Where is the “loyal opposition” on issues of foreign policy?

THE BIPARTISAN TRAP

by Ross K. Baker

The Democratic party is like an estranged married couple that tries to make a go of it again. However great its resolve to play up the things held in common and to minimize those causing strife, it soon finds that the matters that tear at the relationship are of equal or greater importance than those that cement it. One might say that on many issues the Democratic party is divided between those who squeeze the toothpaste tube in the middle and those who roll it up from the end.

For openers, there are elements in the party who are distinctly uncomfortable with many of the constituencies that traditionally have lent it support. For another thing, the party itself is divided between vintage free-traders and born-again protectionists. Although Democrats want government to have more than the limited role Ronald Reagan would consign to it, many in the party fear that the voters are unsympathetic to its statist proclivities. Staggering under the reputation of being the party of tax and spend, the Democrats marvel at Reagan's success at gaining credibility with a program of borrow and spend. But on no set of issues do the battlelines harden more quickly and the juices of passion flow more freely than on the one that usually guarantees a dissolution of Democratic unity: foreign policy.

To be sure, there was a kind of vaguely combative rhetoric that managed to unite most Democrats in the aftermath of the 1980 presidential election. While paying formalistic homage to Jimmy Carter for Camp David, most Democratic officeholders agreed that their defeated president had pursued a wimpy and confused foreign policy that alternated between trucking and truculence.

One would think that the presence in the White House of a certified extremist would have caused the party to close ranks behind any reasonable set of principles. And for a time this seemed to be the case. The party's midterm convention in Philadelphia in 1982 was the closest thing to a love feast since the convention that nominated FDR in 1936. The Philadelphia draft statement on national security called for a responsible build-up in American strategic forces; its statement on conventional military forces, in calling for a balanced approach to military spending, bore the imprint of the "military reformers" within the party. There were in the statement, however, a number of implicit rebukes to the Carter administration, the most interesting of which was the dropping of the term "human rights" in favor of "affirming American values abroad." It appeared that a centrist consensus had formed around such generalized principles as a moderate but not extravagant increase in military spending; greater consultation with America's major allies; a nuclear freeze; increased foreign economic assistance; stability in U.S.-Soviet relations; and—although the term itself appeared in lower-case letters—a discerning application of human rights criteria.

The centrist influence was also dominant in the first major piece of party doctrine to emanate from Congress in recent years, "Rebuilding the Road to Opportunity." While the leading piece in this report—now known as the "Yellow Book"—was a call for an industrial policy, the section on national security was stamped with the same middle-of-the-road imprint as the Philadelphia statement.

There were several reasons for the apparent harmony and unanimity among Democrats on foreign policy last year. First, the party was still in the recovery stage. The wounds of 1980 were beginning to close up, and no one wanted the stitches to pop. Second, Ronald Reagan was still on his good behavior. The moderate image he had cultivated deliberately in the campaign and used to such good effect in debating Carter was still largely intact. Third, the issues most calculated to foment discussion among Democrats were still in rhetorical uto. The nuclear freeze had not reached the stage in which it was being debated as a formal piece of legislation. Central America was a background issue rather than an ominous daily presence, and the Nicaraguan "contras" were still tromping through the Everglades rather than camping on the Honduran border. The MX missile debate was tangled in the question of the basing mode to be used, and the "dense-pack" arrangement suggested by Reagan could be scoffed at by Democrats of all stripes. (That was before the president hit upon the strategy of convening a bipartisan commission on basing—an approach touched by genius and one that served him well on both the MX and Social Security reform.) Finally, there was the happy circumstance that the party had no declared presidential candidates. Presidential hopefuls at the exploratory stage of a campaign speak in generalities and are shy about firm commitments, a factor that lends a degree of fluidity to public dialogue.

