

U . S . - C E N T R A L A M E R I C A N
R E L A T I O N S :
Dilemmas, Prophets, and Solutions

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- THE REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT'S NATIONAL BIPARTISAN COMMISSION ON CENTRAL AMERICA.* Foreword by HENRY A. KISSINGER. (New York: Macmillan, 1984. Pp. 158. \$7.95.)
- CENTRAL AMERICA: ANATOMY OF CONFLICT.* Edited by ROBERT S. LEIKEN. (New York: Pergamon, 1984. Pp. 351. \$19.95.)
- INEVITABLE REVOLUTIONS: THE UNITED STATES IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By WALTER LAFEBER. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983. Pp. 357. \$18.95.)
- THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL AMERICA: POLICY CHOICES FOR THE U.S. AND MEXICO.* Edited by RICHARD R. FAGEN and OLGA PELLICER. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983. Pp. 228. \$20.00 cloth, \$11.95 paper.)
- RIFT AND REVOLUTION: THE CENTRAL AMERICAN IMBROGLIO.* Edited by HOWARD WIARDA. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1984. Pp. 392. \$19.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.)
- REVOLUTION AND INTERVENTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* Edited by MARLENE DIXON and SUSANNE JONAS. (San Francisco: Synthesis, 1983. Pp. 344. \$18.00 cloth, \$8.95 paper.)
- EL SALVADOR: A REVOLUTION CONFRONTS THE UNITED STATES.* By CYNTHIA ARNSON. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982. Pp. 117. \$5.95.)
- CHANGING COURSE: BLUEPRINT FOR PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN.* By POLICY ALTERNATIVES FOR THE CARIBBEAN AND CENTRAL AMERICA (PACCA). (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1984. Pp. 112. \$5.00.)
- THE ELECTORAL FARCE ENDS, THE WAR CONTINUES: THE UNITED STATES AND THE SALVADORAN ELECTIONS.* By COLIN DANBY. (Cambridge, Mass.: Central American Information Office, 1982. Pp. 48. \$2.50.)

According to James Reston's well-known quip, Americans are willing to do everything for Latin America but read about it. The continuation of that era may be in jeopardy. A presidential commission has issued a well-publicized report on Central America. Central America

has drawn a lot of attention from the American media in the last five years or so. The Central American "issue" has penetrated academia, evoking a stream of books, edited volumes, articles, and reports. In the current era, at least, there is plenty to read.

This essay will focus on the report by the Kissinger Commission, officially entitled *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, as well as on several books, edited volumes, and reports on Central America. Each of these works attempts, in varying degrees, to be policy relevant, and most of my effort here will be directed toward evaluating the conclusions that a policymaker, or a conscientious citizen determined to influence policy, might draw from these writings. The drawing of conclusions is not easy, both because the problems are complex and because the different writers and analysts develop very different descriptions, explanations, predictions, and prescriptions for dealing with those problems. Such differences can be traced to diverse theoretical approaches, ideological inclinations, and political interests of the analysts as well as to implicit disagreements on profound epistemological issues of which the disputants appear to be, at best, only dimly aware. They all draw "lessons" from history, for example, but they virtually never discuss important prior questions about how one best goes about drawing lessons from history (except, of course, for obligatory comments about how difficult it is). Nevertheless, having read these materials, I am almost as impressed with a consensus that emerges about Central American problems as with the violent disagreements. I am also impressed, however, with the extent to which the disagreements seem to be based on invisible, arbitrary, *ex cathedra* premises, and thus with the extent to which they are intrinsically unresolvable.

Despite all the other sharp differences among these works, there is a basic agreement about what the most serious problems in Central America are. Nobody disputes the idea that poverty in Central America is a problem. All agree that inequality in the distribution of wealth is a problem. Every writer assumes, or states explicitly, that political violence and instability are problems, which can be traced in part to the poverty and inequality in the distribution of economic resources. Viron Vaky, former assistant secretary for inter-American affairs in the Carter administration, insists in his article in *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict* that "the Reagan administration's . . . premises are cast in a Manichean absoluteness straight out of the 1950s" (p. 24). If that characterization means, and it seems to, that many policy analysts and Reagan administration officials claim that violence and political instability in Central America can be traced primarily to the activities of outside agitators from Cuba or the Soviet Union, I think it is a misleading statement. Howard Wiarda, in the introduction to *Rift and Revolution: The*

