The Future of Central America

POLICY CHOICES FOR THE U.S. AND MEXICO

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U.S. Policy Options in Central America

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THE eruption of political turmoil in Central America over the past two years poses a profound challenge to the United States. Earlier policies aimed at preserving a congenial status quo in the region are no longer adequate to the task. A new policy is needed—one that effectively advances the interests and values of the United States in a period when the Central American region is undergoing profound social and political changes. The key to formulating such a policy is a clear understanding of the basic processes that have produced political instability in the region.

From the colonial period to the mid-twentieth century, the nations of Central America experienced similar patterns of development. Land grants from the Spanish Crown installed small landed elites at the apex of all these societies. From their position of economic privilege, these elites were able to dominate politics and use the apparatus of the state to defend their social and economic interests. Throughout the region, their power served to perpetuate economic underdevelopment, social inequality, and political oligarchy.

For decades, the oligarchic systems were relatively stable. Despite sporadic peasant revolts, such as the Salvadoran insurrection of 1932, the rural population lacked the political awareness and organization necessary to be a consistently potent political force. Regional stability was also reinforced by the United States. As the United States emerged as a world power at the turn of the twentieth century, it developed major economic and strategic interests in Central America. The desire to protect

U.S. investments and the need to defend the Panama Canal produced in Washington a clear preference for stable, friendly governments in Central America—a preference that Washington was willing to enforce by military intervention if necessary. The power of the United States was such that U.S. ambassadors in the region could and often did act as proconsuls. As Washington exercised its influence in favor of stability, it inevitably came to be identified as an ally of the landed oligarchs.[1]

In the decades after World War II, the foundations of Central America's oligarchic systems began to erode. The process of economic development that gathered speed in the 1950's and 1960's had profound and irreversible social consequences: the building of industries produced new social groups, white collar and blue collar urban workers; the extension of transport produced a truly national society from previously isolated rural communities; and the expansion of education and communications produced a citizenry more aware of its place in the nation's social structure, the shortcomings of that structure, and potential alternatives.

Not surprisingly, these social changes had political correlates. The growing middle class, the newly emerging urban working class, and even the traditional peasantry began to see political action as a means to redress the severe inequities of the oligarchic system. Of course, there were differences, from one nation to another, in the depth and timing of this crisis in the legitimacy of the old order. But throughout the region the basic dynamics of the crisis were the same.

The landed elites responded to demands for democracy and social justice with intransigence. Rather than risk a diminution of their privilege, they chose to defend the bastions of the old order by political force. The United States, fearful that fundamental change might open the door to communism in the Americas, enlisted on the side of the oligarchs. In Guatemala, it went so far as to help depose a government of radical reformers, thereby reconstituting the old order on a new foundation of military rule.[2] Except in Costa Rica, the forces of reform were

[1] Richard Millet, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1977).

[2] For the story of the U.S. involvement in the 1954 coup in Guatemala, see Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit* (New York, 1982).

everywhere throttled by the political might of the oligarchs and their allies in Washington.

The efforts at reform that characterized the opposition in Central America during the 1960's and 1970's were defeated by a combination of electoral fraud and political repression. The failure of reformism only exacerbated the crisis of legitimacy by convincing opponents of the old order that it was impervious to peaceful change. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the exhaustion of reformism was quickly followed by the growth of armed oppositions bent on destroying the old order rather than modifying it. The radicalism of the armed groups intensified the fear and resistance of the oligarchs, producing an ever-deepening spiral of political violence. The brutality of the armed forces, often aimed indiscriminately at whole social groups (e.g., peasants, intellectuals, clerics), served only to further delegitimize the existing regimes and bring new recruits to the guerrillas. The predictable outcome, as events in Nicaragua illustrated, was the collapse of the old order in the face of virtually universal popular opposition.[3]

For the defenders of the old order, the United States represented the last real hope of averting defeat. By the late 1970's, however, the United States was no longer prepared to serve as an uncritical ally of Central America's elites. Policy makers in Washington were torn between a traditional concern for stability and a growing revulsion at the brutality Central American regimes were using against their own citizens.[4]

In the wake of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the Carter administration sought to devise a new regional policy that would promote reformism and reduce the abuses of human rights while simultaneously undermining the political support of the armed insurgents. This policy was grounded in the assumption that the pressures for change in Central America had become irresistible. The old policy of supporting the "right" (i.e., the traditional elites and their military allies) was fruitless; it could nei-

[3] On the growth of revolutionary opposition in Nicaragua, see *Nicaragua: A People's Revolution* (Washington, D.C., 1980); on El Salvador, see Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador* (Boulder, Colo., 1982); on Guatemala, see Marlise Simons, "Guatemala: The Coming Danger," *Foreign Policy*, no. 43 (Summer 1981).