The Democratic consensus, then, was born of vagueness and nurtured by the imperative of political recovery and a presidential campaign in its first flowering. Overwhelm-
ing all other issues in those sweet days of summer and early fall in 1982 was the issue of the economy, still staggering under high interest rates and high unemployment. Although the former was not traditional Democratic red meat, the latter most assuredly was; and the prospect of strengthening Democratic control of the House and the fainter prospect of regaining the Senate in the upcoming election induced Democrats to hammer away at a single issue. They forged it into a mighty weapon that enabled them to fashion a net gain of twenty-seven seats in the House and protect most of their Senate incumbents. Foreign policy played almost no role in the Democrats' midterm victory.

So powerful was the economic issue that the Democratic Issues Conference that convened in Washington in February, 1983, dealt with foreign policy in only the most tangential way. The most vigorous discussion of any matter vaguely related to foreign policy concerned the extent to which Democrats were willing to modify their traditional free-trade stand to protect industries threatened by foreign competition.

With the convening of the 98th Congress, issues of foreign policy lost their abstract quality and began to assume the shape of legislation, with votes to be cast for or against. The period of consensus seemed to be approaching an end. Moreover, the economy had begun to show vital signs, although much of the good news was puffed up grotesquely by the administration.

By the spring of 1983 there were three issues to bedevil the Democrats: the actual increase in funds for defense in the fiscal 1984 budget; the president's aid request for El Salvador and the U.S. covert role in Nicaragua; and the funding of research and development and flight-testing of the MX missile. Each of these concrete issues contained within it the seeds of intraparty strife for the Democrats, and each demonstrated that the temporary Democratic consensus was a product of peculiar circumstances.

A HOUSE DIVIDED
To understand why these issues occasioned so much agonizing in Democratic ranks, it is necessary to make a few observations about where the Democrats stand in their painful anabasis from the election of 1980.

The party controls the House of Representatives; for Democrat-watchers, it is the only game in town. Attention focuses upon what House Democrats do to a far greater extent than when they dominate the Senate and own the presidency. When one asks where the party stands on a particular issue, there is a single definitive source for the answer: the Democratic leadership of the House.

One might expect the beleaguered Democrats to find the very compactness of their power base a source of cohesion. Yet the behavior of the House Democrats on matters of national defense suggests that they are all over the lot. Part of the explanation lies in the various factions that make up the party. Another, and perhaps equally significant, explanation for the inability to present Ronald Reagan with a united front is the nature of the House itself and the great changes that have been wrought in it during the past fifteen years.

It is the Democrats' misfortune to be in control of the most fragmented and anarchic institution of the Federal Government. With centers of power now established as far down as the subcommittee level, and with the total number of committees and subcommittees at almost 170, literally every other Democrat can call himself "Mr. Chairman." This situation lends itself to cacophony in domestic policy—witness the six subcommittees clambering over themselves to issue subpoenas and contempt citations in the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund scandal—and to a veritable Babel in foreign policy.

The Senate is preeminently the foreign-policy body in our national legislature. It is difficult indeed to think of any recent debate on foreign policy on the floor of the House chamber that has amounted to much. The freeze resolution debate was an exegetic carnival that concluded on a note of spurious harmony; the resolution itself read as if drafted by a labor mediator. Much of the limited effect of House foreign policy debates, of course, can be ascribed to the restricted role the Constitution assigns to the House in foreign policy: It neither ratifies treaties nor confirms ambassadors, functions that serve as springboards for debate on policy. The House, by virtue of its primacy in fiscal matters, is best at crunching numbers. This, however, is not the stuff of which high-level debate is fashioned.

The problem of the House Democrats in developing alternatives to Reagan's muscular posturing, however, goes well beyond its constitutional limitations. There is, for example, the problem of leadership. In Speaker O'Neill, Majority Leader Wright, Majority Whip Foley, Chief Deputy Alexander, and Caucus Chairman Gillis Long one finds politicians of unusual skill, integrity, and intelligence. They are, however, hardly a team. In the old days, when leadership teams ran as a collegium, there was a good deal more cohesion on major policy issues among the party's top leaders. While free to go their separate ways on issues of concern to their particular district, they were in effect the creatures of the speaker or majority leader and more bound to follow his example.

