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CIA/ONE/STAFF MEMO/19-64
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 April 1964

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 19-64 (Internal ONE Working Paper --
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SUBJECT: The Dispute over Belize (British Honduras)

SUMMARY

It is likely that Britain will grant complete independence to British Honduras (which will probably assume the name Belize) in the next three to four years without making any territorial concessions to Guatemala. Guatemala broke relations with the British after the UK had agreed to give Belize internal self-government. The Guatemalan government clings to tenuous historic claims and is vitally interested in establishing an access route from the Peten, its northern department, to the Port of Belize. Once independent Belize will probably continue to resist federation with Guatemala but will be willing to grant Guatemala guaranteed access routes from the Peten to the sea. Mexico, which also had historic claims, is not expected to interfere with plans for Belizean independence unless Guatemala either wins territorial concessions from the UK or invades Belize. We would expect this issue to continue to be a source of political and diplomatic friction and there may be border incidents. However, the chances are better than even that there will be no military confrontation between any of the parties (Guatemala, Great Britain or Mexico) connected with the dispute over Belize.

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BACKGROUND

1. The Anglo-Guatemalan controversy over Belize, dates back to the mid-seventeenth century when the British settled in the region. After intermittent conflict with Spain, England in 1876 secured privileges of use, but not sovereignty, in the northern half of the colony. Subsequently, the settlers usurped the remainder of the territory of the present colony. With the achievement of their independence in 1821, Mexico and Guatemala became successors to Spain as claimants to the region. Spain theoretically relinquished all claim to the area when it recognized the independence of Mexico in 1836 and of Guatemala in 1863. Great Britain, however, refused to recognize the position of either Guatemala or Mexico and eventually negotiated treaties with both countries by which they implicitly recognized British sovereignty in the area. Mexico confirmed England's right of use in 1826 and surrendered its claims in 1893; Guatemala's acquiescence was apparently given in the "boundary" treaty of 1859 which is today the subject of contention. Guatemala charges that since Great Britain has never fulfilled its obligations to help build a road from the port of Belize to Guatemala City, the treaty is void and the territory has reverted to Guatemala.

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Great Britain's Policy

2. The UK has shown no disposition to recognize Guatemalan claims. It feels that it has made a reasonable attempt to fulfill its treaty obligations and moreover, considers the Guatemalan legal claim to be both tenuous and extra-legal (while Mexico possesses historical documents showing that Belize was once part of Yucatan, Guatemala can offer no such evidence). There is little doubt that the people of Belize want independence, and it is very likely that the UK will resist any proposals that are not consistent with self-determination. In sum, Belize was granted limited internal self-government on 1 January 1964; and Great Britain has gone on record in support of Belize's aspirations for independence and has systematically taken steps to move the colony in this direction.

The Guatemalan Position

3. Guatemala's attitude toward the Belizean dispute has been contentious and metamorphic since the signing of the 1859 convention. Occasionally, Guatemala bemoans the fact that it didn't take Belize while the UK was preoccupied with World Wars 1 and 2. For some Guatemalans the quest for Belize is the quest

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for the Holy Grail; often, politicians attempt to influence and exploit the issue for personal gain. Responsible members of the government feel that the territory is essential for the development of the Peten (Northern Guatemala) ; they also fear that Mexico might absorb Belize, thereby encircling the Peten and possibly precluding its development and even possibly absorbing the Peten itself. Finally, there is genuine resentment toward the British for their disdainful treatment of Guatemala over the years and a belief that Belize rightfully belongs to Guatemala regardless of law or the will of the people of the colony.

4. Although the official Guatemalan attitude toward Belize is at times belligerent (Guatemala broke relations with the UK last July over the question of moving Belize toward self-government), there is evidence to indicate that the general public remains largely apathetic. There will be a continuing possibility of border incidents but larger scale hostilities appear unlikely. Among factors which might be expected to deter Guatemala from taking rash action against Belize are the probable disapproval of the United States and the fact that Mexico would be expected to react very sharply to any military incursion. From the Guatemalan point of view, the limited capability

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of its armed forces, the possibility of tangling with British regulars, and its present preoccupation with insurgents are all arguments against a Guatemalan invasion of Belize. In addition, the Guatemalans have failed to enlist the aid of most Central and South American countries for their claims to Belize. They have, however, elicited token expressions for their claims from Nicaragua but any practical support seems unlikely.

Belize and Mexico

5. Politically, economically, and socially, Belize has nothing in common with Guatemala. The people of Belize have reacted strongly to Guatemala's irredentist claims and pretensions. This reaction has probably been intensified by past reports that high officials in Premier Price's government were in the pay of the Government of Guatemala. The opposition party, the National Independence Party continues to attack the government group, the People's United Party, and has probably forced the Price government to take a more extreme anti-Guatemalan position than it might wish or that is in its best interests (Belize has 140 miles of common border with Guatemala and needs increased trade and commerce to sustain its economy).

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6. Mexico offers an interesting contrast to the Guatemalan handling of the Belize dispute. Mexico, interested in the economic development of its easternmost province, which borders Belize and desiring to undercut Guatemala's aspirations, is extremely helpful to the colony. It supports Belize's desire for independence, cooperates with the Price government to the maximum extent practical, treats Price almost like a Chief of State and opposes the Guatemalan claims. As a result, Mexico can and does wield both political and economic influence in Belize.

The Outlook

7. From time to time, Britain has been concerned that Guatemala would take direct military action against Belize, but this possibility has not pressured the UK into making any territorial concessions. Because of the UK's unfulfilled treaty obligation to Guatemala and the economic burden of supporting Belize, the UK might be willing to subsidize transportation facilities benefiting both Guatemala and Belize. Belize will probably not have any part of a formal federation with Guatemala; but, at the same time, it is probable that the Price government

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would be willing to guarantee duty-free transit rights from the Peten to the sea. Indeed, this seems to be the most reasonable settlement to the dispute since it would help open up the Peten (a prime consideration for Guatemala) and would provide badly needed trade and commerce for Belizean ports.

8. On the other hand, if the Peten begins to develop economically and if Belize refuses to guarantee Guatemalan transit rights, then bloodshed would be very likely. Under these circumstances the United States would find itself in the unhappy position of watching British and Guatemalan troops battle each other in Central America. Presently, the Peten is undeveloped and has a scarcity of known resources. However, oil exploration has been underway since 1955 and although no sizable deposits have been discovered, the Peten basin probably does harbor oil reserves of some undetermined size.

9. In the unlikely event that Great Britain made some territorial concessions to Guatemala, Mexico could be expected to reverse her support for Belizean independence and press her own claims to the northern half of the colony. Under these circumstances, a Mexican-Guatemalan military clash would be possible.

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10. The Belizean issue will remain emotionally explosive within official Guatemalan circles for the foreseeable future. From time to time key politicians can be expected to use this dispute to create a crisis atmosphere to divert national attention from economic and political problems besetting the government.

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