[4] On the development of U.S. human rights policy, see Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton, N.J., 1981).

ther contain nor resolve the growing regional crisis. Worse still, clinging to the old policy would tie long-term U.S. interests to regimes with little chance of long-term survival.[5]

To manage the process of regional change, Carter sought to revive the political "center" of moderate, reformist democrats, while opposing both the traditional right and radical left. But, as the administration's experience with El Salvador and Guatemala demonstrated, the difficulties with this strategy were legion. In El Salvador (as in Nicaragua and Guatemala) the center reached its political zenith in the early and mid-1970's. Its subsequent decline, precipitated by the failure of reformism, accelerated under the hammer-blows of repression so that by 1979 few centrists remained in the center.[6] Reversing the polarization of politics enough to create a viable center proved to be an impossible task. In both El Salvador and Guatemala, the political initiative continued to rest with the right and the left. Only in Honduras, where the spiral of escalating violence and polarization had not yet begun, did the Carter administration have any real success in advancing the cause of peaceful evolutionary change.

The Reagan administration came to office with a Central American policy that was, rhetorically at least, hostile to Carter's reformism.[7] Reagan de-emphasized human rights, promised to increase military aid to regimes threatened by insurgency, and cast the region's crisis in stark cold war terms. By implication, the United States appeared ready once again to enlist on the side of the old order in Central America. However, regional, global, and domestic realities have limited the administration's ability to pursue such a policy. Although it remains skeptical of social reform, reticent to stress human rights, and more willing than its predecessor to dispense military aid, it has been unable to ignore completely either reform or human rights. Congressional concern over the administration's preference for military measures has produced legislative limits on its actions in both El Salvador and Guatemala. The administration's re-

[5] For a full explication of this policy, see "Statement by Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, September 11, 1979" (Washington, D.C., Department of State, 1979).

[6] Montgomery, *Revolution*, *passim*.

[7] The classic statement of this policy is Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, 68, no. 5 (November 1979), 34–45.

sponse thus far has been to try to circumvent such limits rather than seek an alternative policy responsive to congressional concerns.

COEXISTING WITH NICARAGUA

Three years after the Sandinists' victory over Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, the Nicaraguan Revolution is still struggling to define the contours of its political and economic future. The United States is still struggling to define both its relationship to the new revolutionary government and, implicitly, the tolerable limits within which Washington will accept ideological heterogeneity in Central America.

Despite the Carter administration's best efforts, the collapse of the Somoza regime left the Sandinist National Liberation Front (FSLN) as the dominant political force in Nicaragua. The nine-member national directorate of the FSLN functions as the *de facto* executive power. Sandinists comprise a majority of the governing junta and the quasi-legislative council of state. They also hold all the key ministerial portfolios, including state security and the armed forces. Despite this near-monopoly of important political resources, the Sandinists have not moved to turn Nicaragua into "another Cuba." By retaining a significant degree of political pluralism and a mixed economy weighted toward the private sector, they have tried to preserve the unity of the multi-class coalition that overthrew Somoza. This has not been an easy task, and the FSLN has not been entirely successful at it.[8]

The Sandinists' pragmatic policies are the product of both domestic circumstances and international alignments. The FSLN itself is by no means ideologically monolithic—a fact too often overlooked in the United States. In order to build a movement powerful enough to defeat Somoza, the FSLN intentionally broadened its ranks in the late 1970's to encompass elements of the social democratic and Christian left.[9] The success of this strategy produced a movement that is by no means uniformly Marxist, let alone Marxist-Leninist, in its orientation.