The present leadership team is the product of five totally disaggregated decisions to run for the party posts. Each man hankers after O'Neill's job when he steps down, but all know that it will not be transferred by apostolic succession, as was the case in the past. Indeed, there is no guarantee that a party leadership post gives one an advantage in stepping into the speakership over, let us say, someone like Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski. The result of all this uncertainty is a leadership lacking cohesion and often at odds on important matters.

There is no better example of disarray among House Democrats than the May 24 vote in favor of development and flight-testing of the MX missile. O'Neill had gone one way and Wright, Foley, Alexander, and Long the other. The latter carried with them into the pro-MX ranks an impressive array of moderate-to-liberal members, including some of the party's rising young stars: Les Aspin of Wisconsin; Richard Gephardt of Missouri; Norman Dicks of Washington; and Albert Gore of Tennessee. So enraged at this were some of the younger members—particularly a number of liberal freshmen of the class of '82—that they demanded a meeting of the Democratic Caucus to extract from the leadership an explanation of why four of its number defied the speaker and lined up with the president.

Party caucuses tend to be more therapeutic and cathartic than they are decisive, and the meeting that took place on June 14 was no exception. It was unique in one respect,
though: It was the first caucus in anyone’s memory that dealt with a weapons system rather than with a matter of high policy or House rules. What the MX vote and the subsequent caucus demonstrated was that a segment of the Democratic party will always be reluctant to deny a president a major weapon for the U.S. arsenal. Others argue in defense of their pro-MX vote that their support of this weapon denied Reagan a political cudgel to use on Democrats—to wit: their scuttling of the MX had lost him a bargaining counter for an arms agreement with the Soviets.

One must never underestimate the burden that history, reverence for the presidency, and the concept of a “loyal opposition” place on the foreign policy vote of a member of Congress. Effective presidents have a way of combining guile, hoopla, and invocations of patrie en danger to wring the most remarkable concessions out of representatives and senators. Even as ineffective a president as Jimmy Carter managed to pull out all the patriotic stops for the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties. Ronald Reagan, for his part, inspires genuine fear among Democrats when he is invoking the patriotic angels. The fear is well founded: Reagan and his lieutenants have begun to play the sinister game of “Who lost...?”

Right-wingers like Reagan have been particularly skillful at this game since the question “Who lost China?” was first posed in 1949. The answer they supplied then was “Harry Truman.” It is said that fear of the question being asked propelled Lyndon Johnson deeper and deeper into Southeast Asia, and it is a question calculated to send many Democrats today into paroxysms of fear. What is truly pathetic is that the Democrats who feel threatened by the question control one tiny corner of government.

What causes those in the Democratic ranks the greatest discomfort is not the fallout from an anti-administration vote on MX or any other weapons system but on Central America. After Reagan’s address to the Joint Session of Congress on April 27, there are few who doubt that he has already begun building a case against Democrats who are unwilling to follow his lead in Central America.

In tones of mock-sincere incredulity, the president asserted: “I do not believe there is a majority in the Congress or the country that counsels passivity, resignation, defeatism in the face of this challenge to freedom and security in our own hemisphere. I do not believe that a majority of the Congress or the country is prepared to stand by passively while the people of Central America are delivered to totalitarianism and we ourselves are left vulnerable to new dangers.” And the zinger: “Who among us would take the responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?”

The Democrats’ rebuttal to Reagan was offered by Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut. Dodd stressed the role that poverty has played in abetting revolution in Central America; but the main thrust of his rejoinder was that if, as the president had stated, the deteriorating political situation in Central America threatened the vital national interest of the United States, then we damn well ought to have plans to intervene militarily—an intention Ronald Reagan steadfastly denies. Dodd’s analysis of the conditions under which the U.S. should become involved militarily did, in fact, look a lot more like a policy than anything that has issued from the Reagan administration.

