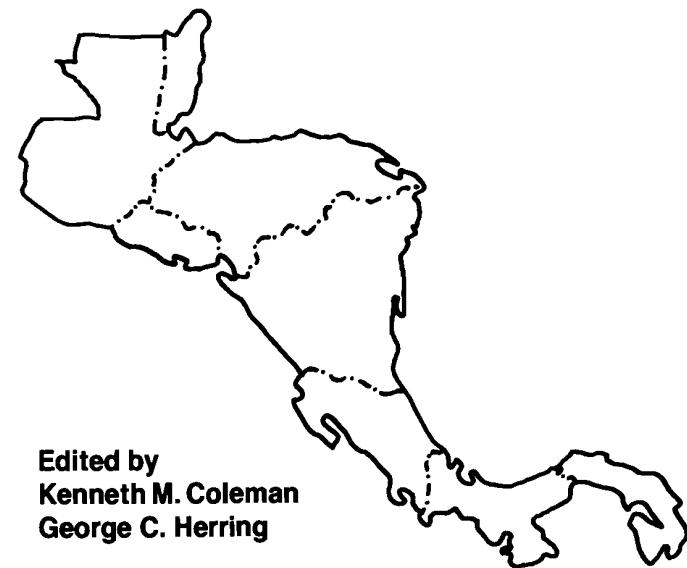


Understanding the Central American Crisis

**Sources of Conflict, U.S. Policy,
and Options for Peace**



**Edited by
Kenneth M. Coleman
George C. Herring**

**With Foreword by
Daniel Oduber**



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Introduction: The Reagan Policy in Historical Perspective

Walter LaFeber

After 1979, U.S. officials changed General Karl von Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is only a "continuation of State policy [that is, a continuation of politics] by other means."¹ In Central America the Reagan administration tried to use war as a substitute for state policy. Diplomacy was replaced by war; military escalation was substituted for politics. More specifically, the Reagan administration used diplomatic discussions as a fig leaf to cover military escalation. In dealing with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, or the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) revolutionaries who tried to overthrow the U.S.-supported government in El Salvador, the Reagan administration used war, not diplomacy, as its state policy.

By the time Ronald Reagan left office in January 1989, however, that policy had collapsed. The Sandinistas, impoverished and besieged, grimly tightened their hold on Nicaragua. Their enemies, the contras (who had been equipped and largely created by the United States), had been unable to hold any significant piece of Nicaraguan territory. By 1988 the contras were divided, dispersed, and had largely disappeared as a fighting force. In El Salvador the U.S.-supported government of President José Napoleón Duarte not only had been unable to stop the brutalities against human rights committed by the Washington-equipped Salvadoran army but also rapidly lost popularity to right-wing political parties who supported the army.

U.S. policy had gone awry in the two main arenas of Nicaragua and El Salvador, as well as in neighboring Guatemala, where the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had overthrown an elected government and imposed a military regime in 1954. There, the army continued to hold

real power despite the election of a civilian president in 1986. The army's control, however, and its use of a violent beans-and-bullets policy (that is, winning over rebellious peasants with beans or killing them with bullets) did not succeed in stamping out a revolution that had existed since the 1960s. And in Honduras, Reagan's closest ally in carrying on the war against the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran revolutionaries, the terrific burden of helping Washington's military policies began to rip apart the society. Once among the most tranquil and liberal of nations in the region, Honduras had been turned into one huge U.S. military base that drained the country's small resources, created widespread venereal disease, produced anti-American terrorism, and turned the southern part of the country—where twelve thousand Washington-supported contras encamped—into virtually a separate, ungovernable nation.

Something had gone seriously wrong with Reagan's policy of using war instead of diplomacy in Central America. A few administration officials had seen it all coming and tried to reverse course. Indeed, the State Department twice tried to modify policy so that a so-called dual track rather than simply a military track would be followed. The dual-track approach was worked out initially by Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs (1981–1983). Enders was not a dove. While stationed in Southeast Asia during 1969–70, he had established his willingness to use force by guiding (and then helping to keep secret) the covert bombing of Communist bases in Cambodia. As a top State Department official in early 1983, moreover, he warned that "it should be made clear to the Soviet Union and Cuba and Nicaragua that the United States may take direct action if they try to destabilize nations in this hemisphere."² Behind the scenes, however, Enders had learned that escalating U.S. military involvement was not solving the key political problems in Central America. The Reagan administration's application of force instead was leading the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutionaries to escalate their military efforts. Enders sought to use the immense U.S. military power as a stick to shape negotiations rather than as a primitive club to drive the Sandinistas and the FMLN into oblivion.