[8] On postrevolutionary policy in Nicaragua, see George Black, *Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua* (London, 1981); Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York, 1982).

[9] William M. LeoGrande, "The Revolution in Nicaragua," *Foreign Affairs*, 58, no. 1 (Fall 1979), 28–50.

The FSLN's relationship with the private sector has been the central dynamic of Nicaraguan politics over the past three years. In a polity still without clear institutional procedures, the FSLN and the private sector confront one another in a fluid, ongoing clash of power and influence. The FSLN controls the state; the private sector controls most of the economy. The FSLN is anxious to secure the private sector's cooperation in the task of economic recovery; the private sector is anxious to secure greater influence within the emerging political system. Thus there exists an uneasy symbiosis that erupts periodically in political crisis as one side tests the resolve of the other. Thus far, such crises have always abated as a result of discussions or negotiations between the two contenders, but the potential for deeper conflict is obviously acute.

Within the Sandinist leadership, the pragmatists have thus far been able to contain the ideologues who prefer a new Nicaragua modelled on Cuba. This containment has been possible because the task of economic recovery has held the highest priority, and economic recovery requires the cooperation of the private sector. Containment also requires substantial external economic assistance, which has been coming largely from Western nations (e.g., Mexico, Venezuela, Western Europe). A sharp radicalization of the Revolution, including an end to pluralism and the expropriation of the private sector, would most likely put an end to such external aid. The Soviet Union has shown no eagerness to provide Nicaragua with the sort of aid it needs to keep the economy functioning.[10]

In early 1982, however, the issue of national security emerged as a priority equal to economic development. The emphasis on national security has been prompted by a high perception of threat and has led to an unprecedented expansion of Nicaragua's military capability. The FSLN's fear of being attacked is by no means totally unfounded. Former members of Somoza's National Guard have launched scores of attacks on Nicaraguan border areas from base camps in Honduras—camps that the Honduran armed forces either cannot or will not control. Tensions with Honduras itself have been high.

The Reagan administration's cold war rhetoric, its suspension

[10] *Washington Post*, May 10, 1982.

of economic aid to Nicaragua, its efforts to block multilateral aid, and its reported covert operations against the Sandinists have all served to exacerbate the FSLN's fears that Washington is intent upon destabilizing their government. From Managua, the threat appears real enough to warrant defensive preparations. Since most of Nicaragua's arms come from the Eastern bloc, an expansion of military capabilities inevitably strengthens Nicaragua's relations with Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.[11]

If the need to bolster national security comes to overshadow the need for economic recovery, the prospects for pluralism in Nicaragua will diminish accordingly. To build its economy, Nicaragua must rely upon the West, but to defend itself it must rely upon the East.

The Reagan administration's objective in its policy of hostility toward Nicaragua is difficult to decipher. Perhaps the aim is to destabilize Nicaragua to the point that the FSLN can be ousted by its internal opponents. Given the FSLN's control of the armed forces and its level of organized popular support, however, this outcome seems extremely unlikely under any circumstances. Perhaps Washington's strategy is simply to set the stage for direct intervention, but both hemispheric and domestic opposition to such action would be overwhelming. In the wake of the Malvinas crisis, it is doubtful that the United States could find any Latin American country willing to endorse or participate in such an undertaking.

The policy of hostility may simply be aimed at intimidating the Sandinists in the hope that fear will lead them to change policies the Reagan administration finds objectionable (e.g., their policy toward El Salvador, their relations with Cuba, and their domestic strategy). If this is Washington's intent, it is likely to be counterproductive, just as it was in the early 1960's when applied to Cuba.

Finally, it may be that Washington has decided that Nicaragua is already irretrievably "lost" and that the best policy is one that makes a negative example of the Sandinist Revolution. If this is the objective of the United States, then the policy of hos-

[11]On March 9, 1982, the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency gave a joint press briefing detailing the Nicaraguan military buildup. The text of the briefing is in the *New York Times*, March 10, 1982.

tility is designed intentionally to produce a radicalization of the Nicaraguan Revolution. If Nicaragua follows a Cuban path of development, it will lose its international financial support from the Socialist International and the multinational lending agencies; it will suffer economically from the departure of the managerial skills of the private sector and from the difficulties of planning a backward economy; and it will "prove" the Reagan administration's contention that moderate democrats are inevitably the losers in coalitions with radical revolutionary forces. This could well strain the alliance in El Salvador between the political forces grouped in the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) and the guerrilla forces grouped in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and prevent the emergence of a similar coalition in Guatemala. Instead of being a new example and inspiration for those who desire to build a democratic socialist society, Nicaragua would become simply "another Cuba."