Central American Imbroglia, asserts that "I know of no responsible student of or policymaker on Central America, within or without the U.S. government, who does not believe the basic causes of problems in Central America are socioeconomic and political. No one really believes, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, that the Soviet Union is the prime cause of the upheavals there" (p. 18). The Kissinger Commission report echoes these sentiments when it says that "there has been considerable controversy, sometimes vigorous, as to whether the basic causes of the crisis are indigenous or foreign. In fact, the crisis is the product of *both* indigenous and foreign factors" (p. 18).¹

There is, to be sure, disagreement over the relative importance of domestic socioeconomic and political factors and outside subversion in explaining the political violence and instability. But judging from the contents of these volumes and reports, and perhaps from the fact that roughly 70 percent of the aid dispensed to Central America during the Reagan administration has been economic as opposed to military, virtually no one seriously contends that domestic poverty, inequality, and injustice are unimportant.

Furthermore, a surprising amount of agreement exists in these works about the primary causes of the poverty and the inequality in the distribution of wealth in Central American societies. Over the last two decades or so, a lively theoretical controversy has emerged regarding the relative importance of internal and external factors in the process leading to economic stagnation and inequality in Third World countries. American scholars in the 1950s tended to concentrate on internal factors, such as the lack of education, the lack of infrastructure, poor health care, cultural values inimical to economic change and progress, and so on. Dependency theorists, in contrast, have emphasized the impact on Third World countries of the international environment, claiming that these countries had been integrated into the international economic system in ways that were considerably more harmful than helpful. If the opinions of the writers of these volumes and reports are any indication, dependency theorists seem to have won that argument (at least with respect to Central American countries, which are admittedly unusually well suited to a dependency theory approach), even if most of these analysts have no inclination to accept the more radical or Marxist implications of dependency theory. Isaac Cohen and Gert Rosenthal, in one of the more useful chapters in *The Future of Central America: Policy Choices for the U. S. and Mexico*, write that "the first and most basic characteristic of these countries [in Central America] is their extreme dependency on events that occur outside their very limited boundaries, both national and regional" (p. 16). For example, virtually all of these sources, including the Kissinger Commission report, trace the origins of the current crisis in part to legacies from the Spanish

colonial era. Certain rigidities in the class structure of all Central American countries are mentioned most consistently.

Not only dependency theorists and critics of American policy in Central America but also the Kissinger Commission report emphasize the extent to which a commercial boom period in the late nineteenth century (stimulated primarily by developments in the outside world) reinforced trends toward economic specialization in the Central American countries. These trends, regardless of the possible rewards for pursuit of comparative advantage, also had damaging long-term impacts. The Kissinger Commission report points out that because of events from this era, "the cultivation of a few basic agricultural crops for export—coffee, bananas, and sugar—dominated their economies. Particularly after the coffee boom of the 1870s, plantations producing for export encroached on subsistence farming. A dual agricultural system emerged: large plantations for export crops, small plots to raise food. This reinforced the social divisions inherited from the colonial period" (p. 23).

None of the writers reviewed here, including those most supportive of American policy or the Reagan administration or both, deny that bitterness and resentment stemming from vigorous American interventions in the early decades of the twentieth century form an important part of the basis for contemporary problems that the United States faces in the region. Although consensus is apparently lacking on the impact of the Depression and the era of the Good Neighbor Policy of the Roosevelt administration, clear agreement exists on the effect of the international economic environment on Central America in the post-World War II era. All the Central American countries experienced substantial economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, which continued for some into the 1970s. Particularly illuminating on this point is the chapter by Richard Feinberg and Robert Pastor in *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, which points out that Central American countries experienced on average a real rate of growth of 5.3 percent from 1950 to 1978 and that real per capita income doubled. "In 1950, a single commodity export from each Central American country generated about 70 percent of their foreign exchange; that dependency declined to 36 percent by 1970" (p. 194). "Trade among CACM countries jumped from \$32 million in 1960 to over \$900 million in 1978, with manufacturing accounting for 95 percent of the total" (p. 195). Adult literacy rose from 44 percent in 1960 to 72 percent in 1976 (p. 196). "Between 1960 and 1977, the number of physicians in Central America increased more than twice as fast as the population and the number of nurses nearly six times as fast" (p. 196).²

In short, lots of good things happened in Central America, economically speaking, in the decades immediately after World War II. As

many of these writers point out, all these good things occurred during a time when population growth rates, allegedly so damaging to economic progress and often asserted to be a prime cause of current problems, were very high. The combined population of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua was eight million in 1950; by the end of the 1970s, it was twenty million.

