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THE PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO CENTRAL AMERICA:
SECURITY CONDITIONS

Submitted by

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Concurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

as indicated overleaf

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

3 July 1968

SUBJECT: SNIE 82/83-68: THE PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO CENTRAL
AMERICA: SECURITY CONDITIONS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the likelihood of incidents that would endanger or embarrass President Johnson during his visit to El Salvador (6-8 July 1968), and during his stops at the international airports of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (8 July 1968).

CONCLUSION

We believe that the risk of a serious incident or major embarrassment during President Johnson's visit to El Salvador will be somewhat greater than during his visits to Mexico.

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During his stop at the Guatemala City airport, there may be a danger of rocket or mortar attack by leftist terrorists. We believe there is little chance of a serious incident during the other airport stops in Central America. One may never, of course, rule out the possibility of an attempt at violence by an individual psychopath or fanatic.

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DISCUSSION

1. Relations between the US and El Salvador have traditionally been cordial. President Fidel Sánchez Hernández will welcome President Johnson's visit as an opportunity to strengthen these ties and to enhance his own political prestige.^{1/} Most informed Salvadorans are favorably disposed to the US; they will receive President Johnson as an honored national guest.

2. For the past several years, El Salvador has experienced relative political stability, both by general Latin American standards and by the standards of its own previous history of dictatorship and periodic turmoil. Moderate reformist governments have made some progress against the formidable social and economic obstacles to the well-being and social mobility of some 80 to 90 percent of the population. The still powerful oligarchy has grudgingly accepted limited change; Communists and other leftist extremists have been kept in check by repressive measures, including political assassinations.

^{1/} Sánchez was elected in March 1967 and started his five-year term in July 1967. He followed in office the more politically dynamic and domineering President Rivera, and has only gradually solidified his control over the government and over his own political party, which was founded by Rivera.

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3. Although President Sánchez's political and economic problems have increased somewhat since the beginning of the year, there is at present no evidence of unusual popular unrest or of a serious threat to the government from its political opposition. Nonetheless, Sánchez's National Conciliation Party lacks the strength of the government party in Mexico and has only a limited ability to turn out its supporters to ensure a cordial and peaceful welcome for visiting dignitaries along motorcade routes and at ceremonial sites. The Christian Democrats, the principal political opposition, control the municipal government in San Salvador, the capital city. They have generally acted as a responsible opposition, and we believe their followers will receive President Johnson in a friendly manner.

4. The principal danger of an incident directed specifically against President Johnson in El Salvador would come from Communists and other leftists. The Communist Party of El Salvador (PCES) is small, illegal, intimidated, and generally ineffective. It does, however, control the leadership of several labor federations and of the major student organizations at the University of El Salvador. In the early 1960's, some members of the PCES received guerrilla training in Cuba, but in recent years neither the PCES nor other extremists have used systematic violence as a tactic.

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5. The PCES and the organizations it influences, especially leftist university groups, may attempt minor acts of protest against the US during the visit. Though US policy in Vietnam is not a heated issue in Salvador, it may be used as the theme of such protests. With the possible exception of radical students, we doubt that these groups will attempt major demonstrations or deliberately seek to endanger President Johnson, because of their fear of government reprisal. There is some danger that experienced leftist terrorists from Guatemala may cross into El Salvador and attempt an act of violence against President Johnson, as a protest against the US and to advertise their cause.

6. The Salvadoran Government will move, to the best of its ability, to protect President Johnson from potentially dangerous or embarrassing incidents, and in particular will cooperate fully with US security officials. To the extent deemed necessary, the government will detain known and suspected radicals and trouble-makers. Surveillance of suspect groups and individuals is not as comprehensive as in Mexico, however. The government may also use intimidation (e.g., the holding of hostages) to get the message across that it wants a peaceful visit.