Apart from such Machiavellian calculations, a radicalization of the Nicaraguan Revolution is not, in fact, in the interests of the United States. To prevent such a development, Washington ought to be reinforcing Nicaragua's economic ties with the West rather than trying to sever them, and trying to reduce the Sandinists' perception of external threat rather than exacerbating it. A Marxist-Leninist Nicaragua militarily aligned with and dependent upon the Soviet Union would be the worst possible outcome for the United States, yet it is precisely the outcome being made most likely by Washington's current policy.

SEARCHING FOR A SOLUTION IN EL SALVADOR

Today, the Central American crisis is most acute in El Salvador. The political roots of the current conflict trace back to 1972 when the military government robbed the reformist Christian Democrats of electoral victory by a fraudulent ballot count. Radical opposition, some of it armed, grew rapidly over the next few years, and the government responded with repression, thus setting off a familiar spiral of violence and political decay.[12]

During the summer of 1979 the Carter administration, in line with its policy of promoting reform and bolstering the political

[12] Montgomery, *Revolution*, pp. 119ff.

center, urged the Salvadoran military regime to ease the level of violence. President Romero refused, and in October he was ousted by progressive military officers who promised the sorts of reforms favored in Washington.[13]

The new government quickly incorporated civilian leaders of the moderate opposition and even suggested its willingness to reach some accommodation with the armed opposition. It promised the eventual creation of democratic institutions and significant social reforms designed to break the economic dominance of the nation's landed oligarchy. Unfortunately, the October government proved to be incapable of carrying out its promises—a failure due primarily to the internal politics of the Salvadoran armed forces. The military, which had historically governed in ways congenial to the landed oligarchy, was by no means united in its enthusiasm for reform. From October to December 1979, the reform efforts of the civilians and progressive officers were blocked at every stage by the rightist officers. The result was governmental paralysis.

The October government's inaction alienated the armed opposition, which gave up on any possibility of working with the new regime, and the mere suggestion of reform terrified the oligarchy, which proceeded to escalate the violence of the "death squads." Amidst this worsening violence, the civilian members of the government sought a showdown with the officers, demanding that reforms be implemented. The armed forces refused, the civilians resigned, and the government moved sharply to the right.

U.S. policy did not change, however. The Carter administration ignored the new political complexion of the Salvadoran regime, acting as if it were still dealing with a moderate, centrist, reformist government. The willingness of the Christian Democrats to participate in the new regime and the eventual passage of limited reforms under intense pressure from Washington gave some credence to this characterization. On one fundamental issue, however, the governments of October and January were distinctly different. The October government had been willing to open a dialogue with the armed groups, with the goal of eventually ending El Salvador's political crisis by accommodation.

[13] William M. LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, "Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador," *Foreign Affairs*, 58, no. 5 (Summer 1980), 1084–1103.

The government of officers and Christian Democrats had, as its first priority, the defeat of the armed opposition, both politically and militarily.

Through 1980 and early 1981, the "moderate" facade of the Salvadoran government slipped inexorably away. The level of official violence against noncombatants escalated dramatically, rather than receding as the Christian Democrats promised it would. The reforms stalled in the face of obstruction from within the government and resistance by the oligarchy. And within the armed forces, the rightist officers consolidated their hold on power by removing the progressive officers from command positions. The rightward shift of the regime was chronicled through an ongoing stream of Christian Democratic resignations.

The political center, which the Carter administration hoped to promote, ended up split by the polarization of politics. When Reagan came to office, the center-right was in the government but had little discernible influence over policy, while the center-left was in alliance with the guerrillas.

