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NOTE FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer, VC/NIC

Here's the piece I mentioned  
yesterday.

*HEM/...*  
Herbert E. Meyer

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*C-352*

## How to Understand Central America

Mark Falcoff

IT is now more than three years since Central America became the United States' most dramatic and divisive foreign-policy issue since the Vietnam war. It has dominated the front pages of newspapers for many months; co-opted almost all of the prime moments of national television news; fueled acrimonious exchanges in Congress; and ignited a national protest movement, centered in the universities and the churches but reaching into unions, professional associations, and the cultural community. For a while it even became a bone of contention between the two leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, and it is certain to become one of the three or four major issues of the 1984 campaign.

Alongside all of these facts—impressive in themselves—one more must be placed. In spite of the vast menu of information, allegation, and misinformation served up to them, most Americans know almost nothing about Central America and, it would appear, are determined to keep it that way. An April poll conducted by CBS News found that only 25 percent of those interviewed knew which side the United States was supporting in El Salvador, and a mere 13 percent could correctly affirm that the United States was (at the time) supporting anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua. More over, knowledge about El Salvador is now lower than it was a year ago, when 37 percent could correctly state that the United States supported the government there.

What, then, is the argument about? And who is doing the arguing? In a very general way it could be said that the Central American controversy is really the latest installment in a fifteen-year-old civil war between two branches of the foreign-policy establishment and its affiliates over the proper uses of U.S. power; over the causes of political insurgency; over the moral and political character of "revolutionary" regimes in the Third World; and, preeminently, over the nature of security threats to the United States and the proper measures to meet them.

These are important subjects, even if only a

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small percentage of Americans have the interest or the time to think much about them. They are fraught with consequences for our foreign policy generally, and the fact that they nicely mesh with partisan political considerations does nothing to detract from their charm. The form and intensity with which they are debated also illustrate a point about the United States which many foreigners persist in missing: this is a country where political controversy often concerns ideas.

Where, then, do people get their ideas about Central America? The variety of sources is wide, but two in particular are of great significance to policy-makers and foreign-policy professionals, if not to the public at large. One is the reports issued by commissions of distinguished citizens, "concerned" laity of some religious denomination or other, or equally "concerned" academics who have made a trip to El Salvador or Nicaragua or (often) both. The best-known such document—the *Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, chaired by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—is actually the least typical of all, since it alone found itself, with slight quibbles here and there, fundamentally in accord with the policies of the Reagan administration. Far more characteristic of the genre is *The Americas in 1984: A Year for Decisions*, the report of the Inter-American Dialogue, a panel of distinguished political and business leaders from North and South America, chaired by Ambassador Sol M. Linowitz and former Ecuadorian President Galo Plaza. While this document deals with several aspects of U.S.-Latin American relations, the sections concerned with Central America have been regarded (quite properly) as the most newsworthy.

The second source is the collective studies constructed by teams of academics (and, sometimes, policy-makers temporarily out of government). Nearly a dozen of these have appeared since 1981, some edited with a heavier ideological hand than others but virtually all primly or not so primly disapproving of our present course. The most interesting and original is *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, edited by Robert S. Leiken for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This group, three of whose members held positions in the Carter administration, was at work roughly during the same time as the Kissinger commission,

and its study was published almost simultaneously. Indeed, there is reason to believe that, in a manner wholly characteristic of Washington, the Leiken group was hastily assembled to provide a ready-made alternative to the findings of the Kissinger commission; this, certainly, was the way it was received by administration critics, although in reality, as we shall see, *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict* contains a far greater diversity of views than one would have gathered from its reception.

These documents and their analogs play a disproportionate role in determining the parameters of the Central American debate. Indirectly, but no less decisively, they shape the kinds of questions the President and others are asked at press conferences, the agendas of congressional committees, and eventually the notions—however watered-down or inaccurate—held by a majority of the American people. They therefore deserve serious examination.

## II

BY NOW a majority of Americans—57 percent according to the April poll of CBS News—think that “the greater cause of unrest in Central America [is] poverty and lack of human rights in the area, [as opposed to] subversion from Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union.” Yet as Richard Feinberg and Robert Pastor point out in the Carnegie Endowment study, the image of these countries as primitive, stagnant “banana republics”—held even by many educated Americans—is vastly out of date. In fact, few regions since World War II have experienced such rapid, dramatic, and sustained economic and social development. Between 1950 and 1978, the Central American republics registered a 5.3 percent annual rate of economic growth, during which time real per-capita income doubled, exports diversified, and there was a significant growth in manufacturing, due largely to the creation in 1960 of a Central American Common Market (CACM). Moreover, meaningful progress was made in health and education: between 1960 and 1977 the number of physicians doubled at a rate twice as fast as the population, and the number of nurses six times as fast. Adult literacy during roughly the same period nearly doubled from 44 to 77 percent, and the number of secondary students as a percentage of their age group increased from 12 to 29 percent.

