

NWC  
ESSAY  
90-47

ISSUE BRIEF

**CENTRAL AMERICA - INEFFECTIVE POLICIES OF INTERVENTION,  
AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO LET GOD SORT IT OUT!**

February, 1990

by

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Geostrategic Context Course

## Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>FEB 1990</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED -			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Central America - Ineffective Policies of Intervention and an Opportunity to Let God Sort it Out!</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>		<b>12</b>	

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CENTRAL AMERICA - INEFFECTIVE POLICIES OF INTERVENTION, AND AN  
OPPORTUNITY TO LET GOD SORT IT OUT!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SCOPE. This paper is submitted by the National Security Advisor to the President for consideration of substantial national security policy reforms relative to our Central American neighbors.

DISCUSSION. Past (and some would even suggest "present") U.S. policies towards Central America have been inconsistent at best, and more accurately - sanguinarily ineffective. While many of the policies exercised by the Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Carter and Reagan administrations gave "hope" to many in Central America. Generally those policies have worsened the crises and provided the opposite of their intended effect. As a generalization, past policies were aimed at attacking symptoms of the crises. Not only did they not preclude proliferation of the symptoms, but many experts would suggest they enlarged the impact of diseases!

In spite of 80 years of sporadic intervention in this region, many billions of dollars spent in military assistance and economic aid, and even worse - after many hundreds of thousands have been killed, and even more displaced - we have not achieved stability in this region. Further, we have not democratized the area; and we certainly have not altered the cultural, economic, or land reform root causes of the problems.

To say that we understand neither the problems nor the people is an enormous understatement! Until we understand both much better, and until our nation's vital interests are truly impacted upon by our Central American neighbors, it is my conclusion that our nation is best served with policies of mutual cooperation in the region, and that the onus for reform must be returned to the Central American nations themselves.

RECOMMENDATION. These conclusions should not suggest to you that we have no interests in the region, or that we should not develop a greater dialogue with all Central American nations. We do have interests, and to achieve them it is recommended we: 1. Regard Central America as a distinct region by itself 2. Begin a "respect-oriented" dialogue 3. Promote their leadership to assume primary responsibility for reforms 4. Divest our support of the Contras 5. Drawdown our economic and military assistance (with the exception of debt relief) 6. Cease covert operations targeted against their leadership 7. Withdraw our military advisors over a graduated time period 8. Pray for divine intervention!

"Time and again one reads that our country lacks a clearly defined foreign policy. When it comes to relations in our own hemisphere - our neglect here, our absence of not merely policy but even rudimentary interest and understanding, has been nothing short of abysmal!"

Edward Hidalgo, Former Secretary of the Navy

November 1983

ISSUE DEFINITION. What should our national security policy be for Central America? Will we continue to be short-sighted and react to economic, military, political, and social crises in this region as we have thus far this century? Few would disagree that our policies toward Central America in the past 40 years have been poorly articulated, inconsistent, and largely lacking in inter-agency coordination. One view that has been routinely applied unilaterally by our nation is a "policy of intervention" - has this policy (with its generally noble intent) achieved its objective? Another view is that "we should not intervene unilaterally" in the region - would this policy endanger current U.S. national security interests? With changes in East-West relations and apparent Soviet retrenchment, has the time come to significantly alter our policies in this region?

#### BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

AREA DESCRIPTION. Central America today is made up of five small and very diverse nations (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua). Their combined population is approximately 24 million

people derived from very diverse ethnic groups. It is a region where four of these five nations are presently engaged in insurgent conflicts (El Salvador vs FMLN, Guatemala vs UNRG, Nicaragua vs Contras, and Honduras vs several groups). They are also involved in several intra-regional conflicts (for example, the Nicaraguan/Honduras border disputes).

In most of these countries, the elite own the land, control the money, dominate and conspire with military forces, and largely control the government. While all of these nations conduct "free" elections, only Costa Rica with its largely homogeneous population has a true "democracy" - especially if you define a democracy not only by free elections, but, more importantly, the criteria of a government "of, for and by the people".

