

*The Politics of Rhetoric:  
Reagan's Rhetorical War on Nicaragua*

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*I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while  
completing this assignment.*

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### Abstract

This paper evaluates President Reagan's use of rhetorical devices to strategically frame his Nicaraguan policy in an attempt to persuade Congress to fund his *Contra* aid packages. The significance of analyzing political rhetoric stems from presidents dependence on deliberative oratory to communicate their policy to a given audience. This paper employs rhetorical analysis to identify the main patterns of political rhetoric in Reagan's public addresses on the Nicaraguan conflict. The result of this analysis was that Reagan's rhetoric framed the political debate surrounding his Nicaraguan policy using negative direction, emphasis on proximity, definition and comparison.

*Keywords:* Political Rhetoric, Rhetorical Analysis, Presidential Communication, President Ronald Reagan, Cold War, Reagan Doctrine, Nicaragua, Contras, Sandinistas

## Introduction

The rhetorical tradition of politicians addressing an audience in a public setting reaches back to Aristotle and continues to be a public expectation of political performance today. World leaders have long been expected to address their public whether in times of great triumph or great sorrow, and United States presidents have followed this historic tradition with public speeches ranging from George Washington's famous Farewell Address to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats. Presidential Communication is central to how public policy is crafted and presented to the American public and Congress, and a president's ability to command his audience and garner support for his initiatives often spells the success of his political career. One president is specifically remembered for his oratorical skills and known as "The Great Communicator" — President Ronald Reagan. He is revered for his personalized, charismatic approach to public presidential discourse and successful use of the television medium usually linked to his background in acting. Yet his strategic use of classical rhetoric is understudied, and it is my intention to analyze Reagan's employment of rhetorical devices to frame one of his most controversial foreign policy areas which culminated in the scandal of the Iran-Contra Affair — the case of Nicaragua.

This thesis explores the link between the theory of deliberative rhetoric and political strategy in framing foreign policy initiatives. In the case of Reagan's policy toward the Nicaraguan conflict during the 1980s, it is important to analyze what rhetorical devices the Reagan Administration employed as tools to try to persuade Congress to support a series of monetary aid requests for the Contras fighting against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The rhetorical tools Reagan relied on including arguments of negative direction, definition, emphasis on location and comparison played a significant role in the administration's framing of

the Nicaraguan conflict and the policy responses it proposed. Before analyzing President Reagan's rhetoric as used in his public addresses to frame his Nicaraguan policy narrative, it is first necessary to understand how rhetoric and politics are inextricably connected within the field of presidential communication.

### **Rhetoric and Politics**

This paper defines rhetoric as the art of persuasion, with a transaction between a speaker having an expressed purpose and occasion to invoke this rhetoric to influence a given audience toward a desired response. Classical rhetorical tradition is divided into three branches according to the purpose of the composition: the epideictic, the judicial and the deliberative.<sup>1</sup> Presidential speechmaking employs deliberative rhetoric, traditionally used by political legislators to argue in support of or against future action or policy.<sup>2</sup> Leaders employ political rhetoric as an arguably essential tool for the functionality of democracy, because in order for the minority to accept the opinions or decisions of the majority, "the values common to all members of the community must be considered more fundamental than those which tend to separate it."<sup>3</sup> The invoking of common values and shared human experience is essential to the creation of a national message or understanding, and this is why American presidents rely on speeches to communicate their policy to the populace who will deem them worthy or unworthy of approval, thus deciding the politician's length in office.

The president is accountable to his people – to the voters – who give him power and allow him to lead. This inescapable relationship between the president and the American public is what deems political speeches necessary for cultivating a direct and intimate relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> Chaim Perelman, "Rhetoric and Politics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17, no. 3 (1984): 129.

<sup>2</sup> Gideon O. Burton, "Deliberative Oratory," *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed November 20, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Chaim Perelman, "Rhetoric and Politics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17, no. 3 (1984): 133.

the audience. Presidential speeches offer a forum with a sole speaker with immediate access to the public, offering a president the ability to stir “public emotions and [propose] solutions to national problems.”<sup>4</sup> Expected presidential public behavior is the act of giving a national address, and the president uses this mode of communication for specific purposes to promote his policies in a public forum. Research shows that the occurrence of a presidential address has a significant, positive effect on the level of public support a president receives, which means that arguably presidents are able to influence their public image through the rhetorical strategies used in their speeches.<sup>5</sup> Presidents use public address in an attempt to sway public approval and garner support for their policy initiatives in order to pressure Congress to approve the president’s policy agenda, and deliberative oratory offers them a unique power over the legislature.

The president as rhetorician holds the power to define political and social reality while condensing “divergent emotional reactions.”<sup>6</sup> The rhetorical choices a president makes in his public address act as tools to often shift the framework in which the audience views a situation or policy for the strategic purpose of persuading that audience to accept presidential definitions of reality. Presidential definition, as defined by David Zarefsky, is unique because it is “stipulated, offered as if [it] were natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable,” and this less forceful tool to construct reality is used to influence not only how the audience views a situation but also identifies remedies and “invites moral judgments.”<sup>7</sup> The speaker-audience transaction is vital in constructing national imaging and support, and if the president can use rhetorical figures to accomplish his goals, his audience will support not only his policies but also

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<sup>4</sup> Lyn Ragsdale, "The Politics of Presidential Speechmaking, 1949-1980," *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 4 (1984): 971.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 980.

<sup>6</sup> David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 8, 2004): 607-619, 611.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 612.

his leadership. The president's reliance on his audience for their approval necessitates his use of persuasive rhetoric, and this is why President Reagan's presidential speeches are central to crafting the American public and Congress' understanding of the reality of the Nicaraguan conflict and the consequential policy needed to compliment that interpretation of reality.

### **Research Methods**

I chose Reagan's rhetoric on Nicaragua as my political rhetoric case study because I wanted to analyze an example situated in Cold War rhetorical framework that did not directly involve a U.S. versus USSR conflict. Instead, I sought a proxy conflict where I could see this rhetoric play employed on a Central American policy stage. Furthermore, the United States maintains a history of interventionism in Central America, and Central America as a region was a cornerstone of President Reagan's foreign policy. Lastly, there is a lack of literature on Reagan's rhetorical stance toward Nicaragua, and I desired to illuminate an understudied case beyond the more developed field of study of the U.S. versus USSR during the Cold War Era. I utilize a rhetorical analysis of the episodic written record about Nicaraguan policy within the sampling frame of Reagan's terms as president (January 1981- January 1989). I searched the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library archives of speeches, radio addresses and television addresses. Within this archive, I employed a keyword search for the terms "Nicaragua," "El Salvador," "Central America," "*Contra*" and "freedom fighter," which yielded 23 documents. Of those 23 documents, I identified 16 public addresses, three State of the Union speeches, two National Security Strategies, one letter to Congress, and one Question and Answer session with the White House press corps.

From here, I narrowed my topic to documents that specifically mentioned "Nicaragua," "*Contra*," or "freedom fighter" in order to more closely examine the rhetoric used exclusively to

reference or define the Reagan Administration's view of the conflict. Fifteen documents were yielded ranging from 1983 to 1988, and include six radio and television addresses, including three State of the Union Addresses and one Joint Session of Congress Address; five radio-only addresses, one television-only address, one National Security Strategy, one letter to Congress and one speech given to the National Conference of State Legislatures. From these documents, I read and identified four repeated patterns of rhetorical devices to include in my rhetorical analysis that were exemplary of President Reagan's Cold War Era rhetorical strategy: arguments of negative direction, location, definition, and comparison. Within these four main rhetorical categories, I chose quotations that highlighted repeated messaging across the six-year sample frame (1983-1988) and related classical rhetorical devices within each category to Reagan's strategic framing of the Nicaraguan conflict.

Finally, I conducted secondary research on topics including political speechmaking and communication, presidential rhetoric, traditional deliberative rhetoric and the Reagan Administration's foreign policy in Nicaragua. In addition to these topics, I examined Ronald Reagan's personal diary to place my topic in a well-developed, scholarly setting. This existing literature is applied to the Reagan and Nicaragua case study as I identify the limits of the current literature and the points of disagreement or agreement my rhetorical analysis holds.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will discuss a wide breadth of scholarship, both historic and current, on the tradition of deliberative rhetoric, comparative studies of political rhetoric, political communications strategy, presidential performance through speechmaking and the limited body of literature specific to Reagan's rhetoric toward Nicaragua. Generally, the literature presents that rhetoric is a powerful presidential tool that builds off of the speaker-

audience relationship central to deliberative method, and though the results of presidential use of rhetoric are mixed and often limited, public address is a strategic way for presidents to bypass Congress and frame their policy. Unfortunately, limited literature exists of President Reagan's rhetorical style and his rhetoric specific to the Nicaraguan conflict, and this paper seeks to fill that gap in scholarship.

