

INTERVENTION IN INTERNAL CONFLICT: THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

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I would like to make a few comments which do not touch specifically on what John Moore said, but deal with the general question which has been raised as to what role the United States can play when dealing with internal conflict in other states. It is very easy when addressing that question to blur the tremendous differences that occur in individual states at any given time in history. When considering the issue of destabilization and whether norms can be adopted to govern the influence of other states, several factors have to be taken into account.

First, the legitimacy of the government in power has to be considered. Legitimacy has to be viewed in terms of how the people perceive their government at a particular moment in its history. The Nicaraguan case is interesting in this regard. Somoza was elected for a second term in 1974, which in and of itself was probably illegal since the Nicaraguan constitution had determined that there should be no reelection. In 1972, Somoza circumvented the constitution to devise a method by which a triumvirate would sit in power for a certain period of time, with the notion clearly in mind that he would be elected for a second term when the new constitution was written. Indeed, it was rewritten, and he was re-elected. The situation began to deteriorate following the events of his second election, and more importantly, with his maladministration following the earthquake of 1972-73.

There was no question about Somoza's being the legitimate president of Nicaragua. Equally as unquestionable, to the Nicaraguan people at least, was that he had used the national guard and other political devices to become re-elected. Internally, a body politic existed which looked upon Somoza as a growing evil and an illegitimate president. In 1978, violence began, initiated by the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, a well known, charismatic, political opponent of Somoza.

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The United States and other members of the Organization of American States became concerned about the clearly deteriorating situation in Nicaragua. The question of the credibility or the legitimacy of Samosa was paramount. Interestingly, the Organization of American States initiated a mediation effort in 1978, which probably was historic in its attempt to remove a standing president through the process of mediating differences between him and his opposition forces. There was no question that unless Samosa left, the situation would deteriorate into civil war. Mediation ultimately failed because the issues of legitimacy and the legal basis upon which Samosa was reigning could not be resolved. Those involved in the mediation effort were convinced that the removal of Samosa, which was certainly possible in terms of the array of forces and the attitude of nations in the area, would have eliminated the problem. That is to say, there was a base of moderate political leadership available to lead a transition government. In fact, the modalities were all clearly defined as to how to make the change from the Samosa government to a transition government, and from there to a new electoral procedure. The mediation failed because in the United States, at the highest level, there was fear that the United States would be involved in an act that was illegitimate in the sense that we would be deposing a legitimately elected president in Nicaragua. Even though our efforts were great, and people were sent in to try to convince Samosa to leave, the key was that he was a legitimate president. Failing to remove him in 1978 opened the door to violence because the moderates of Nicaragua were much discredited in the United States, and the Organization of American States was discredited in terms of its ability to bring about change under crisis conditions. At that point, the FSLN became the sole means of removing Samosa. It was then that nations began to intervene very openly on the side of the FSLN. At the beginning, the intervention came not so much from Cuba as from Venezuela, Panama, and, most importantly, Costa Rica, which offered sanctuary and a supply base. Cuba provided support as well, but the primary result of the failure of the mediation was the open intervention on the part of the FSLN. This episode highlights the question of when the international community can intervene—in this case using the Organization of American States as the vehicle—to settle an internal dispute which has reached crisis proportion. The unfortunate reality was that it failed on that occasion. The net effects were the violent fall of the Samosa regime and the entry into power of a revolutionary group of people who looked upon the

moderates as their enemies, even though the moderates in that society had helped in the destabilization of the Samosa regime. Indeed, the history of Central America since that time has been colored in great measure by what happened in Nicaragua, because every guerilla group in Central America, following the success of the Sandanistas, assumed that the day of revolution had arrived in Central America. For example, the overthrow by elements within the power structure in El Salvador of the government of Romero shortly after the fall of Samosa was an attempt by the elites in El Salvador to bring about a process of reform and avoid the overthrow and collapse of the army as had occurred in Nicaragua. So it seems that there are times—and the Nicaraguan case points it up—when the international community and the United States can play a major role in bringing about a peaceful resolution of a major crisis. How one overcomes the question of legitimacy is important to the attitude that will affect American decision-makers faced with that type of crisis situation.

