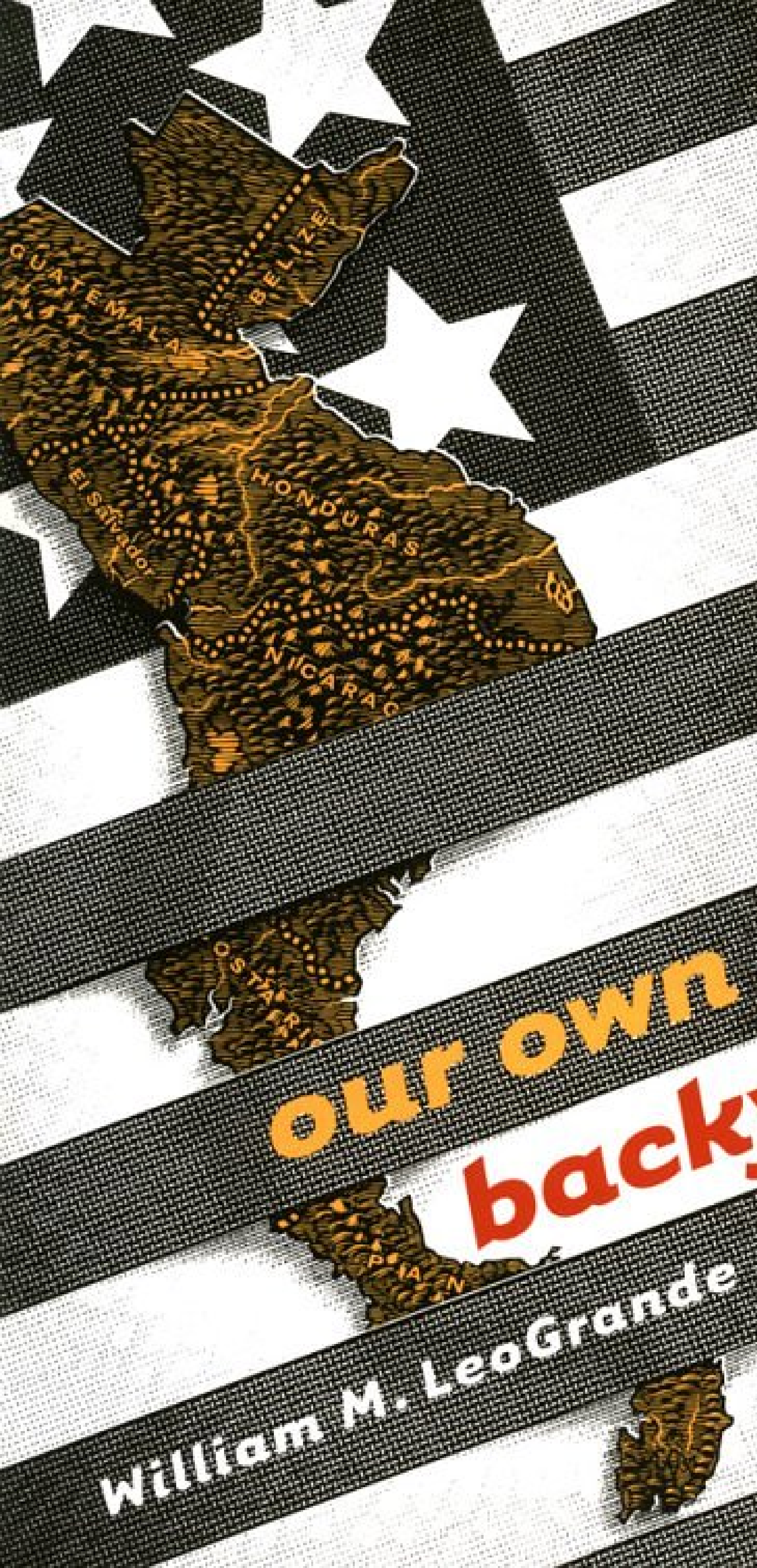


our own backyard

the united states in central america, 1977–1992

William M. LeoGrande

Copyrighted material; sample page 38 of 38

"A masterly and comprehensive chronicle of U.S. policy toward Central America in the 1980s."
Atlantic Monthly

"[LeoGrande] has risen above partisanship to produce a book central to any historical evaluation of those troubled times."
Foreign Affairs

"[LeoGrande] takes the reader confidently through a complex, often tortuous story. . . . Throughout, the analysis is thorough and clear."
New York Times Book Review

"Full of unorthodox, original perspectives, LeoGrande's clearly written, magisterial study holds timely post–Cold War lessons that transcend the Central American setting."
Publishers Weekly

Illuminating one of the most controversial chapters in the history of American foreign policy, William LeoGrande presents a comprehensive account of U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s. From the military clashes fought on the ground in Central America to the bitter political discord that wrenched apart Washington, he chronicles the dramatic struggles that characterized what he calls "the last battle of the Cold War."