The Reagan administration's initial policy toward El Salvador was more military than political in its orientation. A sharp increase in military aid was authorized and, in a reversal of Carter's policy, the aid was no longer tied to human rights or progress in the reform program. The crisis in El Salvador was posed in cold war terms: "a classic case of indirect armed aggression by communist powers," according to the State Department White Paper justifying the new policy.[14] Whether intentionally or not, this new policy had the effect of further undermining the influence of the Christian Democrats who, without any significant domestic constituency, relied upon the support of the United States for their survival in the governing coalition. The right in the Salvadoran armed forces was led to believe that the United States supported their drive for a military victory against the guerrillas, and the new U.S. policy was soon followed by a series of major offensives by the army.

The tragedy was that this policy subverted any hope for a negotiated solution to the civil war in early 1981. The failure of the guerrillas' January 1981 offensive convinced the Democratic Revolutionary Front, the opposition coalition of left and center-

[14] *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, Special Report no. 80, February 23, 1981 (Washington, D.C., Department of State, 1981).

left, that they could not win a quick military victory. It also convinced the international supporters of the FDR (Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico, and the Western European social democrats) that a negotiated solution was preferable to continued conflict.[15] The unwillingness of the United States to endorse any sort of negotiations, and its willingness to supply the Salvadoran armed forces with the arms to wage counterinsurgency war meant, however, that negotiations were impossible.

As an alternative, the United States put forth the idea that elections in March 1982 would constitute a "political solution" to Salvador's crisis. The FDR-FMLN was invited to participate in these elections, on the condition that they first lay down their arms. The left refused, on the grounds that the necessary conditions for holding free elections did not exist. Since 1979, some 30,000 Salvadoran civilians had been murdered by the government's security forces and the paramilitary death squads on the mere suspicion that they might be sympathizers of the left. Moreover, in 1980 the entire leadership of the FDR was kidnapped by a death squad while meeting inside El Salvador. A few days later, their mutilated bodies were found. In light of this history, the FDR-FMLN feared that its electoral petitions and candidate lists would become death lists, and that open campaigning in areas controlled by the government would be impossible. Finally, since El Salvador had never had an honest election, the left doubted that elections designed and administered by its opponents would produce an honest result.[16]

The constituent groups of the FDR-FMLN were divided, however, on what policy to adopt toward the elections. Some groups called upon their supporters to boycott them; others called for voters to deface their ballots (which some 11 percent did). Some groups threatened to disrupt the elections with a military offensive; others promised to simply ignore them. No common strategy was ever arrived at, with the result that none of the strategies proved effective.

The elections were held as scheduled, with a larger turnout of voters than anyone anticipated. Although the Christian Demo-

[15] On the attitudes and policies of various external factors, see Richard Feinberg, ed., *Central America: International Dimensions of the Crisis* (New York, 1982).

[16] The FDR-FMLN position on the elections is outlined in an op-ed piece by FDR leader Rubén Zamora in the *Washington Post*, March 21, 1982.

crats won a plurality of the vote, the rightist parties captured a majority between them and immediately formed a coalition to control the Constituent Assembly.

The Reagan administration seized upon the heavy turnout to justify its opposition to negotiations between the government and the FDR-FMLN, calling the election results a "repudiation of the left." Other observers interpreted the turnout as a vote for peace, and still others saw the result as nothing more than an effective effort at voter intimidation.[17] Whichever interpretation is most accurate, there is no doubt that the election's outcome stiffened the Reagan administration's opposition to any sort of negotiated settlement to the war.

Yet the elections did not move the war any closer to conclusion. Any effort to decipher the meaning of the elections must begin with the fundamental, irreducible fact of Salvadoran political life: the political community of that nation is deeply polarized between two opposing camps locked in civil war with one another. The elections were held among the political groups on only one side of this fundamental cleavage. From the outset, it was impossible for such a truncated electoral process to produce a "political solution" to the war.

The elections did, however, rearrange the balance of forces among the groups on the right, with potentially far-ranging consequences. The coalition formed by the extreme-right party ARENA and the rightist PCN has returned to power the traditional elites who ruled El Salvador before 1979. The Christian Democrats have lost what little influence they had prior to the elections, and even the politics of the armed forces have shifted to the right with the removal of Col. Gutiérrez, who was widely regarded as a Christian Democratic supporter. Only intense pressure from the U.S. embassy and the threat of a military coup prevented the complete expulsion of the Christian Democrats from the government.[18] True to their campaign promises, the rightist coalition began immediately to dismantle the agrarian reform begun by the Christian Democrats.

