

A Defection in the Family

Few people in Washington, other than the die-hards at the Heritage Foundation, would call the liberal-left community a powerful voice in the formulation of US foreign policy. A loose collection of church groups, veteran opponents of the coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile, outgrowths of the antiwar movement, research institutes, the American Civil Liberties Union and the like, it displays few of the trappings of power. It has too few lobbyists working the halls of Congress and garners too little attention in the media. It annoys rather than influences policy-makers. Still, it has presented a united front on many major issues, such as the efficacy of cutting off foreign aid to punish human rights violators.

For the past five months the ranks of this small community have been shaken by the defection of Bruce Cameron, one of its rare effective advocates on the Hill. A former lobbyist for the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), Cameron broke to support “humanitarian” aid to the Nicaraguan *contras* in June. The defection of one person may seem to be a minor matter, but it has touched off accusations of apostasy and counter-accusations of neo-Stalinism. Cameron now openly criticizes the “arrogance of the human rights community,” calling one of the most respected groups on the left, the Washington Office on Latin America, “a shill for the Sandinistas.” More important, Cameron’s defection significantly reduces the liberal-left’s ability to thwart Reagan’s Central America policy in Congress. The crack in its unity has encouraged Congressional liberals to be seduced by the myth that they can make over Nicaragua, and Guatemala, in their image.

There is little agreement on the reasons for Cameron’s heresy. The simplest explanation making the rounds is that he succumbed to the lure of power. Proponents of this view says that Cameron, known for his overbearing style, enjoys plotting and intrigue, and that the Reagan administration led him to believe he could manipulate its Central America policy. Totally absorbed in the world of Congressional policies, he believes that the subtleties of legislative maneuvers in Washington will be fully comprehended in Managua and persuade the Sandinista government to change its ways.

The more charitable interpretation, given by Cameron’s friends, is that he is driven by personal loyalty to a few prominent but politically-isolated Nicaraguans who are not averse to Washington’s acting as an arbiter of Nicaragua’s internal affairs.

A fuller explanation would combine those interpretations and something more. The controversy dramatizes the dilemma of the liberal-left in opposing US foreign policy. Should it accept the logic of imperialism, reducing the struggle over US foreign policy to a quibble over how best to save the world from Marxism-Leninism? Or should it take a cool, tough and candid approach (to borrow the words of William Appleman Williams) to

national security, one that forswears the overthrow of another government unless that government represents a clear threat to the United States?

Cameron's career once exemplified the liberal-left's use of human rights as a tool to make US foreign policy non-interventionist. Beginning in 1976 he represented the ADA in an umbrella group, the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, the successor to a Vietnam-era organization formed to stop the funding of the war, and worked vigorously to attach human rights conditions to the multitude of foreign aid laws. In alliance with two Democratic Congressmen, Donald Fraser of Minnesota and Tom Harkin of Iowa, the liberal-left won several legislative victories, despite the opposition of both the Ford and Carter administrations.

When the regime of General Anastasio Somoza Debayle began to crumble in 1978, Cameron and the entire community fought the dictator's formidable Washington lobby for almost two years. After the Sandinistas' victory in July 1979, the liberal-left immediately advocated reconstruction aid. Cameron, still the ADA's lobbyist, wrote an influential memorandum circulated in Congress arguing that Nicaragua was a test case of the United States' ability to work with revolutionary regimes (a document he now considers "full of lies"). Cameron spent eight months lobbying for legislation that would give \$75 million in aid to the new government.

But over the next five years, Cameron says, he became increasingly disenchanted with the Sandinistas. Managua seemed oblivious to liberal tutelage from Washington. Worse, from Cameron's point of view, the revolution seemed to be leaving behind the democrats who had joined the broad anti-Somoza front in the late 1970s. Cameron had become close to Alfonso Robelo Callejas, a young businessman whose opposition to Somoza had been motivated originally by his disapproval of the dictator's stranglehold over the economy, and Arturo Cruz, an economist who detested Somoza on more principled grounds, but someone who had lived in Washington for more than a decade and had no political base in his own country. Despite his misgivings about the Sandinistas, Cameron maintained ranks for nearly five years, though he made no effort to hide his personal loyalties. He opposed aid to the *contras* and worked for the passage of the so-called Boland amendment, which proscribed aid to groups seeking to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The first inkling that Cameron intended to promote what he would unimaginatively call a third force came last year. By then, the liberal-left had been forced to take a defensive posture in Congress, struggling against the administration's initiatives aimed at destabilizing the Nicaraguan revolution. With a \$27,000 grant to study human rights legislation from the Veatch Program, a liberal foundation in Plandome, New York, Cameron, no longer with the ADA, became a fellow at the Center for International Policy (CIP), a research organization which monitors US military and economic aid to the Third World. One of the tasks he set for himself, without CIP's knowledge, was to squire Eden Pastora Gomez around Washington, introducing him to members of Congress. In league with Robelo, Pastora, a disgruntled Sandinista whose revolutionary credentials were frequently exaggerated by the mainstream press, had built ARDE, a rudimentary political organization in Costa Rica. When CIP officials read in the newspapers of Cameron's

