Robert Hager and Robert Snyder’s stated purpose here is to explore the reasons for the shift in U.S. policy toward the Sandinistas [Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN] from reasonably accommodating to outright antagonistic. The authors explicitly reject the view, which is popular among historians of U.S.-Latin American relations, that the United States precipitated the breakdown in relations with Nicaragua due to the Reagan administration’s fierce ideological hostility toward the Sandinistas. The authors instead put forward a theory of international conflict that suggests radical revolutionary regimes will provoke status quo great powers for ideological and domestic political purposes. Juxtaposing this theory with the spiral model, which emphasizes the role of mutual suspicions in the breakdown of relations, the authors demonstrate that the FSLN’s ideological commitment to international communism required both the sidelining of the moderate opposition at home and a vehemently anti-U.S. foreign policy.

The authors argue that the decisive moment was the summer of 1980, when the Sandinistas began arming the Salvadoran rebels [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN], in direct violation of a tacit agreement with the United States. At this time, the Sandinistas were seeking to radicalize the revolution and undermine the moderates. Arming the Salvadoran guerrillas had the potential to not only enhance the security of the Nicaraguan revolutionary regime, but more importantly, to spread the tenets of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Contrary to the popular view of the Reagan administration as unrelentingly hostile to the Sandinistas, the authors use declassified U.S. government documents to demonstrate that from 1981 to 1982, the administration was actually reluctant to abandon attempts at reconciliation.

The FSLN had made no bones about its intentions upon overthrowing the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. In 1977, it issued a program describing the temporary nature of the alliance with the middle-class bourgeoisie, clearly denying middle class elements any measure of power or control in a post Somoza regime. In this view, the FSLN’s claims to support open elections, a mixed economy, and a pluralist society should be seen as tactical. Moreover, it was not the election of Ronald Reagan that caused the FSLN to start arming the Salvadoran guerrillas in violation of an agreement with the Carter administration; in fact, arms shipments began while President Jimmy Carter was still in office. Despite a very different rhetorical approach to the Nicaraguan regime,
Reagan initially followed the policies that had been laid down under Carter. The Reagan administration proved willing to accommodate the Sandinistas’ security concerns, addressing the use of foreign territories for military training of anti-Sandinista exile groups, and even offering to share information on U.S. military assistance to other Central American countries. Administration officials also informed Managua of U.S. willingness to resume economic aid once the regime had ceased supplying the FMLN.

Thus, President Reagan did not come into office determined to destroy the Nicaraguan regime at any cost. The administration clearly sought to reach an accommodation with the Sandinistas. It was the Sandinistas who were unwilling to address U.S. security concerns, which revolved around fears of a regional arms race and the spread of Cuban and Soviet influence. As relations with the United States became increasingly tense, the Sandinistas stepped up their repression of the domestic opposition. Even after the November 1981 release of the National Security Decision Directive authorizing efforts to roll back the “Cuban-Sandinista support structure” (28) in Central America, the Reagan administration did not abandon the diplomatic track, but continued attempts to reach a settlement, even going so far as to set up a meeting with the Cubans. Moreover, the decision to start arming the counter-revolutionary forces battling the FSLN (known colloquially as the Contras) was initially envisioned for use as leverage in forcing the Sandinistas to stop aiding the FMLN.

This analysis will no doubt prove anathema to many historians of U.S.-Latin American relations, who have long relied on and promoted a narrative in which the United States shoulders the burden of bad relations with Latin American revolutionary regimes. Perhaps the most popular example of this narrative is that of Fidel Castro’s Cuba; the orthodox wisdom holds that U.S. intransigence drove Castro into the arms of the Soviets. Documents from the Soviet embassy in Mexico City overturn this oft-repeated canard. Merely two months after coming to power, Castro sent emissaries to the Soviet embassy in Mexico City to express interest in the eventual establishment of diplomatic and trade relations. These emissaries flattered the Soviets with praise of their socialist system and society, and informed them that the development of relations would have to be cautious and slow so as not to alarm the United States and provide a convenient pretext for a coup attempt, à la Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala.¹

Whether or not Hager and Snyder’s theory has explanatory power for relations between revolutionary regimes and status quo great powers across geographical and temporal lines remains to be seen. It certainly has great utility in explaining the trajectory of relations between the United States and Nicaragua, the case study under examination here, and I would argue that the theory can be usefully applied to the case of Castro’s Cuba as well.

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¹ The primary source documentation for these claims comes from the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVPRF), Fond 110 (Mexico), Opis’ 19, Papka 43, Delo 5.