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Opinion • Commentary

The Failure of U.S. Central American Policy

By Wayne S. Smith

THE Reagan administration's Central American policies are failing — and failing not because of Congressional restrictions, as Mr. Fred C. Ikle, the under-secretary of Defense, would have us believe, but because they are poorly conceived.

We have legitimate interests and security concerns in Central America, but in terms of protecting those interests and advancing our security objectives, we could accomplish far more through imaginative and effective diplomacy than through the tactics followed so far by the administration — that is, the bumbling "secret" war in Nicaragua and the ill-fated efforts to force a military solution in El Salvador.

Yet, the speech given here [to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs] on September 12 by Mr. Ikle suggests that we can expect no change. He emphasized that what we seek is a full military victory, and, apparently, he would have us eschew negotiated solutions. If that is indeed the course the administration has charted, then the stage is set for a full-scale foreign policy disaster. . . .

Mr. Reagan's critics, by and large, are not suggesting that we abandon Central America. I certainly am not. Quite the contrary. No, the point is that the president's policies *are not working*; they seem to lead only to sterile conflict without accomplishing our goals. Other options are available — options which might more effectively advance U.S. interests and objectives at less cost and with fewer risks. Yet, those options have not been seriously explored.

Mr. Ikle told you on September 12 that the Reagan administration's Central American policies haven't been given a chance, that Congress had denied them the means to succeed. With all due respect to Mr. Ikle, the facts simply do not bear out such a statement. The policies are failing, yes. If they were working, then three years after they were implemented we should see some progress, some sign of improvement in the situation. Rather than that, we see that the situation obviously has worsened. The war is going badly in El Salvador. Tensions in the whole region are at an all-time high. And rather than getting rid of the Sandin-

istas, our "secret" war, while harassing them, has helped them rally popular support. On balance, it may have helped them more than it has harmed them. In any event, it has accomplished nothing in terms of U.S. goals.

The administration's policy failures cannot be blamed on the Congress. Despite the Boland-Zablocki amendment, the administration has pursued its "secret" war against Nicaragua without restraints. The Congress has given it funds to do just about anything it wanted. It has provided as many arms to the contras, sent as many CIA advisors to organize and train them, and organized as many air raids and acts of sabotage as it wished. To what avail?

And while many Congressmen — indeed, many Americans — expressed concern over the dispatch of thousands of troops and major fleet units to Central America for "maneuvers," this in no way prevented the White House from doing it. It sent as many troops as it wished and maneuvered to its heart's content.

Nor is Congress to blame for the lack of progress in El Salvador. It has pared back appropriations requests. That is a normal part of the budgetary process. It has also — to little avail — tried to get the administration to use the leverage this assistance should give us to move the Salvadoran government toward cleaning up its human rights record and making other needed reforms.

But the Congress has not by any means denied needed assistance. The war is certainly not going badly in El Salvador because of any shortage of arms and ammunition. One might almost make the opposite case, that the more assistance we give the Salvadorans, the less effectively they seem to fight. . . .

[W]ith millions of dollars in aid, military advisors and other forms of support, the Salvadoran armed forces are barely holding their own — *if they are*. I would not draw from that the conclusion that the way to insure the defeat of the Salvadoran armed forces is to give them unlimited assistance. On the other hand, I cannot resist the observation that the more arms we give them, the more formidable become their adversaries, for a significant percentage of these arms are either captured by

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the guerrillas or sold to them by venal Salvadoran officers. It is no exaggeration to say — and one must keep one's sense of humor in saying it — that we, not the Cubans, are the guerrillas' principal arms supplier. . . .

Mr. Ikle complained on September 12 that the Reagan administration has been unjustly accused of introducing an East-East element to the conflict in Central America. As the Soviets are giving military assistance to Cuba and to Nicaragua, he said, the East is already there. There is an element of truth in that, but he misses the central point which is that to portray the conflict in Central America *essentially* as a matter of East-West struggle, and the violence there as a matter of Soviet/Cuban aggression, is to take it out of context. A more realistic appraisal suggests that the conflict is essentially indigenous. It emerges from decades of fiercely repressive governments, grinding social injustice and economic underdevelopment. The challenge we face in Central America is far more complex and requires subtleties of approach beyond the unsophisticated "good-guys-versus-the-commies" attitude of the administration.

For one thing, such an attitude discourages negotiations (which are the key to reducing tensions). It also makes it extremely difficult to appeal to the many non-Communist components of the opposition in either El Salvador or in Guatemala. After all, if the United States treats the situation as a case of Soviet/Cuban aggression, it will tend to view as Soviet/Cuban allies all those who oppose U.S.-backed regimes. This serves to cut the United States off from the moderate, democratic elements that are its natural partners.

On the other side of the coin, addressing the situation in an East-West context encourages a skewed perception of the repressive governments that have encour-

aged revolutionary turmoil by neglecting the welfare of their people. Rather than seeing them as the agents of instability, the Reagan administration tends to view them as valued allies in a common struggle against the Red Hordes. . . .

Now, it must be asked, how does the Reagan administration expect to end [a] civil war (short of military victory) without addressing its principal causes? How, for example, can it expect the opposition to lay down its arms and participate in a political process so long as the death squads continue to operate with impunity and there are massive violations of human rights? And there are. There has been no improvement in that area at all. Over 30,000 Salvadorans have been tortured and murdered by these right-wing death squads. Not a single person has ever been convicted for these crimes. . . .

In El Salvador, we tolerate death squads. In Guatemala, we have become identified with a series of the most murderous regimes on the face of the earth — regimes which have slaughtered tens of thousands of their own citizens — which have committed atrocities that make the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon look like child's play. When President Reagan said Rios Montt, the then president of Guatemala, was a man of integrity who had simply been given a bum rap by the U.S. media, and when the president now seeks military assistance for the new military regime in Guatemala, he makes a mockery of his claim that we are defending "freedom and democracy" in Central America.

Wayne S. Smith is a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The above material was excerpted from a speech he gave to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs on Wednesday.