Of course, as Pastor and Feinberg hasten to point out, there were considerable variations among countries. Moreover, in Central America as elsewhere in the developing world, modernization brought unforeseen (and undesired) consequences. Pastor and Feinberg point specifically to dramatic improvements in public health which unleashed a “demographic earthquake”—between 1950 and 1980, the region’s population tripled, and today half are under the age of fifteen. (Signifi-

cantly, had the population only replaced itself, per-capita income during the same period would have *quintupled*.) The development of commercial agriculture provoked new tensions over land tenure in the countryside, just as industry generated new conflicts between management and a struggling labor movement. While the “floor” beneath Central Americans rose dramatically, the gap widened between rich and poor, and particularly between rural and urban dwellers. Much of the new infrastructure—roads, schools, hospitals, and other public services—was financed either by U.S. aid or by the international lending institutions; tax collections generally remained low, so that what the foreigner was not willing to finance generally remained undone. That is why, in spite of nearly two decades of progress, as late as 1981 it was estimated that 42 percent of the population remained in “extreme poverty.”

Even if the process of development just described had continued in a linear fashion, raising the floor still further to include most of those left out, the region would have experienced serious political instability because of the challenge posed by economic and social change to existing political structures, particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador. But after 1978, Pastor and Feinberg write, the problem was compounded “by the impact of a global recession on small, open, dependent economies,” which, in the opinion of these authors, put into place “the classic preconditions for a revolutionary situation.”

In other words, the causes of instability in Central America are *both* the successes of past policies and their failings; the promise of overcoming underdevelopment and its lack of fulfillment; the achievements of foreign aid and its limitations; the imagination and flexibility of local elites and their selfishness and myopia. Poverty is part of the picture, and from a humanitarian point of view perhaps the most important. But relative deprivation and the sudden interruption of an ongoing process, combined with political developments both internal and external to the region, have raised the stakes, costs, and risks of almost any course of action designed to deal with poverty. Thus even a resumption of massive economic aid in and of itself may not guarantee a return to social peace. It does, however, hold out far greater promise than cheap political “fixes,” or, worse, an attitude of pious indifference as if “poverty,” the condition of centuries, were irremediable, and therefore whatever unsavory political arrangements may seem in the offing—namely armed dictatorships of the Left—must be accepted as the just retribution for an evil past.

## III

NOWHERE has the conflict between economic growth and outdated social structures been more pointed than in El Salvador.

In this tiny republic—slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts, with a population of five million—no fewer than four revolutions are under way.

One is among the military, which, alarmed by the outcome of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, divided in 1979 over continued support for the traditional order. The second is among the emerging political forces of the middle class and the infant peasant and labor movements. For a brief moment in 1979, these groups ruled in conjunction with the younger officers who had ousted dictator Carlos Humberto Romero. During that time they decreed a series of extensive land, tax, and banking reforms. However, shortly thereafter the leadership split, with a Social-Democratic component under Dr. Guillermo Ungo going over to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the political directorate of the guerrillas who are fighting—this is the third revolution—to impose a Marxist-Leninist regime on El Salvador.\* The fourth is actually a counterrevolution in the most technical sense of the term—former military officers (and some still on active duty), and a coterie of landowners, businessmen, and professionals who object more or less equally to the first three and who seek to extinguish their leaders and supporters, real or imagined, by recourse to political assassination. Hence the macabre term which has entered our political vocabulary, "death squads."

During the past five years the United States has been supporting the efforts of those civilians and military personnel willing to carry forward the original objectives of the revolution of 1979. In March 1982, elections were held for a constituent assembly, and in May 1984 the Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte (president of the first junta in 1979) was elected president of El Salvador by a majority of the popular vote. Meanwhile, the country has received a massive infusion of U.S. economic and military aid, both to combat the rising guerrilla movement and to stabilize an economy doubly beset by war and recession.

