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CENTRAL AMERICA: LEARNING FROM THE LEGACY

By Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe*

INTRODUCTION

Ronald Reagan's entry into the White House signaled, in Arthur Schlesinger's words, "the seizure of foreign policy by a boarding party of ideologies."¹ Despite some moves toward pragmatism—in international economics and trade, European affairs and nuclear arms negotiations, he kept Latin American foreign policy largely in the hands of anti-communist zealots—moral messianists who eschewed pragmatism and realism. Areas of relatively minor priority, like Nicaragua, were suddenly blown up into major issues around which there was little rational debate about national interest or policy effectiveness.² Meanwhile, truly serious problems, like the threat unmanageable debt poses to development and democracy in countries like Brazil, Argentina and Mexico received scant attention.

The opportunities for the new Bush administration to readjust priorities and formulate wise policies were enhanced by changing conditions in the region. The commitment to regional solutions by important actors like Mexico and Venezuela, and by the Central Americans themselves, has increased the possibility for peaceful settlement to long-standing conflicts. Changes in Soviet foreign policy have created possibilities to further minimize the insertion of East-West issues in what have been primarily internal regional conflicts.

Back in the U.S., the bitterness and rancor generated

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by Reagan's policies helped create a constituency for leaders who would pursue peace and security through diplomacy, and who would tackle difficult problems with honesty and clarity.

But forging new policies first demands an honest look at a reality often distorted by rhetoric and hyperbole. Further, both liberals and conservatives must face the difficult, hard to accept, lessons of recent experience. Finally, policy makers must be ready to confront quickly the domestic and regional obstacles that could rapidly overwhelm the soundest of programs.

THE LEGACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

A decade of intense policy focus on Central America by both the Carter and Reagan Administrations did little to alleviate the problems of war, underdevelopment, and abuse of power the people in the region have faced.

El Salvador is still plagued by a costly civil war. The Christian Democratic Government of Jose Napoleon Duarte, long Washington's hope for a moderate, reformist alternative, suffered serious erosion of support because of corruption, failure to deliver on promised reform, and inability to end the war. Consequently, the Christian Democrats were so widely discredited that the ultra-rightist ARENA party won a majority of seats in the March 1988 Assembly elections. Instead of pulling together, the party factions fractured further which led to an easy victory for ARENA in the 1989 presidential elections. Political groups on the left, including the FDR, an ally of the guerrilla FMLN, played a modest role in the elections, but harassment, repression, intimidation and impeded access to full participation kept them from mounting a serious challenge. The insistence of these groups on a negotiated solution to the civil war was perceived as a severe threat to the military and the right, whose tolerance for such dissent is severely limited. Meanwhile, moderate and left leaning labor and peasant organizations began discussing how to coordinate their resistance to the increased repression they had forecast would

accompany an ARENA victory. U.S. policy now confronts an El Salvador with continuing polarization, a no win military situation, and increasing repression by an ultra rightist government whose leaders have been closely associated with death squad activities and whose programs represent an oligarchic reaction to the mild reforms of the Duarte era.

In Guatemala, efforts by Christian Democratic President Vinicio Cerezo to check military abuses of power, open dialogue with insurgent forces and push reforms, triggered a May 1988 coup by hard-line military officers strongly supported by reactionary business elites. It failed to overthrow the government, but it marked the end of any likelihood that the military would allow a genuine reformist civilian government to take *power*, not just *office*. While labor and peasant organizations have continued their efforts to reorganize—they were decimated in the early 1980's by military repression, continued death squad activities, an attack which forced the closing of the leftist opposition magazine *La Epoca*, and government timidity on reforms, all indicative of the power and determination of the coup supporters to maintain control.

Honduras continues to be in difficult economic straits and is kept afloat by infusions of U.S. aid. Political and press freedom remain far greater in its northern neighbors, but elections have neither led to reform nor weakened the control of a corrupt military; and there has been some evidence of deep involvement in narcotics trafficking amongst high officers. What's more, there is growing resentment about the pro-consul attitude of the U.S. The failure of the police to respond for two and a half hours to the April 1988 anti-U.S. riots which burned the Embassy annex, indicates how deeply the resentment had spread into the military itself. The military and most other sectors are deeply worried that the presence of the contra force, or its remnants, in Honduras could spawn marauding bandits who would be a destabilizing force for years to come.

In Costa Rica, the only stable democracy in the region, the U.S. had been at loggerheads with the government of Oscar Arias because of his refusal to support the contra policy.

Actions against that government—forcing out the Costa Rican Ambassador for "lobbying" Congress against the contra policy, for example—slowly chilled relations with a government, that by all of Washington's policy pronouncements, the U.S. should be fully backing in the region.

