In recent years the ghost of an overworked metaphor has haunted public discussion. The situation in Central America has been compared to Munich, and an analogy drawn between the present situation in Central America and that of Central Europe in 1938.1 This has been evoked explicitly by President Ronald Reagan in a major television address:

There are those in this country who would yield to the temptation to do nothing. They are the new isolationists, very much like the isolationists of
the late nineteen thirties who knew what was happening in Europe but chose not to face the terrible challenge history had given them. They preferred a policy of wishful thinking, that if they only gave up one more country, allowed just one more unbridled aggression, then surely sooner or later the aggressor’s appetite would be satisfied.

As the facts of the curious web of misinformation and illegality spun by Reagan and his staff are progressively revealed with the unfolding of the White House basement or Iran conspiracies, even some of those prone to accept this casual analogy are probably becoming more cautious. Yet the analogy remains interesting because, on closer inspection, its relevance is precisely the opposite of what Reagan and his supporters imply. It is the USA, not Nicaragua, whose behaviour today most closely resembles that of Nazi Germany in 1938.

What was Munich about? As the whole world knows, it was about Czechoslovakia. And what was Czechoslovakia about? Here the question becomes somewhat more complex. In an unsigned article in the 1904 edition of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, which is worth citing as an example of conventional wisdom in that period, one finds the following statement: “What the Czechs and the other races want, is the same independence as the Magyars possess, and such independence is as inconsistent with Russian as with German domination. It is against their interests to break away from the Hapsburgs. The day of small states has gone by, and a lonely Czech kingdom could not exist for a year by the side of Russia.”

Against such conventional wisdom, the Czechoslovak republic was born in 1918. To a great extent, its very existence was an affront to German traditions. Prague had been largely a German city. Bohemia had been ruled by Germans for two hundred and ninety-eight years. There were two universities, one German and one Czech. Yet Czech nationalism had been gathering strength throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, Czechs outnumbered Germans in Bohemia by a ratio of five-to-three. The addition of Slovakia in 1918 reduced the proportion, if not the number of ethnic Germans in the new republic. Nevertheless, the very idea of a Czech republic ran contrary to strong and well-rooted currents of German opinion. One of the guiding principles of the *Alldeutsch Verband*, founded in
1891, was pan-German nationalism. Its programme was: "the union of all members of the German race, wherever they resided, in a pan-German state. Its core was to be a Greater Germany incorporating Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Austria-Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia." This very notion of a Greater Germany had been opposed by Bismarck, since it would have made impossible the conservative Prussian hegemony on which Bismarck's Reich was based. But the Greater German idea had wide support among liberals, including such men as Stresemann in the Weimar Republic. In a word, it was not only Adolf Hitler and the "loony right" who felt that Germans everywhere should be gathered under the leadership of a Greater Germany, and that the German Reich should be the hegemonic power in Central Europe. This represented, in effect, the thought of traditional German Liberalism. Germany deserved a place in the sun, and a dominant place in Central Europe. With the destruction of the Austrian federation in 1918, and the humiliation of the Bismarckian Reich, this sentiment was only intensified.

The Czechoslovak republic was an affront to this kind of thinking. The idea of an independent Czechoslovakia was as absurd to many Germans as would be the idea of an independent Texas for many Americans—or the idea of an independent Nicaragua. But once the small national state had been established through a series of unique historical accidents at the end of the European war of 1914–18, the Czechs insisted on being an independent nation state. There was no reason, from their point of view, why their politics should be determined from Vienna or Berlin. Having been ruled from Vienna from 1620 until 1918, they had decided to rule themselves.

Munich, which is now seen as a history of appeasement and betrayal, amounted to an affirmation of Greater German hegemony in Central Europe. It is interesting to recall that while a mutual defence pact existed at the time between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, the Soviets were neither invited to Munich nor consulted about it. They were still beyond the pale.

From a complex series of events rooted in the history of a particular part of the world, Munich has become a metaphor. One could argue that, after Vietnam, the metaphor should be retired. But one could also argue that there are striking parallels with the present situation in Central America.
From William Walker to Anastasio Somoza, with almost no exceptions, Nicaragua has been ruled by the United States. During the life of the “manifest destiny” ideology, it was assumed by many that the United States would eventually occupy the hemisphere, including both Canada and meso-America. César Agusto Sandino had attempted to assert the effective independence of the small nation, and when he laid down his arms to negotiate—just as rebels are now being urged to do in El Salvador—he was murdered by Somoza, the American pro-consul. With the overthrow of the Somoza regime in 1979, a new government attempted to institute independent policies, which in effect would end the satellite status of the republic. Washington would no longer have a veto over the social, economic, and fiscal policies of Nicaragua.

The reaction of the United States government has been as hostile as that of the government of Adolf Hitler to the Czechoslovak republic. There is no question whatsoever but that the United States prefers in this region governments whose economic, social and fiscal policies resemble those of the Somoza regime. Governments that attempt any real change in the distribution of wealth and the provision of health and educational services, or who exhibit less than absolute dependency on the United States in matters of trade, military and foreign policy, run a serious danger, as Latin Americans put it thirty years ago, of “Guatemalization”.

The reasons for all this are often as difficult to analyze as were the reasons for German hegemony in Central Europe. It is difficult to make a case for crude economic imperialism. The United States does not need central American resources. Nor are Central American markets vital to the survival of the United States. Hitler needed resources, although it is doubtful whether Bohemia had resources that would have been unavailable through trade. The desire for hegemony goes beyond economics, although perhaps one could make a case for a kind of “domino theory”. In this sense, it might be argued that a breakaway on the part of a small, poor and relatively insignificant country is worse than the rebellion of a larger nation. If Nicaragua can do it, why not Brazil, or Canada? Hegemony itself becomes an imperative.