The Reagan administration is riding a difficult tiger in El Salvador, in that its scenario calls for some unwieldy pieces to fall neatly into place. Duarte must meet some minimal popular expectations as a reformer and a democrat, without unduly antagonizing the large conservative minority—approximately 45 percent of the electorate—who voted for his far-Right opponent, Roberto D'Aubuisson of the ARENA party. These two agendas may be very hard to reconcile, given the fact that the political spectrum in El Salvador is far wider than in the United States and opinion far more polarized. Like most Latin American Christian Democrats, Duarte cherishes fundamentally pre-capitalist notions of property, and favors the use of state power to reduce social and economic inequalities. His views on that subject, by no means extreme by Latin American stand-

ards, would shock most American conservatives if they knew more about them: in fact, were Duarte only anti-American as well, he and not Dr. Ungo would enjoy the status of a cult figure among the elegant Left in Western Europe and the United States.

This is not all: Duarte must also demonstrate his capacity to control the armed forces, and to reduce if not to eliminate human-rights abuses and the activities of private vigilantes of the Right. He must advance investigations of past misdeeds, particularly those in which the U.S. Congress and public have a strong and legitimate interest. And lastly, the military itself must demonstrate not merely that it can respect civilian authority but also that it can prosecute effectively the war against the insurgents. The contributors to the Carnegie Endowment study who have examined whether this is possible point to the enormous historical baggage which must first be discarded, and one of them (Howard J. Wiarda) argues that the professionalization of the armed forces, rather than producing less military intervention in politics, may actually increase the tendency of the officer corps to play a political role. He also emphasizes the difficulties of trying to reform an essentially praetorian army, in which clan, family, and patronage loyalties may be stronger than ties to the nation or its civilian government.

A shorthand way of describing the situation in El Salvador is to say that the Center, or perhaps more accurately the Center-Left, is split, with one part in an uncomfortable relationship with the military and the United States, the other in an even more problematic relationship with the FMLN, the Nicaraguans, the Cubans, and ultimately the Soviets. The Right has so far been unable to reassert itself as the dominant political force, but it still possesses the capacity to undermine a moderate solution; this, U.S. officials and not a few Salvadorans fear, would simply lead to the worst of both worlds—first a coup and repression from the Right, followed by a revolution and repression of a more systematic and permanent kind from the Left.

**I**N THE United States, debate over El Salvador has centered on two issues—how to use U.S. influence to bring about an elimination of human-rights abuses, and whether and under what circumstances it is possible to reconstitute the two sundered wings of the Center-Left so that each can afford to abandon its respective dependence on the army or the guerrillas. The first turns on some incredibly arcane formulations

\* The FMLN is an amalgam of five guerrilla groups unified under Cuban sponsorship in 1979. Those elements of the first junta who went over to it are formally construed as the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), affiliated with the Socialist International. The correct designation of the guerrillas' unified directorate is thus FMLN-FDR.

about the "conditionality" of U.S. aid. In the view of some of the administration's critics, as long as the Salvadoran military can take for granted U.S. arms shipments and other forms of assistance, it will have no incentive to eliminate human-rights abuses. Those who served in the Carter administration now point with some pride to the "leverage" which they supposedly obtained in El Salvador in 1980, following a three-year arms embargo. This, they assert, demonstrated to the Salvadoran military how serious the United States was about the issue—a lesson now lost by the "blank check" supposedly issued by the Reagan team.

Unfortunately, whatever leverage might have been obtained by the Carter policy was more metaphorical than actual; for 1980 was the worst year in Salvadoran history in terms of political murders, disappearances, and other serious abuses. This is not to argue against the concept of conditionality, but merely to suggest that in practice it may be unattainable, or that policies intended to promote it may have consequences far different from those intended. It is also possible—though admittedly unprovable—that a clear reading by Salvadorans of the general mood of the U.S. public and Congress, combined with strong representations by U.S. envoys and military representatives, may accomplish just as much or even more. We do know, for example, that estimates of civilian deaths attributable to political violence in El Salvador over the past two and a half years reflect a very significant pattern of decline.

**T**HE SECOND issue—how to reconstitute the Center-Left—is even more complicated. It begins with the notion that the United States is pursuing a military victory, which is impossible, instead of a "negotiated solution," which is supposedly within reach. Precisely what form the latter would take varies from source to source. President Duarte has in fact offered to negotiate a reconciliation with those forces of the non-Marxist (or at any rate non-Leninist) Left who have gone over to the guerrillas; this would allow them to reenter Salvadoran political life with no restriction, much as occurred in the 1970's in Venezuela. Dr. Ungo and his associates, as well as their many foreign apologists, claim that the incapacity of President Duarte to guarantee their safety from the military and the death squads makes this impossible; they favor negotiations leading to "power-sharing."

