bush Stands by His Toast to Philippine President.’ July 2, 1981, B8.

Kirkpatrick emphasized with characteristic candor the Reagan administration's desire for warm relations with anticommunist allies. The Reagan team, the UN Ambassador told the press in Santiago, intended to "normalize completely its relations with Chile in order to work together in a pleasant way."⁹

The emergence of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine did not result, however, in the disappearance of human rights as a US foreign policy concern. Galvanized by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's refusal in May 1981 to confirm conservative political theorist Ernest Lefever to lead the State Department Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, by the end of the year, the White House was increasingly deploying human rights rhetoric to describe the Reagan administration's foreign policy approach. Influenced by the neoconservative Cold War hawk Elliott Abrams, who subsequently served as the State Department human rights bureau chief from late 1981 to mid-1985, the Reagan administration turned to the lexicon of human rights to justify aggressive US Cold War policies.¹⁰ Significantly, this was not a repudiation of the Kirkpatrick Doctrine's emphasis on national security; as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Walter Stoessel Jr., succinctly put it, "our objective is to make our security interests and our human rights concerns mutually reinforcing so that they can be pursued in tandem."¹¹

More specifically, the Reagan administration framed its human rights policy around the premise that communist totalitarianism was unique in its complete denial of political rights and civil liberties. Echoing Kirkpatrick's influential 1979 *Commentary* article "Dictatorships and Double Standards," Abrams asserted in 1982 that "once a communist government is established the Soviets make sure that it endures permanently. No efforts by the people of that country will be allowed to win them freedom." Emphasizing that communist governments were uniquely repressive toward their own citizens and dangerously aggressive in the

⁹ John Dinges, 'Kirkpatrick Trip Upsets Opposition in Chile,' *Washington Post* [WP], August 13, 1981, A35.

¹⁰ *New York Times* [NYT], 'Excerpts from State Department Memo on Human Rights,' November 5, 1981, A10.

¹¹ Vita Bite, 'Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Relations: Six Key Questions in the Continuing Policy Debate,' CRS, December 10, 1981, Latin American Strategic Studies Institute Records [LASSIR], Box 11, HIA; Sarah Snyder, 'The Defeat of Ernest Lefever's Nomination,' in *Challenging U.S. Foreign Policy and the World in the Long Twentieth Century*, Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas, eds. (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 136–161.

international arena, Abrams concluded that “resisting the expansion of communism is a key human rights goal.”¹²

Secretary of State George P. Shultz played a particularly important role in fusing the Reagan administration’s strident anticommunism with the liberal internationalist appeal of democracy promotion. Testifying on Capitol Hill in February 1983, Shultz championed democracy promotion as a strategy to protect US national security interests while remaining tied to America’s moral underpinnings:

If we are to achieve the kind of world we all hope to see—with peace, freedom and economic progress—democracy has to continue to expand. Democracy is a vital, even revolutionary force. It exists as an expression of the basic human drive for freedom. While it is threatened or repressed by those forces for whom power takes precedence over liberty, with the hard work, perseverance, and courage of its proponents throughout the world, democracy will flourish.¹³

When congressional lawmakers expressed concern that the democracy promotion initiative could backfire, adversely affecting US foreign relations, Shultz responded expansively, “Don’t be nervous about democracy, about holding that torch up there.”¹⁴

By mid-decade, the democracy promotion initiative had emerged as the defining feature of the Reagan administration’s human rights policy. An overriding emphasis on democratic institutions, the protection of civil liberties, and the free market infused the State Department’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.¹⁵ More significantly, top US policy-makers—with Shultz leading the pack—continued to champion the issue, describing the wave of democratization over the previous half-dozen years,

¹² Elliott Abrams, address to the Tiger Bay Beach Club, Miami, FL, June 2, 1982, Box 12, Shattan Papers [SP], HIA; see also, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards,’ *Commentary*, vol. 68, no. 5 (1979), 34–45.

¹³ George P. Shultz, statement before the Subcommittee on International Operations, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, February 23, 1983, Allen Weinstein Papers, Box 28, Folder 7: ‘The Democracy Program Report, Statements, & Transcripts, 1983,’ HIA.

¹⁴ Don Oberdorfer, ‘Lawmakers Voice Skepticism on U.S. ‘Project Democracy,’ *WP*, February 24, 1983, A1.