As was the case in Czechoslovakia in 1938, the Soviet Union is kept at arms length. The Nicaraguan government, under
attack by a minority armed and supported actively by the hegemonic party in the region, has indeed sought some military aid from the Soviet Union. It has also welcomed technical assistance from Cuba, particularly teachers and medical personnel. These efforts, even more than the Cuban military, have been the object of savage attacks on the part of those American agents who are popularly known as the “Contras”.

As noted, Benes and the Czech government in fact had an alliance with the Soviet Union, signed in 1935. Benes rightly did not expect anything from this alliance. Nor would the present Nicaraguan government expect much beyond sympathy and some material aid from Cuba or the Soviet Union today. Unlike the Czechs in 1938, the Nicaraguans do not have a formal alliance with the USSR.

As Benes, in 1938, hoped for support from France and Britain, the Nicaraguan government's real hopes lie with the Contadora group, and with public opinion in the United States, Canada and Western Europe. Hence the immediate adhesion of the Nicaraguan government to the original Contadora proposal. The reaction of the United States to this proposal was even less enthusiastic than was Hitler's reaction to Benes—it may be recalled that in 1938, Hitler's reaction to the proposals of France and Britain was quite positive. Henlein, for his part, made demands—six months before Munich—that, in the words of A.J.P. Taylor, "would make her (Czechoslovakia) a German satellite.” Today, it is beyond doubt that the only foreign policy the United States will tolerate in Central America is one which makes the countries of this region "satellites of the United States." Even the degree of independence in this area that has been successfully maintained by Mexico could not be tolerated in any Central American state.

It should be obvious that no metaphor fits exactly. There are real differences between the situation of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and Nicaragua in 1986. Two of these differences are important.

The first lies in the relative fragility of the hegemonic state. Hitler's Germany was strong, but not perhaps as strong as it appeared to be. Benes could and did retreat, with some dignity, bend his head to the wind and let the country be engulfed, secure in the conviction that the Third Reich and the Greater German experiment would not last forever. He was right. By
all appearances, neither the DDR nor the BRD have any pretence to the kind of Greater German hegemony that sparked Adolf Hitler’s ambition in the late thirties.

Despite a recent defeat in Vietnam and the dramatic loss of economic and industrial supremacy, the United States is by no means as fragile as was the Third Reich. If indeed it cannot compete economically on even terms with Japan or West Germany, and if it must now rely on military expenditure to maintain the economy to a greater extent than Hitler ever did, the United States is still quite securely established as the hegemonic power on the North American continent, and indeed in the Western hemisphere. And the Americans have shown themselves as ruthless in affirming that hegemony as was Hitler and the Third Reich. The position of Nicaragua is to this extent much more difficult than was that of Benes, and the project of escaping from the traditional satellite status is much more problematic.

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There is a second important difference. In her hegemonic pretensions, the United States is much more isolated than was Hitler. In 1938, many people in France and Great Britain felt quite sincerely that Germany had a real complaint, that three million Germans in the Czechoslovak republic had a right to self-determination, indeed that the Germans of Danzig were unjustly oppressed. Appeasement in the face of Hitler’s demands was a highly ambiguous affair, and it was not simply fear of Hitler’s military power that produced Munich. As Taylor notes, “Both Henderson at Berlin and Newton at Pra-
gue insisted that the Sudeten claims were well founded morally and that the Czechoslovak government were making no genuine attempt to meet them.9

In fact, Hitler may well have had more reason to protest than the Americans do today with respect to Nicaragua. In the case of Nicaragua today, it is difficult to see what the problem is. The issue is clearly not one of oppression, or of "democracy" as most of the world understands it. With the exception of those who are themselves subject to American power, no one in the world seriously believes that Nicaragua is a menace to anyone. Most Europeans quietly wish that the Americans would leave Nicaragua alone. The Nicaraguans are in fact a threat to one thing only: to the dictatorial hegemony of the United States in Central America. If Nicaragua can assert real independence vis-à-vis American power, others might get the same idea. Why this is necessarily a bad idea is beyond the understanding of most people outside the United States.10

In Canada, for example, it is not seen as a problem, since Canada is not a hegemonic power. Quite the contrary, the appeal of being such a power, or the need to preserve this kind of power, is incomprehensible. The pretensions of the United States are in fact deeply resented in many quarters. And the United States is further isolated because of her ideological intolerance. If the United States cannot tolerate the ideological pluralism of a Central America with Nicaragua today, or a Caribbean with Maurice Bishop yesterday, then one must pose serious questions about the supposed pluralism of the United States itself.

Munich is perhaps a tired old metaphor. But if Munich was about "appeasement" in 1938, it was much more about a response to a dominant and dominating power which refused to tolerate the uppity Czechs. And if there be a place for this metaphor in 1987, there should be little difficulty in identifying the actors. The hegemonic power that refuses to tolerate the ideological or political diversity of a small nation in Central America is not the Soviet Union, but the United States.

1. To some extent this was a common rationale in the US Foreign Policy Establishment, who "explained and rationalized their choices by constantly using the analogies of Hitler and Munich." Richard J. Barnet, Roots of War: The Men and Institutions behind US Foreign Policy (New York, 1973), p. 67.
6. There can be no question but that the "Contras" are in fact agents of the United States government. They are more effectively in the pay of that government than Henlein and the Sudeten Germans were in the pay of Adolf Hitler.
8. The message in the 1983 invasion of Grenada is clear: "We are not only tough, but mean!" No country is too small to be defined as a menace and stomped on.
9. Taylor, Origins, p. 198. (See n. 7, above.)
10. And, for that matter, beyond the understanding of a great many people inside the United States.