

The Reagan Doctrine

By Charles Krauthammer, Monday, Apr. 01, 1985

"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 . . . Support for freedom fighters is self-defense."

--President Reagan, in the State of the Union, February 1985

Ronald Reagan is the master of the new idea, and has built the most successful political career in a half-century launching one after another. His list of credits includes small government (Barry Goldwater having tried, and failed, with it first), supply-side economics, and strategic defense (Star Wars). These radically changed the terms of debate on the welfare state, economic theory and nuclear strategy. All that was left for him to turn on its head was accepted thinking on geopolitics. Now he has done that too. He has produced the Reagan Doctrine.

You may not have noticed. Doctrines, like submarines, tend to be launched with fanfare. The Monroe Doctrine was instantly recognized, on both sides of the Atlantic, as a historic declaration; the Truman Doctrine was unveiled in a dramatic address to a joint session of Congress; and when President Carter announced a new aggressive Persian Gulf policy on Jan. 23, 1980, by the next morning the New York Times had dubbed it "the Carter Doctrine." President Reagan saw fit to bury his doctrine in his 1985 State of the Union address beneath the balanced budget amendment, school prayer and the line-item veto. That he decided to make his a footnote is as much a tribute to Mr. Reagan's prudence as to his modesty. Truly new ideas--what Democrats lie awake at night dreaming of--are as risky as they are rare. This one has already precipitated a storm.

The Reagan Doctrine proclaims overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution. The grounds are justice, necessity and democratic tradition. Justice, said the President in his Feb. 16 radio address, because these revolutionaries are "fighting for an end to tyranny." Necessity, said Secretary of State George Shultz in a subsequent address in San Francisco, because if these "freedom fighters" are defeated, their countries will be irrevocably lost behind an Iron Curtain of Soviet domination. And democratic tradition, said the President, because to support "our brothers" in revolution is to continue--"in Afghanistan, in Ethiopia, Cambodia, Angola . . . (and) Nicaragua"--200 years of American support for "Simon Bolivar . . . the Polish patriots, the French Resistance and others seeking freedom."

That tradition ended abruptly with Viet Nam. It is true that President Carter sent arms to the Afghan rebels and that Congress concurred. Congress has also gone along with economic aid to the non-Communist resistance in Cambodia. However, since the Clark Amendment of 1976 prohibiting aid to anti-Marxist fighters in Angola, Congress has refused to support war against indigenous Communist dictatorships, no matter how heavily supported by the Soviet Union or its

proxies. President Reagan's program of CIA support for the Nicaraguan contras, who are not fighting foreign occupation, broke post-Viet Nam precedent. At first, and for three long years, that new policy was given the flimsiest of justifications: interdicting supplies to the Salvadoran guerrillas. The Reagan Doctrine drops the fig leaf. It is intended to establish a new, firmer--a doctrinal--foundation for such support by declaring equally worthy all armed resistance to Communism, whether foreign or indigenously imposed.

To interpret the Reagan Doctrine as merely a puffed-up rationale for Nicaraguan policy is like calling the Truman Doctrine a cover for a new Greek and Turkish policy. In both cases, the principles established have a much more profound implication.

The Truman Doctrine set out the basic foreign policy axiom of the postwar era: containment. With JFK's pledge to "bear any burden . . . to assure . . . the success of liberty," the idea of containment reached its most expansive and consensually accepted stage. With Viet Nam, the consensus and the expansiveness collapsed. Since then the U.S. has oscillated, at times erratically, between different approaches--different doctrines--for defending its ideals and its interests.

The Reagan Doctrine is the third such attempt since Viet Nam. The first was the Nixon Doctrine: relying on friendly regimes to police their regions. Unfortunately, the jewel in the crown of this theory was the Shah of Iran. Like him, it was retired in 1979 to a small Panamanian island. Next came the Carter Doctrine, declaring a return to unilateral American action, if necessary, in defense of Western interests. That doctrine rested on the emergence of a rapid deployment force. Unfortunately, the force turned out neither rapid nor deployable. It enjoys a vigorous theoretical existence in southern Florida, whence it is poorly situated to repel the Red Army.