¹⁵ Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, ‘1983 Human Rights Report’ [excerpt from the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1983] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1984).

particularly Latin America, as a “democratic revolution.” In a major policy address in February 1985 at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, Shultz declared that “as a matter of fundamental principle, the United States supports human rights and peaceful democratic change throughout the world, including in noncommunist, pro-Western countries.” In a clear shift from the Kirkpatrick Doctrine’s emphasis on supporting repressive allies, Shultz maintained that democratic institutions were “the best guarantor of stability and peace, as well as of human rights.”¹⁶

Significantly, this emphasis on democracy promotion dovetailed with the Reagan Doctrine’s call to support anticommunist wars of liberation. Although in his memoirs Shultz recounted frequent clashes with administration hardliners over third world hotspots such as Central America, notably CIA Director Casey and National Security Advisor William P. Clark, the Secretary of State did *not* oppose US support for anticommunist militants.¹⁷ As Shultz maintained in an interview many years later, “I wasn’t comfortable with some of the things the CIA did, but I was comfortable with the Reagan doctrine.”¹⁸

Indeed, in his San Francisco address, Shultz explicitly tied the democracy promotion initiative to the Reagan Doctrine’s emphasis on rolling back communist gains in the developing world. The United States “should support the forces of freedom in communist totalitarian states,” Shultz bluntly declared. “We must not succumb to the fashionable thinking that democracy has enemies only on the right, that pressures and sanctions are fine against rightwing dictators but not against leftwing totalitarians.” Similarly, the Secretary called for strong US support for nations threatened by communism. “So long as communist dictatorships feel free to aid and abet insurgencies in the name of ‘socialist internationalism,’” Shultz demanded, “why must democracies, the target of this threat, be inhibited from defending their own interests and the cause of democracy itself?” Casting the defense of democracy in stark terms, the Secretary of State

¹⁶ Shultz, ‘America and the Struggle for Freedom,’ address to the Commonwealth Club of California, February 22, 1985 (Washington, D.C.: Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, February 1985).

¹⁷ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: Diplomacy, Power, and the Victory of the American Ideal* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 285–322.

¹⁸ Shultz, interview with Stephen Knott, Marc Selverstone, and James Sterling Young, December 18, 2002, transcript, Miller Center of Public Affairs, Presidential Oral History Program, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/george-p-shultz-oral-history-secretary-state>.

depicted anticommunist struggles as a defining feature of the emerging world order.

The democracy promotion initiative also served to advance the Reagan administration's effort to recreate the bipartisan Cold War consensus that had foundered in the late 1960s on the shoals of the Vietnam War. In an address to State Department employees in April 1985 commemorating the tenth anniversary of the fall of South Vietnam, Shultz cast the American intervention in Southeast Asia in distinctly moral terms. "Whatever mistakes in how the war was fought, whatever one's view of the strategic rationale for our intervention, the *morality* of our effort must now be clear," he declared. The ignominious US withdrawal, Shultz continued, ushered in a grim era in the United States of "introspection, self-doubt, and hesitancy." Bluntly criticizing liberal internationalists' efforts in the 1970s to rein in the power of what Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. famously described as the "imperial presidency," Shultz continued:

Some Americans tended to think that *American* power was the source of the world's problems, and that the key to peace was to limit *our* actions in the world. So we imposed all sorts of restrictions on ourselves. Vietnam—and Watergate—left a legacy of congressional restrictions on presidential flexibility, now embedded in our legislation. ... [T]hese weakened the ability of the President to act and to conduct foreign policy, and they weakened our country. Thus we pulled back from global leadership.

A decade later, Shultz concluded, the isolationism and self-defeatism of the 1970s had dissipated, and the United States was once again assuming its traditional leadership position. "The American people believe in their country and in its role as a force for good," Shultz asserted. "They want to see an effective foreign policy that blocks aggression and advances the cause of freedom and democracy."¹⁹

¹⁹ Shultz, "The Meaning of Vietnam," address at the Department of State, April 25, 1985 (Washington, D.C.: Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, April 1985). Shultz's emphasis on moving beyond the "Vietnam Syndrome" echoed a common theme among neoconservatives. Elliott Abrams asserted in 1983, for example, "where democracy is threatened, be it in Western Europe, in Central America, or wherever, American power provides the necessary deterrent to aggression. Where that shield is in place—as in Western Europe—democracy and human rights can flourish. Where that shield is removed—as in Vietnam—the prospects for democracy and human rights are destroyed." Abrams, address to the Education and Research Institute, August 2, 1983, Washington, D.C., Box 14, SP, HIA.