The latter is a solution with which no American political figure has yet become identified, although it has already found some resonance in the foreign-policy community. The Inter-American Dialogue recommends "negotiations among the belligerents" which would not supplant the recent Salvadoran elections but would somehow modify their outcome in important (though not wholly specified) ways; it hotly denies, however, that this would be power-sharing pure and simple.

A number of the contributors to the Carnegie Endowment study favor power-sharing quite openly, but with an original twist—they suggest symmetrical solutions be imposed *both* on El Salvador and Nicaragua. In the former, the Left would be brought into the government; in the latter, the Center would be restored to the posts it held immediately after the fall of Somoza. (One dissenting voice in this group is that of Tom J. Farer, who favors power-sharing in El Salvador but not in Nicaragua.)

How well power-sharing would work in El Salvador depends wholly upon one's view of what the FMLN-FDR is and what it represents. Robert S. Leiken, who directed the Carnegie study and is its most widely-quoted author, has been for many years a student of the Central American revolutionary Left, and his portrait of the Salvadoran insurgents draws upon a wide range of personal contacts. He does not deny that the guerrillas are Marxist-Leninists, but the heart of his analysis is that the largest, best-armed, and most powerful faction in the rebel camp is, if not positively anti-Soviet, at any rate the one that "stand[s] at greatest distance from the Soviet Union." Our policy, by ignoring this fact, "pushes the non-aligned Left into the arms of those who are pro-Soviet." Leiken continues:

U.S. national security would indeed be threatened by Soviet-aligned regimes in the Caribbean Basin, but not necessarily by independent leftist regimes—even if they speak the language of Marxism and seek to practice socialism.

This presumably puts our security concerns to rest. It still leaves open the question, however, of whether the integration of putatively anti-Soviet Marxist-Leninists into the Salvadoran government would advance the cause of human rights. Or rather, it circles right around it, by taking for granted that power-sharing would lead to some sort of "moderate" leftist regime. All Leiken can offer by way of assurance on this score is the FMLN's own assurance that as part of a negotiated settlement, it would be (in Leiken's words) "prepared to participate in elections, and to guarantee a nonaligned foreign policy and a mixed economy."

Leiken's co-contributor Leonel Gómez, a former land-reform official who fled El Salvador in 1981, is far less certain what the outcome of such an arrangement would be:

While the true popular support of the FMLN-FDR coalition is difficult to measure, given the choice between the Left and the Right most Salvadorans would choose the Left, due to its less violent and corrupt history. Still, they wonder how the Left would evolve if it came to power.

However, given the Salvadoran centrists' lack of trust toward the Left, and given the divisions within the Left itself, a left-wing government in

El Salvador might prove more repressive and less flexible than that in Nicaragua.

To summarize, then: as an alternative to existing policy, with all of its admitted perils and difficulties, we are invited to believe that by withholding military aid from El Salvador—or at any rate, credibly threatening to withhold it—we will best serve the cause of human rights, notwithstanding that doing so may lead in the meantime to the victory of the Left revolutionary forces. Although these forces openly and unashamedly avow a totalitarian ideology which, among other things, points to a deep affinity with the Soviet Union, we are asked to sponsor their entry into a governing coalition in El Salvador on the strength of the fact that they say they favor nonalignment, free elections, and a mixed economy. In a word, we are urged not to take Marxism-Leninism any more seriously than loyalty to a brand name; if we persist in taking it seriously, we are warned that we will actually bring about the outcome we most fear. All this rings with a certain depressing familiarity.

#### IV

THE familiarity stems from the fact that the same arguments were advanced a mere five years ago on behalf of a similar policy toward Nicaragua. There, a vast popular revolution against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza was at its culminating moment, led by the Marxist FSLN but including a wide range of moderate, even conservative political and social groups. In exchange for promises of free elections, a mixed economy, and a nonaligned foreign policy, the Organization of American States (including a reluctant United States) took the unprecedented step of withdrawing recognition from a sitting government. This had the effect—deliberately intended—of opening the road to power of its armed opponents.

The victorious revolutionary coalition in Nicaragua lasted an extraordinarily short time. Somoza fled the country in July 1979; in April 1980, Violeta Chamorro, publisher of the courageously independent newspaper *La Prensa*, and businessman Alfonso Robelo resigned from the new Council of State, largely in protest against a plan by the Sandinistas "to reflect the concrete and objective reality of political forces in Nicaragua," which is to say, to swamp it with representatives from the revolutionary army and other, hastily-organized Sandinista groups.