efforts on Pastora's behalf, they returned what remained of his grant money to the Veatch Program and asked that he leave the center.

After his parting of the ways with CIP, Cameron devoted himself to making criticism of revolutionary Nicaragua respectable. He had acquired some allies. In October 1984 *The New Republic* published an article by Robert Leiken that was highly critical of the Sandinistas. Both Leiken, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a veteran of the antiwar movement, and Cameron, who had rejoined the ADA, argued that a third force, which excluded discredited *Somocistas* and uncooperative Sandinistas, could be nurtured with careful guidance from liberals who really believed in human rights. Their identification with Robelo, Pastora, Cruz and his son Arturito became even closer. Gradually, Cameron and Leiken even began to consider using *contra* aid as leverage to force the Sandinistas to become more "democratic."

When Ann Lewis became national director of the ADA in January, Cameron's future as a staff lobbyist was one of the first issues she faced. ADA board members were concerned, according to Lewis, that Cameron "had been operating independently of ADA policy" and that his ties to Cruz were so close that "if Cruz were to endorse aid to the *contras*, Bruce would also." Others in the liberal-left community began to suspect that despite Cameron's unquestioned value as a lobbyist – he was one of the few on their side who had direct access to members of Congress – he had become something of a mole, to the point where they objected to his presence at strategy meetings. Lewis decided to set up a special advisory board, composed of ADA members and outside experts, to oversee Cameron's work.

Before the board could be constituted, Cameron began to participate in meetings of what he came to call the *contra* support group (CSG), which was convened by Penn Kemble, a prominent conservative Democrat. The group discussed various proposals for *contra* aid that would be palatable to the House. One suggestion, from Bernie Aronson, a former speechwriter for Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, was that Congress threaten to approve aid unless the Sandinistas modified their policies in certain specified ways. For the next three months this informal group – whose other members reject Cameron's description of them as a *contra* support group – would thrash out ideas about US policy toward Nicaragua. Cameron acted as legislative point man, drawing on his Capitol Hill contacts and nine years' experience in negotiating compromises.

In April, an administration-based *contra* aid bill lost in the House by only two votes. At that point, Cameron was telling his liberal-left colleagues, "I can't imagine any administration package I could sign off on." Privately, however, he, Kemble, Leiken, Aronson, and others in the CSG had mixed feelings. Although willing to support *contra* aid in principle, they believed that the administration's approach, with all its blather about "freedom fighters," was ham-handed. They also felt that the White House had snubbed them. What the liberal-left saw as a tragic self-fulfilling prophecy, Cameron et al. regarded as a vehicle for enforcing their vision of a brighter political future for Nicaragua.

On May 9 the CSG met with Democratic Representative Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, after he had introduced an amendment to the *contra* aid bill that would provide for the money to be distributed through the Agency for International Development. Since McCurdy and the CSG were obviously of like mind, the congressman asked for the group's help in fashioning a *contra* aid package that would pass. The next day, Cameron met with Lewis and said he needed "time to think through" his position on Nicaragua. They agreed that he should take a leave of absence from the ADA.

In June, Cameron announced that "as an individual," he supported the \$28 million "humanitarian" aid package. McCurdy, by and large, had adopted Cameron's complicated carrot-and-stick approach, which called on the *contras* to observe human right and negotiate with the Sandinistas as conditions for receiving "humanitarian" aid. The final drama occurred when McCurdy lost control of his amendment to House Republican leader Robert Michel, who stripped it of the human rights conditions Cameron had painstakingly crafted. Feeling betrayed, Cameron desperately sought to bolster his claim that he only wanted to make Nicaragua more democratic. He appealed directly to McCurdy and suggested he ask President Reagan to write a letter certifying that the administration did not seek to overthrow the Sandinistas, just reform them. Reagan wrote the letter, which proved instrumental in persuading McCurdy and thirty-two others to switch their votes, although the final language of the aid bill did not differ substantially from the one voted down in April. Nevertheless, the CSG congratulated itself for finally getting the administration to "compromise."

