

UNDER COVER

Poland and El Salvador

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The anxious desire to appear potent in foreign policy helps account, I think, for the administration's zeal for victory over the revolutionaries in El Salvador. There are conflicts and places where the United States has a great deal more at stake, but El Salvador has one decisive advantage: It is a conflict we can win, a small country close to us and far from the Russians. Lyndon Johnson, after all, pulled off the Dominican intervention of 1965. El Salvador is a more difficult case, but the administration thinks it can get results in a short time, emerging from "national liberation war" with enough of a victory to "send a message" to the world—more important, to the American people—that the United States has erased the stigma of Vietnam.

The importance of El Salvador has risen higher in the administration's eyes because of the smoldering crisis in Poland. No one needs to be told that the Soviets fear the Polish workers movement. They expect it to get out of hand and to inspire imitation in other Eastern European states and in the Soviet Union itself. If the Polish regime can establish some measure of control, the Russians will bide their time, hoping that a relaxed atmosphere will make repression easier later on. Since the leaders of the Polish movement know this, they are not likely to be lulled, but that only keeps the tension at high levels.

If the Russians *do* intervene in Poland, what will we do? The answer is anticipated by our reaction to the Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. We will not fight a nuclear war. We will not fight a conventional war, and would not even if we had an army equal to the combat. We will score propaganda points and hope that Polish resistance gives the Russians a bloody nose, but fundamentally we will let them get away with it.

This, of course, would cost Reagan dearly. Poland, the efficient cause of World War II and the cold war alike, means a good deal to the United States. Polish-Americans are only part of the story. Poland is part of the Yalta mythology of the Right, the Polish workers movement has equal standing on the democratic Left. Poland is a place where doctrines converge, an anti-Communist's holy land.

Paradoxically, the administration has made Soviet intervention more likely without increasing our will to resist it. Reagan's provocative comments about the Soviet Union make the Russians more anxious and defensive. The politics of confrontation works against liberals but not against Communists. "Tough talk" does not make the Russians pliable. It makes them afraid to make any concessions, and it inclines them to close ranks, smash dissent, and gear up for *la lutte finale*. We have evidence on the point. Truman's combativeness helped move the Russians to oust the democratic regime in Czechoslovakia.

The more threatening intervention in Poland becomes, the more the administration is tempted to make El Salvador out to be a great political drama in order to lessen the sting of our inability to rescue the Poles. And the way we have chosen to talk about the Salvadoran crisis has its own dangers.

We have argued that we will not tolerate a "revolution in our own backyard" or countenance "exported" revolutions. These arguments, based on sphere of influence theory, endanger our claim to intervene in the Soviet sphere. After all, Poland is in the Russians' "backyard," as is Afghanistan; and we cannot claim that "exported" revolution is an international crime and offer to help the Afghan rebels without at least smiling when we do so. Mr. Reagan sought to make a distinction, arguing that the Afghan insurgents are authentic freedom fighters; presumably, the rebels in El Salvador are bogus. Mr. Reagan must be aware, however, that diplomacy requires more than the assertion that "our guys are good and yours are bad." I suspect Mr. Reagan was really offering to trade our potential support for the Afghans in return for a Soviet commitment to restrain Cuba and Nicaragua in El Salvador. Thereby hangs a tale.

The neo-conservative critique of human rights policy runs something like this: America has been too hard on friendly right-wing dictators and too soft on Soviet totalitarianism; the human rights bureaucracy, aware that it could do nothing about the Soviet regime or its satellites, muted its public criticism and publicized the offenses of allied regimes more vulnerable to American opinion. This far the "double standard" argument makes sense, but those who make this case assume that the proper "single standard" is not to step up our criticism of the Soviets: It is to play down our criticism of rightists.

Other considerations aside, I doubt that this is wise policy. The Soviet Union will not be weakened if a right or center regime holds on in El Salvador, and the United States will not be materially strengthened. The Russians *are* weakened, however, by Solidarity. For a bureaucratic regime that depends on ideology for its legitimacy, the Polish workers movement is a wound in the heart, since it assumes that a Communist regime is not classless and the Communist party does not adequately represent the proletariat. That the Polish movement is so evidently religious makes the cut even more cruel, a massive horse laugh at the pretensions of Marxism. If the Polish movement survives, it may be the beginning of the end for the Soviet empire.

It seems mandatory, then, that we insist as strongly as we can on the rights of Polish workers, while giving the Russians every reason we can to value their ties with the West and, consequently, to hesitate a long time before giving them up. And we should suspect any adventures like El Salvador that distract us from the great events of the time.

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