For most Central American people, the standard of living is poor, the children are not educated, infant mortality is high, and human concerns are primarily directed at the family and village. Wars, earthquakes, and civil unrest have destroyed the industrial bases of these countries, or precluded them from ever really developing. Cultural differences between these people and their neighbors in North America are enormous, and beyond the scope of this paper to address adequately.

None of these nations export anything vital to our nation's economy, and certainly none possesses the capability, (individually or collectively), to threaten U.S. national security, or our lines of communications.

U.S. POLICIES OF INTERVENTION. A quick review of our past policies of intervention should help clarify the assertions I made earlier.

Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Rider" policies of intervention saw our nation apply military force in this region 20 times in 20 years. During this bleak period in Central American history, U.S. forces were largely used to protect U.S. economic interests in the region, and to maintain the "status quo" of elite leadership (such as Somoza in Nicaragua). During this period, our nation's leadership realized many of these "elite" Central American officials were corrupt SOB's - but they were "our SOB's!"

The Truman Doctrine and his "Four Points" did two extremely important things. First, the Doctrine made the region a East-West cold war issue, as our nation was greatly concerned about the proliferation of potential communist states in our hemisphere. Second, his "Point Four Program" represented an effort to transfer the assumptions of the Marshall Plan to the underdeveloped world. Fundamentally, the idea boiled down to U.S. economic aid and technical assistance bringing development, freedom, democracy, stability, anti-communism, and the "American way of life" to the region. Most would say the program failed primarily because it was an "exaggerated political notion" directed at under-developed nations which did not fit culturally into the "liberal-Lockean presumption" intended.

Eisenhower's interventions in the region have not gained great notoriety, but we must remember it was Eisenhower who approved the CIA plan to overthrow Guatemalan President Arbenz in 1954. I find it most interesting that while Eisenhower was acting with the intent of protecting U.S. economic interests in Guatemala, he eliminated the first leader Guatemala ever had who was successfully making progress on land reform - a long term step necessary for stability in this region! The

result of this intervention was to place in power a U.S. sponsored leader, Colonel Castillo Armas, who would initiate one of the most repressive and bloody regimes in Guatemalan history.

Kennedy's noble concept "the Alliance for Progress", showed initial signs of tremendous success. At first, per capita income was increased, new industries grew, the Central American Common Market was launched, education was improved, and agriculture was developed. There are many reasons the concept did not achieve its political objectives however. First, the concept did little to subvert the elite from corruption, and therefore did not start or facilitate the establishment of a middle class. Second, while the concept generated great "hope" it was too ambitious and set goals that were unachievable and even contradictory. Third, and maybe most important, the model was oriented at a culture and people like ours - not the peoples of Central America. Last, as America's interests in containing communism grew in Southeast Asia, our ability to apply resources in Central America diminished. This lack of consistent staying power "pulled the rug out" of billions of dollars invested.

Carter's "Human Rights" policy of intervention took an entirely different approach. Most regard his naive missionary style as inconsistent, haphazardly applied, and not impartial. Certainly for those countries who had become dependent on U.S. assistance, the withdrawal of the assistance and the continuing demand for change only fueled the instability for elite "status quo leaders" we had supported.

As you are keenly aware, Reagan's "Caribbean Basin Initiative" and "Project Democracy" saw us fuel the fire on East-West issues once again, and intervene with all our sources of national power throughout the

1980's. The results of our largely unilateral interventions in the 1980's find the region in a state of economic and political disarray. With the exception of Costa Rica, the elite continue to dominate the political leadership of these nations. Insurgencies are active in four of the five countries, and it is likely that next week Ortega will be elected to office. Certainly our continued support of the Contras does much to de-stabilize the region, as does our continued support of "status quo" leadership in El Salvador and Guatemala. As 1989 concluded, our decade of intervention in this region has seen over 200,000 people killed, nearly 2,000,000 people up-rooted from their homes, much of the region's economic infrastructure damaged or destroyed, and across the board their gross domestic product decreased by nearly 15%.