If Shultz laid the rhetorical groundwork for the democracy promotion initiative, the administration's response to popular unrest in Haiti and the Philippines offered a more concrete expression of US efforts to promote democracy overseas. In February 1986, the Reagan administration withdrew US support from the brutal Haitian President Jean-Claude Duvalier following massive strikes and protests that brought Port-au-Prince to a standstill. With even the Haitian military turning against him, Duvalier fled to France. A few weeks later, as popular unrest in the Philippines intensified following deeply fraudulent elections, Shultz prevailed on a very reluctant President Reagan to withdraw US support from the autocratic Ferdinand Marcos. Bereft of a key source of political legitimacy, in the early hours of February 25, Marcos boarded a US Air Force flight to Guam, setting the stage for a democratic transition led by opposition leader Corazon Aquino.

The Reagan administration's actions in Haiti and the Philippines sent a shockwave rippling across the Washington beltway. Once Duvalier and Marcos had stepped down, American "support for authoritarian governments that opposed communism could not be taken for granted," George Shultz proudly wrote in his memoirs. "The United States supported people who were themselves standing up for freedom and democracy, whether against communism or against another form of repressive government."²⁰ Indeed, the administration's actions were lauded in the press. "Whatever comes next in the Philippines and Haiti, dictators are reeling and America is their scourge," the *New York Times* enthused. "Hats off to President Reagan."²¹ Even stalwart critics of the administration were impressed. "American policy in this instance expressed what we want to believe are the deepest American values," wrote *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis following Marcos's departure. "We used our influence on the side of democracy. We made no excuses for dictators. And our means were peaceful: not weapons or covert military intervention but the words of politics and diplomacy."²²

²⁰ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 642.

²¹ *NYT*, 'Mr. Reagan Scores for Democracy,' February 8, 1986, 26.

²² Anthony Lewis, 'Why We Celebrate,' *NYT*, February 27, 1986, A23; see also Richard Holbrooke, 'Removal of Marcos Was a Triumph for Reagan's Ad-Hocism,' *WP*, March 2, 1986, C1; Philip Geyelin, 'Democracy Triumphs-What Went Right?' *LAT*, March 2, 1986, H5; Flora Lewis, 'A Welcome Reversal,' *NYT*, March 16, 1986; Tamar Jacoby, 'The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights,' *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 5 (1986), 1066–86.

The administration's actions also won support on Capitol Hill from moderates on both sides of the aisle, such as Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard G. Lugar (R-IN) and House Foreign Affairs Committee member Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D-NY). After leading the official US delegation of observers to oversee the Philippine election and stridently denouncing the widespread voter fraud, Lugar emerged as a particularly strong supporter of US democracy promotion. "The strongest suit of American foreign policy is the promotion and protection of democracy abroad," he later wrote. "Democratic countries celebrate human rights, they enhance our security, and they good trading partners committed to a higher standard of living for all citizens."²³

Combined with Reagan's increasingly moderate tone toward the Soviet Union, by mid-decade the democracy promotion initiative garnered rising congressional support. By early 1986 Congress had continued to allocate funding for the National Endowment for Democracy, augmented US support for anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan, repealed the Clark Amendment prohibiting covert operations in Angola, legislated military assistance to non-communist resistance in Cambodia, and approved non-lethal aid to the contras.²⁴ Such bipartisanship prompted claims that American policy-makers were finally free of the Vietnam Syndrome. As one observer optimistically put it: "Since the 1984 election, both political parties have been moving toward the center on foreign and defense questions, suggesting that the divisiveness created by the Vietnam War may be behind us."²⁵

Yet even as the administration was fashioning a new Cold War consensus, the interventionism at the heart of the Reagan Doctrine nearly destroyed the Reagan presidency. In the effort to roll back perceived communist gains in the developing world, ousting Nicaragua's leftist revolutionary regime, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), took center stage. Reagan was deeply committed to defeating the FSLN; the administration's policy toward Nicaragua was a central concern for top Reagan officials throughout the administration's eight years on office.

