

CENTRAL AMERICA IN THE 1980s

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Why Has Central America Come to Our Attention?

Increasingly since the end of World War II, Central America has been in the news. Television cameras and news reporters have taken American audiences to the mountains, capital cities, villages, and jungles of a region that is geographically very close, but rarely thought about by North Americans. A few years ago, a national survey reported that something over 70 percent of the American people either had never heard of Central America, or had no idea where it might be.

Nevertheless, Central America is important because the region is very poor and extremely dependent economically on the United States. Its endemic poverty means that its people constantly confront serious problems, the solutions for which can affect the United States. Also, the Panama Canal has always been important to the United States, and regional events that appear to threaten that waterway are a cause for concern. But more generally, Central America is seen by many to be "our own backyard," and what goes on there is bound to affect us, sooner or later.

The events behind the upsurge in Central American news began even before the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. The Spanish who colonized the region found it very difficult to create the kind of wealth in silver that their brethren were extracting from Mexico and the Andes. The region's wealth could only be had by forcing the Indians to produce a few exportable crops and to weave cloth to be sold. But even this "wealth" was very unevenly distributed. It was mainly in the northern part of the region, what is today Guatemala and El Salvador, and along the Pacific coast in Nicaragua that there was sufficient labor. In the rest of Central America Indians were generally killed off by slavery and disease, or they avoided the Spanish by remaining in the thinly populated, hot, humid, Atlantic coast, a region the Spanish found uninhabitable.

Thus wherever Indians were available for labor, they were extensively exploited. This practice intensified with the development of export coffee production after independence, in the nineteenth century. Both the Indian and the non-Indian, or mestizo, population were increasing. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, a labor pool was kept available by pushing peasant farmers, Indian and non-Indian, off their lands, forcing them to work on the farms exporting coffee—and later

cotton, beef, and other products. Until World War II, labor was controlled through a legal system that served to hide the frequent Indian revolts and the growing resentment in the non-Indian poor population.

From 1950 until about 1980, two things tended to hide the growing problem. One was an economic expansion that gradually increased national income in the Central American countries; this veil dropped when OPEC raised the price of petroleum in the middle 1970s. The increased oil prices, coupled with very bad governmental financial planning, led most of the countries to contract debts far beyond their capacity to pay. Expanded production of crops and beef specifically benefited a few large producers in Central America and consumers in the United States. It provided no improvement in the life of the landless rural poor of Central America.

However, there was sufficient unpopulated land that the rural population could migrate and still find a way to survive. There were limits, though, and increasingly Salvadorans went to Honduras and to Guatemala, Guatemalans found work in neighboring Mexico, and people from all over the region migrated to the United States. Hence, toward the end of the 1970s, the region was confronted with a sharp drop in income, coupled with a closing up of areas to which migrants could go.

After 1959 the success of the Cuban Revolution impressed many Central Americans, who felt that their existing system was never going to permit people to find a better life. They were encouraged by Cuba's successful revolution to think that revolution might achieve improvements that were not possible in the existing systems. When the new Cuban government declared that it preferred a centralized, socialist, form of government to that of the previous capitalist regime, and when it sought closer ties with eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the United States initiated a trade embargo (which continues today) to try to force Cuba to give up this policy through isolating it from the U.S. market. The major result of this policy has been to force Cuba to trade much more with the Eastern bloc countries.

It was no coincidence that the revolutions in Central America developed specifically in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the regions of most intense labor exploitation. In 1979 the Nicaraguan Revolution established a new government that declared its wish to avoid the heavy dependence on the United States that had characterized Central America for the previous

hundred years, and a preference for a socialist economy. The United States, long discomfited by the Cuban situation, also became nervous about the Nicaraguan regime and, at first, began to withdraw support; later, it more overtly began to sponsor a counterrevolutionary force, known as the "Contras."