The day after the vote, Lewis told Cameron, who had come to the ADA to ask for his job back, that he could not return. Cameron argued that Lewis was ignoring the nuances of his position and insisted that the final language in the amendment did not reflect his views. Moreover, he said, while he supported Michel's final version, he hadn't lobbied for it – although some who worked against the bill say they saw Cameron button-holing members of Congress. Cameron's nine-and-a-half-year relationship with the ADA had come to an end. He went to work for McCurdy as a consultant, staying two months.

Cameron's defection continues to split the liberal-left in Washington many ways. Some still consider him a friend because of associations that go back to his antiwar days, but they no longer discuss Central America with him. Others have adopted a harsher attitude. Cameron has lost his position in two organizations in the community: the Foreign Policy Education Fund and the Human Rights Political Action Committee, which he helped found. As justification, members of the groups cite not only his efforts in behalf of *contra* aid but his new associations. In October the "Washington Talk" column of *The New York Times* carried an [item](#) reporting that Cameron gave a Nicaraguan cigar to Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, the National Security Council aide who coordinates assistance to the *contras*, at a party attended by key administration specialists on Latin America. Six weeks ago, Cameron, ignoring alternative sites, chose to sublet office space from the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a neoconservative think tank dedicated to exposing the unholy alliance between the liberal-left and the same churches Cameron worked with for nine years.

More significantly, Cameron's critics point out, he has become a renegade on Guatemala as well. When the country's foreign minister, Fernando Andrade Diaz-Duran, visited Washington in June, Cameron arranged for him to meet with several key members of Congress and their staffs. Andrade was described by Aryeh Neier, vice chair of Americas Watch, a human rights group, as "by far the most effective public relations advocate I have encountered for a government that has engaged in a consistent practice of grotesque abuses of human rights over a period of years." It was no surprise to see Cameron join, at Andrade's request, the official US government delegation that recently monitored the November round of presidential elections in Guatemala.

Cameron exults in his new role as a martyr to the liberal-left, purged because he cares too deeply about human rights. He claims that he stands between extremes, refusing to be an apologist for left-wing totalitarianism (as are his former allies) or for right-wing authoritarianism (the blind spot, he says, of his neoconservative friends). As proof that he has not totally abandoned his former friends on the left he points to his recent support for a Senate amendment that curtails military aid to El Salvador until its government publishes the killers of two US labor representatives and a Salvadoran land reform official. Otherwise, he says his mission is to persuade the neoconservatives that "not everything goes" in the struggle against communism, that they cannot be blind to the outrages perpetrated by US allies. "There has to be a third force."

When asked if he worries about being used by the administration, he replies, "I was used before when I kept saying things that weren't true about the Sandinistas." Compromising with the administration is the least of his worries, however. The *contra* leadership in Florida – the "Key Biscayne Mafia" – has told Arturo Cruz that after they march into Managua, their first act will be to convene Nuremberg-style proceedings to try the *Sandinistas arrepentidos*, repentant Sandinistas like Cruz. Cameron, Leiken, McCurdy and company have countered by fostering stories about Cruz's unhappiness over *contra* human rights violations and his lack of influence over the *contras'* military decisions. In a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece published last month, Leiken threatened that he and his cohorts would undo the Faustian bargain they brokered on *contra* aid unless Washington backs Cruz against the "cabal of former National Guard officers and Miami exiles who have the upper hand among the *contras*."

In a sense, this entire drama is the tragedy of American foreign policy writ small. Some members of the liberal-left community say the lesson is: Keep liberals away from revolution. Liberals are so busy protecting their flanks that they cannot understand that North Americans have no God-given responsibility for how others manage their internal affairs. We do not have to defend their mistakes or correct them.

Senator Frank Church – a quintessential liberal – showed that a persuasive argument can be made that keeps the liberal-left alliance intact when, inevitably, revolution occurs. Shortly before he died, Church wrote an article in *The Washington Post* titled, "We Must Learn to Live With Revolutions," which summed up what he considered the most important lesson he had learned during twenty-four years in the Senate. "There is no reason," he concluded, "to transform a revolution in any of the countries of Central

Washington Decoded

America, regardless from where it draws its initial external support, into a security crisis for us.”