And in Nicaragua the contra policy not only sacrificed peace for war and undermined development programs, but by further inserting East-West issues into the conflict, the U.S., in effect, encouraged the Nicaraguans to militarize, to seek increased Soviet arms shipments, and to maintain the presence of Cuban Advisors. Nicaragua successfully contained the contras militarily, but the war (which, at times, absorbed up to 62% of the national budget) so deepened economic problems that stabilization became the government's number one priority. Major stabilization and adjustment programs initially instituted in February and June of 1988 placed a renewed emphasis on Market principles and accepted stiff IMF type medicine (without IMF monetary support). Though the Sandinistas continued staunchly to resist efforts to force or negotiate them out of power, they have backed regional peace efforts that recognized their legitimacy, such as the Esquipulas II accords signed by the five Central American presidents in August 1987. This agreement, plus official concern to ease economic pressures and restart reform programs, spurred a major policy change in early 1988 when the Sandinistas agreed to negotiate directly with the contras leading to cease fire accords signed in Sapoá in March 1988. The recent Tela accords which the Sandinistas signed set into motion a potential process for demobilizing the contras, holding another round of presidential elections and beginning the long road to reconstruction of Nicaragua's devastated economy. Much of its success depends on the degree to which the U.S. becomes a serious supporter of the efforts of the Central Americans to use diplomacy and to resolve their problems themselves.

Meanwhile our major regional and European allies have seen the U.S. as scuttling attempts to negotiate peace and security agreements. Time and again countries like

Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, and the five presidents of Central America, have said that the situation continues to deteriorate because the United States follows a policy based on military not political solutions to the conflicts in the region. Their efforts to create alternatives have provided the United States with a number of opportunities to forge a new partnership in the region, to add our great influence and strength to their leverage in creating a situation which will serve our national interests, and theirs. Such an opportunity faces the Bush Administration, but seizing this opportunity first demands we learn some important lessons based on the recent experience in Central America.

LESSONS

Central America has long occupied a "special" place in American foreign policy. As President Calvin Coolidge stated in April 1927, "Toward the governments of countries...this side of Panama we feel a moral responsibility that does not attach to other nations." It was left to his Undersecretary of State to make clear just what this "moral responsibility" meant: "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."³

For over 40 years now, our principal efforts to "control the destinies" have been designed to prevent or reverse leftist revolutions.⁴ Many policy makers have simply assumed that any such revolutions are tantamount to a Soviet penetration of our border, threatening our vital national interest. The "loss" of Cuba, even more than the "loss" of China, became the symbol of the danger, of lost prestige, and for inoculating "never again" into the national political psyche.

Conservatives, mostly Republicans, argued that the primary cause of upheaval was, as John Foster Dulles put it, "alien intrigue and treachery," a danger "originating outside the hemisphere." They put forth policies relying primarily on force to eliminate the turmoil and establish order. Liberals,

mostly Democrats, claimed the primary cause was poverty, inequality, and repression—exacerbated, perhaps by the Soviets or their allies. They recommended political pressure and economic assistance to undermine revolution from below by bringing about reform from above. Both sides perceived themselves as helping the anti-Communist—and therefore presumed to be democratic—forces, and they bristled when charged with "intervening" or attempting to "control internal affairs." But such policies inevitably involved the U.S. in managing the internal affairs of these countries to prevent revolution.⁵ In practice, each administration's policies have been a mix of conservative and liberal policies. Eisenhower, Nixon and Reagan emphasized the former: Kennedy, Johnson and Carter, the latter.

The past ten years of U.S. policy toward Central America demonstrate that both approaches are seriously flawed, and mixing them together can create a costly, contradictory and counterproductive concoction. They teach us lessons about the causes of, and threat posed by, revolution; the efficacy of methods we use to combat revolution—rollback and containment mixed with economic assistance; the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy for resolving the crisis; and finally, about the domestic consequences of our foreign policy.

1. Nationalism outweighs internationalism in leftist revolutionary regimes.

This is an old lesson, already appreciated in U.S. relations with countries like Yugoslavia and China. But it could be learned again from the Nicaraguan experience: the Sandinistas are far more Nicaraguan than they are Soviet or Cuban, their Marxist rhetoric notwithstanding. Policy makers have sometimes not been able to see this lesson, because they wrongly assume that public doctrine is a more reliable indicator of a regime's character than its behavior. The economic models they have followed, for all their failures, have not been replicas (and were often rejections) of Soviet or Cuban ones: their reliance on cooperative and private, not state farms; their

mixed economy which left the majority of land and industry in private hands; the institutions they created for negotiating with private growers associations. Their willingness to sign verifiable security agreements with the U.S., including removal of foreign advisors, limits on arms acquisitions, and guarantees of no foreign military bases is another indication. Concrete efforts to reduce border tensions, minimize fears of aggression, and establish reasonable economic relations with their neighbors belie the "inevitability" of communist expansionism assumed by those who by focusing on doctrinaire interpretations of ideology do not see the nationalistic behavior.⁶

2. Internal conditions of inequity and repression are far more fundamental in causing and sustaining revolutions than external support.

