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WASHINGTON POST  
15 January 1984

# The Kissinger Commission

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## Report . . .

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The Kissinger Commission report is a dual disappointment—both for President Reagan, who fell short in his reach for a bipartisan blank check for his failing policies in Central America, and for those of us who question the administration's rush to military confrontation in Central America. The report will also disappoint those Central Americans who search for diplomatic and political alternatives to more guns, more soldiers and more killing as the path to peace in the region.

I welcome the dissent of some commission members from the covert war against Nicaragua. I also welcome the report's recommendation that military aid to El Salvador and Guatemala be conditioned on an end to the death squads and a halt to human rights abuses. Even a Republican-dominated commission was unwilling to acquiesce in President Reagan's veto of the human rights certification requirement on aid to El Salvador.

In short, parts of the report are commendable (particularly Chapter 5 on human development), but taken as a whole, the report represents another chapter in a long history of U.S. misunderstanding and miscalculation in Central America. The report is flawed because it ignores four fundamental defects in our past conduct in that region.

First, the United States has intervened far too frequently in the internal affairs of other countries in this hemisphere. We continue to do so, and at an accelerating pace. Such a legacy has left many Central Americans skeptical of our professed adherence to the principles of democracy and self-determination. We have been unwilling to allow Central Americans to solve their own problems—if we happen to disagree with their solutions. The Kissinger Commission repeats this error by issuing a report that is classically interventionist in its basic assumptions.

Second, too often we have used our superior economic and military power as a substitute for a steady and balanced foreign policy based on our own best values. Too often the United States has resorted to the military and the CIA to rescue a failed foreign policy or to enforce a shortsighted and short-term solution. We have done grave damage to our standing in Central America with our readiness to resort to raw mili-

tary might to protect relatively narrow interests. But the Kissinger Commission ignores the lessons to be drawn from past military "solutions" and once again looks to armed force for the answer. The report contains recommendations that, if implemented, will intensify the fighting in El Salvador, will continue the war against Nicaragua and will inevitably put U.S. military personnel into the midst of combat. The commission has charted a course that, in the end, may only succeed if members of the U.S. military actually enter the war as combatants.

Third, the United States has allied itself far too frequently with the forces of reaction and repression in the region. The Central American nations suffer from vast maldistributions of wealth and power, as the report recognizes, with most of the people living in poverty, ill health and illiteracy alongside small, oligarchic elites living in enclaves of luxury. The report does not recognize, however, that American influence has been used to resist social change, to perpetuate the status quo, to support the privileged and the powerful with little or no concern for the well-being of workers, *campesinos* and a precarious middle class.

Such policies run counter to the most profound instincts and traditions of the American people. If Americans had understood, for example, the true nature of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, our government would not have entered an alliance that kept that dictatorship in power for 40 years. I believe Americans would prefer a foreign policy based on the principles of the Good Neighbor Policy and the Alliance for Progress, for they truly reflected our national ideals—and they surely served our national interests better than our present unhappy alliance with the forces of repression in El Salvador. As President Kennedy said over 20 years ago, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

The Kissinger Commission recommends massive increases in military assistance to the Salvadoran security forces as if the police, national guard and military have not been the primary instruments of repression in El Salvador for almost 100 years. The war in El Salvador may well be unwinnable, not because the Salvadoran army lacks enough bullets and helicop-

ters, as the Kissinger Commission implies, but because the Salvadoran army does not have—and cannot win—the confidence, trust and support of the Salvadoran people.

Fourth, our policies have been distorted because we have so insistently viewed the problems of the region through the prism of the Cold War. The Kissinger Commission repeats this error with a polysyllabic flourish: "The Soviet-Cuban thrust to make Central America part of their geostrategic challenge is what has turned the struggle in Central America into a security and political problem for the United States and for the hemisphere." Such extreme language raises the stakes of the contest to such a level that anything short of total military victory becomes unthinkable, and that is almost certainly unattainable with anything short of an outright commitment of our own forces.

With U.S. interventionism, with our overreliance on military solutions and by our association with repressive regimes in Central America, we have sown the fields of anti-Americanism—and now we are reaping a harvest of bitterness and hostility. It is true that the communists have been quick to exploit this anti-U.S. sentiment, but the Kissinger Commission does not understand that, in Central America, we have often been our own worst enemy.