Ironically, the very elections that the Reagan administration so loudly celebrated produced an internal alignment of forces in

[17] *New York Times*, March 30, 1982.
[18] *Washington Post*, April 23, 1982.

El Salvador that further limited the policy options of the United States. With the far right in power, the administration could no longer defend its policy as one of supporting the moderate center against extremes of right and left. With the reforms of 1980 in danger of being reversed, it was also hard-pressed to claim it was supporting an evolutionary strategy of social change. Furthermore, the new Salvadoran government showed no improvement on the human rights record of its predecessor. Thus, all the purported policy objectives of the United States were undercut by the March elections.

Now that the rise of the far right has ruled out any hope of gradually winning the loyalty of the Salvadoran people to the new government and thereby defeating the FDR-FMLN politically, only two solutions remain for the crisis in El Salvador: a military solution, in which one side or the other wins a full military victory, or a politically negotiated settlement between the government and the opposition. The Salvadoran army does not appear to have the military capability to defeat the guerrillas, and the Reagan administration does not appear to have the political capability of involving itself in El Salvador to the extent that would be required to produce a military victory on behalf of its client. Thus, a negotiated solution is still the best available option for the United States, although the rise to power of the far right makes such a solution vastly more difficult to obtain.

THE EXPANDING WAR IN GUATEMALA

The growing crisis in Guatemala may ultimately pose a greater challenge to the United States than the insurrections in either Nicaragua or El Salvador. It is in Guatemala that the economic and strategic stakes are highest and the political dilemma most intractable. The United States has substantial economic interests in Guatemala (over $200 million in investments), far more than in any of the other Central American states now in crisis. Guatemala's size and strategic position on Mexico's southern border give it a geopolitical importance exceeded in Central America only by the Panama Canal.

The United States also has a long history of intimate involvement in Guatemalan politics. In the three decades since the CIA sponsored the ouster of the Arbenz government in 1954, the

United States has been a pivotal actor in Guatemala's internal affairs.[19] The growing political crisis in Guatemala today is, therefore, a much more direct legacy of past U.S. policy than are the crises elsewhere in the region.

The political trajectory of Guatemala over the past two years is strikingly similar to the polarization experienced in neighboring El Salvador. Where the situations in these two countries diverge, it is usually in ways that make the prospects for peaceful change more bleak in Guatemala. Without gainsaying the repressive policies of either Somoza or the pre-1979 Salvadoran military government, neither of those nations underwent the trauma experienced by Guatemala between 1966 and 1974. During those years, the armed forces conducted a concerted and ruthless campaign to rid the nation of "subversives"—a campaign that took the lives of some 20,000 people, most of them peasants. This campaign, supported with U.S. military aid and advisors, demolished not only the small political groups of the radical left, but most of the moderate political parties as well. In 1974, the army delivered the *coup de grâce* to reformism by fixing the presidential election to prevent a moderate general, Efraín Ríos Montt, from coming to power. As in El Salvador, the combination of frustrated reformism and official violence produced a rapidly growing armed opposition to the regime.

When the Carter administration introduced its human rights policy in 1977, the Guatemalan government reacted angrily by refusing to accept further U.S. military assistance. Nevertheless, pressure from Washington did seem to have some initial effect. In 1978, there was a brief political relaxation as the armed forces sought to bring the Christian Democrats into the government in order to broaden its appeal. The conservative views of the Christian Democrats did not noticeably alter the ideological coloration of the regime, but even this small opening in the political process stimulated other opposition forces. The reaction of the right was swift; the political opening closed and, in the first three months of 1979, the two most popular civilian leaders of the moderate opposition, Alberto Fuentes Mohr and Manuel Colom Argueta, were assassinated by death squads.[20]

The effect of these assassinations and the scores more that fol-

[19] Schlesinger and Kinser, *Bitter Fruit.*
[20] Simons, "Guatemala."

lowed were reminiscent of the effect Chamorro's assassination had in Nicaragua. The moderate opposition was left demoralized and leaderless, the guerrilla armies of the left gained new adherents, and hopes for evolutionary change faded further.

