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The Tough U.S. General On Duty in Latin Lands

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PANAMA, May 12 — As United States policy in Central America has come to emphasize an increasing military presence and cooperation with allied armies in the region, Gen. Paul F. Gorman has emerged as a key American strategist, according to diplomats and military officers.

General Gorman, 56 years old, was named chief of the Army's Southern Command a year ago. He heads United States forces in Latin America and the Caribbean but has focused his attention on Central America. He travels through the region more often than his predecessor, Gen. Wallace Nutting, and has close ties to the military in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

According to Costa Rican officials, General Gorman's policies have become a matter of dispute in Costa Rica, which has no army and has tried to remain neutral.

Veteran of Vietnam and Korea

Western diplomats said General Gorman is convinced that the leftist rebel movement in El Salvador can be militarily defeated if the United States provides enough weapons, ammunition, training and logistical support to the Salvadoran Army.

A veteran of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, General Gorman is described by associates as intelligent, self-confident, vigorously anti-Communist and highly ambitious. He is considered an accomplished strategist, and Central American officers who have dealt with him say he is convinced that the United States must establish a military presence in the area to prevent leftist gains.

Last year General Gorman tried unsuccessfully to revive the Central American Defense Council, a pro-United States alliance that fell apart after the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in 1979. He called together officers from Panama, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in October to discuss the project but was said to have been unable to persuade them to put aside their differences and unite to counter what he has described as subversion sponsored by Cuba and Nicaragua.

Advocate of U.S. Maneuvers

General Gorman's efforts to modernize the armies of Honduras and El Salvador have been more successful. Diplomats say he backs United States exercises in Honduras, which are intended both to train Honduran soldiers and to warn Nicaragua that the United States is prepared to back Honduras in any contingency.

During maneuvers in 1983 General Gorman often traveled to Honduras from his command post in Panama to review progress, according to an American diplomat.

Relations between Honduras and Nicaragua have been poor for the last two years. They worsened further last week after a Honduran helicopter was shot down in Nicaragua. Honduras expelled the Nicaraguan envoy and recalled its own.

The United States has begun a program of airborne surveillance of Nicaragua and guerrilla-held parts of El Salvador. A 300-man United States Army intelligence battalion has been stationed in Palmerola, Honduras, and C-130 aircraft based there are among those conducting surveillance missions.

War Powers Act at Issue

Some Congressional critics have suggested that the program could be a violation of the War Powers Act because it involves the United States in providing combat intelligence to the Salvadoran Army and could expose American pilots to hostile fire.

The Guatemalans have not fully supported General Gorman's efforts and have indicated they resent American criticism of human rights abuses.

United States officers consider Guatemala to have the best army in Central America. In recent years, they say, it has turned to Israel and other countries for supplies and is no longer dependent on the United States. Congress has imposed restrictions on military aid to Guatemala, despite Administration efforts to increase it.

According to Costa Rican officials, General Gorman has pressed President Luis Alberto Monge to accept 1,000 National Guardsmen from the United States to build roads and airstrips near the border with Nicaragua. An aide to President Monge said General Gorman "really exerted pressure," but there has been no agreement. has been no agreement.

A Visit to Costa Rica

On an unannounced visit last week, General Gorman met with Costa Rican leaders to discuss the project again and to offer an acceleration of military aid, according to American and Costa Rican officials.

After the visit Ambassador Curtin Winsor said National Guardsmen might arrive later this year to begin construction projects. But Costa Rica has not accepted the project, and a Costa Rican official said there were

fears it could compromise Costa Rican neutrality.

In Nicaragua, the official newspaper Barricada said General Gorman's visit to Costa Rica was associated with a "climate of rumors," and the paper said it was aimed at creating "a psychological preparation for war."

General Gorman, a West Point graduate, was deputy director of the Pentagon Papers project and later served as the senior military officer at the Central Intelligence Agency. He declined requests for an interview. He rarely speaks with journalists and, according to an American businessman with extensive experience in the region, "he really does not like the press."

Differed on Vietnam Strategy

During the Vietnam War General Gorman argued against some aspects of United States strategy. He did not share Gen. William Westmoreland's belief in the effectiveness of large-scale offensives, recommending instead the use of repeated forays from secure bases.

Military officers and others who have worked with General Gorman cite his mastery of detail as his most outstanding trait. He is said to be among the Army's best briefers, able to speak at length and in great detail without notes. "I think he has a kind of photographic memory," one of his former Pentagon colleagues said.

Associates also said General Gorman was by nature an activist and not the sort to sit back and let events take their course. He has clashed with several United States ambassadors in Central America, and three of them who were considered insufficiently promilitary have been transferred from the area in recent months.

"He's what we call the hard-charging type of commander," a retired American officer said. "He looks at a map and likes to envision the grand strategy."

'Borders on Arrogance'

Representative W. G. Hefner, Democrat of North Carolina, told General Gorman at a Congressional hearing last year that his approval of construction projects in Honduras without informing Congress "borders on arrogance." The general said Pentagon lawyers had advised him the construction was not considered permanent and thus did not require approval.

A three-member Congressional delegation visited Panama this month and met with General Gorman. One member of the delegation, Bill Alexander, Democrat of Arkansas, who is a critic of policy in Central America, said he disagreed with those who portray General Gorman as "a man who wants war down here."

"We have got a President who sees the solution as military and not diplomatic," Representative Alexander said in an interview. "General Gorman is a good soldier. In the absence of a defined diplomatic strategy, he is providing military leadership to fill the void."