William M. LeoGrande is professor of government at American University. A specialist in Latin American politics and U.S. foreign policy, he has been a frequent adviser to the government and private foundations and has served on committee staffs in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives.

The University of North Carolina Press
Post Office Box 2288
Chapel Hill, NC 27515-2288
www.uncpress.unc.edu

Cover illustration by John MacDonald
Printed in U.S.A.

Copyrighted material; sample page 2 of 38

Contents

Preface ix
Abbreviations Used in the Text xv

Part I. Origins

1. A New Beginning 3
2. The Dragons' Teeth of War 10
3. From Carter to Reagan 52
4. The Vicar Draws the Line 72
5. A New Policy for Nicaragua 104
6. Tough Guys 125

Part II. El Salvador

7. The Tonic of Elections 149
8. The War Party Takes Control 174
9. The President Moves to Center Stage 199
10. The Politics of Murder 219
11. From Conflict to Consensus 237
12. El Salvador Disappears 260

Part III. Nicaragua

13. Launching the Not-So-Secret War 285
14. Gunboat Diplomacy 306
15. Bringing the War to a Head 326
16. Peace Offensive 347
17. Project Democracy 381
18. Getting Back in the Game 409
19. High Noon 439
20. Iran-Contra 476
21. Giving Peace a Chance 505
22. The Last Hurrah 526

Part IV. Denouement

23. A Kinder, Gentler Policy? 553
24. Why Were We in Central America? 580

Notes 591
Bibliography 723
Index 745

Copyrighted material; sample page 3 of 38

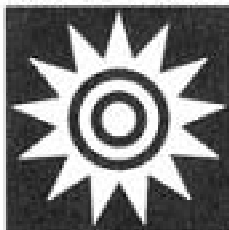
I Origins

We do control the destinies of Central America and we do so for the simple reason that the national interest absolutely dictates such a course. . . . Until now, Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those we do not recognize and support fall.

—Undersecretary of State Robert Olds, 1927

Copyrighted material; sample page 4 of 38

CHAPTER 1



A New Beginning

As if on cue, the sun broke through the gray blanket of clouds over the city of Washington just as Ronald Wilson Reagan was sworn in as fortieth president of the United States. The sunshine pushed the temperature into the mid-fifties, making January 20, 1981, one of the warmest inauguration days on record. The rainstorm forecast for the afternoon never came.

On the inaugural platform, Reagan looked relaxed and resplendent in morning coat and striped pants. At sixty-nine, he was the oldest man ever to assume the presidency, but he looked vigorous next to Jimmy Carter. The outgoing president had not slept for three days, trying in vain to arrange the release of the fifty-two American hostages in Iran before the final hours of his presidency ticked away. Carter, who refused the suggestion by Reagan's staff that he, too, don formal morning dress, looked weary and plain in his ordinary business suit.

A southern populist, Carter had tried to demystify the institution of the presidency by bringing the president closer to the people. After his own inauguration, he walked down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House rather than ride in a limousine. He insisted on being called "Jimmy" Carter, not James Earl. He was everyman, and after the Byzantine Court politics of the Nixon years, Americans found him reassuring. But people were not entirely

Copyrighted material; sample page 5 of 38

comfortable with a president who seemed so common. Americans liked having some pomp and ceremony associated with the presidency. The office was no ordinary one, and it demanded an extraordinary person to fill it. Despite his intelligence and a real compassion for the less fortunate, Jimmy Carter, the peanut farmer from Georgia, never projected a heroic persona.