Dodd, however, is but one voice in the branch of government that is best equipped to debate policy but is politically ill-disposed to do so. The panel that ought to be the source of hard questions—the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Foreign Relations Committee—is chaired by Jesse Helms of North Carolina. The ranking Democrat is Edward Zorinsky of Nebraska who, while priding himself on being the first U.S. senator to call upon Anastasio Somoza to step down, has done and said little since. Alan Cranston, another subcommittee Democrat, is off and running for president. This leaves two effective (and outvoted) critics, Dodd and Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts. They may get occasional help in the Central America debate from Republican Nancy Kassebaum, but the kind of hard-hitting hearings that might smoke out the president’s true intentions in Latin America are unlikely.

Dodd himself may be deterred from stepping forward again by the mixed reception his rebuttal received from congressional Democrats. Two of his colleagues—Lloyd Bensten of Texas and Russell Long of Louisiana—protested openly to Minority Leader Robert Byrd his choice of Dodd. House Majority Leader Wright went before the press to say that he did not share Dodd’s views. It is safe to say that beneath it all was a good deal of unspoken hostility toward anyone with the effrontery to challenge Reagan on Central America.

While the House is Democratically controlled, the principal burden for challenging Reagan’s assertions on Central America falls, as in the Senate, on a small group of relatively junior members, such as Stephen Solarz of New York, Michael Barnes of Maryland, and Gerry Studds of Massachusetts. The House, at a relative disadvantage as a forum for debate on foreign policy vis-a-vis the Senate, is further disadvantaged at present by weak leadership on those committees that might serve as centers of opposition to the administration. The Foreign Affairs Committee is chaired by Clement Zablocki of Michigan, whose irresoluteness on the nuclear freeze debate was a case study of how not to floor-manage a resolution. Melvin Price, chairman of Armed Services and well into his dotage, is a man whose hawkishness is less steadfast than embalmed. Clarence Long of Maryland, who heads the Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, originally opposed the administration’s $60 million request for military aid to the Salvadoran army; but a combination of a well-staged visit to that country and a little White House arm-twisting got him to approve half that amount. In return, Long extracted from Reagan the promise to appoint a special envoy and made the additional $30 million contingent on the performance of the special ambassador, who turned out to be Florida’s ex-Senator Richard Stone, a Democrat.

**SOUND AND LIGHT**

In Reagan’s choice of Stone one finds the key to the president’s general approach to foreign policy, and also the snare he has laid for the Democrats. That snare is bipartisan.

Democrats fear the president’s ability to speak to the American people over the heads of Congress. They fear that a revival of the economy will render him unbeatable in 1984 and that he may even run strongly enough to pull in numerous Republican challengers. They realize too that in foreign policy the president holds most of the clubs and
that, by using his powers as commander-in-chief, he can create conditions that would make it very difficult to avoid following his lead. And because they fear him, many Democrats are vulnerable to his appeals to bipartisanism on issues ranging from the MX to El Salvador. To succumb to his bipartisan blandishments, backed up as they are by the not-so-subtle hints at retaliation and at the posing of the "Who lost...?" question, is to gain a measure of political cover at the expense of fulfilling the essential role of the opposition.

For those Democrats inclined to challenge Reagan on Central America the strongest line of defense appears to be a public opinion solidly opposed to direct American intervention in the region. A Washington Post/ABC News Poll released on May 25 indicated that 55 per cent of Americans believed that the danger of U.S. military entanglement in Central America was greater than any spread of communism as a result of this country's inaction; only 34 per cent took the opposite view. By an even larger margin they ascribed the troubles in the region to poverty and lack of human rights rather than to Communist subversion. These results would seem to provide little comfort for a president whose words and actions hint so strongly at intervention.

But public opinion, as any responsible pollster will tell you, is a "snapshot in time." As conditions change, so does public opinion, and one does not have to possess the imagination of a Hollywood scenarist to postulate how those conditions might change.