After several weeks of harsh verbal exchanges between the Sandinistas and their quondam allies in the private sector, a temporary peace was achieved. Banker Arturo Cruz and Supreme Court Justice Rafael Cordova Rivas were brought into the Council of State; decrees confiscating lands and privately-owned companies were canceled;

dates were set in 1981 and 1982 for elections to municipal councils and a constituent assembly.

Then suddenly in August 1980 the Sandinista directorate announced that elections would be postponed to 1985, and in November all the remaining non-Sandinista members of the Council walked out in protest over an attack on the office of an independent political party in Managua; the directorate also forbade a rally which had been convoked by Robelo's National Democratic Movement. On that occasion—the first of many—censorship was applied to non-government media, most notably *La Prensa*.

Dates are important here, because so many foreigners have claimed that the unfortunate turn of events in Nicaragua is in some undefined way a reaction to hostility and incomprehension on the part of the United States. The truth is that in September 1980 the U.S. Congress—after a long and bruising battle—finally approved \$75-million worth of economic aid to the new Nicaraguan government, and, what was surely more important, at the very same time U.S. bankers rescheduled the country's \$582-million foreign debt under favorable and even generous terms. The conciliatory posture of the Carter administration, its supporters in Congress, and the financial community quite clearly had no impact whatsoever on unfolding events in Nicaragua, except possibly in a counterproductive fashion.

During this same period, when the United States was straining to conciliate the Sandinistas, they also received \$262-million worth of loans from international financial institutions. Private U.S. sources disbursed an additional \$45 million in gifts and grants to assist in reconstruction, and equally impressive sums were forthcoming from Western European governments, churches, and private relief organizations. Meanwhile, the government in Managua, far from remaining non-aligned, was supporting the Soviets at the United Nations and elsewhere on issues where Moscow could normally count on the backing only of its most faithful followers—namely, on the questions of Afghanistan, Kampuchea, and China.

The illusions which a self-effacing U.S. policy inevitably nourished in the Sandinista directorate came to an abrupt end in January 1981, when the Carter administration, having already transferred \$65 million in aid, suspended further disbursements in its final days to protest Nicaraguan shipments of arms to the Salvadoran rebels. The Reagan administration went further still. It began training anti-Sandinista exiles, and by the end of 1982 hit-and-run attacks, launched from bases in neighboring Honduras, were becoming increasingly common. The United States permanently canceled any further economic aid, opposed new Nicaraguan loan applications, and canceled the country's quota of sugar imports. By 1983, several thousand U.S. troops were engaged in "training" exercises in Honduras, and a massive naval and

intelligence presence was dispatched to the area.

Even before the full U.S. reaction to Sandinista policy was in evidence, Managua announced (in March 1981) that its armed force would be expanded to 30,000, making it by far the largest in the region and twice the size of the National Guard under Somoza. The presence of rebel commandos operating on the Atlantic coast was used as a pretext to "relocate" the Miskito Indians under exceedingly cruel, if not genocidal, conditions. Growing unrest over economic policies, censorship, and the harassment of opponents led to widespread domestic turmoil. In April 1982, Edén Pastora, who as "Commander Zero" had been one of the greatest heroes of the anti-Somoza revolution, broke with his former comrades over their failure to fulfill their promises of "political pluralism and the practice of free elections with respect for individual rights." From exile in Costa Rica, he called upon his fellow-citizens to overthrow a regime of "traitors and assassins."

While many critics in the United States and elsewhere may be willing to acknowledge that it was the Sandinistas who turned away the friendly overtures of the Carter administration, they regard the stepped-up countermeasures of the Reagan administration as disproportionate and tending to strengthen the hard-liners among the nine *comandantes* who now rule Nicaragua. This position has a superficial plausibility, but those who hold it must still deal with two inconvenient facts. First, in April 1982 Nicaragua was tendered an eight-point U.S. plan which would have ended military training of exiles, resumed economic aid, and reduced U.S. military presence in the area. All the Sandinistas had to do was to make good their promise to the OAS of nonalignment and free elections, and to cease meddling in the affairs of their neighbors. The offer was haughtily rejected. Second, Venezuela, which originally opposed the termination of U.S. aid as precipitous and which continued to disburse assistance on its own—in this case, oil shipments at very generous prices under very convenient terms of repayment—found that its leverage was no greater; in fact, the Venezuelans' counsels of moderation were so harshly turned aside by the Sandinistas that in 1983 they began quietly to assist opposition parties and trade unions in Nicaragua.