If regional powers prove unstable, and projected American power unreliable, what then? It is a precious irony that the answer to that question has been suggested to Americans by a band of fanatical Islamic warriors in Afghanistan. Unaware of their historic contribution to the theory of containment, they took on the Soviet army, made it bleed and slowed its march to the more coveted goal, the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

This insurgency, and those in Cambodia, Angola and Nicaragua, pointed to a new form of containment, a kind of *ex post facto* containment: harassment of Soviet expansionism at the limits of empire. There is an echo here of the old 1950s right-wing idea of "rolling back" Communism. But with a difference. This is not the reckless--and toothless--call for reclaiming the core Soviet possessions in Eastern Europe, which the Soviets claim for self-defense and, more important, which they are prepared to use the most extreme means to retain. This is a challenge to the peripheral acquisitions of empire.

The Brezhnev Doctrine proclaimed in 1968 that the Soviet sphere only expands. The Reagan Doctrine is meant as its antithesis. It declares that the U.S. will work at the periphery to reverse that expansion. How? Like the Nixon Doctrine, it turns to proxies. Unlike the Nixon Doctrine, it supports not the status quo but revolution.

And that makes it so hard for both left and right to digest. For the left it seems all quite paradoxical, and hypocritical: the Administration denounces Salvadoran guerrillas for blowing up power stations and attacking villages, while at the same time it supports Nicaraguan guerrillas who are doing the same thing only a few miles away. But the idea that intellectual honesty requires one to be for or against all revolution is absurd. You judge a revolution, as you do any other political phenomenon, by what it stands for. Suppose you believe that justice was on the side of the central government in the American Civil War. Does that commit you to oppose the Paris Commune of 1870 or the Hungarian revolution of 1956? In Salvador, the rebels want to overthrow the President, a Christian Democrat. In Nicaragua, the rebels want to overthrow the President, a Marxist-Leninist. To judge rebels by who they are and what they fight for, and against, is not a political morality of convenience. It is simple logic.

On the right, the idea of supporting revolution is equally hard to accept, though for different reasons. Conservatives may find it easier to support revolution in practice than in theory. This is already obvious from their choice of words. Reagan finds it hard to call the good guys rebels. Instead, he insists on calling them "freedom fighters," a heavy, inconvenient term, with an unmistakable socialist-realist ring. "Freedom fighters" practically announces itself as a term of bias. Rebels, Mr. President. With practice, it will get easier to say.

Language, however, is the easier problem facing the Reagan Doctrine. Morality poses thornier ones. By what right does the U.S. take sides in foreign civil wars? What about sovereignty? What about international law?

The President may be revolutionary, but he is not reckless. To ensure that he does not stray too far from current thinking, he appends a reference to international law: "Support for freedom fighters is self-defense and totally consistent with the OAS and UN charters."

This, it must be admitted, is stretching things. There are two difficulties. How can one plausibly argue that the success of Islamic rebels in Afghanistan is a form of self-defense of the U.S.? The Nicaraguan contras, perhaps, might qualify under a generous interpretation of collective security. But Cambodian rebels? Angolans? Eritreans?

The second problem is that if international law stands for anything, it stands for the idea that sovereignty is sacred. Rebels, by definition, do not have it. The governments they fight, no matter how tyrannous, do. How, ask congressional critics, can one justify violating the sovereignty of other countries by helping overthrow the legitimate government?

The answer must begin with cases. Consider Uganda under Idi Amin. Amin was the legitimate ruler when Tanzania invaded and overthrew him. The Tanzanians might say that this was in response to Ugandan border incursions, but Amin had ordered his troops withdrawn more than a month before Tanzania's action. In any case, if repelling a trespass at the border was the problem, Tanzania should have stopped there. It hardly had to drive to Kampala and install the leader of its choice. Tanzania's action, ridding the world of Amin, was a violation of Ugandan sovereignty. It is hard to see how it can be said to be wrong.