The guerrilla war did not begin in El Salvador because of external support; and after ten years of stalemate there is no evidence that external assistance from Cuba, Nicaragua, or the Soviet Union is a major factor. (Which is not to say that there is not external financing or assistance). Far more important in sustaining the civil war has been the unwillingness of the Salvadoran military and government to bring about significant reform and end repression. It has not been possible for the best intentioned moderates—here or in Central America—to engineer reform from above in order to pre-empt revolution from below. The power and recalcitrance of the military and economic elites who control the mechanisms of repression and institutions which most need reform has simply been too great. What's more, they have learned to adapt to external pressures without ceding basic control.⁷

3. Arming exiles to "rollback" revolutionary regimes is a counterproductive and costly policy.

The failure in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs should have served as an early warning: if a revolution is popular internally and strong organizationally, an exile army is not going to generate an uprising. In Nicaragua, despite internal opposition, the

Sandinistas enjoyed substantial support, where well organized, and had important European, Latin American and Soviet bloc support. On the other hand, the initial role of Somocistas, the reliance on ruthless attacks against civilians, and the obvious subservience of the contras to Reagan Administration policy prevented the translation of domestic hardships or disaffection with the Sandinistas into contra support.

Moreover, the rollback policy has been costly in terms of U.S. interests. It encouraged a closing of political space within Nicaragua; led to border tensions with Honduras and strengthened the military there against its civilian government; disrupted regional trade and discouraged investment, both important to the economic recovery of the whole region; undermined our moral authority and credibility in Latin America and Europe; and at home in the U.S., it not only encouraged rancor and division, but diverted attention from dealing with other really important issues in Mexico and South America. As Oscar Arias pointed out, "you must remember, it is easy to convert your best friends into your worst enemies." The U.S. should, he said, "concentrate on a dialogue with us—not the use of force."

4. Aid to local militaries fails to provide a shield for reform, eliminate the root causes of revolution or defeat the insurgency.

In El Salvador, despite massive aid and counterinsurgency training for the military, the evidence of the past decade confirms a March, 1987 study by four U.S. lieutenant colonels at Harvard's JFK School of Government. "The FMLN—tough, competent, highly motivated—can sustain its current strategy indefinitely. The Salvadorans have yet to devise a persuasive formula for winning the war. ...the war in El Salvador is stuck; unhappily the United States finds itself stuck with the war." The recent insurrection proved this point once again.

The carrot of U.S. aid was sufficient to bring about elections that initially put Christian Democratic reformer Duarte

into office, but it could not put him in power. U.S. pressure got the Salvadoran military to reduce murder by death squads, but present as well as past arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, torture, and disappearance of labor and peasant leaders continue unabated and goes unpunished—50,000 noncombatants have been murdered without a single member of the Salvadoran security forces ever having been tried, much less convicted or incarcerated, for these killings. Despite U.S. aid, the police forces are part of the problem and the judiciary, so intimidated by threats and even assassination, has been paralyzed. Consequently, these actions continue with impunity, reinforcing the traditional cycle of repression followed by reaction followed by more repression. Efforts at genuine reform are thus severely restricted, whether seeking political negotiations to end the war, improved salaries and wages, credit and technical assistance for land reform, or a diversion of expenditures from war to development.

The Guatemalan military has been able to contain, not defeat, the insurgency there. The techniques it used—eliminating reformers in parties, unions and peasant organizations; killing Indians in the highlands, on whom the guerrillas depended for support; forcing tens of thousands to take refuge in Mexico or in military controlled "model villages"—allowed it to create a cemetery-like peace. But years of U.S. aid did little to change the internal conditions or help break the cycle of repression, reactions, repression. Today important elements in the military, together with a powerful, recalcitrant private sector, are still able to block the reform efforts of President Cerezo. As Cerezo enters the final months of his term, the repression has been increasing once again.

5. Mixing economic aid with rollback and containment policies contributes more to prosecution of hostilities than to needed structural reforms and economic development.

The U.S. bankrolls El Salvador. The \$608 million we

provided in 1988 was 105% of what the Salvadorans themselves contributed for the governmental budget. U.S. dollars do precious little to address the need to reform the root causes of the war: 75% of U.S. aid went either to fight the war or to repair its effects. As long as a large military has to be supported, the infrastructure and harvests are destroyed, and capital flight continues relatively unabated, resources will inevitably be diverted to finance the war effort. The experience of these past several years has confirmed the argument made in the Kissinger Commission Report that economic development and progress require peace first.⁸

Economic development is difficult to attain even under the best of circumstances. Economic assistance, such as the Alliance for Progress, helped stimulate rapid export led growth in the 1950-1980 period. But, its effect was to force thousands of small farmers off the land to make way for large, commercial farms; create widespread unemployment; swell already overcrowded urban slums; and create higher prices for basic food stuffs. The rigid, highly skewed social structure and lack of government commitment to reform meant the benefits of growth did not trickle down. Instead, those conditions spurred movements for reform which, when they were repressed, shifted to revolution. A policy that simply "throws money" at problems of poverty, independent of the character of the regime, is naive, wasteful and potentially dangerous. It may support growth that leads only to armed insurrection and strengthen the power of exactly those elites that oppose broadly shared development.