²³ Richard Lugar, *Letters to the Next President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 27. See also, Stephen J. Solarz, 'When to Intervene,' *Foreign Policy* 63 (Summer 1986), 20–39; Solarz, interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, November 18, 1996, transcript, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

²⁴ Charles William Maynes, 'Reagan and the American Resolve: A U.S. Policy for Intervention Everywhere,' *LAT*, February 9, 1986, G1.

²⁵ Geoffrey Kemp, 'Reagan Has Pulled US Back to the Center,' *LAT*, February 27, 1986, B5.

Beginning in late 1981, the administration began quietly channeling aid to counterrevolutionary forces, known as the “contras,” operating along the rugged Honduran-Nicaraguan border. By 1983, the contras had grown to a force of more than 7000 and had destroyed an estimated US\$24 million worth of Nicaraguan infrastructure.²⁶

Yet opposition on Capitol Hill constrained the scale of the Reagan administration’s intervention in Central America. The successful passage of the first Boland Amendment (Boland I) in December 1982 prohibited the Department of Defense or the CIA from attempting to overthrow the FSLN with US funds. In June 1984, following revelations that the CIA had mined Nicaraguan harbors without appropriately informing congressional oversight committees, restive legislators passed Boland II, prohibiting all lethal aid to the contras.²⁷ Confronting determined efforts by congressional Democrats to bring the contra program to a halt and widespread opposition among the public to a US military intervention in Central America, the Reagan administration increasingly turned to the rhetoric of human rights. Democracy promotion, in particular, emerged as the centerpiece in the administration’s strategy to garner votes on contra assistance bills from uncommitted congressional moderates and deepen public support for the administration’s Central America policy.

From the outset, the Reagan administration viewed Nicaragua through the lens of the Cold War. Eschewing the complexities of the Nicaragua political landscape in favor of a stark vision of Central America as a battleground in the East-West confrontation, top US policymakers portrayed the Sandinistas as brutal Soviet clients, committed to establishing totalitarianism at home and supporting likeminded revolutionaries abroad. The Sandinistas were a “bad news government,” Shultz declared in February 1985. “I see no reason why we should slam the door on people just because they have been taken behind the Iron Curtain.”²⁸ Moreover, the FSLN could not be trusted to fulfill its side of any negotiation with the

²⁶ Don Oberdorfer and Patrick E. Tyler, ‘U.S.-Backed Nicaraguan Rebel Army Swells to 7000,’ *WP*, May 8, 1983, A1; Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Memorandum, secret, July 26, 1983, ‘Nicaragua: Costs of the Insurgency.’ DNSA, ID: CO01327.

²⁷ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 296, 392.

²⁸ *LAT*, ‘Shultz Labels Sandinista Rule as ‘Bad News,’ February 19, 1985, A2.

United States or the international community. As Reagan told a group of supporters the following year:

We've tried to resolve this question through negotiations, and we're still trying. And the Sandinistas have not been interested in talking seriously and sincerely. All of a sudden, now their apologists come out and say, 'Oh, it's time to give new talks a chance.' Well, that sounds just fine and peaceful and nonharmful; but what some people don't seem to understand is that if we delay aid for a few months while we're talking, the Sandinistas will take that time and use it to finish off the contras.

For Reagan, negotiations were pointless. "That's the Communist strategy—to kill them off," the president concluded dramatically. "And when the execution is complete, they'll end the talks."²⁹

More to the point, Reagan administration officials repeatedly emphasized that since the Sandinistas were communists, they could not, by definition, be democratic. When the FSLN held national elections in November 1984, the Reagan administration responded by denouncing the vote as a fraud—four months before the ballots were cast.³⁰ Scrutinized by more than 600 journalists and 400 international electoral observers, the election was generally considered as free and fair as neighboring El Salvador's election two years earlier, which the United States had heartily endorsed.³¹ The Reagan administration, however, dismissed the results and distracted international attention by manufacturing rumors of an impending shipment of Soviet fighter jets to Nicaragua.³² Underscoring the Cold War interventionism at the heart of Reagan's democracy promotion initiative, a US official in Managua candidly told an election monitoring commission that "the United States is not obliged to apply the same standard of judgment to a country whose government is avowedly hostile to the U.S. as for a country, like El Salvador, where it is not." The Sandinistas, the official concluded, "could bring about a situation in

²⁹ Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Briefing for Private Sector Supporters,' 353.