The first body of literature defines deliberative rhetoric's ability to frame reality. Rhetoric is linked to the political forum in democratic societies because there exists, as Perelman argues, a need to create common arguments of the majority to which the minority confirm or do not.<sup>8</sup> Perelman argues political power is thus a byproduct of rhetorical argumentation by politicians to influence the behavior of their citizens through bridging reality with the abstract. Perelman makes the distinction that rhetoric reflects persuasive communication, unlike philosophy which traditionally depends on rational argumentation and knowledge. Leith makes a similar argument in that "rhetoric deals with probabilities rather than certainties: with analogy and generalization."<sup>9</sup> Very simply, Leith argues that the object of rhetoric is persuasion, not knowledge.<sup>10</sup> These sources together set the stage for how I analyze Reagan's use of rhetoric as a political tool in his public statements and the extent to which it constructed the perception of his Nicaraguan foreign policy and persuaded Congress to support this policy.

A secondary related field of literature is on the history of comparative rhetorical elements and their impact on the speaker audience relationship in deliberative method. Each source presents a different approach to analyzing political statements. Leith's *Words Like Loaded Pistols* explores the history of rhetoric in the deliberative style and includes examinations of

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<sup>8</sup> Chaim Perelman, "Rhetoric and Politics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17, no. 3 (1984).

<sup>9</sup> Sam Leith, *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

multiple presidents and iconic leaders, both positive and negative, from the past 200 years. His main argument is that rhetoric is powerful and provides excellent historical analysis of patterns much like Green's analysis of Presidents from McKinley to Reagan, in his book *Shaping Political Consciousness*, examining the evolution of language and political institutions along with the struggle of subjugation versus independence to create an understanding of how words are used for political purposes and how they influence political change.<sup>1112</sup> One of the major contributions of these works is that they identify patterns over time in presidential use of political language and recognizes trends toward negative self-definition, the use of labels to mask contradictions and government arousal of the public. Zarefsky has a narrower analysis of rhetorical patterns in eight case studies from Presidents George Washington to George W. Bush and their use of presidential rhetorical definition in the context of speeches viewed as transactions between the speaker and his audience.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, rhetoric scholar Stanley Fish argues in his 1995 analysis of rhetoric's purpose that performative language can distort facts and that the rhetorical man is trained to manipulate reality without concern for the accuracy of his argument.<sup>14</sup> Zarefsky identifies four purposes of rhetorical definition including that it creates associations, disassociates, condenses with symbols or establishes frame shifts.<sup>15</sup> Each of these purposes are linked to an audience, which is important to point out because it establishes that the deliberative method maintains the ability to manipulate an audience's perception of reality.

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<sup>11</sup> Sam Leith, *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> David Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness: The Language of Politics in America from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 8, 2004): 607–619.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," In Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, ed., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 203-222.

<sup>15</sup> David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 8, 2004): 607–619, 612-13.

Dedaic and Branham and Pearce's literature also analyzes speaker-audience transactions and how rhetorical strategies can be used to influence this relationship through the creation of collective identity. Dedaic explores the deliberative form of rhetoric and the purpose of political speeches as categorized by the occasion, the speaker and the audience. He argues that specific to presidential discourse is its ability to create collective identity and relationship with its audience.<sup>16</sup> Branham and Pearce's article specifically examines the conversational frame in public address as a rhetorical choice which links the speaker to his audience through common language usage and a more personal tone.<sup>17</sup> Both works link deliberative rhetoric to its historical origins through critical discourse analysis and provide insight into the political history of speechmaking which is helpful to my understanding of how rhetoric links to politics. Further study of political communication, which exists within the deliberative method, is conducted by Denton and Woodward's work which identifies nine functions of political language including reinforcement, inoculation, polarization, labeling expression, power, drama, persuasion and identification.<sup>18</sup> Collectively, these works provide an excellent framework of historical comparison for my content analysis in order to analyze patterns in Reagan's rhetorical style and how these patterns mirror the elements identified by each of these scholars. Dedaic, Denton and Woodward and Branham and Pearce's contributions to the conversation surrounding the speaker-audience relationship links directly to how presidential rhetoric applies in the political arena.

The literature on rhetoric's relationship to politics builds off of the speaker-audience relationship literature and applies deliberative method to the democratic process. This field of

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<sup>16</sup> M.N. Dedaic, "Political Speeches and Persuasive Argumentation," *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (New York: Pergamon Press, 2006), 700-707.

<sup>17</sup> Robert James Branham and W. Barnett Pearce, "The Conversational Frame in Public Address," *Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1996): 423-439.

<sup>18</sup> John E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America*, 3rd. ed. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

study establishes that rhetoric has impact on its audience in the political forum and is a powerful presidential tool. Professor of Political Science and presidency scholar Bruce Miroff examines the advantage of a presidential spectacle, understood as speeches or events, which allows the president an uninterrupted opportunity to convey policy messaging.<sup>19</sup> Miroff also specifically examines Reagan as a successful case of presidential spectacle due to his “decisiveness, forcefulness, and will to prevail.”<sup>20</sup> This is similar to Raphael’s 2009 argument in his analysis of Reagan as a successful presidential performer who met audience expectations of a powerful, decisive leader, thus providing Reagan with the power to influence his audience.<sup>21</sup> Both of these works explore rhetoric’s ability to persuade its audience and look to Reagan as an example of successful audience persuasion with impressive public popularity.

Building off of the literature surrounding deliberative method in the political forum, the next body of literature reviewed examines presidential strategies of performance and the extent to which speaking to a public audience assists a president in furthering his policy initiatives. Kernell, in his 1997 book argues that the practice of going public bypasses the legislative branch and alters the relationship between Congress and the President.<sup>22</sup> Kernell’s research is backed by examples across the American presidency ending with Bill Clinton, and he cites Reagan as a classic case study of going public in regard to his ‘81, ‘82 and ‘83 budget proposals.<sup>23</sup> Neustadt and later Edwards take the examination of going public a step further by analyzing if this strategy of presidential leadership actually works to persuade an audience. Neustadt’s analysis of

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce Miroff, *The Presidential Spectacle*, In M. Nelson, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System*, 11th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2018), 231.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Raphael, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 3rd. ed. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

presidential power, through case studies ranging from FDR to Carter, argues that the ability for a president to persuade is limited; however, presidents repeatedly rely on public address to communicate their policy even though the results of this strategy are often mixed.<sup>24</sup> In this work, Edwards does not reference Reagan as the book was published before he took office. Edwards echoes Neustadt's argument that presidents use of the "bully pulpit" to exert influence over Congress usually fails, and he proves this argument through an extensive analysis of key American presidents including JFK, Reagan and Clinton.<sup>25</sup> Edwards does include specifically to Reagan that though the president was often unable to achieve success with his top legislative priorities, he was able to frame the policy debate in Congress.<sup>26</sup> This literature frames my analysis of Reagan's use of rhetoric and its success or failure to frame his Nicaraguan policy in Congress.

The final body of literature is specific to Reagan's rhetoric and very limited, yielding only a few sources highlighting that the topic is understudied and needs to be further analyzed. Carleton and Stohl's article in *Human Rights Quarterly* focuses on Reagan's framing of Nicaragua in regard to human rights by examining and comparing the "principles and rationale for the Reagan and Carter's policy" through the measurement of their respective foreign assistance.<sup>27</sup> Specific to Reagan's rhetoric, Carleton and Stohl argue that Reagan's policy was not that different from Carter's especially in his definition of authoritarian versus totalitarian regimes and view of international terrorism as human rights abuse.<sup>28</sup> The article does not

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<sup>24</sup> Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1980).

<sup>25</sup> George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> David Carleton and Michael Stohl, "The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan," *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1985): 205-229, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

specifically look at Nicaragua, but it does critique the reality of Reagan's rhetoric much like Schroeder does in his examination of "rhetorical and narrative strategies" the United States utilized to name the Sandinistas in 1927-36 and 1979-90.<sup>29</sup> Schroeder examines what he terms as the politics of naming during two different time periods of U.S.- Nicaragua foreign policy and critiques Reagan's portrayal of the Sandinistas as unfounded and demonizing in a convenient Cold War framework.<sup>30</sup> In a slightly different approach, Baloyra, in his article published during Reagan's first term as president as was Carleton and Stohl's article, also analyzes the differences between Reagan's rhetoric and policy initiatives, concluding Reagan failed in his unilateral approach to the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Baloyra does not critique Reagan's rhetoric specifically, but he does critique the administration's unbalanced approach to Central America and argues these policies were based on assumptions and not reality much like Schroeder argues in his analysis.<sup>32</sup> Though all three articles examine different aspects of Reagan's policy in relation to rhetoric, they all offer a critique of the policy for being simplistic in its approach and using an inappropriate Cold War framework.

