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Private Wars

U.S. Citizens Plunge Into Latins' Conflicts For Peace and Profit

Advocates of Right and Left
Provide Aid and Comfort
And Sometimes Fighters

Latest Idea: Adopt-a-Contra

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Ever since Davy Crockett and his Tennessee Volunteers fought in Mexican territory at the Alamo, American civilians have been proudly poking their noses into foreign wars. U.S. adventurers fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Irish and Jewish Americans for years have helped finance wars against the English and the Arabs.

Today, this time-honored civilian involvement reaches new heights in Central American jungles and sun-drenched Caribbean islands. Thanks partly to the emotions that President Reagan has aroused over his enthusiasm for right-wing "freedom fighters" there, Americans are forging vast fund-raising and military-support networks and turning Latin American conflicts into a kind of do-it-yourself war for Americans of all political stripes.

Hollywood personalities, retired Pentagon officials and other notables have made headlines with their financial involvement or outspoken views and Main Street Americans—truck drivers, doctors, homemakers, clergymen and others—are working on behalf of some cause in the region.

Varied Motives

Some want to fight communism. Some want peace. Some want profit. Some are simply weekend cowboys who thrill at training and fighting side by side with foreign armies. And whether from the left, the right or neither side, Americans involved in Latin American conflicts share a conviction that in these small, nearby lands, a few civilians can shape international events.

"I felt important in Honduras," says James Adair, a 36-year-old Houston adventurer who recently spent six weeks there accompanying right-wing guerrillas on forays into Nicaragua. "It was exciting."

The proximity of Latin American combat zones—Houston is closer to San Salvador than to New York—makes the turmoil not only more pressing to Americans but also more accessible. U.S. citizens from the left and the right occasionally almost bump into each other there: Christian war protesters, for instance, sometimes inspect battle sites in northern Nicaragua hours after receiving reports of American mercenaries fighting in the area.

"We see more of these pseudo-military ventures popping up every day," says Leonard Lindheim, a U.S. Customs agent in New Orleans. "When you've got Third World revolutions just a three-hour plane trip away, these types of activities are bound to increase."

Civilian involvement was certain to increase when Mr. Reagan, enraging some and inspiring others, called the Nicaraguan rebels "the moral equivalent of our founding fathers." In the past year, private groups backing the Contras have raised some \$12 million on their own.

And on Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives voted \$27 million in non-military aid for the rebels. As Congress debated, more than 1,000 demonstrators were arrested after occupying federal buildings and congressional offices from Chapel Hill, N.C., to San Francisco. "Those who protested weren't the average radical," says Jim Sweeney, a Maryknoll missionary who helped coordinate the national civil-disobedience and protest campaign. "Congress now has to face average people, many who are ministers and nuns and have access to a continuous public forum—the church."

Reagan Criticized

Some critics charge that the Reagan administration has encouraged right-wing military adventurers by looking the other way when they violate U.S. laws. "Private groups are now constantly breaking our neutrality laws in Central America," says Rep. Ted Weiss, a Democrat from New York, "and we're overlooking it." A Justice Department spokesman counters, "There's a lot of holes in the Neutrality Act. . . . You can't prosecute these guys."

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Alamo, Ariz., markets repackaged copies of the Central Intelligence Agency's controversial covert-operations manual with an advertisement exhorting conservatives to irk "your liberal friends by having a copy of this manual on your coffee table." Well-heeled liberals are beckoned to Central America to "study Spanish while you learn about the Nicaraguan revolution firsthand." Since 1979, more than 100,000 Americans have visited the war-torn region—and have created a minor industry in doing so.

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The Adventurers

Some gung-ho Americans trek to Latin America mostly for adventure. The 2,500-member Civilian Military Assistance group of Decatur, Ala., provides military training and combat gear and even fights side by side with rebel soldiers.