³⁰ Doyle McManus, 'Reagan Sees Nicaraguan Vote as 'Soviet-Style Sham,' Urges Regional Leaders to Cooperate,' *LAT*, July 20, 1984, B19. See also, Department of State, 'Resource Book: Sandinista Elections in Nicaragua,' 1984, Box 1, Folder 15, LASSIR, HIA.

³¹ Dennis Volman, 'Nicaragua Campaign Races to Chaotic Finish,' *Christian Science Monitor*, November 2, 1984, 7.

³² Roy Gutman, 'Nicaraguan Vote a Setback for U.S.,' *Newsday*, November 5, 1984, 13; Norman Kempster, 'Spy Photos Reveal No MIGs,' *LAT*, November 10, 1984, A1; Harry Anderson, 'The MIGs that Weren't There,' *Newsweek*, November 19, 1984, 44.

Central America which could pose a threat to U.S. security. That allows us to change our yardstick.”³³

Indeed, the imperatives of the Reagan Doctrine were on full display in US policy toward Nicaragua. Claiming the moral high ground, Secretary of State Shultz tried to turn the tables on liberals’ criticism that rising US intervention in Central America would lead to a Vietnam-style quagmire. “Our goals in Central America *are* like those we had in Vietnam: democracy, economic progress, and security against aggression,” Shultz claimed. Like North Vietnamese communists, the Sandinistas, “employ slogans of social reform, nationalism, and democracy to obscure their totalitarian goals.” The real parallel between Vietnam and Central America, the Secretary of State concluded, was “broken promises; communist dictatorship; refugees; [and] widened soviet influence, this time near our very borders.”³⁴

As congressional support for the democracy promotion initiative swelled following US actions on Haiti and the Philippines, the Reagan administration intensified its efforts to secure congressional funding for the anti-Sandinista rebels. Offering a scathing appraisal of Sandinista militarization, repression of civil liberties, and interventionism throughout the region, Shultz exhorted the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to support the president’s February 25 assistance request. “Only a democratic opening in Nicaragua can alter these dim prospects,” Shultz warned. “And the resistance is a major element in the present equation that can help create that opening.”³⁵ Cold War hawks quickly jumped on the bandwagon. “The success of the elections in the Philippines points the way for a similar policy in Nicaragua,” claimed Senator Richard Lugar in a pro-contra press release.³⁶ Neoconservative commentator Norman Podhoretz went a step further. Reagan’s tough stand against Duvalier and Marcos had put the ball in liberals’ court, Podhoretz asserted. “It is now up to the liberals to demonstrate the good faith of their own devotion to

³³ Latin American Studies Association, “The Electoral Process in Nicaragua: Domestic and International Influences. The Report of the Latin American Studies Association Delegation to Observe the Nicaraguan General Election of November 4, 1984.” Excerpt reprinted in Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, eds., *Nicaragua: Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 73–107.

³⁴ Shultz, ‘The Meaning of Vietnam.’

³⁵ Shultz, ‘Nicaragua: Will Democracy Prevail?’ statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, February 27, 1986 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Public Affairs, March 1986).

³⁶ Lugar, press release. March 4, 1986, Box 10, Folder 4, Freedom House Archives, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library. Princeton University.

democratic institutions by backing the Administration when it works against non-democratic regimes of the left—specifically, at the moment, Nicaragua.”³⁷

The most forceful call for bipartisan support for the democracy promotion initiative, however, came from President Reagan himself. In March, Reagan embraced the “democratic revolution” in a powerful address to a joint session of Congress. “In this global revolution, there can be no doubt where America stands. The American people believe in human rights and oppose tyranny in whatever form, whether of the left or the right,” Reagan declared. “We use our influence to encourage democratic change, in careful ways that respect other countries’ traditions and political realities as well as the security threats that many of them face from external or internal forces of totalitarianism.”³⁸ Emphasizing the imperative of US support for “freedom fighters” struggling against communism across the globe and placing special emphasis on the Nicaraguan contras, Reagan nonetheless offered a powerful paean to Wilsonian internationalism that resonated on both sides of the political aisle. As *New York Times* reporter Bernard Weinraub noted, “Mr. Reagan seemed to be saying the United States would promote ballots for dealing with right-wing regimes, such as Ferdinand E. Marcos’s in the Philippines, but bullets for left-wing dictatorships like that in Nicaragua.”³⁹

