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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
30 January 1986

Great Decisions/1

Central America in US foreign policy

The making of US policy for Central America is a textbook example of the challenges of building domestic consensus on key international issues. Just a few decades ago, liberals and conservatives worked together to 'contain' communism. Since the divisive Vietnam war, however, agreement on major US security issues has eluded policymakers.

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WASHINGTON — When Reagan administration officials took over the job of managing US relations with Central America five years ago, they came loaded for bear.

Pointing to evidence of Soviet encroachments in the Western hemisphere, they announced plans to make the region a test case of the administration's resolve to "draw the line" against communist advances in a region judged critical to the national interests of the United States.

In swift succession, Reagan officials launched, and then expanded on, a spate of new initiatives, increasing US aid to help El Salvador to fight leftist insurgents, and organizing an undeclared war against Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government, using Nicaraguan rebels (called "contras") who were trained and funded by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Since 1981, over \$4.7 billion in US economic and military assistance has been spent in or committed to Central America, up six times from the Carter years. Carter administration appointees, and even those Reagan appointees judged "soft," have been purged from key Latin America policy posts. A trade embargo has been imposed on Nicaragua, even though the US maintains full diplomatic relations with Managua. Meanwhile, the largest US military maneuvers ever in Central America, code named "Big Pine," have underscored the Reagan commitment to restore predominant US influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Reagan officials insist the tough new approach to Central America has been a success.

"In 1980, the situation looked almost hopeless in El Salvador. Today, Salvador has become a success story," says one State Department official. "In Nicaragua, we've substantially increased the costs of trying to export communism to other countries."

Even so, the policy has encountered rough sledding at home. Congress has made life difficult for the President. It

has often questioned the administration's basic assumptions about Central America and, by suspending aid to the contras last year, it temporarily gutted one key part of the President's strategy for dealing with communist influence in the region. At the same time, a tenacious collection of interest groups has led successful efforts to hold the Reagan team to account on issues like human rights in Central America.

For the most part, President Reagan has managed to stay in control, setting the tone and, ultimately, the terms of the national debate over policy for the region. But experts say the struggle over Central America policy provides a textbook example of the complex workings of the nation's fragmented foreign policy process.

Despite the President's clear objectives and personal popularity, experts note that the limits of presidential leadership in foreign policy have been set by a variety of factors.

One is public opinion. Opinion polls show that most Americans agree with the President that Central America is important to US national interests. Most agree that communism poses a threat to the region.

But public support for Reagan objectives has not always translated into a mandate for more decisive action in the region. Reflecting their fears of involvement in an unpopular war like that in Vietnam, Americans worry more about the danger of becoming "too entangled" in Central America than about the spread of communism "because the US doesn't do enough to stop it," says pollster Burns Roper.

In other words, for most Americans, the cure may be worse than the malady. To the extent the President has advocated excessively strong cures, public approval of his handling of Central America policy has languished.

Policy has also been hamstrung by countervailing views within the administration itself. Moderates, led by Secretary of State George Shultz, have generally favored keeping the negotiating

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option alive. Hardliners, including Central Intelligence Agency director William Casey and Assistant Defense Secretary Fred Ikle, have favored more extreme measures, including severing diplomatic relations with Managua and recognizing the contras as the legitimate government of Nicaragua.

"As the administration's on-again, off-again commitment to negotiations with Nicaragua suggests, the result has been to make US diplomacy in the region somewhat more erratic," says a congressional source.

In addition to disagreements among top Reagan officials, differences between Reagan appointees and career foreign policy bureaucrats at the state, defense, and treasury departments and elsewhere have also worked to moderate policy.

The views of regional experts who oversee the day-to-day aspects of US trade, immigration, security, and investment policy toward Central America have tended to reinforce the learning process of political appointees, exerting a strong gravitational pull toward the political center; Abraham Lowenthal, a Latin America specialist at the University of California at Los Angeles has written.

But experts say the main constraints on policymaking stem from the more basic fact that foreign policy is not made by presidents alone. Since the Vietnam war, Congress has acquired a much larger role in the foreign policymaking process. In addition, various nongovernmental groups, ranging from multinational corporations to religious organizations, have acquired more influence on the shaping of US Latin America policy.

The best-organized opposition to the Reagan policy has come from a coalition of religious and human rights groups. Church groups began organizing against military aid to El Salvador following the March 1980 assassination of Salvadorean archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero and the December 1980 killing of four US missionary nuns. Both atrocities were attributed to right-wing death squads linked to the Salvadorean military.

Although the human rights lobby has had no success in forcing cuts in US military aid levels to Central America, it has helped make compliance with human rights standards a *condition* for US aid by focusing attention on alleged human rights abuses of both the Salvadorean government and contra forces in Nicaragua. Meanwhile, many in Congress have rallied in opposition to the Reagan policy, concerned with its accent on military means and fearful that it could lead to direct US intervention in Central America.