6. Multilateral diplomacy often works far better than unilateral force in securing U.S. interests.

The record on Nicaragua is clear; there is a direct correlation between political and multilateral initiatives and the opening of political space in the country. Conversely, military pressure over the past decade has tended to lead to a closing of political space and a tightening of restrictions by the Sandinistas. The agreements of the five presidents at

Esquipulas in August 1987, and the cease fire accord this spawned between the contras and the Sandinistas at Sapoa in March of 1988, created far more positive changes in terms of peace and political openings in Nicaragua, than years of contra war. The acceptance of the Tela agreement was yet another indication that the Sandinista Government was willing to respond to political opportunity, not military coercion. Although success in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador have been far more limited, the Esquipulas accords have strengthened internal forces that backed reconciliation and reform, and opened some possibilities for refugees to return.

While it is never publicly admitted, there seems to be a presumption in the U.S. that lesser developed and impoverished nations do not produce intellectually agile and diplomatically astute individuals. But the delivery of negotiations that have taken place over the last ten years belie this belief. The Central Americans understand the viability of diplomacy. Costa Rica has negotiated a border agreement with Nicaragua, and an information arrangement operates to deal with border tensions between Honduras and Nicaragua. Indeed, the ability to orchestrate the Equipulas and Tela agreements in the face of the pressures coming from the U.S. is a testament to their concern and competence for devising political/diplomatic solutions to the problems in the region.

What they lack—resources and technical capabilities to organize monitoring groups, verification commissions and so on, could be provided with the help of the OAS and the United States. But, as Central American leaders will tell you, the major obstacle to effective regional diplomatic efforts has been the lack of genuine support from the U.S.⁹

7. Pursing an unpopular, interventionist strategy abroad is damaging to the institutions of our own constitutional democracy here at home.

This lesson, only partially learned from the Vietnam experience, was brought to the fore once again when the Iran-Contra scandal broke. It was opposition to the contra war that

led high administration officials to lie, break the law, circumvent Congress, and privatize foreign policy making in their efforts to keep the contra war alive. Because it is costly to pursue such interventionist strategies (in terms of U.S. lives) it is likely that strong opposition will continue and so will the risks to democracy here at home.

FORGING A NEW POLICY

Both the conservatives and the liberals find some lessons easier to learn than others. The liberals understand the failures of rollback and the damaging consequences of aid to repressive militaries; conservatives easily learn the lessons about the failures of economic aid and political pressure to prevent revolutions. But it is very difficult for either side to learn all the lessons. If a particular blend of carrots and sticks — economic aid and military assistance, elections and counterinsurgency, human rights and free fire zones, diplomatic pressures and contra aid — does not work either to create democracy and reform, or prevent revolutions, or eliminate leftist governments then both sides assume that we must simply readjust the ingredients in the recipe. Because the United States still has such tremendous military and economic influence in the region it is hard to learn that the old dictum is not longer (if it ever was) applicable: we can not control the internal destinies of these countries.¹⁰ Both sides see this as simple "giving up" on U.S. interests. Since this is clearly unacceptable to them, the debate erroneously returns to what proportions to mix together.

What is ignored, then, is the most important and difficult lesson to learn: Giving up control over internal affairs does not mean abandoning U.S. interests; quite the contrary, it would allow us to promote real US interests more effectively.¹¹

Take, for example, security interests. We must prevent the Soviet Union from using Central America to threaten the United States militarily. The stationing of Soviet missiles there would be as unacceptable now as it was in 1962, when the

Soviets sought to place missiles in Cuba. There is no public evidence that using Central America this way has ever been an intention of the Soviets. Aside from their intentions, however, the recent developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union make that kind of offensive move less and less likely each day.

It is also important for the United States to assure access to the Panama Canal and the Caribbean Sea lanes. But we could far more effectively protect these interest if we stopped mucking around trying to destabilize the Sandinistas and trying to manage El Salvador's internal affairs and, instead, dealt directly with the Soviets. Washington must make clear that we would respond with overwhelming force if such actions were threatened, in effect extending to the entire region the kind of understanding prohibiting the stationing of strategic weapons, worked out between President Kennedy and the Soviets over Cuba, and later reaffirmed by the Nixon administration.

We also have a strong interest in encouraging regional peace. Current regional conflicts disrupt growth, divert funds for investment and reform into military expenditures, increase unemployment and poverty, and displace tens of thousands of people. The U.S. feels the impact directly in terms of increased immigration pressures. Such conflicts also heighten border tensions and threaten to spill over into regional war which would jeopardize trade and investment.

Yet the very attempts to destabilize the Nicaraguan government have resulted in intensifying such regional conflicts and clocking promising peace accords. The Sandinista's nationalist concern with internal development already makes aggression by them highly unlikely, as does the widespread understanding that such action would bring a disastrous military confrontation with the United States. If there were indications of hostile intentions (incidents have occurred in the past, such as the 1969 Honduran—Salvadoran "soccer war") we could most effectively discourage or stop them by working within the collective security arrangements of the Rio Treaty:

that would bring to bear multilateral pressures (to which all the countries, including Nicaragua, are very sensitive) incorporating diplomatic and economic sanctions, and force, if necessary. Similarly, concerns about significant support for insurgents in neighboring countries—if there were credible evidence—could be taken to the OAS and handled through the appropriate clauses of the Rio Treaty, and multilateral sanctions sought to halt that aid. Insistence on controlling Nicaraguan politics has discouraged Washington from testing Managua's offers to negotiate verifiable agreements to assure that no arms flow out of Nicaragua through Honduras to El Salvador, or flow through Honduran based contras back into Nicaragua.