Furthermore, virtual unanimity exists in these sources on the causes of these favorable economic trends, especially during the 1960s. The formation of the Central American Economic Market is given a lot of credit. So too is the influx of foreign investment that it helped to attract. The Alliance for Progress is praised almost universally. Feinberg and Porter point out that the United States poured over \$2 billion in bilateral economic aid into the six Central American countries (including Panama) between 1962 and 1980. Often left unstated, but quite obvious, is the fact that for most of the 1950s and 1960s, the United States and the rest of the western industrialized world enjoyed economic smooth sailing and that important economic benefits trickled down to the states of Central America.

The growth of the 1950s and the 1960s did contain some seeds of future problems. About this point, shared perceptions are evident. One would expect that Susanne Jonas, one of the editors of *Revolution and Intervention in Central America* (part of the "Contemporary Marxist Series") would rail against the extent to which the fruits of economic growth of the fifties and the sixties were unequally distributed (pp. 12–17). One is perhaps less prepared to read in the Kissinger Commission report that "although some benefitted from social change and economic growth in these decades, many others benefitted little or not at all," and to see the report cite approvingly the conclusion by the Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA) to the effect that "the fruits of the long period of economic expansion were distributed in a flagrantly inequitable manner" (p. 28).

Finally, a remarkably firm consensus exists among these writers—for all their diverse theoretical, ideological, political (and epistemological) viewpoints—that after the period of economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, things began to go wrong in the 1970s and fell apart entirely in the 1980s. None of these writers doubt that this sharp economic downturn following the prolonged period of growth has had revolutionary implications for Central America, and virtually all of these analysts point to the same factors as causes of that downturn. One cause is indigenous to the region—that is, the war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, which contributed significantly to the paralysis of the Central American Common Market. But generally the countries of Central America were the victims of events in the international economic and political system beyond their control, events to

which they were particularly vulnerable. Perhaps most important were the two shocks of tremendous increases in the price of oil in 1973 and 1979. Walter LaFeber points out in *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* that “between 1977 and 1980, the region’s annual cost of oil imports leaped from \$189 million to \$1.5 billion” (p. 205). The bad effects of the oil shocks were exacerbated, especially toward the end of the 1970s, when demand and prices for most of Central America’s exports fell precipitously. As Howard Wiarda observes in *Rift and Revolution*, “There were times when sugar was given away free in American grocery stores. Consumer drinking habits also began to shift away from coffee and sugared drinks toward decaffeinated and non-sugared beverages. That trend was good from the point of view of our collective and individual figures and bloodpressures, but it was ruinous for the economies of Central America” (p. 16). In response to these changes, most Central American countries arranged loans from American and international banks, thus laying those debts on top of debts from the days of the Alliance for Progress and making themselves doubly vulnerable to the combined impact of the second oil shock, worldwide recession, high inflation, and high interest rates that occurred after 1979. By 1982 Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua were all experiencing declines in their respective gross national products.

Although a tinge of economic determinism is implicit in this widely accepted “model” of political violence and instability in Central America, the books and reports reviewed here do not ignore political factors. For example, virtually all of them, including the Kissinger Commission report, acknowledge that the CIA-sponsored overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala in 1954 was a crucial turning point in Central American history and that the turn was not for the better.³ The Commission report is perhaps not sufficiently sensitive to the long-term costs of various American interventions in Latin American domestic politics, even though it is occasionally surprisingly candid on this issue. That candor does not extend to an evaluation of the impact of the American campaign against Allende in the early 1970s on the attitudes of reformist and revolutionary elements in Central America, a situation that is not surprising in view of the role that Kissinger played in the affair. Arturo Cruz Sequira, in his contribution to *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, points out that in the early 1970s “a new generation of Sandinistas . . . had been educated in Chile during the Allende years. They returned from Chile with new ‘dependency’ theories suggesting that a break with the developed metropolitan centers of capitalism was necessary for development to occur in the third world periphery” (p. 101). One wonders how much more staying power the moderate elements in the Nicaraguan revolutionary coalition might

have if they did not have to deal with the arguments implicit in the slogan "Remember Chile."