His approach clashed with the administration's determination to overthrow—not negotiate with—the Sandinistas and to destroy—not to discuss power-sharing with—the Salvadoran rebels. Those policies were shaped not in the State Department by Enders but in the National Security Council (NSC). In the White House offices of the NSC, William C. Clark, the president's national security adviser and close friend, combined little knowledge of and less experience in Central

American affairs with an ardent military approach to foreign policy problems. This policy of force was also strongly supported at the U.S. office in the United Nations where Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick worked out a rationale for supporting right-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Finally, the promilitary policy was encouraged at the Pentagon where Fred Iklé and Nestor Sanchez held die-hard views of the need to oppose Third World revolutionaries by force. (Notably, the uniformed military at the Pentagon often disagreed with Iklé and Sanchez over Central America. Still suffering from the Vietnam involvement, and more concerned with increasing the military budget to deal with the Soviet Union, the uniformed military opposed a Central American policy based on force that could—as it had in Vietnam—slowly but inevitably lead to the increasing use of U.S. troops.)

Against this range of opponents, Enders stood little chance. In May 1983 the White House forced him out of Washington. He became ambassador to Spain, where he could talk with a government that agreed with his dual-track approach. Enders and Spanish officials now could console each other while Clark, Iklé, and Kirkpatrick pushed policy along the single-track military route.³

Despite Enders's departure, the State Department did not immediately join the single-trackers. The professionals at State knew Central America and understood the region's dilemmas too well. Enders was replaced by Langhorne Motley, who had been a real estate speculator in Alaska before becoming the rather widely publicized and outspoken U.S. ambassador to Brazil in 1981. Little public evidence indicated that Motley would oppose the single-trackers, but he learned quickly. He continued to support a tough military approach and agreed with the ongoing North American buildup in the region. But, resembling Enders, he also came to understand that, unless the United States aimed for a diplomatic settlement, the use of military power could only lead to a bloody dead end. Worse, that power, instead of frightening the revolutionaries into surrender, was driving them into more rapidly expanding their military strategy. The U.S. military escalation was creating results opposite from what had been intended.

Thus, Motley also began to explore the dual-track alternative. In July and August 1983, however, he and the State Department were dramatically undercut by the White House's announcement that the United States would begin massive military maneuvers in Central America. In conducting the largest peacetime maneuvers in history in the region, U.S. officials planned to deploy as many as thirty thousand troops. The announcement came, moreover, at a time when Washington was rapidly building the military capacity of Honduras as a base for

attacking Nicaragua and as the CIA publicly escalated its supplying and direction of the contras. The White House apparently announced the dramatic news without informing either Motley or Secretary of State George Shultz.

Shultz reportedly was furious. His anger exploded, moreover, as Congress and knowledgeable private citizens unleashed a barrage of criticism at the Reagan policy. A political crisis of considerable proportions loomed just one year before the 1984 presidential campaign was to begin. The White House staff, led by the cool chief of staff, James A. Baker, shrewdly gained time by arranging the appointment of a bipartisan commission on Central America chaired by former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. President Reagan charged the commission with examining the region's problems in depth and recommending a course of action. The political crisis temporarily eased, but U.S. military escalation continued. Indeed, that escalation reached new levels during late 1983 and early 1984, just as the Kissinger Commission issued a report that refused to condone any power sharing with the Salvadoran revolutionaries, condemned the Sandinistas, and placed strong emphasis on the need to provide military security and not on diplomatic approaches. Motley's two-track approach was not at all strengthened by Kissinger's report.

Thus, the Central American wars roared on. By 1984, after nearly one full term in office, President Reagan had involved his country in several costly conflicts. The bloodiest in terms of lives lost occurred in Lebanon, where 269 U.S. soldiers were killed within one year. In Central America, North Americans were engaged on three fronts, and a fourth threatened to open.