The central problem with this formulation, however, was that in the case of Nicaragua, American democracy promotion meant orchestrating a regime change. Reagan came close to admitting as much when asked by a journalist whether the United States sought to “remove” the FSLN from power. “Well, remove in the sense of its present structure, in which it is a Communist totalitarian state, and it is not a government chosen by the people,” the president responded.⁴⁰ A foreign diplomat in Managua put it differently. Asked what the Sandinistas could do to conciliate Reagan, he responded, “Well, they could shoot themselves.”⁴¹ Not surprisingly, this formulation was unacceptable to FSLN policymakers, who attributed Reagan’s actions to the longstanding US drive to dominate the hemi-

³⁷ Norman Podhoretz, ‘Liberals Wanted Marcos Out, So Why Not Sandinistas?’ *LAT*, March 7, 1986, B5.

³⁸ Reagan, ‘Freedom, Regional Security, and Global Peace,’ address to Congress, March 14, 1986, *PPP*, 386.

³⁹ Bernard Weinraub, ‘The U.S. and Dictators: Reagan’s Vow to Oppose All Despots Offers a Rationale for His Efforts to Aid Contras,’ *NYT*, March 15, 1986, 1.

⁴⁰ Reagan, news conference, February 21, 1985, *PPP*, 209.

⁴¹ Steven Strasser, ‘Reagan’s Gunboat Diplomacy,’ *Newsweek*, August 1, 1983.

sphere. For the US president, FSLN Directorate member Carlos Núñez Téllez asserted in 1983, “in his global strategy and ruling philosophy, the hegemony of the United States, especially in a continent like Latin America, must not be damaged by any country seeking independence.”⁴² Similarly, many human rights groups were deeply uncomfortable with the Reagan administration’s use of human rights rhetoric to advance Cold War goals. As the Americas Watch Committee asserted in a 1985 report, “Such a concerted campaign to use human rights in justifying military action is without precedent in U.S.-Latin American relations, and its effect is an unprecedented debasement of the human rights cause.”⁴³

Nonetheless, the confrontation with Washington had taken a severe toll on the promise of the Nicaraguan revolution. As defense spending ballooned and the economy stagnated, Nicaraguans found the FSLN’s lofty promises of social and economic justice increasingly out of reach. Correspondingly, although the FSLN retained significant popular support in the face of Contra threat, the intensification of the war polarized the political landscape and left many Nicaraguans increasingly disillusioned. Referring to the former dictator, Marta Patricia Baltodano, the coordinator of the independent Nicaraguan Commission on Human Rights, told a journalist in mid-1983, “under Somoza, who was unimaginably bad, you could at least avoid politics. Now it seeps into all levels of life. You cannot escape it. Both systems are bad. Asking which is worse is like saying, ‘What rope should I hang myself with?’”⁴⁴

Amid the heated debate over US policy toward Nicaragua, the Iran-Contra Scandal broke like a firestorm. Beginning in late 1986, congressional investigations revealed that the White House had solicited funding from wealthy American conservatives and friendly foreign governments to support the contras. The administration had also violated US law by secretly shipping arms to Iran in exchange for promises that hostages held by Iranian terrorists in Lebanon would be released. Worse, NSC staffer Oliver North, charged by President Reagan to “do whatever you have to do” to keep the contras “body and soul together,” had illegally diverted profits from the arms-for-hostages scheme to the contras.

⁴² Carlos Núñez, interview with Robert McCartney, September 1983, reprinted as ‘Preparing for Elections: An Interview with Comandante Carlos Núñez Téllez,’ *Contemporary Marxism* vol. 8 (Spring 1984), 188–9.

⁴³ Americas Watch Committee, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York: Americas Watch Committee, 1985).