In general, U.S.–Nicaraguan relations and their deterioration over the last five years are dealt with in a superficial, unsatisfying manner by the Kissinger report. At one point, the report mentions Nicaraguan rebels "who reportedly receive U.S. support," only to give credit to those rebels for pressuring the Sandinistas into announcing a date for 1985 elections (p. 37). On the other side of the coin, one finds William LeoGrande arguing in *The Future of Central America* that "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" (p. 106). With all due respect to LeoGrande, whose chapter is generally balanced and insightful, I have always had the feeling that neither side of this particular debate really knows what it is talking about. Although I realize that Arturo Cruz Sequira is hardly a disinterested source, I suspect that he is correct when he says of the Sandinista leadership: "During the first months after the victory, some of the *comandantes* adopted the extreme view that the United States had not intervened militarily in Nicaragua in 1979, although imperialistic logic would have demanded it, because of the shift in the world balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union As far as the Sandinista Front was concerned, the world was necessarily bipolar . . . the world could be reduced to a struggle between imperialism and the socialist camp" (*Central America*, pp. 102–3).⁴ Criticisms such as LeoGrande's suggestion that the Reagan administration, through its hostility, is driving the Sandinistas into the arms of the Soviets, are commonplace. But the comments by Cruz Sequira suggest that some leadership elements in both Managua and Washington have been inclined to "reduce" the U.S.–Nicaraguan conflict to Cold War terms. This observation strengthens my admittedly intuitive impression that in conflicts like the one between the Sandinista government and the U.S. government (and the earlier one between Castro's Cuba and the United States), influential groups in both capitals engage in mutually reinforcing self-fulfilling prophecies. Whether those prophecies are based on misperceptions is an incredibly complex epistemological question. As Jack Levy has pointed out recently in his analysis of the role of misperceptions in international conflict, "decisionmakers' expectations . . . may turn out to have a self-fulfilling or self-denying impact because of the actions they induce. For these reasons, expectations about future reality are not really falsifiable in any meaningful sense" ⁵ In other words, my contention is that if those who argue that the Reagan administration's policies toward Nicaragua produced hostility that otherwise would not have surfaced are faced with the question of "How do you

know that?" it becomes impossible to provide a convincing answer, especially because the possibly self-fulfilling, but also possibly accurate, expectations in Washington may well have been reinforced by similar expectations among a significant portion of the Sandinista leadership.

In any case, probably the best description of the breakdown in the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua in these sources is provided by Walter LaFeber in *Inevitable Revolutions*. He makes it clear that one of the key turning points occurred when the Sandinistas announced (in mid-1980) that elections would not be held until 1985. In contrast, he also points out that "when radical union organizers tried to foment a strike against Coca Cola and other U.S. companies, Commander Daniel Ortega, emerging as the junta's strongman, expelled the organizers from the country" (p. 239). LaFeber points to the continuation of aid from the United States after the Sandinista regime came to power as evidence against the idea that U.S. policy created the antagonism it feared, but he also mentions the onerous conditions that were put on this aid. (Susanne Jonas offers a relatively dispassionate and informative analysis of those conditions in one of her contributions to *Revolution and Intervention in Central America*.) LaFeber concludes, justifiably in my opinion, that the "North American system was unable to tolerate revolutionaries. And vice versa" (p. 242).

My summary judgment about these writings on the problems in El Salvador and the rest of Central America outside of Nicaragua is that they all tend to underestimate or obscure the difficulty of resolving the various dilemmas, even though they discuss the high degree of difficulty incessantly. If these problems are not insoluble, I nevertheless cannot see how any of the multitude of suggestions made by all of these analysts will work in the way they are supposed to. Probably the easiest target for criticism in this vein is the Kissinger Commission report. The report implicitly recognizes one dilemma to which I refer here. It repeatedly makes such assertions as: "Unless rapid progress can be made on the political, economic, and social fronts, peace on the military front will be elusive and would be fragile. But unless the externally supported insurgencies are checked, and the violence curbed, progress on those other fronts will be elusive and would be fragile" (p. 5). Again, "Just as there can be no real security without economic growth and social justice, so there can be no prosperity without security" (p. 16). Also, "The region is torn by war and the threat of war. It needs peace in order to have progress. It needs security in order to have peace" (p. 100).

The solution to the dilemma suggested by the commission is that progress be made on all fronts simultaneously (p. 60). But that kind of approach is not only vulnerable to the criticism that it fails to establish the priorities required by finite resources but also does not resolve the