The first front engulfed El Salvador, where by 1984 about forty thousand government soldiers fought nine thousand to twelve thousand FMLN revolutionaries. In January 1981 the FMLN had launched what it termed a "final offensive" to sweep the government from power, but the Salvadoran army inflicted heavy casualties in pushing back the offensive with surprising ease. About 3,500 FMLN troops remained after the defeat. Over the next three years their numbers tripled. By early 1984 the military situation was so bad that the Kissinger Commission believed the collapse of the Salvadoran army was not inconceivable. Moreover, the government's troops had proven to be poor fighters. Only one out of every ten trained in the United States reenlisted, officers in some key areas were corrupt and ineffective, and important commanders were more concerned with their tasks in the brutal terrorist death squads that killed about forty thousand civilians between 1979 and 1984 than with fighting the revolutionaries.

By the end of Reagan's second term in early 1989 the Salvadoran government had about sixty-five thousand troops, while the United States had spent over \$3 billion to keep that government propped up. Washington's aid began to pay more than two thirds of El Salvador's federal expenditures, or about the level at which the United States had supported South Vietnam during the height of that war in the late 1960s. But the FMLN could not be conquered. It closed down large parts of El Salvador by blocking roads and dynamiting power stations. The revolutionaries launched terrorist attacks in 1987-88 within the capital, San Salvador, and made destructive surprise attacks on army bases. The Salvadorans were being ground down in a bloody stalemated war.

Meanwhile, El Salvador's government was losing popularity and legitimacy. It could not pass badly needed land-reform programs because of opposition from the army and the army's longtime ally, the oligarchs (that is, the so-called Fourteen Families that had run the country as a personal fiefdom since the nineteenth century and whose exploitation had largely brought about the revolution). To try to create legitimacy for the government, the United States had sponsored elections. The first, in 1982, created a constituent assembly; the second, in 1984, elected a president. Both fell far short of providing the needed legitimacy, and from 16 to 25 percent of the 1982 votes may have been fraudulent. This fraud helped gain a majority vote for a party (ARENA) that was linked to some of the worst human rights atrocities, so the United States intervened to ensure that this party did not obtain the interim presidency to which the vote entitled it. In neither 1982 nor 1984 did the FMLN participate in the election. Several of their top leaders had been trapped and murdered in cold blood by the Salvadoran army in 1980 as they prepared to discuss terms with the government. No guarantees existed that the personal safety of any politician in the liberal-to-radical part of the political spectrum could be ensured against the death squads' rifles.

In 1984 the United States controlled the election. It used public relations devices and front organizations operated by the CIA which, together with the U.S. embassy in San Salvador, worked out and supervised the election process.⁴ Duarte, a graduate of Notre Dame University in Indiana, won the presidency. Because he was highly popular in Washington, Congress opened its pocketbook to him. But by early 1989 he had not been able to carry out reforms or defeat the FMLN, he had failed to control the army or maintain the popularity of his Christian Democratic party, and, tragically, he was dying of cancer.

The elections had been an integral part of U.S. military policy. They were conducted less to create a nationally accepted government than to create a regime that appeared to be legitimate—and thus appeared to be worthy of the billions of dollars of U.S. aid that were necessary to conduct military campaigns.

The second war in the region occurred in northern Nicaragua along the Honduran border. The contras, with about ten thousand men, attempted to launch invasions from Honduran bases into northern Nicaragua between 1981 and 1987. They particularly wanted to declare the existence of a provisional government on Nicaraguan soil, a regime that Washington then could recognize as an alternative to the Sandinista government. To fight the incursions, the Sandinistas built an army of sixty-five thousand troops and reserve militias of about one hundred thousand. In late 1983 the CIA shoved aside the politically inept contra leaders who had failed to achieve their military or political goals. By mid-1984 over \$70 million of CIA money had flowed to the contras, but there was little to show for it other than the killing of several hundred persons on both sides and the bombing by the CIA of the Managua airport and the country's major oil refinery and docks in late 1983.

