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Kissinger Report: Insider's View

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No document crafted by 12 people will be completely satisfactory to each of them. But the "conditionality" clause and the proposed alliance for democracy, prosperity and security made me proud to sign the report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, despite its occasional lapses into geopolitical truculence.

Can reasonable people conceive of a sequence of events in Central America and Mexico — each of which is unlikely to occur but not impossible — leading to a serious threat to United States security? Could reasonable people in 1958 have imagined a sequence of Cuban events and United States policy blunders leading four years later to a serious threat to the security of the United States?

The Kissinger commission's report makes the modest point that prudent Presidents must take into account such an improbable but highly risky sequence of possible events. Yet a fair reading of the report also indicates that the United States still has many options to avoid Armageddon in the tropics. Specifically, the report implies that events in El Salvador do not present enough of mortal threat to United States security to justify unconditional military aid, much less sending in the Marines.

My proudest day as a member of the commission came in San Salvador, watching some of my conservative colleagues become increasingly outraged by the mounting evidence that right-wing death squads were not a liberal fantasy. Perhaps that hectic day sealed the approval of the finest part of our report — the conditionality clause making military aid contingent on progress toward free elections and the rule of law.

If such progress is made in El Salvador, a reformed army will have something to fight for. Under those circumstances, military aid would make political and diplomatic solutions possible. Insurgents refusing to negotiate with a reformist Government legitimized by free elections would run the risk of fading from the scene as Colombian and Venezuelan guerrillas did in the 1960's.

But what if the Salvadoran regime ignores the goals of conditionality? The United States must stand ready then to cut off its bilateral aid, seeking higher ground elsewhere in the region. This warning must be credible, otherwise death squads and electoral fraud will not be eliminated. This was certainly the intention of the conditionality clause, although it may be undercut by a remarkable footnote signed by Henry A. Kissinger, Nicholas F. Brady and John Silber.

The United States must forcefully state conditions for its bilateral aid, but it cannot walk away from all of Central America — for reasons other than security. Decency requires some concern for our democratic friends in that region, especially unarmed Costa Rica. Our day in San José was as revealing as our day in San Salvador: Most Costa Ricans, who for years despised the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, are disappointed and alarmed by what has happened in Nicaragua since 1979. More attention to Costa Rican, Colombian and Venezuelan opinions would improve the United States debate over Central America.

Democrats in the region are also likely to look with favor on the proposal that the United States and Central America enter into a contract in which Washington commits significantly increased aid to underwrite economic reform and recovery, while participating Central American re-

publics commit themselves to greater respect for human rights, genuinely democratic processes and verifiable security assurances.

I did, nevertheless, register two fundamental disagreements with the report. First, I would argue that the most cost-effective policy for promoting long-term United States strategic interests in Central America would be to offer complete and unimpeded access to the United States market to exports from Central American countries joining the development organization proposed in our report.

Second, I believe that covert support to Nicaraguan insurgents hampers the democratization of Nicaragua. How? Covert support to some insurgents is used in Managua to brand all dissidents as pawns of a foreign power, eroding the legitimacy of dissent, especially among the nationalistic youth. (If promoting democracy is the aim, overt civilian programs to encourage Central American democrats would be a better alternative.) The possibility of accidental war is also increased by the covert operations, which otherwise show little prospect of overthrowing the Sandinista regime. Finally, the covert aid probably makes successful negotiations with Managua less likely — raising unsettling questions about what Washington will do if they fail.

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