many dilemmas faced by the United States in El Salvador and Central America. It is certainly true that economic prosperity will not come to Central America until peace and stability are established. But virtually everyone—from left to right, in the U.S. government, out of the U.S. government, or against the U.S. government—agrees that two of the primary causes of conflict and instability are poverty and economic stagnation. In short, prosperity will not come until peace is established, but peace is impossible until prosperity is achieved. What the Kissinger Commission report (and the other analysts) refuse to acknowledge is the probability that attempts to achieve both simultaneously under the current conditions in El Salvador and Central America will work at cross purposes and cancel each other out entirely. As Richard Feinberg has pointed out in his critique of the Kissinger Commission report, “the friends of foreign assistance should be extremely wary of disbursing large-scale foreign aid in the current political climate in Central America.”⁶ Investing the vast amounts of aid recommended by the commission in El Salvador and the rest of Central America under the current conditions of violence and instability will almost certainly be analogous to pouring it down the proverbial rathole. The regime in power in El Salvador now will misuse it in various ways, bringing at best growth without equity or justice. More likely, even growth cannot be achieved under current conditions. But a “peace first” approach will not work either because peace can only be achieved in El Salvador through oppression of massive proportions unless economic reform and progress occur. Putting that oppressive structure into place, however, will preclude the possibility of meaningful economic, political, and social reforms after the “peace” is achieved. Simultaneous attempts to achieve peace and prosperity will not resolve the dilemma; rather, they will ensure that El Salvador stays in the limbo to which it is now condemned, in which it cannot achieve peace because poverty and injustice are rampant, and it cannot achieve prosperity and equity until peace and stability are established.

The more fundamental dilemma is that the United States is attempting to preserve the political and economic integrity of El Salvador (and the other countries in Central America except Nicaragua) while simultaneously making energetic plans to undermine it. The members of the Kissinger Commission were not entirely insensitive to this dilemma. They repeatedly assert that the problems of Central America must be solved by Central Americans. “Ultimately, a solution of Central America’s problems will depend on Central Americans themselves” (p. 5). Again, “The burden of action in these areas . . . lies primarily on the Central Americans themselves” (p. 81). Yet the whole report encourages intensive intervention by the United States in the affairs of El Salvador and the rest of Central America. The report itself acknowledges

that "because the nations are small, because they are near, efforts that would be minor by the standards of other crises can have a large impact on this one." That assertion is unobjectionable. But one thing the United States probably cannot do, even with its tremendous power and influence and even in a tiny country like El Salvador, is create a government with integrity and legitimacy. The very effort is self-contradictory.

This contradiction can perhaps be seen most clearly in the context of a discussion of two more specific problems. The United States has managed to bring about "free" elections in El Salvador, and the commission approves. It recommends that the countries in Central America be made ineligible for aid unless they make progress toward "political pluralism, and a process of recurrent elections with competing political parties" (p. 73). But when the United States is present in such an obtrusive way in a small country like El Salvador, its presence alone (not to mention all the other problems endemic there) makes election results a dubious source of political legitimacy. This dubiousness has been proven repeatedly in the history of Central America. One wishes the commission had paid more attention to historical studies of American attempts to sponsor elections in Central America, such as that by Thomas P. Wright. He concluded that: "Impartial support of free elections is impossible. Since the impartiality of the supervising power is presumably a condition of any support of a really 'free' ballot, we are driven to the further conclusion that the support of free elections as an end in itself is self-defeating in countries where genuine democracy has not already existed."⁷

Colin Danby, in *The Electoral Farce Ends, The War Continues*, provides an informative discussion of some of the specific problems that can arise when a superpower tries to supervise and monitor elections in a country like El Salvador. He points out that the U.S. observer team for the 1982 elections included two men who had observed the fraudulent 1967 elections in Vietnam and had been well pleased with them. He describes the activities of another U.S. observer, Senator Nancy Kassenbaum of Kansas, with tongue obviously in cheek. "Accompanied everywhere by a soldier carrying a rifle, Kassenbaum duly asked voters (through an interpreter) if they were voting because of government threats; the voters duly answered no" (p. 21). Kassenbaum symbolized the U.S. presence in her need for an interpreter and a soldier with a rifle of both symbolic and real significance. Her presence constituted a revealing metaphor of the dilemma faced by the United States when it tries to supervise "free" elections in Central America. She could not be there unless protected by the government that, as her question indicated, was an important source of potential threats to the integrity of the elections. Just by being there, she made it impossible for the voters she witnessed to cast a really "free" ballot.

Much the same dilemma arises when the United States tries to monitor and control the behavior of a government like that in El Salvador in the area of human rights. I have no sympathy for torturers, and indeed I believe that officially sponsored torture is one of the few internal evils in other countries that the United States can usefully combat with official policies and pronouncements. But no government in Central America can be expected to achieve integrity or legitimacy if it is perceived to be a puppet of the United States. When the United States government insists that a regime such as the one in El Salvador be "certified" periodically as making progress in the area of human rights as a condition for receiving aid, it puts that regime in an impossible situation.