"The CMA is just a bunch of good ol' boys from Alabama not given to deep political examination," says Mr. Adair, the one-time Honduran adviser, who writes about the group's exploits for an obscure military magazine under such headlines as "Sandinista Turkey Shoot." "Why do we have to wrap everything in the flag?" Mr. Adair asks. "Why can't we just say we do it for adventure? We had a good time."

The danger only adds to the CMA's appeal. The group's membership swelled after two CMA men were killed in a helicopter crash in Nicaragua last fall. Sam Hall, a 48-year-old former Olympic diver from Dayton, Ohio, proudly grimaces as he opens his shirt to show off a pink-rimmed scar on his abdomen and produces a graphic photo of himself sewing up his own wound, inflicted by a Sandinista bayonet in Nicaraguan jungles. On a recent visit to the U.S., Mr. Hall said he operates a CMA-backed commando school and has launched several "training missions" into Nicaragua. Although the group's leaders officially discourage members from entering combat in Nicaragua, the CMA's founder, Tom Posey, says, "I admit it—we all want to go over" into Nicaragua.

Unwelcome Visitors

The Honduran and Costa Rican governments haven't exactly welcomed CMA's involvement, however. In March, 14 CMA men were thrown out of Honduras after the government learned that they planned to assault a Nicaraguan military encampment; five other members remain jailed in Costa Rica on weapons charges. Mr. Hall can't even count on moral support from his brother, U.S. Rep. Tony Hall of Ohio, who has voted against aiding the Contras.

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But what they lack in official support, CMA members make up for with ingenuity. Mr. Posey, a 39-year-old vegetable dealer in Decatur, has filled the concrete warehouse of Posey's Produce with goods donated from across the country: camouflage uniforms, gas masks, boxes of stewed tomatoes and ravioli, and even baseball bats fight for space among Mr. Posey's carrots and cabbages.

On his daily rounds, Mr. Posey spends as much time collecting money and goods for rebels as he does selling produce. At Mondo's Pizza, the owner, Armando de Quesada, promises to donate food and medicine to the cause and slaps Mr. Posey on the back for a job well done. The Sandinistas may have Cuban support, the pizza man says, "but we have CMA."

Mr. Posey's crusades have taken a heavy personal toll. His business isn't getting any new customers. He had to sell his \$15,000 coin collection and half his gun collection to finance trips where the greatest excitement comes from crouching in fetid foxholes and listening to Sandinista rockets landing nearby. And his 14-year-old son has been sleeping next to a carbine ever since the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned Mr. Posey that the Nicaraguan government put a \$250,000 price on his head—a charge that an embassy spokeswoman in Washington denies.

Teaching Teams

Like Mr. Posey's group, Soldier of Fortune magazine has sponsored a dozen teams of medics and mercenary "trainers" who teach right-wing groups throughout Latin America the finer points of mortars, explosives and sniping. "A lot of us were advisers in Vietnam," says Dale Dye, the magazine's executive editor and a self-appointed rebel adviser in Nicaragua. "It's the same gig."

At the same time, U.S. leftists travel to Central America on campaigns that they describe as "waging peace." A religious organization called Witness for Peace sometimes has 40 members scattered through Nicaragua, hoping that publicity-conscious Contras will think twice before shooting if they know that North Americans are nearby. The group also helps arouse people back in the U.S. with a hot line that plays recorded messages detailing such alleged Contra atrocities as the rape of rural women and terrorism by drunken soldiers.

Some self-appointed advisers seem more enthusiastic on the battlefield than do their students. Mr. Dye's recent efforts to train rebel mortarmen in Nicaragua were delayed when they expressed unwillingness to bomb bean fields where some of their relatives were working.

Similarly, when Mr. Adair of the CMA and four other Americans set out with several Contras to destroy a bridge in Nicaragua, most of the rebels fled with the group's machine guns when they were surprised to find 300 Sandinista soldiers defending the target. Mr. Adair and his lightly armed comrades scurried to Honduras with enemy patrols in pursuit. The Adair forces vented their frustration by shooting a pair of deer that strayed too close to them.