An engineer by profession, Carter approached the presidency as a problem solver—clear-headed, unemotional, matter-of-fact. He appealed to the American people for support by explaining issues, trying to persuade them by dint of logic. Coming to office in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, during the Middle East oil crisis, Carter believed the days of U.S. military and economic global dominance were over, and he said so. To many Americans, it was an unwelcome message. Carter was not wrong when he observed, in his infamous "malaise" speech, that the country was plagued by self-doubt, but in the end it was easier to blame the messenger.

Ronald Reagan, a successful film actor for over twenty years, approached politics as if it were theater. He understood instinctively that the first task of the leading man is to form an emotional bond with the audience. Once the hero wins the audience's loyalty, it will stick by him, rooting for him, even if he displays a few minor faults and even if the story line has an occasional hole in it. This was the secret of Reagan's "teflon" presidency—a willing suspension of disbelief. He could make factual mistakes, he could advocate policies that most people disagreed with, but he was so warm and engaging, both in person and in front of the camera, that the audience was always on his side. He played the hero to perfection.

And he cast Jimmy Carter as the villain. When Carter told the American people that they had entered an era of limits, Ronald Reagan reassured them that it was not America that was unequal to the challenge; rather, Jimmy Carter was unequal to it. "It is time for us to realize that we are too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams," Reagan said in his inaugural speech. "We're not, as some would have us believe, doomed to inevitable decline. We have every right to dream heroic dreams."[1]

People liked Ronald Reagan because he told them they lived in a shining city on a hill and that the nation's greatest days were still ahead. He told them that their traditional values—the belief in hard work, love of country, dedication to family, and the small-town sense of community—were not obsolete. Reagan's appeal was classically conservative; he recognized people's discomfort with the rapid economic, social, and cultural changes that had pounded the nation like a succession of hurricanes since the early 1960s—the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement, the women's movement, Vietnam, Watergate, stagflation. He held out

Copyrighted material; sample page 6 of 38

the promise that fidelity to the old virtues could form the basis of a moral revival and make America great again, both at home and abroad. The lost tranquility of Norman Rockwell's America could be recaptured. America would have "a New Beginning."

Central America and the Legacy of Vietnam

In foreign policy, Reagan aimed to recapture the bipartisan unity and self-confidence that were shattered in Vietnam. Over the next eight years, he would pursue a foreign policy diametrically opposed to Jimmy Carter's. Where Carter had sought to expand detente with the Soviet Union, Reagan would return to a Cold War posture of distrust and animosity, punctuated by the largest peacetime military buildup in American history. Where Carter had sought to craft a new relationship with the Third World based on tolerance for ideological pluralism and a presumption against intervention, Reagan viewed the Third World primarily through the prism of the East-West struggle and, under the rubric of the "Reagan Doctrine," would launch half a dozen covert paramilitary wars against perceived adversaries. Where Carter promoted human rights as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, Reagan would renew U.S. alliances with anti-Communist authoritarian regimes.

The foreign policies of these two presidents were as different as any in the post–World War II era, and nowhere were the differences clearer than in Central America. When civil conflicts erupted in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala in the late 1970s, Carter's instinct was to limit Washington's direct involvement and promote diplomatic settlements. Despite the growing strength of Marxist guerrillas, he refused to commit the United States to the defense of the status quo by resuming military aid to dictatorial regimes. From his first day in office, Ronald Reagan repudiated Carter's approach in favor of active U.S. military support for Central America's anti-Communists.

For the next decade, the Central American crisis would dominate America's foreign policy agenda and polarize domestic politics. During the first Reagan administration, the civil war in El Salvador held center stage. Despite fervent opposition from congressional Democrats, who opposed aiding a regime guilty of massive human rights abuses, Reagan never wavered in his support for the Salvadoran military. In eight years, he poured nearly $4 billion in U.S. assistance into the country. During Reagan's second term, El Salvador receded from Washington's political agenda (though the war continued unabated), only to be replaced by Nicaragua. As part of its global campaign to roll back the tide of international Communism, the Reagan administration organized an exile army to wage a proxy war against Nicaragua's revolutionary government. Here, too, Reagan met with stiff congressional resistance, but he would

Copyrighted material; sample page 7 of 38

brook no opposition. When Congress finally voted to prohibit further U.S. aid to the exiles ("contras"), senior administration officials, led by National Security Council staff aide Oliver North, continued to support the contras clandestinely. The revelation that they had circumvented the law produced a political scandal reminiscent of Watergate and nearly destroyed Reagan's presidency.