In 1984 news leaked of the detailed CIA efforts, including a manual that discussed assassinating Nicaraguan opponents. An angry U.S. Congress moved to stop the CIA activities and temporarily cut off military aid to the contras. Not until 1986 did Congress restore that aid, which lasted only one year. In 1987 the contras' military and political failures, a spreading peace settlement that took root in the region under the sponsorship of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, and—perhaps most important—the headline-grabbing revelations that a lowly lieutenant colonel in the White House, Oliver North, had diverted funds from arms sales to the contras' use despite Congress's prohibition of such a diversion, combined to kill their cause in the United States. The contras fragmented. Some returned to Managua to discuss peace terms with the Sandinistas, while a few remained in the jungles and tried to revive the counterrevolution. Most lived in southern Honduras with their dependents and waited for their powerful sponsor to help them move elsewhere—preferably Costa Rica or Miami.⁵

A third war devastated parts of southern Nicaragua along the Costa Rican border. An anti-Sandinista group (with the Spanish acronym ARDE), led by Edén Pastora and Alfonso Robelo, included about four thousand soldiers. Pastora and Robelo had been major figures in the Sandinista movement in the late 1970s, but they left Managua when Pastora did not obtain an important post in the new regime and when

both men saw that the Sandinistas intended to carry out a social revolution through authoritarian methods with which Pastora and Robelo had little sympathy. Pastora, nevertheless, adamantly refused to move closer to the CIA or to form a partnership with the contras in the north as Washington urged him to do. He charged that the contras included too many followers of Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship that he had helped throw out of power in 1979. In the spring of 1984 a bomb planted at Pastora's press conference severely wounded him, killed four journalists, and threw his movement into confusion. No conclusive evidence emerged to prove who planted the bomb. As Pastora recovered, Robelo and the CIA tried to reorganize the southern forces so they could fight against the Sandinistas.⁶ By 1987, however, this third front was breathing its last.

A fourth war also was being waged in the region, although the United States was involved less directly there than in the other three. The Guatemalan government had been fighting revolutionaries intermittently since 1960. The outbreak changed dramatically in political complexion during the mid-1970s when significant numbers of Indians joined the revolutionaries. Holding a bare majority of Guatemala's population, the Indians have been among the most oppressed and politically quiet people in Latin America. The army-controlled government, however, went too far when it grabbed large areas of land and devastated traditional Indian settlements. The Guatemalan regime responded with such atrocities that, in 1977, President Jimmy Carter threatened to cut off U.S. military aid unless the repression was stopped. The Guatemalan leaders told Carter that they no longer wanted assistance on those terms and continued to slaughter the Indians.⁷

The Reagan administration endeavored to reopen military aid channels for the Guatemalan army, but Congress refused to appropriate large sums of money until the mid-1980s when a civilian president, Vinicio Cerezo, was elected. Cerezo made several small attempts at economic reforms, only to have right-wing members of the army try to overthrow him in May 1988. Cerezo survived, but the reforms stopped. It was clear that the remaining army officers controlled both the president and the country, and human rights brutalities against opponents continued. Nearly one hundred thousand Guatemalans, most of them Indians, lived in camps in southern Mexico where they had fled for safety.⁸ U.S. military aid continued to flow to Guatemala, and the Reagan administration apparently asked few questions about how or against whom it was being used.

That the United States was not more fully involved in Guatemala was due less to the restraint of the Reagan administration than to the Guatemalans' passionate belief that they were not going to become like the Hondurans, whose country was being turned into a U.S. military base. The Guatemalan military is one of the proudest and most tightly controlled in Latin America. Its members have exceptional loyalty to their institution and do not care for outside advice, even from the nation that put them into power in 1954. Because of the army's strength and the country's historic influence in the region, and also because of the Reagan administration's desire to form a Central American military front to deal with the FMLN and the Sandinistas (a front that would have to include Guatemalan army forces to be effective), U.S. officials tried to help the Guatemalan forces in every way allowed, and in some cases not condoned, by Congress. Washington hoped to use Guatemala as a fourth front for its "State policy," to use Clausewitz's phrase.

In Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Nicaraguan revolutionary conflict, the United States allied itself with the forces of the past: regimes represented by small elite groups that had exploited their own people for a century or more, by military officers who had lived off their countries for decades and now formed death squads to kill suspected critics, and, in the case of the contras, by army officers and political leaders closely associated with dictatorships.

Such a perspective on U.S. policy raises two major questions. First, how did North Americans, who were once, as John Winthrop of the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony (and much later Ronald Reagan) phrased it, to form a "city upon a hill" that shined its light of liberty to the world, end up in such tragedies? Second, what alternatives to the Reagan policy appeared in the 1980s?

The United States did not create the conditions that produced Central American revolutions. When the Spanish colonial rulers involuntarily departed amid the Latin American wars for independence during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, they left behind class-ridden societies, most of which were desperately poor and parochial. Many Central American political leaders were so conservative that they did not want Spain to leave (some feared, correctly, that Guatemala would immediately attempt to extend its power over the area), and they succeeded in killing the nascent union movement of the 1820s and 1830s that might have united the five nations—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—into a self-sufficient unit.

As parochialism triumphed, the oligarch class developed its power in each of the nations except Costa Rica. In that country a more homogeneous racial composition (heavily Spanish with little of the Indian or black blood found elsewhere in the region) and a relatively equitable land-holding system, which survived into the twentieth century, created bases for a more consensual political system than had emerged in the other four nations. With only two major exceptions—the civil wars of 1918 and 1948—Costa Rica developed a democratic and stable government that set it apart in the region and gave its people, the Ticos, a feeling of superiority that made later attempts at Central American cooperation difficult.

In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, on the other hand, control of the land was tightly held by a relative few. Masses of peasants had sunk to depths of poverty and forms of wage slavery by the late 1920s. The elites exploited the laborers and land to produce plantation crops such as coffee, cotton, and bananas for export to industrializing nations. These Central Americans thus became dependent on one or two crops. They were unable to regulate the prices of their products because their exports depended on a world market, not domestic markets where some control might be exerted. Moreover, domestic markets were too poor and wealth too inequitably distributed to ensure a self-sufficient economy.

Honduras underwent a slightly different development. It had more land available than its neighbors. Consequently, its peasants could find room to scratch out a living. The best areas for plantation crops, however, fell into the hands of U.S. banana companies after 1890. Honduras became the prototype of the banana republic, with its land, transportation, communications, and government operated directly (or, in the case of the government, indirectly) by North Americans. Occupying a key strategic location in the region and willing to cooperate with those who held dollars for investment, Honduras acted as Washington's staunch and agreeable ally decades before the Reagan administration used it as a base for U.S. military and CIA operations.

North American policy worked on several levels until the 1930s. On one level, private investors and merchants penetrated the local economies until every nation except El Salvador became highly dependent on the U.S. economy for markets, food staples, or both. El Salvador, which actually had tried to become a state of the United States during the 1820s, escaped Washington's financial control and worked more closely with Western Europe until World War II. On another level, Washington officials frequently dispatched troops to maintain stability. Their objectives were at least twofold: to provide

peace of mind for Yankee investors and to ensure that European powers (especially Great Britain and Germany) would not take such police chores into their own hands. U.S. soldiers and sailors had appeared as peacekeepers in the nineteenth century, but, after Theodore Roosevelt began to build the Panama Canal in 1903 and issued his so-called corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904 (a pronouncement in which he told the world that henceforth his country would act unilaterally as a policeman in Latin America), the United States became the supreme military power in the hemisphere.⁹

Most notably the United States used its muscle to maintain order when its forces landed in Nicaragua in 1911–12 and, more particularly, to guarantee that a faction in Managua willing to cooperate with Washington would remain in power. Unfortunately, many Nicaraguans did not care for such a regime, and U.S. troops remained until 1925 to protect the government they had put in power. When the troops left, civil war resumed almost immediately; they returned in 1926 and stayed until 1933. During these later years, however, they signally failed to destroy the guerrilla band of Augusto Sandino. This small, tough nationalist, supported by the peasants, vowed to fight until the Yankees left his country. By 1933 this intervention was becoming too costly and politically embarrassing for officials in Washington. The administrations of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt pulled out the troops but left behind a new device for protecting their interests: a native National Guard trained by North Americans and commanded by young Anastasio Somoza. A Nicaraguan who had received much of his education in the United States, Somoza promptly used the guard to become dictator. He murdered Sandino when the guerrilla leader came to Managua to make peace, and he controlled the country until an assassin gunned him down in 1956. His sons then took over until the younger Anastasio lost power in 1979 to the Sandinistas.¹⁰