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7. Security conditions in San Salvador, a city of some 350,000 inhabitants, ordinarily are fair to good. The Salvadoran security forces are adequate for maintaining order under most circumstances in the capital city, but will probably be severely taxed by the visit of President Johnson and the Presidents of the neighboring Central American republics. The National Police will as usual be the first line of defense in the city; they will be backed up by units of the army and of the National Guard (a rural constabulary). Though these forces are all under the titular command of the Minister of Defense, overall security responsibility for the visit will be in the hands of Colonel José Alberto Medrano, chief of the Salvadoran Intelligence Agency and Commander of the National Guard. He is a political confidant of President Sánchez and is staunchly pro-American, but is somewhat lacking in political finesse and has a penchant for strong arm tactics.

8. The Salvadoran police and army have for some years received training assistance from US AID and MAAG missions, respectively. Though their training and experience in crowd and riot control are far below the standards of their Mexican counterparts, they will probably be able to cope effectively with routine problems and minor emergencies. The quality of their response to

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large demonstrations or a crisis involving an attempt at violence, should any occur, is less certain.

9. The presence of other visiting Presidents and their personal security guards will be a complicating factor in providing security for President Johnson. The idea of Central American cooperation is popular in El Salvador,^{2/} but President Somoza of Nicaragua is not and he may be the object of leftist protests. Also, the Nicaraguan political enemies of Somoza, and to a lesser extent the Guatemalan enemies of President Méndez and the Honduran enemies of President López, may attempt to direct a protest or an act of violence against them during the visit. Such attempts could endanger President Johnson directly, or indirectly through the reaction of the target President's security guards.

10. In sum, we believe that the risk of a serious incident or major embarrassment during President Johnson's visit to El

^{2/} Relations between El Salvador and neighboring Honduras have been poor, but such differences will probably be put aside for the meeting of the Presidents.

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Salvador is somewhat greater than during his visits to Mexico. One may not, of course, rule out the possibility of an attempt at violence by some individual psychopath or fanatic or by a "suicide squad" from Guatemala.

11. Following the meetings in El Salvador, President Johnson is scheduled, via Air Force One, to fly each of the visiting Central American presidents to the international airport in his own country. We believe that, in the case of Guatemala, this plan may expose President Johnson to considerable danger. Security conditions within the fenced area of the Guatemala City airport (La Aurora) are good, and the Guatemalan security forces, which can be expected to cooperate fully with US officials, will probably be able to prevent hostile groups from gaining access. But the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR)^{3/} the principal leftist terrorist group, is probably able to attack the airport with rockets and mortars from certain adjacent areas; they launched one successful rocket attack against another airport near

^{3/} Last January, the FAR split away from the Communist Party of Guatemala, which subsequently formed another terrorist group with a similar name.

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Guatemala City in March 1968. FAR has long engaged in violent activity, both in the towns and in the countryside, but has been relatively quiescent in recent months. The FAR leadership is now being pressed by one of its factions to increase its aggressive activity, and may view President Johnson's airport visit as an opportunity to advertise the revolutionary cause and discredit the government of President Mendez.

12. We believe that there will be less risk of serious incident during President Johnson's visits to the other Central American airports. The Nicaraguan security forces will probably close off the Managua airport (Las Mercedes) to all but trusted civilians and National Guardsmen. Anti-US and antigovernment forces in Nicaragua, moreover, lack the will as well as the armament of their counterparts in Guatemala. The international airport in Honduras, at San Pedro Sula, is in a relatively remote area, and the Honduran security forces will probably be able to prevent the access to the field of potentially hostile or unfriendly groups. The Costa Rican Government, however, is unlikely to restrict the size of crowds at the San Jose airport (El Coco), or to detain potentially hostile individuals. Communist and Castroist groups, and perhaps also certain student

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groups, may attempt protest demonstrations against US policy in Vietnam. But these are not likely to be large or violent, and the small Costa Rican security forces would in any case probably be able to keep them from getting out of control.

13. We believe it very unlikely that the Castro regime would use its Mig aircraft to interfere with President Johnson's flight.

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