Overall, the literature highlights the integral relationship between traditional rhetoric and politics by examining how and why rhetoric is employed by presidents in public address even though the results of this strategy are limited. The lack of literature particular to Reagan's rhetoric toward Nicaragua presents why this paper's rhetorical analysis is necessary in understanding Reagan's Nicaraguan policy and its success or failure in persuading Congress to support the Reagan Administration's initiatives.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael J. Schroeder, "Bandits and Blanket Thieves, Communists and Terrorists: The Politics of Naming the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, 1927-36 and 1979-90," *Third World Quarterly*, 26, no. 1 (2005): 67-86, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Enrique A. Baloyra, "Central America on the Reagan Watch: Rhetoric and Reality," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 27, no. 1 (1985): 35-62.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## Historic Background

Even before Ronald Reagan took office as President of the United States and was still on the campaign trail, the Nicaraguan conflict was a subject of policy debate warranting crafted rhetorical messaging. In July of 1979, the Sandinistas take power after ousting Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle who then flees the country and is later assassinated September 17, 1980.<sup>33</sup> During this time, the United States under the Carter administration is sending aid to the Sandinista government. While campaigning against Democratic incumbent President Carter, then candidate Reagan declared in a March 1979 radio broadcast that the Sandinistas who were then revolting against the Somoza regime were ““Cuban-trained, Cuban-armed, and dedicated to creating another Communist country in this hemisphere.””<sup>34</sup> Even at this early stage, Reagan was pointedly crafting his future policy with statements toward the different sides in the Nicaraguan conflict.

Soon after Reagan’s inauguration in January of 1981, the United States National Security Council began to form its Central American Policy, with El Salvador initially as the country of foremost concern. Nicaragua officially became part of this strategy under a Cold-War framework, when Reagan’s first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, went before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee to answer questions about the Reagan Administration's request for Central American aid. In these meetings, Haig described a communist plan to take over Central America, ““What we are watching is a four-phased operation of which phase one has already been completed -- the seizure of Nicaragua,' he said.

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<sup>33</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 73-74.

<sup>34</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 57.

'Next is El Salvador, to be followed by Honduras and Guatemala.'"<sup>35</sup> In April of 1981, the Reagan Administration went so far as to state Nicaragua was exporting terrorism to El Salvador.<sup>36</sup> This framework set the stage for the importance of the region as another theater in which the United States needed to act against the Soviet-backed "communist threat" that the Sandinista government in Nicaragua presented, and on April 1, 1981 the Reagan Administration ends all aid to Nicaragua.<sup>37</sup>

In December of 1981, Reagan authorized the CIA to support the *Contras* with military aid without Congress' consent.<sup>38</sup> Following U.S. support, in March of 1982, the *Contras* "launched their first major attack against the Sandinistas," and in defensive response against those who Reagan termed "freedom fighters," the Sandinistas "undertook a dramatic build-up of military manpower assisted by Soviet and Cuban advisers and weaponry."<sup>39</sup> The Reagan Administration continued to support the *Contras* and authorized covert CIA involvement in the conflict. In December 1982, Congress passed Boland Amendment I to limit *Contra* military aid and by stating that "no money could be spent on actions aimed at overthrowing the Nicaraguan regime."<sup>40</sup> As a result, the United States still publicly supported the *Contras* but only with \$24 million of Congressionally funded non-military aid, yet the Reagan Administration continued to provide covert military support mainly through the CIA, in direct violation of the Boland

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<sup>35</sup> Jim Anderson, "Secretary of State Alexander Haig Told a Congressional Hearing....," UPI, March 18, 1981. Accessed January 27, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> "Central America, 1981–1993." History.state.gov. 2017. Accessed January 27, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 88.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 49.

<sup>39</sup> "Central America, 1981–1993." History.state.gov. 2017. Accessed January 27, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 168.

Amendment.<sup>41</sup> After Congress became aware the CIA was helping to mine the Nicaraguan harbor, an action not approved by Congress, Boland Amendment II was passed into law in October 1984, barring any funds available to any intelligence agency to be used to support “military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual.”<sup>42</sup> As a result of this restriction in aid, the Reagan Administration once again used covert operations in direct violation of Boland II by trading with foreign nations for weapons to provide to the *Contras*, known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

During this time, Reagan again returned to Congress in 1984 with another aid package requesting \$21 million, and Congress approved \$27 million in non-military aid.<sup>43</sup> Reagan’s next request was in 1985, and this time Congress approved \$100 million in aid for the *Contras*, 70 percent of which was aimed at military aid which could be obtained October 1986.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately for Reagan, the Iran-Contra scandal broke in the press just a month after this funding was approved, revealing the Reagan Administration had been illegally arming the *Contras* with “arms sales to Iran and foreign donors” prior to Congress’ approval for military aid in October 1986.<sup>45</sup> Following the Iran-Contra Affair, Congress was not willing to continue funding the *Contras*, and this military funding was revoked. Reagan’s final *Contra* aid request for \$36.2 million was in January 1988, but Congress failed to approve this aid package by a margin of 8 votes.<sup>46</sup> Shortly after this vote, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega finally agrees to

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<sup>41</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 187-188.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> "U.S. AID TO THE CONTRAS: THE RECORD SINCE '81," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1986, accessed March 25, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Central America, 1981–1993." History.state.gov. 2017. Accessed January 27, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Tom Kenworthy, "HOUSE REJECTS REAGAN'S *CONTRA*-AID REQUEST, 219 TO 211," *The Washington Post*, February 04, 1988, accessed March 25, 2019.

peace talks with the *Contras*, and in March of 1988, a 60-day ceasefire is agreed upon and a lengthy peace process begins thus ending President Reagan's need to request further *Contra* aid before he leaves office in January 1989.<sup>47</sup>

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

President Reagan's rhetoric in public addresses on the Nicaraguan conflict was heavily reliant upon arguments of interpretation for increased aid to the Nicaraguan Communist Resistance, *Contras* or "freedom fighters;" all terms which Reagan used to define those who were primarily former National Guardsmen who served Somoza. Arguments of interpretation in the rhetorical method are used to make generalizations instead of descriptions, which allows the speaker to craft a calculated message and persuade his audience toward a certain view of a given situation. In the case of the Nicaraguan conflict, Reagan's ultimate goal was to persuade his audience, especially Congress, that the "freedom fighters" were worthy of monetary aid for both military and non-military purposes. As documented in Edward Lynch's book, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America*, Reagan repeatedly emphasized throughout his presidency that the *Contras* were "guerrillas fighting a Communist government...[and] forces for freedom."<sup>48</sup> Reagan's definition of the *Contras* and his interpretation of the conflict as a fight of freedom versus Communism were central to his rhetorical argument as will be analyzed later in the definition and arguments of consequence sections of this paper. Important to note is that Reagan's choice of rhetorical interpretations was purposeful in its messaging of his administration's Nicaraguan policy. As Thomas Walker explains in his book, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, central

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<sup>47</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 282-283.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

to Reagan's policy was "the removal of the Sandinista government [which] did not mean that the administration preferred military means[,but]...the diplomatic solution the administration had in mind could only be achieved if the Sandinistas were on the ropes, 'if they'd say uncle.'"<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Holly Sklar in her book, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, cites a February 1985 news conference in which Reagan replied when asked about supporting an overthrow of the Sandinista government, "Not if the present Government would turn around and say -- all right -- if they'd say uncle, or all right, and [say to the 'freedom fighters'] come back into the revolutionary Government and let's straighten this out."<sup>50</sup> This Reagan Administration policy that did not believe the Sandinistas would pursue a peaceful solution unless pressured by the United States and the *Contras* is evident in rhetorical interpretations throughout Reagan's public addresses. This intentional rhetoric not only argued for Congress to give aid to the *Contras* but also ridiculed and demonized the Sandinista government.

One type of rhetorical interpretation Reagan commonly employed was argument of consequences which is divided into three categories: "the argument of direction, the fear appeal, and the effort to reduce things to an absurd result (*reductio ad absurdum*)."<sup>51</sup> It is evident in Reagan's public addresses, ranging from 1983 to 1988, that he relied on both argument of direction and fear appeal to interpret for his audience the consequences of Congress' inaction or disapproval of providing monetary aid to the "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua.

### **Arguments of Consequence: Negative Direction, Fear Appeal and the Communist Threat**

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 166.

<sup>50</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 260.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Sproule, *Speechmaking: An Introduction to Rhetorical Competence* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991), 181.