The Kissinger Commission recommends "'conditioning' military assistance to the government of El Salvador on progress in the effort to bring death squads under control" (p. 102). But this approach means that periodically and persistently the government of El Salvador will have to obtain a stamp of approval from the United States government in order to receive aid and thereby continue its existence. No government that is forced to go through such a procedure can appear to be anything but a puppet of its benefactor, which in fact it will be to an important extent. Nor can a government sustained in that fashion be expected to last any longer than did the government in South Vietnam after American troops left; and if El Salvador's current government were cut off from U.S. support, it would probably not survive that long. President Reagan may have resisted the "certification" process with respect to El Salvador for all the wrong reasons, but an implicit and compelling logic exists, whether he was aware of it or not, in refusing to subject a government to such a process while trying to augment its integrity and legitimacy.

All of this criticism of the recommendations of the Kissinger Commission should not be taken to mean that the other works discussed here have satisfactory answers to these problems. To repeat, I am unconvinced that they do.

The other volumes and reports *are* surprisingly and refreshingly free of warnings that the United States is on the verge of becoming involved in "another Vietnam" in El Salvador or elsewhere in Central America. It is to their credit because the slogan "El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam" may well be useful politically, but it is not a very convincing prognosis for several reasons. Perhaps the most important of these is the tendency for governments to overreact to the lessons of the latest unsuccessful war. I believe that it is highly unlikely, even more than ten years after the debacle in Vietnam, that the United States will become progressively involved in an escalating, but ultimately losing, military conflict in Central America. Opposition to a slowly escalating process

with uncertain prospects for victory, a process so vividly reminiscent of Vietnam, is likely to halt it quickly. The departure of troops from Lebanon even after President Reagan made several statements about the crucial nature of their mission there is an apt example. Such opposition would not be confined to critics in the universities or in the streets but would be likely to develop also within the government, perhaps especially in the military. As Barry Rubin points out in his contribution to *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, the military has already exhibited "dovish" tendencies regarding the internal debate over Central America. "Remembering the Vietnam experience, the armed services did not want to become involved in a war where they would lack public support and be subject to political constraints" (p. 305).

The improbability of "another Vietnam" does not mean, however, that mistakes will not be made in U.S. attempts to deal with the problems in Central America. While the analysts discussed here point out what they believe the mistakes to be, they stop short of credible speculation about what the undesirable consequences of those mistakes might be. Surely some of the more likely consequences would result from a tendency to overreact to the Vietnam experience. Earl C. Ravenal has pointed out in his study of American foreign policy failures that "one of the most widely accepted instrumental lessons among national security elites is the notion that future interventions must be sudden, central, and (in one way or another) overwhelming."⁸ Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, the Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific from 1964 to 1968, has argued that two of the lessons that should be drawn from the Vietnam War are that "the application of military, war-making power is an ugly thing—stark, harsh, and demanding—and it cannot be made nicer by pussyfooting around with it," and that "once a decision has been made to wage war, the leadership must permit war to be engaged, expeditiously and full bore, not halfway."⁹ Most interesting are the findings of Ole Holsti and James Rosenau in their survey of 2282 respondents who included "most, if not all, of the major components of the nation's leadership structure." The statement that "it is best to forget the foreign policy mistakes of the past as quickly as possible" evoked the strongest disagreement of all items. The statement eliciting the second-highest level of agreement was "If foreign interventions are undertaken, the necessary force should be applied in a short period of time."¹⁰

Such straws in the wind, as well as the tendency for policymakers to overreact to mistakes in the immediate past, suggest that the American government might decide, for example, to solve the problems in El Salvador and Nicaragua with a quick, massive, and decisive military operation in a manner opposed to the slow, piecemeal strategy used in Vietnam.¹¹ That strategy could provoke strong reactions by the

Russians or Cubans that the United States might find hard to face without precipitating a dangerous process of escalation and confrontation.

Less catastrophic, but more likely, is the possibility that the United States will respond to the current crisis in Central America by increasing dramatically the role of military force in its relationship with countries in that region. Some sentiment apparently already exists in the Reagan administration for moving in that direction. In a September 1983 speech to the Baltimore Council of Foreign Affairs that has been widely publicized (and often cited by the works discussed here), Defense Undersecretary for Policy Fred Iklé called for a military victory in Central America and asserted that U.S. troops might have to be stationed permanently in the region to deal with Communist subversion by Nicaragua and Cuba.