AT THIS point, the Nicaraguan controversy in the United States has gone beyond debate over who is responsible for the present situation to the propriety or convenience of supporting—at first covertly, then semi-covertly, and perhaps eventually openly—the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, or *contras*. It is true that Congress, after a series of wafer-thin majorities, finally reversed itself and ended that aid in June, but since the cutoff was more of a defeat on parliamentary tactics than a definitive judgment on the policy itself, the issue will in all probability re-

main to vex the 1984-85 legislative season and indeed those beyond it.

Some objections to this policy are wholly legalistic: critics point to the U.S. Neutrality Act and long-standing commitments under various OAS treaties not to intervene in the affairs of member states. If the aim of foreign policy is for the United States to demonstrate its adherence to the rule of law above all other considerations, including the right to counter the illegal activities of other parties, then such prohibition should be observed literally and aid to the *contras* should be immediately terminated. But this should be done in the clear prospect of no other favorable outcome than, at best, a momentary public-relations victory: the United States might claim some position of virtue in debate at international forums, and the Sandinistas would have to find new ways of blaming Washington for all that ails their country. Neither of these satisfactions is likely to alter the situation on the ground, where on the contrary a cutoff of aid to the insurgents would enable the Sandinistas further to consolidate their hold on power at home and would free them for more extensive activities elsewhere.

A second objection to the policy of aiding the *contras* is that it purportedly places the United States in league with the darkest elements of the Nicaraguan past, the old National Guard, which served for decades as the watchdog (and bully-boy) of the Somoza dynasty. These are men whom Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill has colorfully labeled "murderers, marauders, and rapists."

Actually, there are three important *contra* forces—the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force), the ARDE (Democratic Revolutionary Action), and the FARN (Nicaraguan Armed Revolutionary Forces). The FDN comes closest to justifying Speaker O'Neill's remark, since it is officered by former Guardsmen and commanded by former Guard General Enrique Bermúdez. Even so, as Richard Millett, a veteran student (and critic) of the Nicaraguan military, has pointed out in the Carnegie study, Bermúdez does not fully fit the *somocista* mold. He was "viewed by Somoza as too popular with the troops and not sufficiently committed to the Somoza family," Millett writes, and during the last years of the dictatorship he was consigned to virtual "diplomatic exile" in the United States and Japan. Consequently, he had no connection with the atrocities associated with Somoza's final years of power.

The ARDE, on the other hand, is led by Edén Pastora, and officered not by ex-Guardsmen but by ex-Sandinistas. In fact, these people are the "democratic Left" the United States is always being urged to support in Latin America; in this particular incarnation, however, such democratic leftism provokes discomfort and aversion in its North American counterpart. Ironically, far from being puppets of the CIA, Pastora and his men have pointedly distanced themselves from it, and

are reliably reported to be distrusted by the Reagan administration. As for the tiny FARN, it is of minor importance; though its leader Fernando Chamorro and his lieutenants are undoubtedly conservative, they have no ties to the Somoza dynasty or the old National Guard.

This is certainly a more complex picture than Speaker O'Neill has painted; and when one examines the base of these movements, the picture becomes more complex still. FDN draws its fighting force—in some estimates as much as 10,000 men—from peasants, small landowners, and shopkeepers who resent the Sandinistas for religious or ideological reasons. Many, Millett reports, are Miskito Indians "reacting to Sandinista actions which have disrupted their traditional pattern of living, destroyed their homes, and transformed them into bitter refugees." ARDE's small army—about 2,000 combatants—is also an amalgam of Miskito Indians, veterans of the 1978-79 civil war against Somoza, and civilians active in the struggle against the old dictatorship, notably Alfonso Robelo.

Clearly, whatever differences may exist at the top, at the level of the rank-and-file the contras are not fighting and dying to enthrone a new Somoza, or even to obtain veterans' pensions from the CIA (as if such things existed). While the work of the FDN would be more difficult without "covert" U.S. aid, the example of ARDE strongly suggests that for the Sandinistas this is a problem which even in the absence of U.S. involvement will not go away.

Finally, it is often said that the contras are not really fighting, as they claim, to compel the Sandinistas to live up to their promises to the OAS, or (as the U.S. government additionally claims) to interrupt arms traffic to neighboring countries, but are rather attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. When and if this happens, it is added, the differences between the FDN and the ARDE will make the country ungovernable. Oddly enough, this view is advanced by people who only yesterday saw nothing improbable in an alliance between Sandinistas and Nicaraguan democrats, and who today are likely to commend a coalition government in El Salvador between the Christian Democrats and the FMLN.