Reagan's patterned employment of negative direction and fear appeal rhetorically illustrates and proves to the audience the consequences of United States' inaction to assist the Nicaraguan *Contras*. These consequences are often framed using the classic rhetorical tradition of hyperbole, or strategic overstatement, which plays well with Reagan's message of an impending encroachment of Soviet-backed forces in the hemisphere.<sup>52</sup> This rhetorical strategy had a intentional purpose for the Reagan Administration as Thomas Walker observes in his analysis, "classic scare techniques, along with Red baiting, were trotted out whenever the administration feared losing a crucial vote."<sup>53</sup> Red-baiting is a specific logical fallacy, *reductio ad Stalinum*, which is used to isolate a particular group of people as communist, supporting Marxism or Stalinism, or socialist.<sup>54</sup> The Reagan Administration was heavily dependant on this logical fallacy which appears across multiple public addresses given over a period of six years (1983-1988). Interestingly enough, according to Richard Sobel's 1989 collection of polling data on public opinion, "Only a third (34% to 36%) [of Americans] saw greater peril in 'the spread of communism in Central America because the U.S. does not do enough to stop it.'"<sup>55</sup> This data signals two important purposes of this rhetorical strategy; Reagan utilized existing fear of Communism and sought to increase a spread fear to the remaining two-thirds of Americans as a means to garner support for his *Contra* aid packages.

Additionally, in a 1987 address, Reagan intertwines arguments of negative direction about the United States' inaction in Nicaragua causing a sweeping communist threat across the hemisphere with fear appeal of the subversion of democracy and the consolidation of a

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<sup>52</sup> Gideon O. Burton, "Hyperbole," *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 177.

<sup>54</sup> Gideon O. Burton, "Reductio ad Stalinum," *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Richard Sobel, "The Polls – A Report: Public Opinion about United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua," *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 53: 114-128 (1989), 117.

“totalitarian Marxist-Leninist dictatorship” backed by the Soviet Union.<sup>56</sup> As Carleton and Stohl argue in their analysis, Reagan utilized the “broader United States fight against global communism” as a tool to communicate the national security threat Nicaragua posed, which Walker identified as the logical fallacy of red-baiting.<sup>57</sup> Again in 1988, Reagan reiterates the 1987 argument using the global communism framework: “I’ve warned that if we fail in Nicaragua we could one day face a Communist Central America spreading subversion northward and southward...This is why we must work to free Nicaragua.”<sup>58</sup> Red-baiting by invoking a global communist threat was previously used by Reagan in a 1984 televised address, which related the location of the Nicaraguan conflict to the threat of spreading Communism. Reagan defined Central America as “the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.”<sup>59</sup> The Reagan Administration's calculated logic behind this argument was based on evidence that the Sandinista regime received military and economic support from the USSR, and “figures published by the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency showed a steadily increasing flow of soviet support to Nicaragua.”<sup>60</sup> Yet the continued dependence on this “evidence” of Soviet support, especially after 1986, was unfounded though rhetorically strategic. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute showed in their research that “weapons sales from Moscow peaked in 1984 and 1986 and fell thereafter.”<sup>61</sup> Despite this fact, the Reagan Administration continued to

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<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” September 12, 1987. Accessed through Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>57</sup> David Carleton and Michael Stohl, “The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1985): 205-229, 208.

<sup>58</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Economic Growth and the Situation in Nicaragua,” June 18, 1988. Accessed through Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America,” May 9, 1984.

<sup>60</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 154.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasize a Soviet threat through the use of red-baiting still two years after this last peak in arms sales as evidenced in his 1988 address' reference to a Communist Central America.

Furthermore, the rhetorical flourish Reagan employs to illustrate these arguments of negative direction are a slippery slope fallacy and logically unsound. These arguments predict that the communist threat is a growing, almost living thing that will invade Central America spreading northward to the southern border of the United States.<sup>62</sup> Walker analyzes this use of interpretation explaining that "President Reagan found it expedient...to incarnate the fear of Soviet gains at U.S. expense[,and]...world communism rivals credibility in its power to relate challenges to U.S. hegemony...to the elemental defense of the American homeland."<sup>63</sup> This use of arguments of negative direction combined with fear appeal and red-baiting is an evident thematic strategy across Reagan's framing of the Nicaraguan conflict. Framing the conflict with this rhetoric descriptively persuades Congress and the American public to interpret the conflict as an immediate threat not only to Nicaraguan democracy but also to democracy in the entire hemisphere, including the United States.

### **The Location Strategy: Establishing the Proximity of the Threat**

Part of this fear appeal of the communist threat which Reagan employs multiple times across his various speeches is the interpretation of the proximity of the Nicaraguan conflict. Reagan argues the threat is "close to home" and inaction is a "dangerous gamble with our national security."<sup>64</sup> This emphasis on the location of the conflict linked with the spread of

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<sup>62</sup> The slippery slope fallacy, "is based upon the claim that a controversial type of action will lead inevitably to some admittedly bad type of event." Gary Curtis, "Slippery Slope," Logical Fallacies: The Fallacy Files, 2017, Accessed February 6, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 163.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Economic Growth and the Situation in Nicaragua," June 18, 1988.

communism as a security threat is rooted early in Reagan's presidency. On March 18, 1981, Reagan's Secretary of State Alexander Haig presented a Soviet "hit list" to the House Foreign Affairs Committee which cited a "four-phased operation, beginning with 'the seizure of Nicaragua'...[and continuing with] El Salvador...[then] Honduras and Guatemala."<sup>65</sup> Haig was only Secretary of State until he resigned in 1982, but his demonstration to Congress that Nicaragua was a strategic launching point for a Soviet takeover of Central America laid the groundwork for Reagan's rhetorical strategy to emphasize location going forward.<sup>66</sup>

To give an idea of the pronounced emphasis on the position of the conflict framed as a national security threat, the concept of location is mentioned forty times across only eleven documents examined spanning from 1983 to 1988. The phrases used to emphasize location include: "so near our own borders,"<sup>67</sup> "only 2,000 miles from the Texas border,"<sup>69</sup> "our neighbors to the south...Nicaragua is just as close to Miami, San Antonio, San Diego, and Tucson as those cities are to Washington,"<sup>70</sup> "so close to our southern border,"<sup>71</sup> "America at its doorstep,"<sup>72</sup> "it is so close: San Salvador is closer to Houston, Texas, than Houston is to Washington, DC. Central America is America. It's at our doorstep,"<sup>73</sup> "two hours' flying time from our own borders" and "defense of our own southern frontier."<sup>74</sup> The intended rhetorical effect of this repeated message, combined with the use of amplification through the rhetorical

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<sup>65</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," January 25, 1988.

<sup>68</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America," April 27, 1983.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua," September 12, 1987.

<sup>70</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America," April 27, 1983.

<sup>71</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," February 2, 1988.

<sup>72</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua," March 16, 1986.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America," May 9, 1984.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua," March 16, 1986.

tool auxesis,<sup>75</sup> emphasizes the proximity of the conflict and argues to the audience that action is necessary as a means of protecting U.S. national security, not just the security of Nicaraguans. Reagan is able to communicate to his audience that they should care about the conflict in Nicaragua because it is not far from their homes. Additionally, the audience should be concerned because this means that communism and therefore the Soviet Union, a force far more threatening and well-known during the Cold War era, is also threatening their homes. Yet, as Sklar points out in her book analyzing Washington's view of Nicaragua, "Reality is not a zero-sum game. A U.S 'loss' need not mean a Soviet 'gain' and vice-versa."<sup>76</sup> The Nicaraguan conflict in reality was not a battle for U.S. versus Soviet possession, or influence, of Nicaragua. Yet because the conflict occurred at the close of the Cold War era, the Reagan Administration capitalized on this convenient definition of the conflict as will be further explored in the definition section of this paper. By framing the conflict as something that will affect Americans by threatening what they historically value the most, their democracy and security, Reagan crafts a call to action that leaves no room for inaction or lack of funding from Congress without imminent risks and consequences.

### **The Location Strategy Continued: Maps as Visual Aids**

To further this argument based on fear appeal and proximity, Reagan utilizes a visual aid in the form of a map of Central America. Proximity was important for Reagan to establish, because it would confirm the fear of a Communist threat spreading in the same hemisphere as the United States. In order to support aid to the Nicaraguan *Contras*, Americans would need to be convinced that Nicaragua was of strategic importance for a national defense strategy against

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<sup>75</sup> Auxesis is defined as "arranging words or clauses in a sequence of increasing force. In this sense, auxesis is comparable to climax and has sometimes been called incrementum." Gideon O. Burton, "Auxesis," *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>76</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 60.

Communism. Reagan begins implementing this argument in his 1983 Joint Session Address. The speech was divided into three sections: first the “strategic and military importance of the Caribbean,” then a contrast between “the budding democracy in El Salvador with the onset of a Communist-style dictatorship in Nicaragua,” and lastly “US policy toward the region.”<sup>77</sup> To prioritize his policy in the region, Reagan stated that “too many have thought of Central America as just that place way down below Mexico that can’t possibly constitute a threat to our well-being.”<sup>78</sup> By emphasizing that others miscalculate the security threat Central America presents, Reagan uses location strategy as a teaching tool to strategically position the Nicaraguan conflict. Simultaneously, Reagan also propagates the fear of the potential spread of Communism from USSR influence in the country if Congress does not support his policy.