The lessons of the 1912-to-1933 military interventions in Nicaragua were instructive for those who cared to learn. The first lesson was that the use of force would require a long time to build a viable, pro-United States native regime in Central America. A second lesson was that not even a twenty-year occupation could produce equitable political and economic systems—only a dictatorial regime whose first commitment was to its own stability and pocketbook. A third lesson was that U.S. military intervention actually produced a result that had long terrified Washington officials who had to deal with the Soviet Union, China, and Mexico: mass-based revolutionaries who fought U.S. interests at every turn and who seemed to prosper even more when fresh foreign troops appeared. By 1933 the military intervention had produced exactly the opposite results intended by Washington policymakers.

Unfortunately, those lessons were not well learned. The U.S. military involvement became less direct and public during the Good Neighbor era of President Franklin Roosevelt, but control remained ultimately in North American hands—although this control worked through economic leverage, the common cause of World War II, and the need of the region for North American products and foodstuffs in the 1940s and 1950s. The economic ties, however, did nothing to alleviate the class divisions and inequitable economic situation. Indeed, they worsened these problems. Pressures built toward a series of explosions. One occurred in Guatemala between 1944 and 1954 when a middle-class uprising overthrew a dictatorship and established a reform government that tried to redistribute wealth and institute fair elections. This government incurred the wrath of the CIA and President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration in 1954.

The breathing room gained by that CIA operation was brief. In 1959, Fidel Castro's revolution suddenly conquered Cuba. No nation in Latin America, not even Nicaragua, had been as fully under Washington's control since the 1890s as Cuba. Castro's success, and his ability to maintain his power despite enormous U.S. pressures (including an attempted replay of the 1954 CIA operation at Cuba's Bay of Pigs in 1961), raised the specter of other Castros seizing power in the region. And Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were especially ripe for such revolutions. President John F. Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress in 1961 to develop an economically just and democratic Latin America that would not need Castro's type of revolutionary change.

The alliance instead became a cause of the revolutions in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s. It did so because the economic aid that the United States poured into the region during the 1960s went to the oligarchs who controlled the distribution points in the economies. As the wealthy profited, the poor multiplied. Even before his death in November 1963, Kennedy understood that the alliance was not working as he had hoped. It was even polarizing some of the Latin American societies. To maintain stability and give the alliance time to work, Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, launched a series of military policies.¹¹

Increased numbers of Central American troops were trained at U.S. bases in the Panama Canal Zone and in the United States itself. Military aid to these forces roughly doubled during the 1960s. Much of this assistance helped to create counterinsurgency forces that soon preyed on their own people. A policy that aimed to build stability for development too often ended with Guatemalan, Salvadoran, or Nicaraguan

officers torturing political suspects for the officers' edification and the perpetuation of their own corruption. In 1963–64 the United States even tried to create a Central American military force (CONDECA) that could act as a unit to provide region-wide order. CONDECA collapsed under the national mistrust that divided Honduras from Salvadoran (the two peoples actually went to war briefly in 1969), Guatemalan from Nicaraguan, and Costa Rican from everyone else.¹²

These new policies nevertheless reintroduced a powerful, direct U.S. military presence for the first time since the early 1930s. In historical perspective the Good Neighbor era from 1930 to the 1950s appears as an aberration. As Washington policymakers used troops to maintain stability in much of Central America before 1933, so they now used force to quiet the growing unrest that ironically stemmed from the Alliance for Progress. By the 1970s, President Richard M. Nixon's Latin American policy depended almost entirely on military aid to regimes controlled by the armed forces. Such an approach worked only sporadically. By the late 1970s three revolutionary movements—in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador—grew stronger. At the start of the Alliance for Progress twenty years before, only one small revolutionary group in Guatemala had threatened Central American oligarchs.