Despite charges contained in a series of administration "white papers," congressional opponents say there's little convincing proof that significant amounts of aid from Nicaragua are being channeled to Salvadorean guerrilla forces. The Reagan administration has charged that arms are being shipped from Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador for the purpose of destabilizing both that nation and the region as a whole.

In addition, many in Congress have questioned the shifting rationale for administration policy in Nicaragua. Mr. Reagan first said that aid to the contras was needed to interdict arms supplies to the Salvadorean rebels. By 1984, the President was dropping clear hints that the real purpose of contra aid was to overthrow the Sandinista government, a policy widely held to be in violation of international law.

"It was one thing for the contras to have that as their objective. Where I fell off the bandwagon is when the President said so too," says one senator, John Chafee (R) of Rhode Island, who changed his stand on the issue of contra aid.

Congressional opposition to Reagan's Nicaragua policy was catalyzed when news leaked in April 1984 that the Central Intelligence Agency had played a direct role in laying underwater mines in Nicaragua's harbors. Later reports implicated the CIA in producing a 90-page field manual for Nicaraguan contras endorsing the "selective use of violence" — including assassination — against Sandinista officials.

The revelations led to the high tide of congressional opposition, prompting a cutoff of US aid to the contras and a prohibition on the use of any US funds for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinista government.

Despite these setbacks, few disagree that Reagan has left a deep imprint on US policy in Central America. Congress has now resumed aid to the contras for "humanitarian" purposes. Reinforced by Nicaragua's worsening record on political and human rights, Capitol Hill sources say the administration's case for restoring military aid this spring may yet carry the day in Congress. Current humanitarian assistance runs out in March.

But by restricting the military option and encouraging negotiations — and by forcing Reagan officials to rank poverty and human rights abuses with Soviet interference as root causes of the turmoil in Central America — other participants in the policy process have defined the limits of US involvement in Central America.



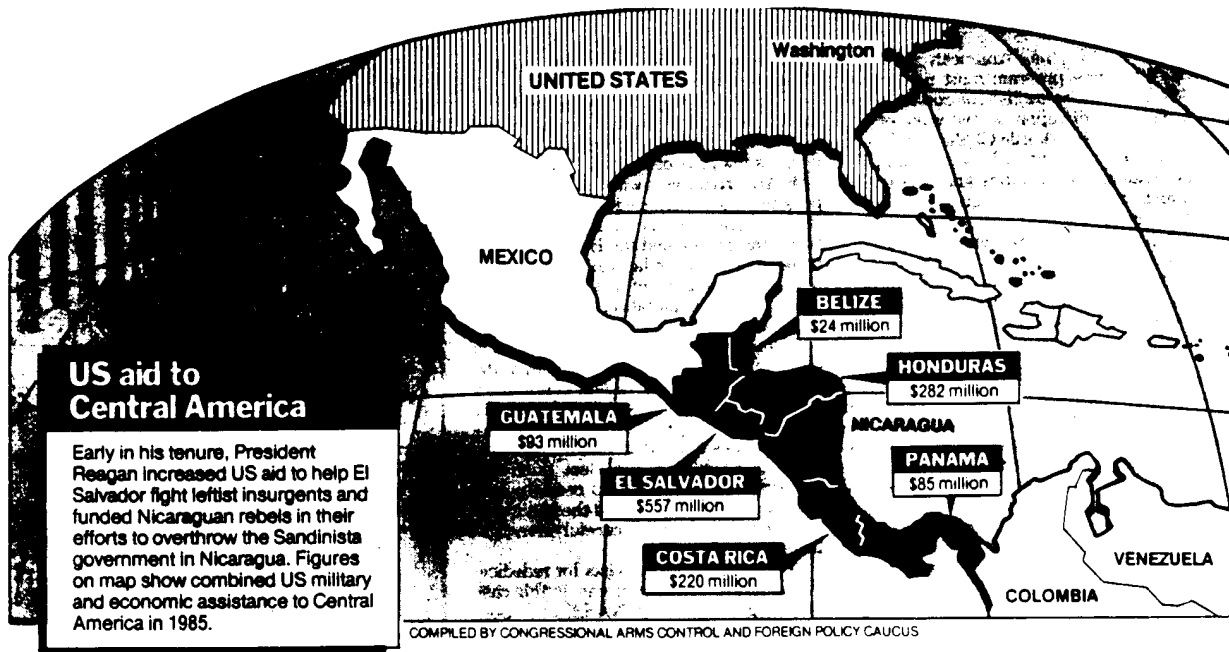
“ Central America is a region of great importance to the United States. . . . And it has become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.”

President Reagan, May 10, 1984

“ Sandinistas have been engaged for some time in spreading their communist revolution beyond their borders. They're providing arms, training, and a headquarters to the communist guerrillas who are attempting to overthrow the democratically elected Duarte government of El Salvador.”

President Reagan, April 15, 1985

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This series is keyed to the New York-based Foreign Policy Association's "Great Decisions" program, which is designed to help Americans become better informed about critical foreign policy issues. The articles will appear on Thursdays from Jan. 30 through March 20. The subjects are:

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