The level of political violence in Guatemala has escalated over the past two years, but it has not stemmed the growth of the revolutionary opposition. On the contrary, the regime's indiscriminate use of violence against the rural population, most of whom are Indians, has for the first time given the guerrillas a base of popular support among the Indian population.[21]

The Carter administration had no success with Guatemala because it could find no moderate center strong enough to pose a credible alternative to the existing military dictatorship, and it could find no elements within the regime willing to yield to U.S. pressures for reform. The Reagan administration faces this same dilemma, though it is more willing to restore military aid to the current regime despite its brutality. As in the Salvadoran case, the Guatemalan armed forces will have no incentive to moderate their human rights abuses or begin the process of reform so long as they sense that the United States is willing to underwrite their quest for a military victory. Yet if the history of Guatemala proves anything, it proves that the popular pressures for change in that country cannot be contained by force of arms. Twice before—in 1954 and 1974—the military has won clear victories over the opposition by the use of military force. Now, less than a decade later, the regime is faced with a guerrilla opposition stronger than any it has faced before. The political crisis in Guatemala is simply not amenable to military solution, and no amount of bloodshed will ensure long-term stability.

The March coup that ousted Lucas García and installed Ríos Montt in power has not changed the basic realities of Guatemalan politics. Assuming that Ríos Montt can consolidate his position (an assumption that is by no means certain, given the factionalized character of the Guatemalan military at this juncture), and assuming that he is earnest in his promises to end corruption and human rights violations, he is nevertheless limited in his ability to bring about fundamental changes in the midst of the current crisis.[22]

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Washington Post*, July 19, 1982.

As yet, Ríos Montt has said nothing about undertaking the sorts of social and economic reforms that would be essential in any effort to avert further warfare, nor has he shown any inclination to negotiate with the guerrilla forces. On the contrary, his reputation as a loyal officer, committed to the military as an institution, does not suggest any openness to negotiations. Thus, there will be little he can do other than to continue prosecuting the war—an agenda that will make any improvement in human rights conditions, particularly in the countryside, difficult to achieve.

In light of this, it would be dangerous for the United States to enlist wholeheartedly with the new Guatemalan government, resuming military assistance and thereby linking U.S. interests with a government that is both precarious and as yet unwilling to undertake the kinds of policies likely to produce an end to the Guatemalan civil war. Unfortunately, the Reagan administration seems intent upon following precisely that hazardous route.

THE OPENING IN HONDURAS

Honduras has thus far avoided the political turmoil and polarization that have swept through Central America. In Honduras, the poorest and most backward nation in the region, the pace of economic development and modernization has been slower over the past three decades than in neighboring countries. At the same time, the Honduran government has reacted to pressures for reform with much less brutality and intransigence. Though the military has ruled since 1963, it has been willing to tolerate organized dissent from political parties, trade unions, peasant leagues, student groups, and the press. There have been no waves of intense and indiscriminate official violence, no plague of "disappearances," and no death squads. In the early 1970's the military government undertook some limited reforms, including the redistribution of land, in order to avert the growth of unrest among the peasantry.

The Honduran government's conciliatory and tolerant attitudes are atypical in Central America. In part, they stem from the absence of a powerful landed oligarchy in Honduras. Agriculture, and therefore the economy as a whole, have long been dominated by U.S. agri-business firms rather than a domestic

elite. Unlike the governments in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the Honduran state has not served primarily as the guardian of oligarchic interests; rather, it has been a channel of upward mobility for state officials who use their posts to enrich themselves by corruption. The result is a regime that, though unsavory and illegitimate, has not catalyzed significant polarization of the political system or armed opposition. This is not to say that the regional crisis has passed Honduras by—only that it is at a much earlier stage of development there, and thus is far less acute.[23]

For all these reasons, Honduras seemed to offer the brightest prospect for a successful "centrist solution" of the sort envisioned by the Carter administration. At the urgings of the United States, the Honduran armed forces held elections in 1980 and 1981 that produced a successful transition to civilian rule.