President Carter attempted to deal with this new insurgency through a human rights program that he hoped would force the oligarchs to make their systems more humane and, moreover, open up those systems before they were overthrown by revolutions. The president's policy, however, contained a fatal contradiction. The oligarch-military complex ultimately had to rule through terror and oppression; it had no other legitimacy. To force it to cease oppression undermined its own authority. Carter's human rights program consequently undermined the status quo, but he proved unwilling to accept such results. In all of Central America except Costa Rica, leftist forces could take advantage of the oligarch-military weakness to propel themselves into power. No center existed. There was no viable Christian Democratic type of party that could present an alternative to the leftist factions. The centrists either had bases too weak to threaten the two extremes, or, as in El Salvador and Nicaragua, they had been killed, exiled, or otherwise kept from political participation.¹³

Carter's ultimate test came in Nicaragua during mid-1979. As the Somoza dictatorship escalated its oppression, including the bombing of slums where Somoza's National Guard mistakenly believed the Sandinistas were hiding, the president forced the dictator to act more humanely. Somoza's change of tactics, however, opened new opportunities for the revolutionaries who rapidly gained power in early 1979.

Carter then resumed sending some aid to Nicaragua and even tried to work out a hemisphere-wide approach that would block the Sandinistas from obtaining power. He apparently hoped to put elements of the National Guard in control until at least the 1981 elections, but he found no support for such intervention. In July 1979 the Sandinistas ruled Nicaragua.¹⁴

This brief historical survey is necessary for understanding the Reagan administration's policy since 1981. Its emphasis on military force—the preeminence of Pentagon civilians and National Security Council hard-liners willing to use force unilaterally in place of either negotiations or a multilateral approach to resolving the conflicts—was consistent with the history of U.S. intervention in Central America. With the exception of the Good Neighbor era, Washington officials have used military force to try to maintain stability and protect their nation's interests in the region, regardless of the changing nature of those interests. In this sense the Reagan policy is traditional. The history and the tradition it embodies, however, have not been among the happier pages in the story of U.S. diplomacy. Since 1900, Central American nations have become ever more unstable internally, not happier and more stable. Since 1954 (and in Nicaragua since the appearance of Sandino in 1927) revolutionaries in the region have moved ever leftward, not toward the democratic middle. For at least eight decades the United States has been the most powerful force by far in the area; in some cases (for example, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica), the smaller nation developed an almost total dependency on its giant neighbor to the north.

Contrary to the Kissinger Commission's claim, it cannot be argued that the United States has paid too little attention to Central America in the twentieth century. The opposite is the case. Nor can it be argued that the United States has been reluctant to use military force, both overtly and covertly, in the region. Here, too, the opposite is the case. Nor can it be argued that the constant application of force and the integration of the North and Central American economies have benefited either side or bought time so that the Central American oligarchs could make their societies more equitable. Indeed, the opposite has been the case.

These events need to be studied in order to break the historical cycle. An alternative to these eight decades of policy were the Contadora proposals formulated in September 1983 and then agreed to by the five Central American nations in January 1984. Those proposals declared that the signatories would deescalate military fighting, reduce their armed forces, reject foreign military forces or advisers, refrain from intervention in the affairs of other nations, carry out open and fair

elections, and commit themselves to equitable economic development. The Contadora principles constituted a wish list, and so-called realists in Washington and elsewhere dismissed these principles as empty, if not dangerously seductive, promises. No one could say that they would not work until they were tried, but trying them required that the most powerful nation, the United States, agree to the principles, especially the points on military deescalation and the removal of foreign military forces.

The Reagan administration, however, refused to work with the Contadora nations. By 1985 the two-track U.S. policy had been effectively narrowed to one—military power—and Langhorne Motley resigned from the State Department. He was replaced by Elliott Abrams, a hard-liner who had no interest in a negotiated settlement in Central America. Abrams continued to control policy in the region even after he lied to a congressional committee about his knowledge of how secret funds were sent to the contras despite Congress's prohibition of such aid. Although Abrams became a pariah on Capitol Hill and his policy failed utterly in Central America, Reagan and Shultz kept him in power until the administration left Washington in January 1989.

