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# 'Crisis in Central America,' on PBS

By JOHN CORRY

**C**RISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA confronts a question it does not explicitly raise: Is the United States responsible for the crisis? The four-part "Frontline" series provides no answer, expecting us to find it ourselves. We can, although we must work at it, perhaps harder than we may wish. The series, beginning on Channel 13 at 9 tonight, continues through Friday.

The episode tonight, "The Yankee Years," begins with flickering old film: it is 1898; United States troops land in Cuba. Interventionism has begun. The Panama Canal is dug. United Fruit reaps its harvests. Marines are sent to Nicaragua. The Central Intelligence Agency manipulates Guatemala. For more than 50 years, American interests flourish.

Tomorrow night's program deals with the Cuban revolution and its aftermath. Nicaragua is examined on Thursday, and El Salvador on Friday. The final image in the series, a freeze frame, is "a crowd of Salvadoreans," the narrator tells us, "who came to witness the prospect of peace."

The series, using old film and interviews, is even-handed, determinedly so. For example, a former Marine, who fought Augusto César Sandino, the Nicaraguan rebel, in 1926, says, "I think the natives really favored the Marines." A Nicaraguan says, "We wanted to shoot them, and run them through with machetes." Thus the format: credit the United States, if only for good intentions; then penalize it for insensitivity or something worse. There is balance.

Therefore, "Crisis in Central America" suggests that the United States was neither as malevolent as critics claim, nor as benevolent as apologists insist. The most interesting sequence in the first program looks at an inglorious episode: the Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala in 1954.

The Arbenz Government, democratically elected, was influenced, but apparently not led, by Communists. Mr. Arbenz began labor and land reform, including the appropriation of 80 percent of the land owned by United Fruit. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, alarmed, dispatched an envoy, who demanded that Mr. Arbenz remove Communist labor leaders. Mr. Arbenz refused.

Consequently, the Eisenhower Administration decided to remove Mr. Arbenz. Richard Bissell, a former Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence, says in an interview that there "is absolutely no reason to believe" the desire to help United Fruit played "any significant role" in reaching the decision.

Moreover, right-wing dictatorships such as Batista's sometimes evolve into democracies, while left-wing dictatorships such as Mr. Castro's do not. More than one million Cubans have fled their country. Does this

mean the United States should support right-wing dictators? This is an unpalatable proposition, and "Crisis in Central America" is cautious.

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The dominant factor was presumably Mr. Dulles's obsession with Soviet expansionism. Whatever it was, however, was incidental. The coup, fabled today, was carried out largely by a C.I.A. radio station that broadcast news of a "liberation" army. The army was actually 150 Guatemalans in a few trucks and station wagons.

As coups go, this wasn't much. Reasonable people may agree that it was wrong for the United States to intervene, although the principal result was unintended. Mr. Bissell hints at it delicately: "In other situations, in other countries, too much reliance was placed on the method that had been successful."

Possibly, he is thinking of the disastrous 1961 invasion at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. Meanwhile, José Figueres Ferrer, the former President of Costa Rica, notes that "the leftists have great propaganda machinery" and that the Guatemalan intervention provided the left with a cause.

"The Yankee Years" suffers from omission — it suggests that Central American history began around 1900, which ignores 300 years of wars, revolutions, European adventurism and local politics. But certainly unrest did grow after Guatemala in 1954. Anastasio Somoza García was assassinated in Nicaragua in 1956; Carlos Castillo Armas, the C.I.A.'s Guatemala heir, was killed a year later. By then, Fidel Castro had landed in Oriente Province in Cuba. Two years later, he entered Havana.

"Crisis in Central America" is addressing another foreign policy concern here. It is implicit and unspoken, but it is there: no more Vietnams; no more Cubas, either. Tomorrow night's episode, "Castro's Challenge," looks at the problem.

Fidel Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista, a thug. American moderates rejoiced, but too quickly. Cuba soon became a Soviet client. "Castro's Challenge" does not argue that world peace would have been better served with Batista, although it does note that Mr. Castro's ascension led to the Cuban missile crisis, and that Cuba dispatched 30,000 troops to Angola in 1975 and 10,000 troops to Ethiopia in 1978. Batista may have been odious, but he did not export violence.

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Democratic Congressman from Maryland, saying that the Administration has chosen the worst possible way to deal with Nicaragua: C.I.A. involvement with old allies of the Somozas. If anything, Mr. Barnes says, this will unite the Sandinistas and their allies against us.

It is possible that Mr. Icklé and Mr. Barnes both share a part of the truth. "Crisis in Central America" is often plodding, and sometimes repetitious. Visually, it is not nearly as gripping as "Vietnam: A Television History," the public television series with which it will most often, even if unfairly, be compared. But it does give us a sense of complexity. In an age in which simplistic rhetoric flourishes, that's an accomplishment of note.

"Crisis in Central America" was produced for "Frontline" by WGBH in Boston in association with the Blackwell Corporation, an independent production company. The executive producer for the Blackwell Corporation is Neal B. Freeman.