This transition to democracy, widely regarded as the best and perhaps the only way to avoid the growth of insurgency, has by no means been consolidated. The armed forces still command a major share of political power and contain some officers who would prefer a return to military rule, even if it means increasing repressive violence against opponents.[24] If these hard-line officers should come to predominate in the army, Honduras's democracy will be short-lived. The country would then suffer the same process of polarization and spiralling violence as its neighbors have endured. The policy of the United States should aim at helping to consolidate Honduran democracy by clearly and unequivocally warning the armed forces that good relations with the United States depend upon the maintenance of democratic civilian rule.

The greatest danger for Honduras is that it will be swept up in the tides of political conflict in surrounding countries, particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador. On this score, U.S. policy has been less than helpful. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations cast Honduras in the role of regional armory—the one "island of stability" through which the United States could increase its military presence in the region without provoking

[23] *NACLA Report on the Americas*, special issue on Honduras, 15, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1981).

[24] *New York Times*, September 1, 1981.

sharp international or domestic opposition. It is a role that Honduras's fragile democracy may not be strong enough to sustain without fracturing. The Reagan administration has even gone so far as to utilize Honduras as a base for covert action against the Sandinist government in Nicaragua, thus greatly magnifying the danger of war between the two nations.[25]

It would be particularly tragic if the one country in addition to Costa Rica in Central America that seems to have a chance to avoid civil war should squander its chances by being enticed into the conflicts of the surrounding states. If the intention of the United States is to use Honduras as an instrument of U.S. policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Washington should recognize that it is wagering the future of Honduras as well.

ELEMENTS OF A REGIONAL POLICY

Formulating policy in the midst of crisis is always difficult. Normal patterns of political interaction and relationship are ruptured, uncertainty mounts as reliable information becomes scarce, and events always outpace the ability of policy makers to plan for them. When past policy has been oriented toward preserving the status quo, the disruption that comes with crisis seems threatening as well as unpredictable. Policy makers are then tempted to fall back on familiar responses, pursuing them with a vengeance even if they show little sign of producing the desired results.

The depth of the crisis in Central America and its complexity makes such routinized responses very dangerous for the United States. A reformulation of U.S. policy for Central America must begin with an unemotional assessment of U.S. interests in the region, whether they can be safeguarded independently of the survival of rightist military dictatorships, and whether the emergence of revolutionary governments necessarily poses a critical threat to them.

It may be that the traditional U.S. goal of regional stability can no longer be attained in Central America by supporting traditional elites. It may be that the revolutionaries are less the enemies of democracy and human rights than are the military regimes fighting against them. And it may be that less direct U.S.

[25] *Washington Post*, March 10, 1982.

involvement in the region's political and military conflicts offers the best hope of safeguarding U.S. influence and interests.

The most sensible general strategy for the United States to pursue in Central America today is one that seeks to reduce the level of internal violence and the potential for international conflict in the region. This implies a policy in which diplomacy and economic assistance are the principal levers of influence, and military assistance is minimal. In Nicaragua, the United States should try to improve bilateral relations by restoring economic assistance and offering to help reduce tensions on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. In the case of El Salvador, the United States should join the growing international consensus in favor of a negotiated solution to the civil war and should do its utmost to convince the Salvadoran armed forces to enter into a dialogue with the FDR. In Guatemala, the United States should resist the temptation to increase military aid to the rightist military regime. The withholding of such assistance constitutes the only lever of influence that Washington has to push the regime into some sort of political accommodation that can avoid full-scale war. In Honduras, the United States should make clear to the armed forces that it supports the electoral transition to civilian rule and that U.S. military aid does not constitute an endorsement of either military government or regional intervention.

These are the sorts of policies that offer the best hope of restoring regional stability to Central America, and doing so in a way that benefits the people of the region. In the pursuit of such policies, the United States would enjoy wide support both in Latin America and among our European allies. The greatest danger to the United States in Central America today comes not from the Cubans' support of the FDR in El Salvador, but from a lack of vision in Washington—an apparent unwillingness to look beyond policies of the past, even though they no longer serve us.