The vacuum left by the collapse of Abrams's strategy was filled by a plan pushed through in August 1987 by President Arias of Costa Rica. The Arias plan required the five Central American governments to carry out policies of reconciliation with opposing forces, begin a democratization process at home, prohibit use of their land to insurgent forces fighting in neighboring nations, and stop sending aid to such forces. All five Central American presidents signed it, and subsequently—much to the displeasure of top Reagan officials—Arias won the Nobel Prize for Peace. The United States found itself largely isolated in its Central American policies.¹⁵

The Arias peace plan, without U.S. support and with historic Central American mistrust often paralyzing any progress, was not yet fully in force when President Reagan left office in early 1989. The plan, however, had helped open some political dialogue between opposing forces in El Salvador, and, of special importance, it had helped lead the U.S. Congress to end all military aid to the contras. Arias personally blamed Washington for not fully cooperating with the peace effort, but he also condemned the Sandinistas for refusing to open Nicaraguan society fully to opposing political parties and views. The plan nearly was destroyed in mid-1988 when the Sandinistas jailed several hundred political opponents and closed down critical radio stations. By late 1988, however, many of the prisoners were released, and the radio stations (as well as opposition newspapers) were functioning, albeit warily.

No one could guarantee that the Arias plan would work. Its multi-lateral approach makes it unwieldy, not to mention highly frustrating for Washington officials who traditionally have acted unilaterally and according to U.S. interests alone in the Central American region. But their determination to follow a single-track military policy alienated allies and caused regional Latin American powers to break away from this policy. If the integration of the economies, the use of military force, and unilateral decision making in Washington have been the three characteristics of U.S. policy toward Central America throughout the twentieth century, then the results of that history should convince the supposed pragmatists and realists who formulate that policy that at least a two-track approach, with the larger and stronger track running through the multilateral approaches represented by the Contadora and Arias plans, should become the history of the future. In this case, war has not proven to be a substitute for state policy.

Notes

1. The Clausewitz quotation and a useful commentary are available in Roger A. Leonard, ed., *A Short Guide to Clausewitz on War* (New York, 1968), esp. 11–14.
2. Quoted in Allan Nairn, "Endgame: A Special Report on the U.S. Military Strategy in Central America," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 18 (May–June 1984): 39.
3. Author's interviews, March 1983 and July 1984; *Washington Post*, March 6, 1983.
4. *Washington Post*, February 25, 1984; Timothy Garton Ash, "A Tale of Two Countries," *Spectator*, March 31, 1984; *Central America Report*, March 30, 1984; *Washington Post*, May 4, 1984.
5. Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (New York, 1988), esp. 164–67; *New York Times*, June 11, 1984; Commission on U.S.-Central American Relations, *U.S. Military Intervention in Central America* (Washington, DC, 1984), 4–5, 8–12.
6. *New York Times*, June 14, 1984.
7. This section is taken from the extended discussion of these points in Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1983), 209–13, 256–61.
8. *New York Times*, September 4, 1988, has a useful overview by Stephen Kinzer.
9. James Daniel Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, 1897–1914), 16:7375–76; Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (Baltimore, 1940), esp. 428–29.
10. There is a fine overview in Lester D. Langley, *The United States and the Caribbean, 1900 to 1970* (Athens, GA, 1980), while Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Chicago, 1967), is the standard account.
11. This argument on the alliance is presented at length in Walter LaFeber, "Inevitable Revolutions," *Atlantic Monthly* 249 (June 1982): 74–83.

12. Don L. Etchison, *The United States and Militarism in Central America* (New York, 1975), esp. 64–67.

13. This argument is derived especially from the work of Sandy Vogelgesang, *American Dream, Global Nightmare* (New York, 1980), notably the sections on El Salvador; and Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton, 1981).

14. Richard R. Fagen, "Dateline Nicaragua: The End of the Affair," *Foreign Policy* 36 (Fall 1979): 178–91; Arnold Levinson, "Nicaraguan Showdown," *Inquiry* 22 (June 11 and 25, 1979): 13. Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition* (Princeton, 1987), is an insider's account of the sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic, mistakes committed by the Carter administration.

15. Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy* (New York, 1988), 324–28.

INDIGENOUS SOURCES OF CONFLICT