What has brought Central America most immediately to our attention, then, is the fact that there has been one successful revolution—in Nicaragua—and that revolutions are still in progress in El Salvador and Guatemala. These revolutions are deeply based in the growing poverty of the region and on the growing numbers of Central Americans who have no effective access to the limited wealth that their countries can provide. While Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have instituted limited land redistribution programs, Nicaragua's revolutionary program is more extensive and more radical. The current U.S. policy, however, maintains a deep fear of socialism, seeing in the Nicaraguan efforts a threat that all Central America may become socialistic, endangering not only the Panama Canal, but the United States itself. President Reagan told the American people at one point that if the revolutionary activities were not stopped, we could expect to see Nicaraguan troops invading Harlingen, Texas.

What Do We Need to Know about Central America?

To better assess the dangers posed by the revolutions of Central America, we need more information on Central America itself. Our understanding needs to be based on economic, humanistic, and political considerations.

"Central America" traditionally encompasses Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. These five countries, together with Mexico, were part of colonial New Spain, and all achieved their independence in the early 1820s. In the twentieth century, however, two new countries emerged in the isthmus. Panama became independent of Colombia in 1903, and Belize achieved its independence from Great Britain and Guatemala in 1981.

These countries share many conditions. All are tropical and quite mountainous. The two smallest nations face only one sea: Belize, the Caribbean, and El Salvador, the Pacific. All the rest contain significant volcanic and broken mountain territory and are bordered by both oceans. Also important is that all are small. The accompanying table compares them in terms of territorial size, population, and income per capita both with each other and with some of the states of the United States and European countries of similar size. What is immediately clear is that Central American

countries can be similar to other states in terms of the size of their territories and populations, but their incomes differ sharply. Besides being small, then, they are very poor. The income per capita of the wealthiest, Costa Rica, is still only a quarter of that of West Virginia, one of our poorest states, and half that of the Netherlands (which is somewhat smaller); the income of El Salvador is only one-twentieth that of Massachusetts, almost identical in territorial size and very close in population, and 15 percent of that of Israel, which is almost the same size.

The economy that stands behind this poverty is basically agrarian. All the Central American countries depend for their principal income on a very limited number of exports—primarily coffee, cotton, and beef—and must compete on a world market where prices are determined by events far beyond their borders. To get a decent price for their products is often more a political than an economic problem. While their laboring population is largely derived from rural areas, that population's expulsion from farming areas has led to migration both from the urban areas (where there is excessive unemployment and underemployment already) and to other countries.

The quality of labor relations differs among the countries, but it is generally much worse in Guatemala and El Salvador, and better in Costa Rica. As the per capita income figures indicate, wages tend to be somewhat better in Costa Rica also, but tragically low in most of the other countries. The wage level is both an index of the problem and part of the cause.

Coupled with more difficult labor relations, the ruling sectors in Guatemala and El Salvador and in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua were strongly reactionary, little inclined to allow the poorer sectors of the population access to real political participation. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua now have very powerful military establishments. In contrast, Costa Rica disbanded its army in 1949, and has resisted reinstituting it. The military is by its very nature an instrument of force, and the agrarian and labor problems that have arisen in the two northernmost countries have been met not with civilian negotiation, but with armed force. Under the tutelage of the United States, both Panama and pre-revolutionary Nicaragua created National Guards that, in effect, became their military force. That force was defeated in the Nicaraguan Revolution, but residues now form a central part of the Contras. In Panama the Guard is increasingly constricting the democratic process. Basically, the ruling powers—agrarian based and the military—fear the loss of control to a broader electorate, and also the loss of their properties to a socialist regime. They are very opposed to the Nicaraguan government and do not oppose the militaristic