In short, the potentially disruptive foreign actions of Central American countries can much more effectively be handled by dealing directly with the behavior. Putting U.S. energy and resources into deciding what kind of government a country should have is not only costly, but may actually undermine our interests in regional peace.

U.S. economic interests in Central America are relatively modest—the region does not provide us with any strategic resources. However the U.S.'s interest in peace does imply an interest in promoting broadly shared, equitable development: hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, and disease create justifiable causes for discontent and demands to redress the situation. Further, such problems intensify pressures for northward migration, and should themselves be a concern to a country that values human life and dignity. But ironically, there are a number of ways in which the effort to manage internal affairs undermines such equitable development.

For example, the necessary condition for such development is some modicum of regional peace; but U.S. insistence on keeping, or getting, the left out of power in El Salvador and Nicaragua has blocked efforts at negotiating a reduction in conflict. The continued war has simply eaten up U.S. economic aid with few developmental results. Further, the efforts to control internal conflicts have often led the U.S. to ally itself with

military and economic elites that oppose needed reforms so the effort to help "guarantee stability" undermines the possibility for broadly shared development. The U.S. may initially insist on reform as a condition for aid, but when electoral fraud, harassment and violence leads would be reformers to turn to demonstrations, sit-ins, land seizures and even armed insurgency, control of these disruptive elements generally becomes primary. U.S. interests in long term peace and development demand living with a certain amount of disruption and conflict in the region instead of rushing to aid reactionary forces.

Development itself is unlikely to be broadly shared unless the citizens of each country are organized to demand reform and can participate in the planning and administration of development programs. Long term peace is unlikely if military, political, or economic elites repress such reform efforts. But the presumption of control actually undermines U.S. efforts to promote real democracy. Although the term "democratization" has recently been distorted and devalued by many conservatives to justify aid for contra forces and the Salvadoran military, the United States does have an interest in promoting democracy.¹²

Liberals anxious to keep revolutionaries out of power may initially favor democracy. They understand that an end to repression, and popular participation moderate the pressures for revolution. But if reactionary military and economic elites will not open up the process (eg. are not willing to give elected reformers power) and revolution is threatened, the overriding desire to establish and maintain order often leads to a redefining of democracy—relying heavily on formalistic criteria like the mere holding of elections—so as to justify military and economic aid. Further, there is a temptation to hush up our concerns with more basic conditions that eventually could promote democracy—the right to organize and demonstrate, the protection of dissidents and of a free press, respect for fundamental human rights—because making a fuss about these things would highlight the face of repression and undermine support for aid.

The U.S. must not give up on promoting real democracy, but we do need to learn that this is not a problem of "better management", or more skillfully blending carrots and sticks. In the immediate future, the history and conditions, for example, of El Salvador and Guatemala, make democracy an unrealistic and unattainable goal: the U.S. does not have that kind of power. Judging the success of policies by their ability to achieve democracy—making "democratization" the central goal of policy—will create a gap between expectation and reality that will needlessly undermine domestic and international credibility. Worse, it may blind us to the relatively more modest steps that could be taken to encourage those conditions which someday may make democracy more likely: speaking up for those imprisoned or tortured or censored; publicly condemning, and refusing to aid, governments (independent of their ideology) that engage in gross and systematic violations of human rights; and working with other countries to support the efforts of human rights monitors and international rights organizations.

The focus on getting or keeping the left out of power hampers our encouragement of development and democracy in an even more subtle way: it is only when internal turmoil raises the specters of revolution that the U.S. pays attention to such issues. When order is restored, our concern shifts. What is forgotten is that long term U.S. security interests are best served by having neighboring countries whose citizens feel secure, have decent life chances, and are not repressed. Neither building barriers of containment nor rolling back the alien hordes gives as much security as building a good neighborhood. Yet the short term focus on maintaining control in an effort to eliminate a misconceived and overinflated security threat, actually discourages U.S. policy makers from formulating the kinds of multilateral, long term efforts—for encouraging regional trade, easing the debt burden, resolving armed conflicts, promoting human rights—that might encourage the development and decency that would constitute a foundation for durable peace and real security.

When American policy makers learn that they do not have to take responsibility for managing the internal affairs of Central America in order to pursue U.S. interests, they can put forward sound and reasonable policies.¹³ To minimize Soviet military influence in the region, diminish any threat that these countries might pose to each other or to us, and promote peace, economic recovery, and real democracy we could adopt the following policy guidelines:

1. De-escalate superpower rivalry in the region. Minimizing this East-West component means working to eliminate the dependence of local forces on either the Soviet Union or the United States for external military support. The primary responsibility for this lies with the U.S., because it is the primary "East-West" actor in Central America.