The use of the characterization of Nicaragua as a strategic military launching pad for the Soviet Union because of its location is referenced again in 1987 and 1988 public addresses. In Reagan’s 1987 State of the Union Address and in a 1988 evening television address, Reagan argues using the rhetoric of location and hyperbole that “Nicaragua is being transformed into a beachhead of aggression against the United States”<sup>79</sup> and “there must be no Soviet beachhead in Central America.”<sup>80</sup> In the 1988 National Security Strategy, the term beachhead is used again in referring to “critical national security interests in Latin America” and that there can be no “Soviet, Cuban, or other Communist bloc beachhead on the mainland of the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>81</sup> Reagan strategically identifies the misconception he says Americans have of the

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<sup>77</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 113.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>79</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” February 2, 1988.

<sup>80</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” January 27, 1987.

<sup>81</sup> United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, [Washington]: 1988, President Ronald Reagan.

Nicaraguan conflict as something far away and then builds the rhetorical framework of proximity throughout his terms as president. As Lynch argues in his book, Reagan believed “military pressure from the contras was absolutely indispensable in bringing about true democratization in Nicaragua...[and] was the only guarantor of peace in the Central American region.”<sup>82</sup> This perception of the conflict’s solution aligns with Reagan’s rhetorical argument that without aid to the *Contras*, Communism would spread throughout the hemisphere and pose a national security threat to the United States. Echoing Lynch’s argument, Kentworthy, in his chapter “Selling the Policy” in Walker’s book on Reagan’s Nicaraguan policy, asserts the White House relied on three central assumptions in their characterization of the Sandinistas: that Nicaragua “subverted neighboring governments, built up its military for aggressive purposes, and functioned as a Soviet satellite.”<sup>83</sup> The subversion and satellite assumptions are highlighted by Reagan’s rhetorical strategy to emphasize the location of the conflict. Reagan additionally employed yet another rhetorical tool, visualization, to further these assumptions as true and in support of his *Contra* aid packages.

To further expand this location argument, Reagan utilizes a map visual aid in both his 1986 “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua” and 1988 “Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” which were both evening broadcasts from the Oval Office. One map is of the Western Hemisphere, and the other map is more specific to just Central America. The overall effect of both maps is very similar to visually represent the spread of a Communist threat to other democratic countries. For example, in his 1986 television address, Reagan shows a map which highlights “where weapons supplied by Nicaraguan

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<sup>82</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 255.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 170.

Communists ha[d] been found: Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala.”<sup>84</sup> This map is an obvious rhetorical strategy utilizing imagery and visual aid, formally termed *enargia* or a description that is visible or palpable.<sup>85</sup> The visual aid is employed in order to illustrate that almost every country in Central America and even South America have a connection to the conflict in Nicaragua whether in the form of military training, arms, communications or military occupation. This image invokes the fear appeal, because it leaves the United States no other option but to intervene at the consequence of having violence and Communism spread into Mexico and then the United States as Reagan argues by invoking what he terms “an old communist slogan that the Sandinistas made clear they honor: ‘the road to victory goes through Mexico.’”<sup>86</sup> This 1986 speech served as Reagan’s method of garnering support from Congress for *Contra* aid. Along with this visual aid strategy, the Reagan Administration was also again utilizing red-baiting and a new tactic of accusing Congressmen of being pro-Communist if they did not support the aid package.

Continuing the new tactic of red-baiting Congressmen is also visible in a statement from White House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan, ““With the *Contra* vote, the Democratic Party will reveal whether it stands with Ronald Reagan and the resistance or Daniel Ortega and the communists.””<sup>87</sup> Buchanan, as a spokesman of the Reagan Administration, directly links supporting Communism with not approving *Contra* aid and rhetorically positions Congress as related to a Cold War enemy. Red-baiting here inherently applies pressure on members to approve of Reagan’s *Contra* aid package. If not approved, Reagan’s rhetoric

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<sup>84</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” March 16, 1986.

<sup>85</sup> Gideon O. Burton, “Enargia,” *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” March 16, 1986.

<sup>87</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 175.

suggests the spread of Communism, and this argument is continued further in a 1988 television address. In this 1988 speech, Reagan makes it clear that the conflict in Nicaragua is at risk of spreading: “in their midst...lies a threat that could reverse the democratic tide and plunge the region into a cycle of chaos and subversion.”<sup>88</sup> However, this rhetoric is not based on factual information, because as Sklar cites in her analysis, the Center for Defense Information reported that “in reality, ‘Soviet world influence was at its height in the 1950s and there has been no significant positive Soviet geopolitical momentum for many years.’”<sup>89</sup> Location as a rhetorical strategy is a tool for Reagan to interpret reality for his audience regardless of facts cited by the Center for Defense Information without directly lying or covering up the truth. Rhetoric, as a tool based on interpretation and not logic, conveniently allows Reagan to capitalize on framing the Nicaraguan conflict as one that can directly impact U.S. security. Overall, Reagan’s use of arguments of consequence in the form of the argument of negative direction and fear appeal is repeatedly predominant and aided by visuals to emphasize location across his public addresses. The location strategy places the Nicaraguan conflict, but Reagan employs another rhetorical device - definition - to establish who is involved in the conflict.

### **Defining the Conflict: “Freedom Fighters” versus a “Communist Reign of Terror”**

Definition is also a key rhetorical figure often employed in deliberative address, because it situates the speaker as not only the informer but also the interpreter of policy which is especially useful in controversial policy areas. As Zarefsky points out in his article, “defining a situation...[shapes] the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public” and can

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<sup>88</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” February 2, 1988.

<sup>89</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 59.

condense divergent emotional reactions into one dominant reaction.<sup>90</sup> Presidential use of definition specifically offers an opportunity for a claim to be offered without support and to be accepted as “natural and uncontroversial rather than chosen and contestable.”<sup>91</sup> This ability to define reality can be a manipulative use of power as Fish further explains in his analysis of the figure of equivalence. According to Fish, the rhetorician is not as concerned with the accuracy of his statements and instead more concerned with the response his rhetoric provokes.<sup>92</sup> In Reagan’s case, the American public, including Congress, was not well-informed about the ongoing situation in Nicaragua or even about who the *Contras* and Sandinistas were and their ultimate goals. Reagan utilized this lack of knowledge to his advantage by using his position as rhetor and national leader in offering this needed definition and interpretation of the conflict for his audience.

Beginning in 1983, Reagan publicly states his administration’s support for the *Contras* and begins utilizing the phrase “freedom fighters” when referring to the *Contras*. When he is asked about his use of the phrase in a White House Press Conference, Reagan replies that ““the thing that brought those people together is the desire...for the same revolutionary principle that they once fought [sic] and have been betrayed in.””<sup>93</sup> By invoking a definition which Americans can relate to linked to democratic principles, Reagan situates the *Contras* as allies in the fight for freedom. Political communications scholars John Denton and Gary Woodward evaluate that the *Contras* were defined in differing ways, “For Ronald Reagan, the rebels in Nicaragua were ‘freedom fighters’ comparable to America’s revolutionary war heroes. Some members of

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<sup>90</sup> David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 8, 2004): 607-619, 611.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

<sup>92</sup> Stanley Fish, *Rhetoric*, In Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, ed., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>93</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 138.

Congress, however, called the rebels ‘common criminals.’”<sup>94</sup> Righting the difference in definition of the *Contras* was crucial for the Reagan Administration in order to secure aid for the *Contras* from Congress. If Reagan could frame the *Contras* as an ally for freedom, then Congress would be more likely to support the “freedom fighters” with aid.

Reagan provides his first official and specific definition of the *Contras* in his Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Central American in 1983, saying:

contrary to propaganda, the opponents of the Sandinistas are not diehard supporters of the previous Somoza regime. In fact, many are anti-Somoza heroes and fought beside the Sandinistas to bring down the Somoza government...Others are Miskito Indians fighting for their homes, their lands, and their lives.<sup>95</sup>

The power of definition lies in its ability to frame a situation for a strategic benefit. In this case, Reagan was trying to persuade Congress to support increased funding toward *Contra* aid, which he framed as supporting courageous freedom fighters and neighbors. According to Reagan Doctrine and Nicaraguan scholar James Scott, the “largest component and recipient of U.S. aid was the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN)” as part of the *Contras*.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, the U.S. State Department reported that 30 percent of *Contra* commanders were from the National Guard and the majority were “Somocistas” according to the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus.<sup>97</sup> The political wing of the *Contras*, which was “organized by the U.S. State Department, consisted primarily of democratically oriented anti-Somocistas, some of whom had worked with the Sandinistas to overthrow Somoza,” and the guerilla fighters “consisted of peasants who joined

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<sup>94</sup> John E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America*, 3rd. ed. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 48.