Why did such a small region loom so large in the American psyche during the 1980s? The debate over Central America was, in large measure, an extension of the debate over Vietnam. For the Reagan wing of the Republican Party, Central America was, first and foremost, an arena of struggle between Communism and Democracy. Those who, like Ronald Reagan, regarded Vietnam as "a noble cause" worried that the "Vietnam syndrome" was interfering with America's ability to resist Soviet encroachments in the Third World.[2] Central America was a test of America's mettle after the defeat in Southeast Asia, and conservatives were determined to win a clear victory to reinvigorate the nation's will to use force abroad.

Much of the general public shared the Republican right's distress about America's position in the world. Defeat in Vietnam seemed to mark the end of America's global preeminence. The 1970s oil crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the revolution in Iran all seemed to confirm that the United States was sliding downward toward the status of a second-rate power. Ronald Reagan pledged to stop the march of the "Evil Empire" of international Communism by restoring the United States to its rightful place as world leader.[3] Central America was the place that Reagan would draw the line.

If anti-Communism was a unifying force for Republicans, it divided Democrats. The Democratic Party never fully recovered from the political trauma of Vietnam. The war split the party from top to bottom along ideological lines: The "doves" of the left-liberal wing backed Eugene McCarthy's and Robert Kennedy's insurgent challenges to Lyndon Johnson; the "hawks" stuck with their president and Hubert Humphrey. After Johnson's withdrawal from the race and Kennedy's assassination, the party convened in Chicago for a fratricidal bloodletting that paved the way for the election of Richard Nixon. Four years later, the Democrats nominated antiwar candidate George McGovern.

Although McGovern lost as decisively as Barry Goldwater had almost a decade earlier, the ideological center of the national Democratic Party moved to the left, just as the center of the Republican Party had moved to the right after 1964. Outside the South, Democrats who had been Cold War liberals became antiwar liberals. The few who resisted this evolution either migrated as neoconservatives to the Republican Party, or tried in vain to fight a rear-guard action against the Democrats' ideological shift. In the South, however, most Democrats remained supporters of the war and a tough anti-Communist

Copyrighted material; sample page 8 of 38

foreign policy. The shift of majority sentiment in the national party to an antiwar, anti-interventionist posture widened the chasm between southern Democrats and their northern colleagues, reinforcing the split over civil rights. Liberal Democrats regarded Vietnam as a mistake and were always on guard to be sure the mistake was not repeated in some other faraway land. To them, Central America looked like another Vietnam in the making—another benighted Third World region where America would run afoul of history by casting its lot with authoritarian military regimes defending an anachronistic social order. They were determined not to start down the slippery slope.

The American people—from the average citizen to the foreign policy elite—were as divided about the lessons of Vietnam as were the Republican and Democratic Parties. Among the elite, Vietnam shattered the bipartisan consensus constructed by Harry Truman at the onset of the Cold War. That consensus rested upon several basic premises: that the Soviet Union (and later, Communist China) was an aggressive power that had to be contained or, like Hitler's Germany, it would subjugate others relentlessly; that the United States, as the leader of the free world, had primary responsibility for standing up to the Soviets; and, after Korea, that no corner of the world was too far away or too insignificant to defend from Soviet encroachment, lest aggression appeased become aggression repeated.

An unwritten corollary to this containment doctrine held that revolutions in the Third World created opportunities for Communist penetration. Instability was incompatible with U.S. security interests. With this precept as rationale, the United States took on the role of global policeman. In its zeal to block the advance of Communism, Washington often committed itself against the aspirations of revolutionary nationalists and social democrats in developing nations around the world. The war in Vietnam brought the limits of U.S. power into sharp focus. If the United States was no longer willing or able to "pay any price, bear any burden" in the international struggle against Communism, then debate was inevitable over what price should be paid, and where. Central America became the arena for that debate.

Among the general public, the war in Vietnam increased isolationist sentiment substantially, but it also split the "internationalist" public into two camps: those who thought Vietnam was justified and those who did not. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these two groups disagreed fundamentally over the most basic issues of American foreign policy. The antiwar group opposed virtually all U.S. military involvements abroad, especially if they involved sending American advisers or troops and therefore raised the specter of "another Vietnam." Those who supported the war in Vietnam evinced no such fears and no reluctance about new adventures abroad.