

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 23

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
27 June 1983

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Central America: the tyranny of old orthodoxies

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While the Central American crisis deepens, both Democrats and Republicans have been guilty of political posturing. Yet at this point, thoughtful members of Congress have an obligation to design an effective bipartisan policy toward Central America — a policy which would recognize the internal origins of the crisis, be based on a sober assessment of the geopolitical factors, and, equally important, be consistent with US political institutions.

President Reagan, in his recent address before the joint session of Congress, did not put forward the needed new policy, but rather took advantage of the worn-out and unrealistic Marxist orthodoxy of the Sandinistas in order to justify his own worn-out and equally unrealistic orthodoxies about El Salvador and Nicaragua itself.

But it is not only US conservatives who cling to unrealistic orthodoxies. I find it highly ironic that, owing to the timidity of many liberals in academia and other sectors of American society, President Reagan (the defender of the regime of Rios Montt in Guatemala) also has become the principal defender of the legitimate claims of the Nicaraguan peasants and Miskito Indians.

Senator Dodd's speech, while it pointed out the obvious fallacies of Reagan's address and was without a doubt more sensitive to the internal causes of the crisis and the daily suffering of the Salvadorean people, also fell back too often on solutions of the past (in this case, those of the liberals of the 1960s). Essentially, the senator recommended providing large amounts of economic aid, thus, paradoxically, supporting an external solution for what he himself described as a crisis rooted in the internal dynamics of Central America. In any event, neither of the superpowers would have the will or the means to furnish the enormous amounts of aid which a purely financial solution to the region's problems would require.

While Dodd correctly called for a political solution in El Salvador, he neglected to look at the kind of government which exists in Nicaragua today, failing to notice that only a revolution with a broad socio-political base can in the long run succeed in constructing a viable and relatively independent economy. Those of Senator Dodd's persuasion must learn to deal with the reality that what is occurring in Nicaragua is undermining their case for El Salvador.

Traditional oligarchical societies existing throughout most of Central America have failed to provide the vast majority of their inhabitants with a decent life. Neither has Cuba with its heavily subsidized economy provided a solution. The initial novelty of the Sandinista experiment gave the region the hope of a new solution, a hybrid revolution, which would have placed a new form of mixed economy (balancing the public,

private, and cooperative sectors) and a commitment to social change within the context of a politically tolerant system. The Sandinista leadership has deviated from that promise by increasingly moving toward a failed orthodox Marxist model, which places most effective political and economic power in the hands of a government bureaucracy that is inherently incapable of running the economy and that is repressive by its very nature.

The true challenge for American policy is how the US can help Central Americans themselves to organize their societies to be economically viable and socially equitable. Clearly, the US cannot provide Central Americans with the solution, but it can identify itself with and encourage those of the region — such as Archbishop Rivera y Damas from El Salvador, Prime Minister Price in Belize, and under overwhelming limitations the leader of the Nicaraguan Independent Liberal Party (PLI), Virgilio Godoy — who are seeking new answers rather than those locked in the past.

Futile CIA-sponsored clandestine operations are not going to meet the challenge posed by Nicaragua and the banner of revolution it has raised. The Reagan administration policies should not provide the excuse for further radicalization of the Nicaraguan process. Nor should they serve as a convenient justification for the Sandinista leadership to avoid engaging in a serious dialogue with honest and revolutionary dissidents inside and outside Nicaragua. Eden Pastora is one example, as long as he remains true to his commitments to noninvolvement with the so-called Frente Democratico Nacional, and to continue searching for a political solution.

Finally, the Reagan administration policy must cease to be the convenient bogeyman which the FSLN invokes to prevent Nicaragua's Western friends (such as the European members of the Socialist International and those of the Contadora group) from publicly voicing their growing misgivings about the direction in which the Nicaraguan revolution is moving.

If the US were to break away from its identification with the Nicaraguan Somocistas, who totally dominate the guerrilla leadership in the northern frontier, the Salvadorean oligarchy, and the relics of Central America's past, it would have the legitimacy to then join with Europeans and other regional forces to demand that the Sandinistas live up to their original promise of the revolution. Such a stand would place the US on the ideological offensive and also put it in a much stronger position to counter excessive Soviet influence in the region, for it would eliminate the contention that US pressure is forcing Nicaragua into the Soviet camp.

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