<sup>95</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>96</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

the resistance” due to failing FSLN policies and repression.<sup>98</sup> Reagan’s rhetorical definition of the *Contras* reflected an interpretation of the makeup of the *Contra* forces that did not directly reflect these reports. Strategically, Reagan emphasized qualities of the *Contras* that would support his policy initiatives and funding requests and downplayed any qualities that would appear negative to his audience.

This same strategy of rhetorical definition is employed in Reagan’s 1984 televised address characterizing what kind of government the Sandinistas are and why the *Contras* are fighting against them:

The Sandinista rule is a Communist reign of terror. Many of those who fought alongside the Sandinistas saw their revolution betrayed. They were denied power in the new government. Some were imprisoned, others exiled. Thousands who fought with the Sandinistas have taken up arms against them and are now called the *contras*. They are freedom fighters.<sup>99</sup>

By defining the Sandinistas as a Communist reign of terror, Reagan is characterizing an enemy related directly to Soviet Communism. Furthermore, by deliberately choosing to follow up this description of an enemy with the contrast of the *Contras* as fighting against terror for freedom, Reagan positions two opposing sides. Of the two sides, Reagan’s definitions of both groups leaves only one side for the United States to support – that of the “freedom fighters.” Building from this definition of sides, 1985 marked the year of a *Contra* imaging campaign which began with the president’s 1985 State of the Union Address when President Reagan insisted the United States “must not break faith with those who are risking their lives on every continent, from

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<sup>98</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America,” May 9, 1984.

Afghanistan to Nicaragua.”<sup>100</sup> This imaging campaign continued in three phases according to James Scott’s analysis in his book *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy*. Phase one included a renovation of the *Contra*’s image and a “new civilian directorate known as the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition.”<sup>101</sup> In phase two, “administration officials planned a campaign...[with] themes, talking points, and literatures...to be published under the names” of non-government persons.<sup>102</sup> Lastly, phase three was coupling Reagan’s \$14 million *Contra* aid request with a ceasefire proposal.<sup>103</sup> In a February 1985 radio address, Reagan continues to define the *Contras* in this reimagining campaign as “non-communist, democracy-loving revolutionaries” and further in the address as “the democratic resistance fighters...freedom fighters.”<sup>104</sup> The term “freedom fighters” rhetorically defined the *Contras* in a positive image that united the resistance fighters with democratic ideals and pitted them against the rhetorically defined Communist Sandinistas.

Central to Reagan’s communication surrounding Nicaraguan policy, the rhetorically deliberate phrase “freedom fighters” appears 50 times in just 15 of Reagan’s public speeches from 1983 to 1988. “Freedom fighters” is even employed in the 1988 National Security Strategy for the Western Hemisphere; inclusion of the term in this document makes an official, pointed foreign policy definition of the *Contras* as valiant revolutionaries when describing the Reagan Administration's desire to request “renewed assistance” from Congress.<sup>105</sup> With this definition of U.S. interests in the conflict, Reagan is not arguing for a direct overthrow of the Sandinista

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<sup>100</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” February 6, 1985.

<sup>101</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 171.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Central American,” February 16, 1985.

<sup>105</sup> United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, [Washington]: 1988, President Ronald Reagan.

government but argues that the United States should act as a protector of the region: “Our interest is to ensure that it does not infect its neighbors through the export of subversion and violence...[and] to prevent the flow of arms.”<sup>106</sup> Even with Reagan’s rhetorical appeal to Congress, members still critiqued the Administration’s Reagan Doctrine in Central America. Consequently, the White House created an office within the State Department called The Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean which Scott writes in his book “employed tactics that bordered on a deliberate disinformation campaign” that was even described by a congressional panel as “prohibited covert propaganda activities.”<sup>107</sup> The Reagan Administration also made it clear that negotiations with the Sandinistas were not part of their policy solution because “diplomacy was an avenue to ‘accommodation.’”<sup>108</sup> Publicly though Reagan said he supported “negotiations among all nations of the region to strengthen democracy.”<sup>109</sup> As Scott documents in his work, Congress was not persuaded by this rhetoric and controversial imaging campaign however and passed the Boland-Zablocki amendment in July of 1983, (228 to 195) which barred all funding for “support of military or paramilitary activities in Nicaragua.”<sup>110</sup> The Senate did not agree with the House’s decision and compromised with a “cap of \$24 million for contra funding and a prohibition on using CIA contingency funds, ensuring that future funds would have to be authorized by Congress.”<sup>111</sup> This limitation on *Contra* aid and funding for military purposes in overthrowing the Sandinista government offered Reagan another use for political rhetoric by defining how aid would be used in the future in order

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<sup>106</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>107</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 164.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>109</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>110</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 167.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

to receive Congressional approval. But this limitation of funding also invited the beginnings of the Iran-Contra Affair, because the Reagan Administration, without Congressionally approved funds for arms, sought other methods of arming the *Contras* that illegally violated the Boland Amendment.

The final important definition which is central to Reagan's argument for Congressional support of *Contra* aid is his definition of the aid itself and what the *Contras* were asking of the United States. A very normal concern of both Congress and its constituents was military intervention and the sending of weapons which might perpetuate the violence and risk American lives. Beginning with the first request Reagan submitted to Congress, he assures his audience that the aid will not be used for *Contra* military operations: "and by a margin of 2 to 1 our aid is economic now, not military" and again later in the same address, "the greatest share of these requests is targeted toward economic and humanitarian aid, not military."<sup>112</sup> The rhetorical choice to emphasize that aid would not be used for military purposes was contrary to the Reagan Administration's position that the conflict would not be resolved through peaceful means and the fact that there were plans in place for military intervention if necessary. This same emphasis on defining *Contra* aid is echoed again in 1986, when Reagan makes a clear distinction that military aid is not going to be sent if Congress approves the *Contra* aid package he is proposing: "They don't want our troops, just our aid."<sup>113</sup> Reagan highlights how the \$36 million aid package will be used: "Ninety percent of the...package is for nonlethal support...only 3.6 million is for ammunition."<sup>114</sup> Once again, the responsibility is put on Congress to support the aid package,

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<sup>112</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America," April 27, 1983.

<sup>113</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Grenada and Nicaragua," February 22, 1986.

<sup>114</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance," January 30, 1988.

because as Walker cites in his book, “Reagan aids argued that failure to support the contras would result in U.S. troop commitments later.”<sup>115</sup> This rhetorical definition is again reliant on fear appeal, because Congress does not want to be responsible for sending U.S. troops into a foreign conflict. The Reagan Administration's rhetorical strategy to pressure Congress to support aid in place of sending troops to Nicaragua also played out in the media. A television commercial airing at the time of a Congressional aid vote stated: ““If congress will act while there’s still time, thousands of Americans will never be sent to fight and die in Nicaragua,”” and another commercial displayed missiles as a voice-over asked, ““What can you do if the communists use Central America as a base for nuclear missiles?””<sup>116</sup> This scare tactic about American lives at risk due to the Nicaraguan conflict relied on rhetorical fear appeal and hyperbole to frame why Congress should approve Reagan’s policy proposal. Reagan emphasizes evidence in favor of his requests for aid by quieting fears about the United States funding violence or military opposition and instead invokes fear of further violence if the Nicaraguan conflict is not addressed by Congress.

In several of Reagan’s speeches, he makes sure to continue to address that the United States will not go to war in Nicaragua, though scholars cite that there were preparations for troops to be sent if necessary. In his address to a joint session of Congress in 1983, Reagan strategically paints the opposition to his aid package, without directly calling out anyone, by saying, “some people talk as though the United States were incapable of acting effectively in international affairs without risking war or damaging those we seek to help.”<sup>117</sup> The tone of the

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 165.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

sentence is dismissive and implies that if people disagree with aiding Nicaragua it is because they do not think the United States is capable of problem solving or providing positive pathways forward, which is a historical trend especially in light of the last major conflict at the time – Vietnam. Reagan knows the audience is fearful of entering war, and even addresses this opposition, “let me say to those who invoke the memory of Vietnam, there is no thought of sending American combat troops to Central America.”<sup>118</sup> Applause even follows this line of speech as noted in the transcript, which shows that in order to receive public support, Reagan would not be able to engage in combat. Yet, as Nicaraguan scholar Walker points out, “The administration played both sides of the street, scaring the public with ‘the Russians are coming’ while reassuring it that the problem could be taken care of without sending ‘American boys’ to battle.”<sup>119</sup> The administration’s contradictory rhetoric regarding the security threat that Nicaragua presented complicated the President’s policy stance. Additionally, contrary to the Reagan Administration’s reassurance that no troops would be sent, a high-ranking Green Beret officer and other sources cited in a December 1986 article in the *Los Angeles Weekly*, stated that “a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua would likely have occurred by April 1987,” due to military preparations that were being made in 1985 and 1986.<sup>120</sup> Using rhetoric, Reagan was careful to lend responsibility for sending troops to Congress instead of himself if *Contra* aid was not approved. Simultaneously, Reagan knew that outright support of military action in Nicaragua would not be well received by either the American public or Congress.

