

 **Article REVIEW**

**John A. Soares, Jr.** “Strategy, Ideology and Human Rights: Jimmy Carter Confronts the Left in Central America, 1979-1981.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8:4 (Fall 2006): 57-91.

Reviewed by **William M. LeoGrande**, American University  
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In his article on President Jimmy Carter’s policy in Central America, John A. Soares, Jr. presents a well-researched and factually accurate portrayal, while bringing to light some new documentary evidence from the Carter Library. Analytically, the article engages the issue of whether President Ronald Reagan’s Central America policy was a fundamental break with Carter’s or whether there were major elements of continuity. This is, in many respects, an argument about whether the glass is half empty or half full. There were certainly elements of continuity between the two policies: both shared the aim of keeping the radical left out of power in Central America, and both presidents had essentially the same kit-bag of the instruments to exert influence— military aid, economic aid, and covert action. On the other hand, Reagan’s policy was premised on a very different conception of the challenge to U.S. interest in Central America and the strategic approach for safeguarding them. Those are not small differences.

Soares focuses on the elements of continuity between the two policies, arguing that Carter and Reagan wanted to keep the left out of power in El Salvador and keep it from consolidating a Leninist system in Nicaragua. He’s right, but in making his case, he tends to give the differences between the two policies short-shrift. In places, he offers a straw man version of the contrary hypothesis— that Carter and Reagan’s policies were sharply different. In the straw man version, Carter’s policy is alleged to have enthusiastically accepted and accommodated the left in Central America. This interpretation of Carter is little more than a conservative screed of the times, fashioned to score partisan debating points in the policy wars over Central America. I don’t know anyone who has put it forward as a serious scholarly argument. Not surprisingly, Soares has no difficulty demolishing this thesis. But he leans too far in the other direction, claiming that Carter’s policy was essentially no different than Reagan’s. Carter, Soares argues, simply couched his policy in more liberal rhetorical garb for “tactical” reasons— meaning domestic political ones. “Carter’s attempted accommodation of the Sandinistas was merely a tactical maneuver,” Soares argues, just “rhetoric,” (p. 70). As proof, he cites Carter’s willingness to covertly support moderate opponents of the Sandinistas, and overtly support the post-October 1979 government in El Salvador. Carter’s motivation for obscuring his real intentions was allegedly to avoid alienating Congressional support for the Panama Canal treaties (p. 66).

This logic has some holes. First, the main battle over the canal treaties was fought in the spring of 1978, when Carter won Senate ratification by a single vote. This happened more than a year before the Sandinistas ousted Somoza or the moderate military coup in San Salvador. Carter did face a tough battle to pass implementing legislation for the treaties in the fall of 1979, but even that was completed before the October Salvadoran coup. Moreover, Carter’s policy of coexistence with the Sandinistas won him no friends among the conservative opponents of the canal treaties. If anything, it reinforced their conviction that Carter was dangerously soft on the

Central American left (Panama's Omar Torrijos included), and made them less likely to cooperate in what they regarded as the giveaway of the Canal. Soares' argument that Carter was disingenuous about his real policy in Central America in order to maintain support for the canal treaties doesn't stand up.

A number of Carter officials, many of whom Soares cites, have offered their accounts of what motivated Carter's decision to pursue coexistence with the Sandinistas, and these ring truer. First, Carter had little choice. The complete collapse of Somoza's National Guard left the Sandinistas in uncontested control of the country. Short of direct military intervention (which Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated but Carter rejected because it lacked support in Latin America), Washington could either try to get along with the new Nicaraguan government, hoping to create an environment in which the young revolutionaries had some incentive to moderate their radicalism, or it could isolate and pressure their government in hopes of destabilizing it. Carter chose the first option; Reagan chose the second. The difference was neither tactical nor rhetorical.

The difference between Carter's policy and Reagan's rested upon an ideological assumption about the nature of Marxist regimes. Reagan's senior officials, especially Jeanne Kirkpatrick and Elliott Abrams, viewed Marxist regimes as totalitarianism and hence immutable. Once consolidated, they were impervious to external influence or internal challenge. They would inexorably ally themselves with the Soviet Union and subvert their neighbors. Thus the only sensible U.S. policy was to prevent them from coming to power (El Salvador) or overthrow them before they could consolidate (Nicaragua). Carter's senior officials operated from the premise that Marxist regimes were not *sui generis* and, despite their ideology, would respond to the proper mix of carrots and sticks. This led the Carter administration to regard the Nicaraguan revolutionary government as malleable, so Washington crafted a policy to influence its trajectory.

Soares constructs another straw man argument, allegedly held by "some" who argue that Carter was "enthusiastic about the prospect of close relations with the Sandinistas." The rhetoric of senior officials reinforced this view, according to Soares (pp. 71, 76-77). Again, it's hard to identify anyone who has actually argued that Carter welcomed the Sandinista triumph, or was enthusiastic about U.S.-Nicaraguan relations after Somoza's fall. Soares offers us no examples. "Indications that the Sandinistas were not political pluralist seeking 'bourgeois democracy' persisted in 1980," Soares writes, as if to refute people who thought they were (p. 76). Few thought any such thing, and certainly Carter officials were under no such illusions. As I wrote in 1979, the social democratic thrust of the Sandinistas' initial program reflected, "a political compromise between radical and conservative forces, not a consensus for social democracy," ("The Revolution in Nicaragua," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1979: 28-50).