As it happens, however, the contras have repeatedly stated that they will lay down their arms if and when the Sandinistas permit genuinely free elections and open the political process so that all elements of the opposition may freely organize and campaign. (The elections now announced for the fall clearly do not meet these criteria.) The Sandinistas need not even believe in the contras' sincerity to test their offer: were they to do what the contras have asked, there would be no possibility of the Reagan administration's successfully reviving in Congress the aid program to the FDN; and the contras themselves would suffer massive defections from their ranks. It is entirely possible that even now the Sandinistas would win such elec-

tions, but in a subsequent political order in which the opposition had a legitimate role they would have to accept some of the restraints characteristic of pluralistic political systems. This is admittedly an unlikely outcome, but less likely still in the absence of the kinds of pressures which the contras are uniquely positioned to apply.

## V

THE internal political problems of El Salvador and Nicaragua would be infinitely less vexing for the United States if they had no larger implications for our foreign policy or for the strategic balance generally. Of course, that they have no such implications is precisely what many critics of U.S. policy have been insisting all along—from the prestige press and the religious lobbies in the United States to the Contadora countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama) in Latin America and most of the signatories to the Inter-American Dialogue. In their view, the United States has made a small problem large by artificially placing it in the context of the "East-West struggle."

This view would carry somewhat greater weight were it not advanced by many who habitually doubt the relevance of the "East-West" struggle to other and more central theaters of world politics. But the real problem with it, as Morris Rothenberg points out in the Carnegie study, is that it requires us to ignore the most basic fact of Soviet foreign policy, which is that Moscow believes that all international problems impinge upon the superpower struggle. In Soviet thinking, Central America figures as the "strategic rear" of the United States; keeping it in turmoil or ultimately converting it into a security threat could significantly detract from the ability of the U.S. to meet Soviet challenges elsewhere in the world. It is entirely understandable that the Soviets have not made much of this in their public statements. As Rothenberg writes,

Moscow has consistently muted the East-West aspects. . . . Indeed, the Soviets deny that the USSR, Cuba, or Nicaragua are involved militarily in El Salvador, presumably so as not to lend credence to administration arguments about the nature of these conflicts or to provide justification for increased U.S. intervention.

The Soviet strategy dictates a different short-term policy for El Salvador, where the outcome is still in doubt, from Nicaragua, where it appears more secure. In El Salvador the Soviets have chosen for the moment to remain in the background, steering the revolutionaries toward third-party sources of arms—other members of the Eastern bloc, Vietnam, or Ethiopia, utilizing Cuba as the point of transshipment through Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, they have made fewer efforts to disguise their presence, and in fact since 1979 they have moved rapidly to strengthen their relation-



ship with the Sandinistas' military, intelligence, and security agencies. A recent defector from Nicaraguan intelligence, for example, reported that the security forces are now equipped with Soviet arms; that there are 100 Soviet tanks now in Nicaragua; and that 80 MIG's are waiting in Cuba while the Nicaraguans who will fly them are being trained in Bulgaria. He also claimed that the Sandinistas had received radar-guided and heat-seeking ground-to-air missiles.

Whatever the precise configuration of Soviet arms shipments to Nicaragua, the state-to-state relationship is beyond all doubt. In March 1980—during the period when the Carter administration was avidly courting the new regime—Comandante Daniel Ortega signed an agreement in Moscow for Soviet repair and use of the Pacific port of San Juan del Sur. (Such agreements elsewhere, Rothenberg remarks, "have opened the way to use of these facilities for naval surveillance and military purposes.") Since then it has been authoritatively reported that there are 70 Soviet advisers in all aspects of state security, along with 400 Cubans, 40 to 50 East Germans, and 20 to 25 Bulgarians. The FSLN has signed party-to-party agreements with East Germany, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia; affiliated with all major international Communist front organizations; and joined InterSputnik, the Soviet-controlled telecommunications network. Nicaragua has also obtained observer status in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA), which puts it on a par with "socialist" countries like Yugoslavia or "socialist-oriented" states such as Angola, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. Interestingly, for several months in 1982 Soviet journals referred to Nicaragua as a "people's democracy"—a term normally reserved for the bloc states of Eastern Europe.

None of this is meant to discount the role of the Cubans—indeed, without them the Soviets would have to make their presence more visible and obvious in places where it is currently inexpedient to do so. In El Salvador, it was Castro who unified five contending guerrilla factions into the FMLN-FDR in 1979 by leveraging promises of arms, economic assistance, and training of cadres; a similar process has been reported in Guatemala and Honduras in 1982. The Cubans are also the Nicaraguans' primary source of political advice, military and intelligence training, and access to the international terror network; some 8,000 of them are now at work in that country, and not—as is often suggested—principally to heal the sick or teach people to read. Finally, the Cubans provide a legitimizing myth that the Sandinista revolution is but part of a chain of "Hispanic" revolts against "Anglo-Saxon" world domination, which in spite of obvious distortions of fact plays equally well in Madrid, Buenos Aires, and now in New York and parts of the Southwestern United States.