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<sup>118</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 168.

<sup>120</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 367.

Reagan was highly aware of what scholars have termed as the Post-Vietnam Syndrome, and wanted to quell the fear Americans had of another intervention into a foreign conflict. This persuasive rhetoric seems to have worked, because “In March 1988, 57% said that the United States was not headed for a Vietnam-type involvement in Nicaragua.”<sup>121</sup> Reagan was very astute in addressing this major counterargument against his Nicaraguan policy and directing the public away from thoughts of military intervention as a possible part of his policy initiatives. A series of pointed rhetorical questions, known as epiplexis, used “in order to chide, to express grief, or to inveigh” in the same address provides Reagan the ability to frame and interpret the choices the United States has while at the same time relying on emotional appeal and argument of consequence to strengthen his argument.<sup>122</sup> Employing anaphora<sup>123</sup> to emphasize his argument, Reagan asks a series of four rhetorical questions beginning with the phrase “must we,” which are followed by an emotional appeal that argues the consequence of Congress’ inaction will destabilize a region, allow Communism to spread and perpetuate a refugee crisis.<sup>124</sup> Not only are these statements presumptuous interpretations, but they are hyperbolic in nature and appealing to the emotion of the audience by placing blame on Congress by implying these consequences will inevitably occur. Again, in February of 1985, this same ultimatum for Congressional action is employed: “We can save them, as we were once saved, but only if we act now.”<sup>125</sup> The United States in this statement is potentially the hero in the Nicaraguan conflict, but only if Congress approves Reagan’s request for *Contra* aid. The president’s ability to define

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<sup>121</sup> Richard Sobel, “The Polls – A Report: Public Opinion about United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 53: 114-128 (1989), 116.

<sup>122</sup> Gideon O. Burton, “Epiplexis,” *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>123</sup> “Repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines.” Gideon O. Burton, “Anaphora,” *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>124</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983.

<sup>125</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Central America,” February 16, 1985.

his own policy places him in a strategic position to garner public and Congressional support for his aid packages without expressly asking for it. Rhetorical questions are repeatedly employed for the aim of garnering public support for the cause of the “freedom fighters” to place pressure on Congress to approve Reagan’s various aid packages over multiple years.

The rhetorical questions Reagan used in 1983, to establish an argument that heavily relied on emotional appeal and argument of consequence is a repeated tactic that occurs in multiple instances across the documents this paper examines. These rhetorical strategies continue to define the conflict by pitting the freedom fighters against Communism in the form of the Sandinistas backed by Soviets. As Schroeder acknowledges in his article analyzing the politics of naming the Sandinistas, the Reagan Administration utilized the “convenient framework...[of] the broader global context of the Cold War” to identify and place the Sandinista government as a Soviet Union proxy conflict.<sup>126</sup> Reagan’s rhetorical questions in a 1986 television address to the United States’ public directs rhetorical questions to Congress again using this Cold War framework as Schroeder identifies. Reagan defines the situation of Congress’ approval or disapproval of Nicaraguan aid as a “crucial test for the Congress...Will they provide the assistance the freedom fighters need to deal with Russian tanks and gunships, or will they abandon the democratic resistance to its Communist enemy?”<sup>127</sup> Reagan again provides a closed-option of consequence for Congress’ inaction by stating that the United States will essentially make way for Communism to defeat democracy in Nicaragua if aid is not given. Reagan’s statement leaves no room for a third avenue and defines the negative effects of Congress’ inaction through an emotional appeal in his rhetorical question. The emotional appeal, or pathos,

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<sup>126</sup> Michael J. Schroeder, “Bandits and Blanket Thieves, Communists and Terrorists: The Politics of Naming the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, 1927-36 and 1979-90,” *Third World Quarterly*. 26, no. 1 (2005): 67-86, 82.

<sup>127</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” March 16, 1986.

lies in the fact that he uses the term “freedom fighters” to refer to the Nicaraguan *Contras* and pits this group against the greatest enemy the United States had at the time – Communism. Freedom and Communism are once again at war according to Reagan’s rhetorical argument with United States aid, once approved by Congress, painted as the only solution. Contrary to Reagan’s dependence on appeal to fear of the spread of Communism and his assertion that this spread is factual, at the time, the Center for Defense Information listed eighteen countries with significant Soviet influence which did not include Nicaragua.<sup>128</sup> Additionally, a 1986 CIA study agreed that “reduced Western influence in Third World countries has not necessarily led to a corresponding rise in Soviet influence.”<sup>129</sup> Essentially, Reagan’s rhetorical argument based on fear appeal of a Communist threat interpreted reality in a hyperbolic way which supported his administration’s policy of supporting the *Contras* with monetary aid.

In 1988, Reagan continues the message that the United States must step up to aid the “freedom fighters” and makes a very direct emotional appeal to the morality of his audience through rhetorical questions: “Can we, as a moral people, a moral nation...leave them at the mercy of the Sandinista regime?...What message will that send to the world, to our allies and friends in freedom?”<sup>130</sup> This speech was given once again to sway Congress to support the Reagan *Contra* aid package, and was given just the evening before the House’s vote. This was the Reagan Administration's final request for aid before leaving office, and at the time the Sandinistas had agreed to negotiating the Arias plan for a ceasefire.<sup>131</sup> President Arias himself had asked Congress to reject the aid package, and Reagan knew the vote would be very close

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<sup>128</sup> Holly Sklar, *Washington’s War on Nicaragua* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 59.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>130</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance,” February 2, 1988.

<sup>131</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 185.

when giving this speech, hoping to garner just enough support to pass the *Contra* aid. Reagan was unsuccessful, and on the day after the speech, the House rejected the aid package in a vote of 219 to 211.<sup>132</sup> In this 1988 appeal almost two years after the first example of rhetorical questions, the same rhetorical strategy is used to create the same argument that the United States has a duty to support the “freedom fighters.” According to the rhetorical argument made, if the United States (meaning Congress) does not support the *Contras*, they will be abandoned to a Communist dictatorship that not only threatens the freedom of Nicaraguans but also freedom throughout the Western Hemisphere.

### **Comparison and Contrast: An Appeal to American Values**

Another important rhetorical figure Reagan employs in his public address is that of comparatio, or comparison, which both invokes shared values and uses historical examples to persuade his audience to support *Contra* aid.<sup>133</sup> As Leith iterates in his book analyzing rhetoricians across history, invoking commonplaces that are specific to an identity “tend to be so deep-rooted in their appeal that they pass for universal truths.”<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Perelman in his analysis of the relationship between rhetoric and politics speaks to the use of common values as a powerful tool due to their emotional hold as symbols for “a religious or political community.”<sup>135</sup> This appeal is exemplified in Reagan’s September 1987 radio address on Nicaragua. Due to the public discovery of the Iran-Contra Affair, in February of 1987, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee “voted to end all U.S. support for the contras,... and the House subsequently voted to

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<sup>132</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 185.

<sup>133</sup> Gideon O. Burton, “Comparatio,” *Silva Rhetoricae*, February 26, 2007, (accessed February 22, 2019).

<sup>134</sup> Sam Leith, *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 64.

<sup>135</sup> Chaim Perelman, “Rhetoric and Politics,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17, no. 3 (1984), 132.

cut off” the remaining funding to be issued from their earlier 1986 authorization.<sup>136</sup> To combat this Congressional cut in *Contra* funding, Reagan once again employs rhetorical strategy appealing to Congress to continue supporting the *Contras* in his public addresses. Additionally, Reagan signs National Security Directive Decision 264 to “engage the administration resources in a campaign of public diplomacy...[and formulate] a comprehensive action plan to gain sustained congressional support for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance.”<sup>137</sup> As part of this administrative campaign for Congressional support, Reagan also utilizes the rhetorical strategy of comparison across multiple addresses, often invoking familiar references to American history and revolution.

