

TESTING REAGAN : SOVIET MIGS IN NICARAGUA

Just hours after receiving the most massive electoral vote mandate in U.S. history, Ronald Reagan is being watched by the American people to see whether he will fulfill or betray the faith they have placed in him. Throughout the long election campaign, Reagan pledged to defend America's interests. A confidence that he meant what he said, the pollsters confirm, was a main reason why a commanding majority of the voters reelected him.

Now his word is being tested by the Soviet Union, which may have shipped MiG-21 warplanes into Nicaragua. They may have done so deliberately in the final days of the U.S. political campaign when America was almost entirely mesmerized by the fast-approaching election. Moscow clearly has tried to exploit America's quadrennial preoccupation with presidential politics and Ronald Reagan's understandable reluctance to respond firmly to Soviet action on the eve of the voting. Reagan now must not allow Moscow to get away with its bold attempt to change the military balance of power in Central America in favor of Nicaragua.

The Administration's position is clear on the matter of MiG-21s being sent to Nicaragua. This September, for example, Vice President George Bush warned that such a move by Moscow "would be destabilizing. There is no precedent for that in that region." Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt said that "the delivery by the Soviet Union of advanced weapons, including supersonic fighters to Nicaragua, would be a serious development." More important, in private talks with Soviet officials, including Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, top Administration aides warned Moscow to keep the MiG-21s out of Nicaragua.

Already Nicaragua's Marxist leaders command Central America's largest and most powerful armed forces. With 48,000 active troops and 50,000 in the well-trained militia, Nicaragua's military has grown at least fivefold since the Sandinistas seized power five years ago and dwarfs the military defenses of Nicaragua's neighbors. MiG-21s would enhance significantly this already formidable arsenal. This warplane is the standard Warsaw Pact fighter-jet and is used by Cuba, Libya, and

Syria. It can fly in all kinds of weather and carry its 3,000 lbs. of bombs and air-to-air missiles about 350 miles and still return to its base. This will enable the Sandinistas to dispatch their planes to targets in El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama. No Central American nation has any aircraft capable of matching or stopping these Soviet-built MiGs.

Ronald Reagan on other occasions has proven that he does not bluff when promising to defend U.S. interests. When Libyan fighter-jets in August 1981, for example, fired on U.S. F-14s operating from carriers in international waters in the Gulf of Sidra, the F-14s--under standing orders from the President--promptly fired back and shot down the attackers. When U.S. students and interests were threatened in Grenada last year, Reagan launched a military rescue operation. And more than two decades earlier, when Moscow tried to convert Cuba into a Soviet nuclear missile base, John Kennedy made the Kremlin withdraw its weapons. The Americans who gave Ronald Reagan his avalanche victory expect no less of him now.

Soviet leaders were talking of their desire for peace in recent weeks--even as they may have been sending MiG-21s to Nicaragua. In the wake of his acclamatory endorsement by the American people, Ronald Reagan must tell Moscow that there can be no serious discussions of other matters so long as Soviet actions deliberately attempt to raise military tensions in Central America. Ronald Reagan must remind Moscow that the 1970s are over, that America no longer is on the retreat. He must tell the Kremlin that the U.S. takes very seriously its nearly two-centuries-old Monroe Doctrine commitment to shield this hemisphere from outside military intervention. And the President must point out to the Soviets and the world that, if Moscow refuses to reverse what may be its deliberate provocation in Central America, the U.S. will take action to ensure that the MiG-21s will not be able to attack, threaten, or intimidate other nations.

As a first step, the President should consult with the members of the Organization of American States and with CONDECA, the Central American Defense Council. Then the President must prepare his military options, in the event that the MiGs are not withdrawn. One option would be to organize a commando unit of the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters (or Contras) to assault and destroy the MiGs. If this is not feasible, a joint U.S.-Honduran operation should be considered. As a last, but perhaps necessary, resort, the President must be prepared to order U.S. commando forces to act unilaterally.

Even New York's Democratic Senator, Daniel P. Moynihan, in an August 9, 1984, speech to the Senate said that "to put MiG's in would accordingly be a decision to create a political crisis, and that we could not allow." Ronald Reagan indeed must not allow it. When Americans voted for him, this is what they expected of him. The dawn of his new Mandate is no time to betray them.

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