**Comparison of Central American Countries with
European Countries and Similar U.S. States**

COUNTRY	SIZE (sq. mi.)	POPULATION (millions, 1985)	INCOME (\$/Capita)	
Belize	8,867	166	\$1,000	(1984)
El Salvador	8,260	4,981	\$854	(1984)
Israel	7,847	4,128	\$5,609	(1983)
Massachusetts	8,257	5,822	\$15,790	(1985)
Guatemala	42,043	8,346	\$1,085	(1984)
Honduras	43,277	4,499	\$590	(1982)
East Germany	41,768	16,686	\$8,000	(1984)
Ohio	41,222	10,744	\$12,979	(1985)
Tennessee	42,244	4,762	\$10,934	(1985)
Nicaragua	50,193	2,232	\$804	(1980)
North Carolina	52,584	6,255	\$11,314	(1985)
Czechoslovakia	49,365	15,502	\$5,800	(1980)
Costa Rica	19,575	2,644	\$2,238	(1981)
West Virginia	24,181	1,936	\$10,112	(1985)
Netherlands	15,770	14,481	\$9,175	(1983)
Panama	29,208	2,180	\$1,116	(1978)
South Carolina	31,055	3,347	\$10,514	(1985)
Austria	32,374	7,451	\$8,280	(1980)

solution promoted by the United States.

The agrarian economies and the need to import petroleum make all Central American countries very dependent on the outside market. Since the OPEC price increases of the mid-seventies, they have built up some of the highest per capita national debts in the world.

In short, Central America comprises a set of economically weak, small countries that are dependent on world market prices that require expensive imports,

such as oil. They are, thus, both economically and militarily vulnerable to threats from the United States. Whether they, in turn, really constitute a national security threat to the United States has brought forth two very contrary views. The policy of the U.S. government since 1982 has been to regard them as a potential danger to the United States that can only be handled through military means. There are many, however, who feel that such a perspective is not appropriate. The feelings on

this matter have become so highly politicized that it is difficult to discuss them without reflecting a bias. In an attempt to provide the reader with the positions as seen by some of their adherents, I conclude this brief essay with a number of quotations, grouped in accordance with whether they are in favor of the solution that resorts to military action sought by the Reagan administration, or in favor of a political solution to the issue.

In Favor of the Reagan Administration Position

"I think it's crucial that every possible step be taken to make sure that a Castro-type government does not come to power in Nicaragua because that would be a threat to every free nation in the Western Hemisphere."

—Richard Nixon, July 14, 1979

"We deplore the Marxist Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. We do not support United States assistance to any Marxist Government in this hemisphere and we oppose the Carter Administration aid program for the Government of Nicaragua. However, we will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government."

—Platform of Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign, August 4, 1980

"The Government of Nicaragua has imposed a new dictatorship; it has refused to hold elections it promised; it has seized control of most media and subjects all media to heavy prior censorship; it denied the bishops and priests of the Roman Catholic Church the right to say mass on radio during Holy Week; it insulted and mocked the Pope; it has driven the Miskito Indians from their homelands—burning their villages, destroying their crops, and forcing them into involuntary internment camps far from home; it has moved against the private sector and free labor unions; it condoned mob action against Nicaragua's independent human rights commission and drove the director of that commission into exile.

In short, after all these acts of repression by the Government, is it any wonder that opposition has formed? Contrary to propaganda, the opponents of the Sandinistas are not die-hard supporters of the previous Somoza regime. In fact, many are anti-Somoza heroes who fought beside the Sandinistas to bring down the Somoza Government. Now they have been denied any part in the new Government because they truly wanted

democracy for Nicaragua, and they still do."

—Ronald Reagan, April 28, 1983

"If we have another Cuba in Central America, Mexico will have a big problem and we're going to have a massive wave of immigration. The effort to prevent this from happening is not going to excite Americans as much as the threat they would face if things go wrong."

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"I think there's no chance [the Contras] will be able to overthrow the Government. In the resistance you have, it is said, perhaps 15,000 men with rifles, scattered around the open, unpopulated parts of the country, which is where guerrillas can hide. They can't go into the cities, which the Government is protecting with tanks and 75,000 men in the army, the militia and the security forces."

—William Casey, former CIA director, April 16, 1984

"Nicaragua constitutes a security problem for the United States because it is being rapidly integrated into the Marxist-Leninist world system. It is not that there is a trend for Marxist-Leninist control in Nicaragua, but an established control."

—Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, former United States ambassador to the United Nations, April 17, 1985

"Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sea lanes and, ultimately, move against Mexico. Should that happen, desperate Latin peoples by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States, or to wherever some hope of freedom remained."

—Ronald Reagan, in speech requesting \$100 million in aid to the Contras, March 17, 1986

"We want to be a great power on the cheap. No Administration wants to undertake unpopular actions. In the case of Central America, this Administration did want to undertake that responsibility, but we were stopped by the Congress. But there were a lot of Americans who felt that this was such an enormous danger to the country that they were willing to act on their own. As long as they didn't violate the Neutrality Act or the Arms Export Control Act, how can anyone say that what they did was wrong?"

—Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs

Against the Reagan Administration Position

"It's a mistake for Americans to assume or to claim that every time an evolutionary change takes place or even an abrupt change takes place in this hemisphere that somehow it's a result of secret, massive Cuban intervention. The fact in Nicaragua is that the incumbent Government, the Somoza regime, had lost the confidence of the Nicaraguan people."

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"I came back [from Nicaragua] far more ashamed of my country than at any time since the Vietnam War. The Nicaraguans are a generous people, a poor and often hungry people, who want to make a truly democratic revolution, and it is we who work to subvert their decency even as we demand more of it."

—*Michael Harrington, national chairman,
Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee,
July 16, 1981*

"Our most fundamental values are undermined when an Administration breaks the law, lies to its citizens and supports the same kinds of subversive actions we accuse our enemies of taking. Its actions in Nicaragua also endanger our national security by polarizing conflict in the region. Congress must tell the President that he cannot violate the law with impunity."

—*Prof. Kenneth E. Sharpe, Swarthmore College,
April 9, 1983*

"If Central America were not racked with poverty, there would be no revolution. If Central America were not racked with hunger there would be no revolution. If Central America were not racked with injustice, there would be no revolution. In short, there would be nothing for the Soviets to exploit. But unless those oppressive conditions change, the region will continue to seethe with revolution—with or without the Soviets."

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"Instead of trying to do something about the factions or factors which breed revolution, this Administration has turned to massive military build-ups at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars. Its policy is ever-increasing military assistance, endless military training, and further military involvement. This is a formula for failure. And it is a proven prescription for picking a loser. The American people know that we have been down this road before—and that it only leads to a dark tunnel of endless intervention."

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"No one in this Congress or this country is under the delusion that the Sandinista Government is a model

democracy or a force for stability. But the insurgents we have supported are the remnants of the old Somoza regime whose corruption, graft, torture, and despotism made it universally despised in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas may not be winners, but right now we are backing sure losers. We are doing for the Sandinista Marxists what they could not do for themselves. We are weakening the very groups inside Nicaragua which believe in a free and democratic society. And that is the sad irony of this Administration's policy."

—*Sen. Christopher Dodd, (D-Connecticut)
April 28, 1983*

"North American intervention in Nicaragua could lead to many Vietnams."

—*Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam's foreign
minister, September 7, 1983*

"The right to sovereignty and to political independence possessed by the Republic of Nicaragua, like any other state of the region or of the world, should be fully respected and should not in any way be jeopardized by any military and paramilitary activities which are prohibited by principles of international law, in particular the principle that states should refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or the political independence of any state, and the principle concerning the duty not to intervene in matters within the domestic jurisdiction of a state, principles embodied in the United Nations Charter and the Charter of the Organization of American States."

—*From ruling of the World Court in response to
Nicaraguan government's protest of the CIA mining
of Nicaraguan waters, May 11, 1984.*

"I share the President's dismay at some of the things the Sandinistas have done. But I don't think we have any call to appoint ourselves as God's avenging angels. This is not a basic American position."

—*Rep. Jim Wright (D-Tex), House majority
leader, February 23, 1984*

Final Note

Are the Central American nations a threat to the United States? This is not an easy question to answer. Small things can be dangerous to big ones: microbes and viruses can bring down much larger animals. On the other hand, it might prove effective to help such countries seek a more robust development.