With arms shipments from Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador originating from the Pacific ports of Potosi and Estero Padre Ramos and proceeding across the Gulf of Fonseca or, more circuitously, to El Salvador's Bay of Jiquilisco, the suppliers come under the surveillance of Central America but who recoil at the thought of a solid bloc of Central American Marxist states in thrall to Cuba and thence to the USSR. If an American surveillance ship is fired upon by a Nicaraguan vessel and sustains casualties, how much of that apparent revulsion to intervention would be transformed overnight to a resolute defense of the flag? Recollections of the U.S.S. Maddox and C. Turner Joy in the Gulf of Tonkin suggest that this scenario is not far-fetched.

Democrats who oppose such backdoor intervention in Central America but who recoil at the thought of a solid bloc of Central American Marxist states in thrall to Cuba and the USSR have no easy task in proposing alternatives. Their task is made all the more difficult by the tendency of many of their colleagues to accept the president's definition of the situation and acquiesce in his proposals for dealing with it.

In fact, opposition to Reagan's actions has little chance of crystallizing around the Democratic party itself because there is little hope of forming a distinctively Democratic position. The party merely echoes the division and confusion among the public it represents. There are Democrats for whom the proper analogy in Central America is Vietnam and others for whom Munich seems a more apt comparison. There are Democrats from the northeast who feel no measurable pressure from Hispanic constituents and Democrats from the Sunbelt for whom they are a major political presence. There are Democrats who came of political age at the time of the Marshall Plan and NATO who instinctively follow the lead of presidents and those who arrived at maturity during the Vietnam era who are viscerally mistrustful.

And there is another group of Democrats, perhaps the largest one of all, that is uninformed and concerned about one thing only: that the Central America issue not blow up in its face. For this group and for the people it represents what is most needed is a full-fledged debate on the subject. Since such a debate will not emanate from the White House and will take place in only muted form in the Republican-controlled Senate, the House is where it must be held, and soon.

Since they are at odds both on Central America and arms control, the speaker and the majority leader ought to begin a constructive and public dialogue on foreign policy. Their discussion should serve to clarify issues and explore options that the president has either ignored or foreclosed. It might also be instructive for the party's presidential hopefuls, all of whom are uninspired and confused. The presumptive front-runner, former Vice-President Mondale, demonstrated his difficulties with Central America in a telephone conversation with a New York Times reporter after an appearance on Meet the Press.

In the course of the TV interview Mondale had made two glaringly contradictory statements, asserting first that he would "utterly, and completely, and profoundly oppose" U.S. combat involvement in Central America, while suggesting later that the establishment of a major Soviet or Cuban base in the area "would go to the vital interests of our country and it would raise grave challenges." When asked by the Times reporter to define what "grave challenges" he had in mind, Mondale's stupefying response was that he "didn't try to define in the abstract what he meant, what would and would not be acceptable" and then added: "It would be difficult to define in advance what kind of foreign presence, power and permanence would be unacceptable." If front-runners are forced to make such convoluted and elliptical responses, what may we expect from lesser, more poorly briefed politicians?

Perhaps the Democrats should accept, for the time being, the division in their ranks and go public with a debate that would serve to enlighten the general public as well as their own numbers. As things now stand, the president will pick them off one by one. He will define where the political center is located and claim the flag for the Republicans once again.

If an opposition party can do anything, it is to air and illuminate the issues that might cause a nation to take momentous and fateful steps. Those steps might well be taken, but the decision to do so should not be the result of deceit and guile or the product of a specious and contrived consensus. A vigorous campaign to educate the public on Central American affairs cannot call itself a policy, but it might serve to expose the president’s own.

With regard to arms control the process may come too late, because the president's political objectives already have been met—not by an agreement with the Soviets but by getting House Democrats to certify his good intentions with their vote on the MX. A hasty move by Democrats to avoid political retaliation by underwriting the administration's actions in Central America would be bad policy. Worse than that, it would be bad politics.