2. De-militarize the region. That means finding ways to limit the regional arms race, keeping advance weaponry (particularly aircraft and missiles) out of the region, encouraging the build-down of armed forces, assisting with mechanisms to minimize the cross border flows of arms shipments to insurgents in neighboring countries, and looking to develop alternative, non-violent mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts.

3. End all support for illegal mercenary activity. That means not only ending direct military aid for the contras, but ending the entire contra-type policy—the CIA intelligence and logistics support, the funneling of aid through third countries or private sources, the non-lethal military aid. That also means shouldering our responsibility to find a decent and humane way to resettle these exiles in Nicaragua or elsewhere, and help neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica with the associated refugee problems. To do less would be to leave in place armed bands that could wreak havoc on the region for years.

4. Promote broadly shared development. That means working to restore regional trade, encourage U.S. Central

American trade, and promote mechanisms of debt relief that will free up national funds for investment and reform, not simply to make interest payments on debts. But it means more than promoting growth. It also means encouraging efforts at structural reform—land reform, for example, and programs in education, health, and housing—that will more equitably distribute the benefits of growth to the majority of the population. Such reforms will inevitably be turbulent and conflictual, and must not lead to the panicky or knee-jerk responses of the past which resulted in destroying them and providing the oligarchy and military with the tools to reinforce their dominant political, economic and social position.

5. Promote the strengthening of democratic institutions, values and practices. That means more than simply encouraging the election of civilians. It means promoting the full political participation of all non-violent groups and parties, of the right, center, and left; championing protection of press freedom not only from censorship but from officially tolerated or supported violence against it; and encouraging the protection of party and union activists, human rights monitors, and election officials from threats, disappearances, arrests and torture.

6. Re-establish the primacy of diplomacy, negotiated settlements, and promote multilateral approaches to regional problems. Multilateral does not mean inviting other countries to lend support for plans the U.S. has formulated. It means a true partnership with regional allies. And an emphasis on diplomacy does not mean eschewing force as an instrument of last resort in instances where there is a clear and present danger to the security of the United States. But it does mean recognizing diplomacy and cooperation as the first resort, and understanding that negotiated solutions are far more effective and lasting than ones imposed by force. Concretely, it means throwing the full weight of the U.S. behind regional efforts to promote peace, and taking steps to

promote a political settlement to end all regional conflicts.

IMPLEMENTING A NEW POLICY: OVERCOMING THE ROADBLOCKS

The Bush Administration can and should move quickly to implement policies based on these guidelines. Firmly putting forward concrete measures to reduce super-power rivalry and de-escalate conflicts would go a long way toward diffusing irrational fears and convincing the public that the administration understands, and can deal with, real threats and promote real security. A first step would be initiating bilateral discussions with Nicaragua to negotiate all mutual security concerns. It should be possible to make rapid progress on reaching verifiable agreements prohibiting foreign military bases in Nicaragua, reducing foreign military advisors on both sides, and setting up international monitoring mechanisms on the Nicaragua-Honduran border to minimize cross border arms flows and incursions.

Another step would be to throw firm U.S. support behind regional peace efforts. This would quickly distance the United States from responsibility for the internal affairs of Nicaragua, and perhaps even El Salvador; and it would provide a forum for encouraging a full peace agreement between the contras and the Sandinistas as well as multilateral mechanisms for dismantling the contra forces and resettling the soldiers and their families. The Esquipulas and Tela accords might still form a basis for a regional effort, and other important forces (Mexico, Venezuela, the Church, the OAS, Canada and some of our European allies) could help create a regional framework for resolving this conflict—if Washington signals its strong support.

Policy makers could also quietly probe the possibility for pursuing Gorbachev's original offer to former President Reagan to negotiate reductions of arms shipments in the context of a regional settlement along the lines of the Esquipulas II accords. Taking such concrete steps would help remove the

overemphasis on Cold War tensions in Central America and allow attention to shift to the rest of Latin America where serious problems need urgent consideration.

Serious problems would still remain, but the more they are publicly defined for what they are—primarily regional developmental problems, not East-West ones—the greater latitude there will be for implementing rational policies. Such efforts, however, will also face important obstacles here at home: the U.S. does not have a great capability to carry out policies that so heavily emphasize diplomacy, and new policy directions are likely to face vocal domestic opposition.

Since 1947, the U.S. has put massive sums of money into building and maintaining its military capability. But, relatively speaking, little effort has been made to develop and maintain the capacity to conduct diplomacy. The past nine years have been no exception to that trend. When one considers how much money was put into the military and how little into beefing up the Foreign Service, it is not surprising to see the difference between the overly abundant and sophisticated capabilities of the former and the threadbare resources of the latter.

The problem of this "diplomacy gap" is all the greater as the foreign affairs needs have grown so much over these years, with the dramatic increase in the number of new nations, issues, international organizations and conferences. Yet, the U.S. has a foreign service which has not kept up. They are understaffed and inadequately trained. The system of rewards and promotion, reinforced by the foreign service subculture, conduces to conformism and mitigates against comprehensive, carefully crafted, accurate and incisive reporting. This problem was greatly exacerbated during the Reagan years when "supporting the line" was considered by many to be more important than reporting accurately.