Morally speaking--and congressional critics of the Reagan Doctrine are speaking morally, above all--sovereignty cannot be absolute. Indeed, it is not a moral category at all. Why must it be accorded respect, moral respect, in cases where it protects truly awful regimes? The Nazis were the legitimate government of Germany. That does not mean that one is justified in overthrowing any government one does not like. It does mean that one has to face the crucial question: How awful must a government be before it forfeits the moral protection of sovereignty and before justice permits its violent removal?

In Congress today there is almost no opposition to supporting Afghan and (non-Communist) Cambodian rebels. There is a consensus that resistance to invasion warrants support. But by what logic should support be denied to those fighting indigenous tyranny? It seems curious to decide the morality of a cause on the basis of the address of its chief oppressors.

There are more relevant criteria. First, the nature of the oppression and the purposes of those fighting it. The difference between El Salvador and Nicaragua is that in Salvador, a fledgling democracy is under attack from avowed Marxist-Leninists. In Nicaragua, a fledgling totalitarianism is under attack by a mixture of forces, most of which not only are pledged to democracy and pluralism but fought for just those goals in the original revolution against Somoza.

A second important distinction is whether the insurgency is an authentic popular movement or a proxy force cobbled together by a great power for reasons of *realpolitik*. In both Salvador and Nicaragua, the governments say their opponents are puppets of different imperialisms. In neither case does the charge stick. Consider Nicaragua. As no less a democrat than Arturo Cruz, leader of the (nonviolent) opposition, writes, the contras--"the revolt of Nicaraguans against oppression by other Nicaraguans"--now represent an authentic "social movement." Indeed, they are more than 12,000 strong and growing, even after the cutoff of American aid.

If a revolution is both popular and democratic, it is hard to see the moral objection to extending it support. But there is a practical objection: if every country decided for itself which revolutions to support, there would be chaos. What about the prudential reasons for respecting sovereignty and international law?

This argument has the virtue of recognizing that international law is not moral law but an arrangement of convenience: like the social contract in civil society, it is a way to keep the peace. This argument has the vice, however, of ignoring the fact that unlike the domestic social contract, international law lacks an enforcer. It depends on reciprocal observance. If one country breaks the rules at will, then later claims its protection, what--apart from habit and cowardice--can possibly oblige other countries to honor that claim?

The idea that international law must be a reciprocal arrangement or none at all is not new. As Churchill said to Parliament in 1940, "Germany is to gain one set of advantages by breaking all the (neutrality) rules (upon the seas) . . . and then go on and gain another set of advantages through insisting, whenever it suits her, upon the strictest interpretation of the international code she has torn to pieces." He added, "It is not at all odd that His Majesty's government are getting rather tired of it. I am getting rather tired of it myself."

So is today's American Government. There is something faintly comical about Nicaragua going to the World Court to accuse the U.S. of fomenting revolution and interfering in its affairs, when for years the Salvadoran revolution was quite openly headquartered in Managua--and not for a shortage of housing in the Salvadoran jungles. The Reagan Doctrine is more radical than it pretends to be. It pretends that support for democratic rebels is "self-defense" and sanctioned by international law. That case is weak. The real case rests instead on other premises: that to be constrained from supporting freedom by an excessive concern for sovereignty (and a unilateral concern, at that) is neither especially moral nor prudent. The West, of late, has taken to hiding behind parchment barriers as an excuse for inaction when oppressed democrats beg for help. The Reagan Doctrine, while still hiding a bit, announces an end to inaction.

Only a few months ago, a Nicaraguan friend, an ex-Sandinista who still speaks their language, said in near despair that the struggle of democrats around the world was doomed by the absence in the West of what he called "democratic militance." The Reagan Doctrine represents a first step toward its restoration.

Source: TIME Magazine (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,964873-1,00.html>).