⁴⁴ William D. Montalbano, ‘Leaders Hang on as Revolution Loses Romance,’ *LAT*, July 10, 1983, A1.

As the congressional hearings proceeded, few observers connected the scandal with the Reagan administration's democracy promotion initiative. Reagan's intervention in Central America, however, defined communism as the ultimate violation of human rights and hence justified US efforts to orchestrate a regime change. Indeed, North referred to his expansive web of black operations in Central America as "Project Democracy," and the administration consistently—and falsely—described the contras as moderate democrats.⁴⁵ As one of the dozens of reports generated by the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean asserted in January 1986: "The goal of the armed democratic resistance is the same as that of the internal political opposition: to bring about the implementation of genuine democracy."⁴⁶

The Ronald Reagan presidency survived Iran-Contra. And as the Cold War came to an abrupt and largely peaceful end shortly after Reagan departed the Oval Office, the scandal was all-but-forgotten. In the heady months following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Reagan's call for American democracy promotion in his 1982 Westminster speech seemed both historically grounded and brilliantly far-sighted: tapping into longstanding American values in the foreign policy arena while also prophetically envisioning the fall of the Iron Curtain. Indeed, by the late 1980s, it was evident that the Reagan administration's embrace of democracy promotion had led to a greater institutionalization of human rights—albeit narrowly defined—in US foreign policy. As US support for democracy movements abroad made clear, such as the American assistance for the opposition coalition in the lead-up to the 1988 Chilean plebiscite, democracy promotion had become increasingly accepted as a legitimate US foreign policy goal among the many players shaping foreign policy in the Washington Beltway and in US diplomatic posts overseas United States.

Less recognized at the time was the extent to which the Reagan administration's emphasis on democracy promotion also served to discursively legitimate a distinctive form of American interventionism—a foreign policy impulse strongly revealed in the *other* Westminster speech—William J.

⁴⁵ Joel Brinkley, 'Iran Sales Linked to Wide Program of Covert Policies,' *NYT*, February 15, 1987, A1.

⁴⁶ Office of Public Diplomacy for the United States and the Caribbean, 'The Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,' January 1986, Patrick Buchanan Files, Box 2, Folder: 'Nicaragua (1986), RRL.

Casey's 1983 address in Fulton, Missouri. This development was clearly evident in the unexpected denouement of Reagan's war on Nicaragua. In the months leading up to the 1990 Nicaraguan election, the George H. W. Bush administration facilitated the unification of 14 diverse opposition parties into the *Unión Nacional Opositora* (UNO) coalition led by publisher and politician Violeta Chamorro. Correspondingly, the White House won congressional approval of a special allocation of more than US\$7 million to influence the Nicaraguan election. Channeled through the National Endowment for Democracy, the funds included civic and voter education programs and "training and the provision of infrastructure (including office supplies, equipment and vehicles), as well as to support voter registration, verification, and election monitoring activities intended to instill confidence in the electoral process."⁴⁷ Simultaneously, in April 1989 Congress approved an aid package of nearly US\$49.7 million for the contras, who increased both military actions and propaganda in favor of the opposition in the months leading up to the election.⁴⁸ Although Nicaraguan voters bore the ultimate responsibility for UNO's surprise victory in the February 1990 election, American support for the contras over the course of the decade and relentless pressure on the Nicaraguan economy, combined with support for the fragile opposition coalition, underscored the power and potential of the democracy promotion initiative in advancing US political goals.

The Reagan administration's emphasis on democracy promotion thus served to discursively legitimate a distinctive form of interventionism. Pursued through civil society or "low-intensity" military interventions and rooted in the neoliberal imperatives of US-led globalization, Reagan's emphasis on human rights *as* democracy promotion would have major implications for US foreign policy. The Cold War ended, but American interventionism, legitimated by a human rights discourse centered on democracy promotion, would continue to shape the post-Cold War era.

⁴⁷ National Endowment for Democracy, *Annual Report 1990, NED Annual Reports, 1984–2004*, <http://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/annualreports/1990-ned-annual-report.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Robert Pear, "Congress Votes \$49.7 Million in Aid for Contras," *NYT*, April 14 1989, A8; Lee Hockstader, "*In Rural Nicaragua, War Dominates Politics*," *WP*, November 12, 1989, A31.