It would probably be a mistake to categorize this statement as an idle threat. In fact, American troops may already be stationed "permanently" in Honduras. If this action is a preliminary step toward a militarization of U.S. relationships with the countries of Central America, these relationships may be evolving in a direction reminiscent of those of the early decades of this century or resembling the relationships now existing between the Soviet Union and the states of Eastern Europe. The American attempt to control Central America by overt military methods was difficult and ultimately frustrating in the early twentieth century, at a time when the American "hegemonic presumption" in this hemisphere was more valid than it is in the contemporary era.¹² Even in the earlier era, opposition to a U.S. policy based on military coercion in Central America met with stiff opposition in Central America, Europe, and the United States. Modern means of communication, as well as the combined impact of memories of inter-American relations in the early twentieth century and those of the Vietnam era, will almost certainly produce opposition to such a policy in this era. Such opposition will be even more vociferous and probably more effective, especially at a time when large defense expenditures are making a significant contribution to worrisome budget deficits. In short, "another Vietnam" in Central America may be unlikely. But "victories" such as the Soviet Union engineered in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland more recently (accomplished with a thinly veiled threat of direct military intervention) are more likely. An effort by the United States to duplicate, and more importantly, to sustain such victories in Central America promises to be costly, painful, and less likely to succeed.

But what are the alternatives? If policymakers or interested citizens consult the works under review here for answers with respect to El Salvador in particular, they will find excellent historical background in LaFeber's book but not much in the way of specific recommendations. The exception is the recommendation implicit in his descriptions

of all the problems that the United States helped to create in Central America by overzealous meddling in the domestic affairs of the countries of that region. Cynthia Arnson's *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* is rather sketchy on the earlier history covered closely by LaFeber, but it is very good on the details of domestic politics in El Salvador in the 1970s. Basically she recommends "accommodation of the left" to avoid "continued conflict, years of instability, tens of thousands of dead or homeless, and millions of dollars wasted" (p. 91). In *Changing Course: Blueprint for Peace in Central America and the Caribbean*, the organization Policy Alternatives for the Caribbean and Central America recommends for El Salvador that the United States "cut off military aid, and support efforts for a negotiated settlement involving power-sharing among the contending forces." Similar recommendations are made by several authors in the volumes edited by Fagen and Pellicer and by Leiken, with an added emphasis on taking advantage of intermediation by Mexico or the Contadora group. Thomas Anderson in *Rift and Revolution* reinforces the notion that what the United States needs to do with respect to the problems in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America is to back off. "One of the ironies of the region," Anderson points out, "is that the two countries of Latin America which were most North Americanized, Cuba and Nicaragua, have had the most profound anti-Yankee revolutions. This is no coincidence—national resentment against the United States lies at the heart of both revolutions" (p. 124).

Because of the problems I foresee as a probable consequence of overly assertive U.S. policies in Central America, I am basically sympathetic to the recommendations that the United States adopt a lower profile there and allow other states a larger role in attempts to deal with the problems of the region. My concern is that such recommendations might have been oversold. I suspect that it is true, as Thomas Anderson says, that intensive American meddling in the affairs of Cuba and Nicaragua over the last several decades is an important cause of virulent anti-Americanism in those states. But as Cynthia Arnson points out, "El Salvador is one of the few Central American and Caribbean states that escaped landings by U.S. Marines or naval forces in the past 100 years" (*El Salvador*, p. 2). Yet there is plenty of anti-Americanism in El Salvador, and the society there has managed to develop serious problems even without American meddling on a scale experienced by Cuba and Nicaragua, at least historically. "Letting George do it" in El Salvador, for example, may not solve the problems there, as many of these writers seem to suggest. If the United States pulls out, it seems quite possible that the Right might just impose the massively oppressive solution that is needed to restore "peace" there without political and economic reforms, despite the best efforts of Mexico or the rest of the

Contadora group. Or perhaps, even though Soviet and Cuban efforts on behalf of the rebels may be minimal, if countered by *no* American program, these efforts might be sufficient to tip the balance in favor of violently anti-American forces.

In short, I think that most of the policy recommendations made by critics of American policy in Central America in the works reviewed here would become more credible if they included admissions that simply adopting a lower profile and letting others play a bigger role may not be enough to avoid developments in Central American countries of great benefit to enthusiastically anti-American elements, even if the United States also supplies aid through multilateral auspices. I would also like to see more discussion of the possibility that such developments need not concern the United States very much, especially in this nuclear era. I. M. Destler, in *Central America: Anatomy of Conflict*, begins to address seriously such an idea in a discussion initiated by the following statement: "Suppose we declared that we had no vital interest in the internal character of Central American regimes." Destler goes on to acknowledge that "the right would point to Marxists we were not combatting, the left to outrages we were not preventing" (p. 335). But such an approach is brought up rather timidly in a footnote and is not explored in any depth.