Unfortunately, no better case exemplifies this than that of Central America. Even before the Reagan administration took office, the demand for ideological conformity was made clear. A "hit" list of ambassadors was developed and the new administration purged virtually the entire set of foreign service officers

who had Central American regional experience and replaced them often with those whose principal service had been in Southeast Asia or Soviet Bloc countries.

What is needed immediately in Central America is the placement of skilled, highly competent foreign service officers thoroughly knowledgeable about the region. They must be given clear instructions that reporting should be an accurate reflection of the reality on the ground in the region, and should not be designed in accord with some preordained administration position back in Washington. And they must be empowered to utilize their diplomatic skills in pursuing negotiations and political settlements to the conflicts in the region.

There are often obstacles in the U.S. to this policy. One problem is the deeply rooted assumption, so ingrained into the national political psyche, that Americans are responsible for managing the internal affairs of countries on its borders and preventing revolutions that have long been defined as equivalent to takeovers by hostile powers. This problem has been heightened by both Reagan and Bush administration rhetoric aimed at creating the image that continued Sandinista rule threatens vital U.S. security interests.

Given this context, the administration needs to talk calmly and honestly about Central American reality and U.S. interests there. It needs to counter the conservative's obsession with Central America by locating regional policies in the larger context of new global and hemispheric policies. It is time to take advantage of the Gorbachev era to wind down the cold war and demilitarize regional conflicts. It is time to encourage cooperative efforts to deal with pressing issues like spurring growth at home and in Latin America, easing the burdens of debt, initiating reforms that relieve hunger and malnutrition, tackling international environmental problems, and coping with other sensitive problems such as migration and narcotics.

Certain factors favor this redefinition of the problem. A majority of the U.S. public has consistently opposed the conservative's contra policy, and there is widespread suspicion that the Reagan Administration was less than honest about its

involvement in the region. There is also the atmosphere of improving relations with the Soviet Union and evidence of a Soviet commitment to reduce its interventionist role in the Third World. Further, because the new policy demands less control it is also less costly. It will be difficult to get Congressional approval for regional economic aid or trade arrangements in a time of deficits if the banner of anticommunism can no longer be waved. But the administration would not be fanning the same rancorous flames that engulfed efforts to get aid for the Salvadoran military before 1984, or the contras after 1984.

No amount of rational policy argument is likely to change quickly an imperative that is so deeply ingrained. Opponents of a new direction are only going to be convinced that the U.S. should deal with the region in a new way when they see that such policies actually work to enhance real interests—and the sky does not fall when the U.S. stops trying to control "destinies." But in order to implement these policies and demonstrate that they can work, the administration must be prepared for a potential difficulty. Its best efforts to put Central America on the back burner, and proceed cautiously and quietly so as not to inflame passions, may face vocal, well organized opposition by conservatives who have long made Central America a litmus test for a policy makers' political bonifides. Former administration officials, publicly certified as experts by their long experience, will likely inhabit conservative think tanks or join the already quite conservative class of Washington pundits, and may try to use these positions to make Central America a "test" of the administration's willingness to be tough, stand tall, and protect America.

Under such circumstances, the administration needs a strong defense of its policies if it is not to suffer the same fate that President Carter suffered when the right organized (in groups like the Committee on the Present Danger) to block, almost successfully, the Panama Canal treaties, to block the Salt II treaty, and to blast his administration for allowing the

hostage crisis and the defeat of Somoza by the Sandinistas. The obstacles created by such right wing attacks could be compounded if some regional crisis engulfs the administration. Although it is reasonable to be concerned about Nicaragua, the events that might spark such a crisis—an unprovoked Sandinista renewal of the war or a really severe government crackdown—are not likely to occur. El Salvador, however, presents greater possibility for trouble.

PREPARING FOR ANOTHER SALVADORAN "SURPRISE"

Nine years ago, at the time of the last presidential transition in this country, the situation in El Salvador exploded on the front pages and became the occasion for the Reagan Administration to draw the line against communism and define the outlines of what proved to be an unsuccessful policy toward the region. The current tense situation could again rapidly deteriorate, triggering conservative demands that the administration do something about internal affairs there. If policy makers are not prepared to deal with it, and respond reflexively from old visions, they could get locked in in ways that made later extrication—let alone a reorientation of policy—difficult.

The current Salvadoran situation is being driven by a number of closely connected dynamics. The guerrillas, strong militarily, are looking to take advantage of deteriorating conditions to improve their military position and, short of victory, force serious negotiations with the armed forces. Meanwhile, the ultra right, organized around the ARENA party, sees their recent electoral victories as the chance to gain complete government control, dismantle reforms, and put back in place the anti-reformist oligarchic project they led until 1979. Labor and peasant organizations have been bracing for the reactions they fear.