These historical references are used to invoke a common cause of freedom between the *Contras* and more American values. In 1987, Reagan defines the goal of the *Contras* as similar to revolutionary America by stating, “the cause of freedom is America’s cause...mutual concern about peace and freedom in Latin America.”<sup>138</sup> Later in the same speech Reagan continues to compare the *Contras* to revolutionary America: “in the best tradition of our Founding Fathers, they formed a democratic resistance against tyranny.”<sup>139</sup> The creation of unity between the freedom fighters and shared American values of freedom and peace strategically links the ongoing conflict to one that demands American action and support. Reagan furthers this point by referencing historical figures in a 1985 radio address, “America may never have been born without the help and support of the freedom-loving people of Europe, of Lafayette and Von

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<sup>136</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 182.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” September 12, 1987.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

Steuben and Kosciusko.”<sup>140</sup> Additionally, in a 1988 speech, Reagan speaks similarly: “Let us be for the people of Nicaragua what Lafayette, Pulaski, and Von Steuben were for our forefathers and the cause of American independence...their cause is our cause: freedom.”<sup>141</sup> This historical reference along with the emphasis again on a common cause with the use of “our” to again invoke unity, invites the audience to join in the freedom fighters’ efforts because of the nobility of their quest for freedom which is so central to American identity. The rhetorical comparison of the Nicaraguan conflict to the American Revolution offers purpose to Congress supporting increasing aid to the *Contras*. According to Reagan’s rhetoric, the justification for this support is the noblest of all American values – freedom.

Continuing the theme of rhetorical comparison, Reagan also deliberately contrasts the “freedom fighters” with their enemy the Sandinistas. This use of contrast to depict an enemy is exemplified in Carleton and Stohl’s work where they discuss the Reagan Administration’s identification of authoritarian regimes as friendly to the United States and totalitarian regimes, like the Sandinistas, as friendly to the Soviet Union.<sup>142</sup> In February 1985, Reagan remarks in a radio address that the Sandinistas are persecuting the church, implying that the Nicaraguan government is denying freedom of religion.<sup>143</sup> In a later radio address from the Oval Office in December 1985, Reagan defines the Sandinistas not only as a Communist dictatorship with Marxist qualities backed by the Soviet Union but takes his contrast a step further.<sup>144</sup> Reagan declares the Sandinistas are “nothing but thugs, a gang of Communists to whom the word of God

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<sup>140</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Central America,” February 16, 1985.

<sup>141</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” January 25, 1988.

<sup>142</sup> David Carleton and Michael Stohl, “The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1985): 205-229, 210.

<sup>143</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Central America,” February 16, 1985.

<sup>144</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Tax Reform and the Situation in Nicaragua,” December 14, 1985.

is a declaration of liberation that must be stamped out.”<sup>145</sup> This contrast is an incredibly strong characterization that pits the Sandinistas against one of America’s most valued traditions – freedom of religion. By invoking the name of God in his characterization, Reagan makes an emotional appeal to Congress which situates the Sandinistas as a totalitarian regime without regard for individual freedoms. This evokes the classical rhetorical tradition of pathos, or emotional appeal, which can at times overwhelm the truth by relying less on logic and more on the shared human experience. In Reagan’s argument, the emotion of fear is rooted in the logical fallacy of Red-baiting as defined earlier, which is linked directly to contrasting traditional American values against Communism. Reagan repeats this strategy across his terms as president and uses it to provide a comparison that unites the United States with Nicaraguan “freedom fighters” and pits the U.S. against the Sandinista dictatorship. By rhetorically defining both sides of the conflict and their goals, Reagan is able to manipulate the audience to accept his interpretation that the *Contras* are worth supporting and that the Soviet-supported Sandinistas are an inherent, active enemy posing a strategically hyperbolized threat against the security of the entire Western Hemisphere.

In his 1985 State of the Union Address, Reagan continues to rely on this comparison of a shared, universal American experience by framing the Nicaraguan conflict as similar to that of The Colonies against Great Britain. In his 1985 address, Reagan points to the necessity of standing by “democratic allies...from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours since birth.”<sup>146</sup> Once again, the first-person plural possessive is employed to evoke commonality between two very distant populations.

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<sup>145</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Tax Reform and the Situation in Nicaragua,” December 14, 1985.

<sup>146</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” February 6, 1985.

Reagan also speaks to endowed rights because they are commonly referenced in many historic United States documents and are familiar to his audience. Congress is viewed as an institution of democratic freedom, and by making this comparison, Reagan argues that Congress should support aiding the “freedom fighters” in Nicaragua. Thomas Walker points out another rhetorical strategy in his analysis of Reagan’s Nicaraguan policy: “‘Democracy’ provided the needed link between the diplomatic settlement popular in Congress and the White House’s goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas.”<sup>147</sup> Reagan needed Congress’ approval of his policy and *Contra* aid packages to further his agenda. His strategy of framing the *Contra*’s cause during a major address as one similar to the American Colonies reiterates to Congress that supporting the *Contras* is the only solution to stopping the Sandinista “Communist threat.”

Additionally, Reagan establishes Communism as a common enemy to freedom as a component of his Cold War rhetoric in the same address. Reagan argues that the Sandinista dictatorship “not only persecutes its people, the church, and denies free press, but arms and provides bases for Communist terrorists attacking neighboring states.”<sup>148</sup> Through the use of contrast, this statement relies on rhetorical definition, as explained earlier in this paper, as well as the characterization of an enemy, or “other.” Reagan argues to the American people and Congress that the choice of inaction is going against American values of freedoms ensured in the Bill of Rights. He finalizes this argument with a direct presidential definition that “support for the freedom fighters is self-defense,” which proposes that the United States is under attack in some way.<sup>149</sup> Reagan’s referral to an attack on freedom of religion builds off the then current

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<sup>147</sup> Thomas W. Walker, *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 169.

<sup>148</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” February 6, 1985.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

events in Nicaragua. In March of 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Nicaragua where he was heckled during a mass in the capital city where Sandinistas chanted during the Consecration ceremony and his departure flight was delayed from taking off.<sup>150</sup> This mass was broadcasted by a Venezuelan television station and replayed in the United States, angering viewers.<sup>151</sup> In several addresses, Reagan argues the Sandinistas are suppressing human rights; invoking this emotional appeal to religious members of his audience assists in contrasting the Sandinistas to the United States and democratic values.

Two years later, this same definition and use of contrast is employed in Reagan's 1987 State of the Union Address, which argues again that "the cause of freedom is being tested" and the Sandinistas are "suppressing the church, the press, and democratic dissent and promoting subversion in the region."<sup>152</sup> The same message used in Reagan's 1985 address is rhetorically argued to the same audience that the Sandinistas are in contrast to American values and freedoms and are a threat to the United States. In this 1987 State of the Union Address, Reagan points the audience to the history of three presidents who were committed to keeping the Western Hemisphere "safe from aggression" to establish that he is not alone in his endeavor to support the Nicaraguan *Contras*. James Monroe, Franklin Roosevelt, Truman and John F. Kennedy are all referenced as examples of being historically committed to protecting freedom which Reagan assures he will not depart from even if "some in this Congress may choose to" do so.<sup>153</sup> In his numerous addresses, Reagan clearly argues that universal freedom, American values and United States' security is at stake through his comparison of the Nicaraguan conflict to the

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<sup>150</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 112.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ronald Reagan, "State of the Union Address," January 27, 1987.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

Revolutionary War and direct contrast of the Sandinistas as a Communist enemy of freedoms important to the United States. Each of Reagan's rhetorical strategies deliberately framed Reagan's Nicaraguan policy in order to persuade Congress to approve his *Contra* aid packages.

### **Conclusion: Larger Implications for Presidential Use of Political Rhetoric**

President Reagan's Nicaraguan policy heavily depended on his framing of the conflict through the use of rhetoric in his public address and offers an example of how presidents employ rhetoric to communicate their policy initiatives and persuade an audience to a given action. Classical rhetorical tradition and politics are inextricably linked in presidential communication because the president relies on a speaker-audience relationship to facilitate a transaction of information to be interpreted in a strategic manner. Since rhetoric relies on interpretation instead of logic, it provides the president with a tool that can be used to either mask or emphasize aspects of a conflict to support an administration's policy. In Reagan's case, the employment of rhetorical tools including arguments of negative direction, definition, location and comparison emphasized a positive image of the *Contras* as "freedom fighters" and the Sandinista government as a "communist threat." This rhetoric produced mixed success for the administration's proposed *Contra* aid packages in Congress and did not culminate in situating the Nicaraguan conflict as a national security concern as Reagan viewed it.

Reagan himself even recognized his failings in communication regarding Nicaragua foreign policy. He writes in his memoirs that "for eight years the press called me the 'Great Communicator... Well, one of my greatest frustrations during those eight years was my inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America."<sup>154</sup> Despite this recognition, due to the nature of the presidency and its

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<sup>154</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 417.

dependence on Congressional approval for funding of policy initiatives, presidents will continue to rely on rhetoric as a persuasive tool to garner support. The ultimate risk involved with the use of rhetoric is that the audience's response is not controlled by the rhetorician and thus results are often mixed. Yet, the analysis of presidential rhetoric in framing policy must be further studied in order to disseminate what is interpretation and what is fact when rhetoric is employed to persuade its audience.

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