In short, Carter's policy toward the Sandinistas was neither a facade, as Soares would have us believe, nor the product of a naive belief that the Sandinistas would somehow be transmuted into model social democrats. It was a calculated attempt to use U.S. leverage, especially economic assistance, to influence Nicaraguan decision-makers by creating an environment in which they would have to weigh the benefits of maintaining good relations with Washington (and the costs of bad relations).

Nicaragua's record of aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas demonstrates that Carter's policy was effective. Up until Ronald Reagan was elected, the Sandinistas refrained from making any major commitment to their Salvadoran brethren, much to the Salvadorans' chagrin. Soares notes that while the Sandinistas started shipping significant caches arms to the Salvadorans after the U.S. election, they were stockpiling arms beforehand. This is not evidence that the Sandinistas were unresponsive to Carter's policy of influence, as Soares implies. Quite the contrary. They refrained from violating the rules of the game they had established with Washington until after it was clear that the game in Washington had changed with Reagan's election. And in the first months of the Reagan administration, when U.S. Ambassador Larry Pezzullo offered the Sandinistas a deal in which they could continue to receive U.S. economic aid and have a constructive relationship with the United States they halted arms aid to the Salvadorans, the Sandinistas complied. Reagan, however, wouldn't take the deal.

Regarding El Salvador, Soares argues that Carter and Reagan's policies were basically the same because both supported the center against the radical left and right, and both supplied assistance to the military despite its human rights abuses. Here, too, he overstates the case by not taking seriously the different strategies the two administrations pursued. The Carter administration regarded the insurgency in El Salvador as resulting from decades of economic inequality, social exclusion, and political dictatorship. Only serious reform addressing these problems held any hope of restoring peace and keeping the radical left out of power. The Salvadoran right, therefore, was an adversary of U.S. policy. Washington resisted restoring military aid to the government, even after the October 1979 coup, because it feared that aid would stiffen the resolve of the right (both inside and outside the government) to resist changes proposed by the Christian Democrats. Only when the guerrillas launched their "final offensive" in January 1981 did Carter relent and resume lethal aid, and even then he sent a relatively small amount.

The Reagan administration's conception of the problem and solution was wholly different. It saw the insurgency as fundamentally external in origin, incited by Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. The problem was not social or economic conditions, but rather the presence of armed revolutionaries. The solution was massive military assistance to win the war, not social engineering to reform Salvadoran society. Only when Congress imposed land reform and human rights conditions on military assistance did the Reagan administration try to extract concessions on those issues from the Salvadorans, and even then the effort was usually half-hearted.

Soares tries to argue that Carter shared Reagan's assessment, citing a meeting with U.S. Catholic bishops in which Carter justified his decision to resume military aid by calling aid "a great lever to require moderation." Soares interprets this to mean Carter shared Reagan's belief that the left was a greater danger to human rights than the right, so defeating the guerrillas on the battlefield would produce a human rights victory. But the conversation itself does not sustain that interpretation. Carter was simply repeating a stock argument in favor of assistance: if you are providing another country's armed forces with aid, you have some leverage over their behavior. No aid, no leverage. At the time this debate over El Salvador was underway, Guatemala stood as a stark counter-example, a place where Washington had cut-off all military aid on human rights grounds, and thus had no influence with the Guatemalan army when it launched a genocidal campaign against Mayan rural villages.

The bishops meeting is just one of several places in which Soares makes assertions about what President Carter thought (as distinct from what he said or did) without citing sources (e.g., pp. 67, 80, 91). This sort of mind-reading is usually unwise, since observable policies are almost always compatible with several different mind-sets. It is especially dangerous here, since Soares is arguing that Carter's intent was frequently different (especially in Nicaragua) than how it was portrayed publicly at the time and how virtually all of the administration's senior decision-makers have subsequently described it.

By focusing on the broadest objectives and the narrow instruments of policy, Soares emphasizes the continuities between Carter and Reagan's policy at the expense of recognizing their divergent diagnoses of the nature of the Central American crisis and the best strategy for resolving it. At the time, the policy-makers in these two administrations certainly thought the two approaches were fundamentally different. The deep division between Carter's strategy and Reagan's is perhaps most clearly evidenced by the speed with which Reagan summarily fired most of Carter's ambassadors and the senior State Department officials dealing with the region, forcing most of them into retirement. Some became bitter critics of Reagan's policies. For the next decade, Republicans in the White House and Democrats in Congress battled constantly over policy toward both Nicaragua and El Salvador— a contest so bitter that it led to the Iran-Contra scandal. If Carter and Reagan's policies were as similar as Soares asserts, how do we explain the acrimony of the ensuing decade's policy debate?

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University Northridge*