Such an approach seems "isolationist," harking back to the concept of "Fortress America," and I am skeptical of it for those reasons. But reading all these alternatives for dealing with the current problems in Central America has made me less skeptical about a fairly simple "hands-off" policy, even though I think it likely that several unattractive developments in Central America would occur in the wake of an American withdrawal from the area.¹³ The fact is that the United States has followed such overbearing, insensitive policies in Central America for so long that it seems likely that any unilateral American activity in the area now will be counterproductive. Even abstinence will not allow the United States to escape the consequences of past policies; but again, in the nuclear era, will those problems really matter? Such questions are discussed too little in all of these works.

To end on a contrastingly optimistic, and perhaps even contradictory, note, let me briefly suggest that pessimism about the future of Central America, including that expressed in this essay and by most of the authors discussed in it, can be overdone. As I mentioned earlier, a virtual consensus emerges from these analyses that current problems in Central America can be traced to a crucial extent to the buffeting that these countries received from a series of developments in their international economic environment, ranging from the actions of OPEC to changes in the dietary habits of American coffee drinkers. It is rather strange that so much emphasis is placed on the harmful effects that that

environment has had and so little on the potentially beneficial impact it could have. What if the price of oil stays low? What if the economy of the United States continues to grow, inflation stays low, interest rates fall, and the economies of the rest of the industrialized world follow suit in a more vigorous way than they have so far? Is it possible that the economies of Central America would reap sufficient benefits from such developments (even if not equitably distributed) that the crisis of Central America will disappear from the headlines, at least until the next economic downturn?

NOTES

1. At another point, the Kissinger Commission report declares that "Cuba and Nicaragua did not invent the grievances that made insurrection possible in El Salvador and elsewhere. Those grievances are real and acute" (p. 103).
2. Cohen and Rosenthal provide a similar summary of the beneficial changes that occurred in Central America after World War II: "During the past three decades . . . real per capita income has doubled, and foreign trade has multiplied by sixteen; the countries are more urbanized, societies more differentiated, economies more diversified, and physical space better integrated" (p. 21).
3. William LeoGrande, a prominent critic of American policy in Central America and the Kissinger Commission report (as well as a contributor to *The Future of Central America*), criticizes the report because "the CIA's outster of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954—arguably the critical event in the failure of reformism not just in Guatemala but throughout the region—goes unmentioned." See his article, "Through the Looking Glass: The Kissinger Report on Central America," *World Policy Journal* (Spring 1984):4. But the commission report does in fact mention that "in Guatemala . . . the United States helped bring about the fall of the Arbenz government in 1954," and even goes on to acknowledge that afterward "politics became more divisive, violent, and polarized than in neighboring states" (p. 25).
4. As evidence supporting this description of the worldview of an important sector of the Sandinista leadership, Cruz cites a speech given by Humberto Ortega to Sandinista army officers on 25 August 1981.
5. Jack Levy, "Misperceptions and the Causes of War," *World Politics* 36 (Oct. 1983):81.
6. Richard E. Feinberg, "The Kissinger Commission Report: A Critique," *World Development* (Aug. 1984):874.
7. Thomas P. Wright, *American Support of Free Elections Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1964), 156–62.
8. Earl C. Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 70. Ravenal also quotes former Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger as saying that "one of the lessons of the Vietnamese conflict is that rather than simply countering your opponent's thrusts, it is necessary to go for the heart of the opponent's power: destroy his military forces rather than simply be involved endlessly in ancillary military operations" (p. 71).
9. See U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1987), 269–70.
10. Ole Holsti and James N. Rosenau, "Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders," *World Politics* 32 (Oct. 1979):5, 35, 38.
11. This "scenario" seems especially believable if, as Laurence Whitehead plausibly contends, the Reagan administration sees Central America primarily as an opportunity to refight the Vietnam War, this time to a successful conclusion. See "Explaining Washington's Central American Policies," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15 (Nov. 1983):360.
12. The phrase comes from Abraham Lowenthal, "The United States and Latin America:

Ending the Hegemonic Presumption," *Foreign Affairs* 55 (Oct. 1976):199–213. In a recent restatement of his earlier argument, Lowenthal asserts: "The fundamental flaw of U.S. policy toward Latin America in the past twenty years is not the failure to implement proposed new policies but the failure to deal with the overriding fact of contemporary inter-American relations: the redistribution of power. Since the early 1960s, U.S. policy has failed to cope with hegemony in decline." See his "Change the Agenda," *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1983):75.

13. "Vietnam and Central America," a paper delivered by Jerome Slater at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, 27–31 March 1984, has played an important role in bringing me around to this point of view.