The historical defects of U.S. policy in Central America are repeated, combined and compounded in our support for the covert war against Nicaragua. The recommendation of the commission's majority that the United States continue CIA financing of the contras is a prescription for disaster.

Once again, the United States is perceived as supporting the forces of reaction and repression in Central America; much of the leadership of the *contras* comes from veterans of the Somoza National Guard—a critical fact flatly ignored by the Kissinger Commission. Once again, the United States is seen as endorsing a military solution without first exhausting political or diplomatic alternatives; we have given grudging lip service but nothing more to the diplomatic initiatives of the Contadora group. Once again, we are seen as readying our own military for use in the region; we have thousands of U.S. troops on constant maneuvers in Honduras, barely a mortar shot away from the battlelines. The first American soldiers have already died.

The original justification for supporting the *contras* was to interdict the transportation of weapons, ammunition and war materiel from

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Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador. Now U.S. officials acknowledge what the *contras* have been saying all along—their real objective is to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

Advocates of our present policy contend that pressure from the *contras* has led the Sandinistas to liberalize Nicaraguan society, to schedule elections and to preserve a degree of pluralism inside the country. Whatever the reason for this Sandinista program, it ill behooves the United States to respond to conciliatory efforts with even greater truculence and ever heavier reliance on military means. It is time to give the Nicaraguan government some space to carry out its pledges, which include halting all support for the guerrilla forces in El Salvador, organizing free elections for 1985, and ensuring freedom of speech and religion inside Nicaragua.

Above all else, we should learn the lesson of the Panama Canal Treaty, where, in an explosive situation that could have brought military conflict, the United States invoked politics and diplomacy to reach a negotiated settlement. Jimmy Carter worked skillfully with other nations of the region to arrive at an agreement that kept the peace in Panama and secured stable relations between Panama and the United States.

How can we apply that lesson now?

To begin with, we should try diplomacy. In Central America, negotiation is more likely to succeed than escalation.

With respect to Nicaragua, the United States should itself respond to the Sandinista's October proposals, which remain unanswered. We should agree to talk directly with representatives of the Nicaraguan government specifically about compliance with the Contadora 21-point plan. The Reagan administration has had discussions with Nicaragua, but has been unwilling to negotiate that plan bilaterally. That plan offers the single best hope for a negotiated settlement.

With respect to El Salvador, we must press for unconditional negotiations between the government and the opposition under the aegis of Contadora. Only an agreement that brings opposition leaders into the political process with adequate guarantees for their safety can make it possible to hold genuinely free and open elections in which all can participate without fear of death squads and assassination.

Next, we must reverse the rush to militarize Central America. As a first step, we should discontinue our support for the president's war against Nicaragua. Then we should terminate the perpetual military maneuvering in Honduras, scrap Big Pine II and the plans for Big Pine III and halt the trend that is turning Honduras into a Central American version of Tansonhut airfield. And we should order the fleet home. Unless we are in fact contemplating an invasion, the fleet is nothing more than a provocation without a purpose, an invitation to another Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Finally, with respect to economic assistance, we should return to basics, at least until peace has returned to the region. Today Central America needs more Peace Corps volunteers and fewer soldiers. We should support human development projects—as described in Chapter 5 of the report—aimed at illiteracy, hunger, disease and infant mortality, which is 10 times higher in Central America than in the United States.

Even under the best of conditions, the countries of Central America would be in no position to absorb \$8 billion of America aid over five years. The only recipients capable of absorbing that much money are the oligarchs and the corrupt officials with their bank accounts and their booty piling up in Miami. These are not the best of conditions, and the idea of pumping in billions of dollars of foreign aid in the midst of a war, such as in El Salvador, or in support of a tyranny, as in Guatemala, is absurd.

The administration has already hinted that it will look the other way when it comes to the report's recommendations on human rights. Congress should look the other way when it comes to the report's endorsement of the president's secret war in Nicaragua. It is time to adopt a policy that will encourage peaceful change instead of fueling the fires of violent revolution; that will follow the path of negotiation, not war; that will not, out of fear or frustration, relive a history that has meant tragedy for this hemisphere and defeat for our own interests; that, instead, will trust the power of our founding values—liberty and justice for all—not only for the American people, but for all the people of the Americas.

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