All of this suggests remarkable subtlety and

tactical prudence on the part of Soviet strategists. But it is very strange conduct indeed from a superpower supposedly uninterested and uninvolved in the Central American struggle. Obviously the Soviets did not invent the economic and social crisis which currently afflicts the region, but in their absence that crisis would be infinitely more manageable. To imagine, however, that the problems of Central America fester in isolation from the larger currents of world politics requires a studied neglect both of what the Soviets themselves have written about the region and what the evidence shows they are willing to do to advance their interests within it.

## VI

Most critics of present U.S. policy in Central America advocate some kind of multilateral diplomatic solution, in which the Contadora countries, the United States, and, in some scenarios, Spain, France, and Cuba would negotiate a regional settlement. Given the diversity of interests which would have to be harmonized, it is difficult to imagine what that agreement would look like, much less who would enforce it—unless one imagines that all nations are created equal in power and influence, that ideology counts for nothing in international relations, and that all treaties are self-enforcing. Some people do in fact believe all of these things, and during the Carter administration they proved it by ultimately consigning the fate of Nicaragua to the Organization of American States. Just why that method should work now when it did not work under far more auspicious circumstances five years ago is a deep mystery. But perhaps what is really being proposed is the withdrawal of the United States from the Caribbean Basin and a thinly-disguised military and diplomatic defeat in our oldest area of security concern.

No doubt many of the same people would sincerely regret such an outcome. They advocate a "multilateral" way out of the Central American labyrinth only because they believe—as I.M. Destler puts it at the very end of the Carnegie study—that our present course will inevitably lead to "what almost everyone still opposes, deployment of U.S. combat troops in Central America." This is an argument which on its very face is supposed to silence objections to the various utopian proposals making the rounds of the study commissions, congressional committees, and ~~de~~ed pages.

It is not an argument to be taken lightly, but given the current environment of public opinion in the United States, combined with the institutional restraints now imposed by the War Powers Act, there is not much chance that troops will actually be deployed. If it does happen nonetheless, it may have an impact far different from the one intended; indeed, Guillermo Ungo of the FMLN-FDR recently told a visitor to his

Mexican refuge that for him, such an eventuality would lead to a wholly satisfactory outcome—the “Lebanon-ization,” as he called it, of El Salvador.

Having nearly foreclosed the option of covert action, are we to discard as well not merely the use of military force but even its threat? In that case, the task of U.S. diplomacy, at least in the Third World, would be limited to disbursing largesse—in large quantities to friends, but also in large quantities to adversaries, in the hope of “influencing” them favorably. If even that failed to produce the desirable outcome, the United States could still be blamed (or could still blame itself) for not giving enough aid, for not giving it rapidly enough, or for attaching too many conditions to it. Meanwhile, the Soviets and the Cubans could reap the benefits of a new international division of labor, in which they would do what they do best—making revolution—while the guilt-ridden West also does what it does best—paying for it. This is a recipe not merely for failure but for suicide.

Over the last four years a curious cloud of historicism has settled over discussion of Central America, as if the world were created around 1965 and Vietnam were our only experience of situations of this kind. In his recent book *The Real Peace*, Richard Nixon recalls that in 1947,

when President Truman was attempting to resist the Communist seizure of power in Greece, Congress was flooded with an orchestrated campaign of correspondence demanding that “food, not arms” be delivered to the beleaguered government of that country. Had Congress taken that advice, the outcome in Greece would have been very different—and not merely for the monarchy (which has since disappeared), the military (which has been returned to the barracks), or the wealthy (now subjected to new taxes). Without the action taken by Truman, it is simply inconceivable that Greece would have a democratic government today, much less one which is both socialist and independent of the Soviet Union.

It will be said that Greece is not El Salvador; self-evidently, it is not. But neither is El Salvador Vietnam. The Central American labyrinth has its own, unique ground plan. We may not find our way out easily or quickly, or even under terms which fully satisfy us, much less our Central American neighbors. But we should be clear about what we are seeking, what outcomes are most probable, and what their human, political, and strategic costs will be. There is no shortcut; those who suggest that there is one are deceiving us, and probably themselves as well.