The internal situation in El Salvador is deteriorating as land and other reforms are gutted and the repression against labor and peasant organizations increases. Moderate, formerly

pro-Christian Democratic organizations, unsupported and unprotected by the new government, have been moving to the left and joining independent and leftist unions in widespread demonstrations and protests. The FMLN is likely to continue to increase its military activity and strengthen links to the urban movements.

As the deterioration continues, the Salvadoran military, conservatives in Congress, and some State Department, Pentagon and CIA officials, will pressure the administration to act quickly so as not to "lose another country." They are likely to paint such a situation as a test case of administration "will" and "toughness," overestimate the threat, and recommend steps that will lock the administration into reaffirming support for an ultra-rightist, and probably quite brutal, government.

How might the administration, faced with an elected ultra-rightist government and a deteriorating internal situation, respond? It would need a policy that distances itself from the ultra-rightist government while creating multilateral support for a negotiated solution. Such immediate steps might include the following:

First, the U.S. could encourage regional actors with good relations to the FDR/FMLN, ARENA and the military to set up a framework, involving the best aspects of the Esquipulas II and Tela accords and the Contadora process, to help encourage internal reconciliation. The talks between the current government and the FMLN present a tremendous opportunity for such an effort. As of the present they have been used by the ARENA Government more to posture than to negotiate. The Church, the OAS, and certain European countries, as well as the Socialist International and the Christian Democratic international could also play important roles in bringing about a viable, though undoubtedly protracted, negotiation process. Strengthening such efforts would increase the changes for a negotiated solution, and decrease the responsibility of the U.S. for a particular outcome in El Salvador.

Second, the U.S. could make clear to the Salvadoran government that it does not think a military solution to the

current conflict is either possible or desirable. The level of assistance presented in the administration's budget must reinforce this message: there must be a noticeable lowering of military aid, and a shift away from the current war-related economic aid toward assistance aimed at humanitarian relief and refugee resettlement.

Third, the U.S. could send clear messages to the government, the military and the ARENA party that U.S. aid to El Salvador is contingent on an end to human rights abuses.

Quickly putting into place the steps outlined above might enable the administration to redefine the Salvadoran situation nationally and internationally *before* there is another crisis, and create some room for maneuver, but the pressure to "do something" will still be very great. Policy makers must thus be prepared to draw a very clear line, beyond which they will not go to protect the Salvadoran military and oligarchy, and to insist that a negotiated solution is the only workable alternative.

The Bush administration has the opportunity to define, skillfully, realistic and principled new policies for the hemisphere. A deteriorating situation in El Salvador is no place for it to get bogged down.¹⁴ Immediate and careful preparation to cope with the potential crises could avoid the danger of yet another administration finding itself perennially sticking itself to the Central American tar baby.

NOTES

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), p. 56.
2. See, Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Central American Traps: Challenging the Reagan Agenda," *World Policy Journal*, No. 1, Winter 1987-88, pp. 1-28.
3. Cited in Richard Millett, "Central American Paralysis," *Foreign Policy*, NO. 39 (Summer 1980), p. 101.
4. See, Morris J. Blachman, William M. LeoGrande and

- Kenneth E. Sharpe, (eds.), *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986), especially Chapter 13.
5. Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).
 6. See, for example, Mario Arana Sevilla, "Nicaragua: Establizacion, Ajuste y Estrategia Economica, 1988-1989;" Kenneth M. Coleman, John Speer and Charles L. Davis, "The Urban Informal Economy in Nicaragua: Preliminary Observations;" and Kinichiro Harada, "Mixed Economy and Transition in the Periphery: Nicaragua, Hungary and China," all presented to the 15th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, December, 1989.
 7. See, Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Things Fall Apart: Trouble Ahead in El Salvador," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1988-89, pp. 107-139; also see, Martin Diskin and Kenneth Sharpe, "El Salvador," in Blachman, LeoGrande and Sharpe, *Confronting Revolution*.
 8. See, Richard S. Newfarmer, "The Economics of Strife," in Blachman, LeoGrande and Sharpe, *Confronting Revolution*.
 9. Personal interviews on an off-the-record basis.
 10. See, Blachman, LeoGrande and Sharpe, *Confronting Revolution*, especially Chapter 13.
 11. For a discussion of another facet of U.S. national interests, see, Morris J. Blachman, "U.S. Interests in South America," in *South America into the 1990s: Evolving International Relationships in a New Era*, edited by G. Pope Atkins (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).
 12. Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Central American Traps: Challenging the Reagan Agenda," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Winter 1987-88, pp. 1-28.
 13. For an interesting assessment of the issues surrounding

learning on the part of policy makers, see, Lloyd Etheridge, *Can Governments Learn?: American Foreign Policy and Central American Revolutions* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985).

14. For a different perspective on the underlying conditions contributing to the crisis in El Salvador, see Joshua Karliner, "Central America's Other War," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Fall 1989, pp. 787-810. Although he deals with a different aspect of the problems in the region, the thrust of his policy suggestions also suggest the need for a principled and realistic assessment of U.S. national interests as the basis for developing and implementing effective policy actions.