NON-INTERVENTION POLICIES. While some would suggest it is difficult to find examples of U.S. policies of non-intervention in Central American affairs, I would list the following two models.

First, after Carter decided to withdraw U.S. assistance to Guatemala in 1978 (at a time they were engaged in a bloody insurgency), a new Guatemalan President, General Lucas Garcia, gained consensus inside his country on what needed to be done - and then did it - without U.S. support. Garcia's "Scorched Earth" and "Beans for Bullets" campaign was founded on a principle that "Guatemalan's must solve Guatemalan problems in Guatemalan ways". Although bloody (but relatively not as bloody as our Civil War), he conducted a successful counter-insurgency, and began a process to educate and develop his nation. Garcia's success without U.S. intervention is starkly

contrasted to the current situation in El Salvador which President Cristiani faces with increased U.S. intervention in economic and military assistance areas.

Second is the case of Costa Rica where U.S. policies (until the early 1980's) were largely ones of disinterest. With the exception of President Monge (1982-86) who could not resist U.S. pressures to isolate and de-stabilize Nicaragua, Costa Rica has largely acted in its own best interests without U.S. intervention. Presently, Costa Rica is being placed on the pedestal of what a democracy should be, and enjoys the "Nobel Peace Prize" winning leadership - who advocates Central American initiatives, vice U.S. initiatives, to peace in the region. Clearly Costa Rica is an example of a Central American nation that has achieved what our policy objectives should be, largely without U.S. intervention.

CONCLUSIONS ON U.S. POLICIES. In summary, since the United States promulgated the Monroe Doctrine in the early 19th century, our hegemonic influence in this region has been enormous. Yet while our influence has been great, our ability to achieve policy objectives has been pitiful. Many experts have concluded our policies have been counter-productive, and indeed have contributed to the de-stabilization of the region. In March 1979 at a State Department conference on the region an expert noted:

"Our interests, and strategies to achieve them are outdated, shortsighted, and fundamentally flawed. U.S. goals are short-termed, reactive, and excessively concerned with stability - the maintenance of the elite dominated status quo."

Things have not improved in 1990. My recent discussions with

current Regional Desk officers and the Under Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs convince me that neither the State Department, the Defense Department, nor the NSC Staff has a vision of what our long-term interests and objectives should be in this region. And clearly, there presently exists a deep split between public perceptions of our policy objectives and assumptions. Further considerable tensions persist in our bureaucracy, and these tensions are strained by interest groups and blatant ignorance of the issues! It is apparent we have not learned the lesson Sun Tzu taught us long ago, that if we know neither the enemy nor ourselves we have no chance for victory - we must learn!

#### RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

Considering our current opportunities globally, the diminished East-West conflict, and our internal domestic needs, I recommend the following eight point plan be implemented:

1. Regard Central America as a region separate and distinct from Mexico, Panama, the Caribbean nations and the nations of South America.
2. Engage in respect-oriented dialogue with Central American leaders, and give their initiatives an opportunity to bloom (such as Esquipulas II, also known as Guatemala Accords).
3. Encourage Central American leadership to assume primary responsibility for their cultural, economic and security considerations.
4. Divest our support for the Contras.
5. Drawdown over the next five years our economic (to include

forgiveness of their national debts to us) and military assistance efforts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras - make them self-sufficient, not dependent.

6. Cease all covert operations in the region directed against authoritarian leaders regardless of their ideology.
7. Withdraw military advisors from the region on a graduated basis over the next three years.
8. Pray that God's divine intervention will, over both the short and long term, be more successful than our past 80 years of intervention.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF COURSE OF ACTION

STRENGTHS. Strategically, this course of action is an economy of force initiative which will assist our nation in focusing its resources on primary areas of vital concern. Certainly our respect internationally has the potential of soaring when the world community sees us out of the business of treating our neighbors to the south as step-children, and more as respected international partners.

Regionally, the entire Latin American conglomerate would "jump for joy", and they certainly would be in a better position to support other more critical U.S. interests (trade and drug interdiction, to name but two). Additionally, I firmly believe that what they develop as their game plan (to achieve their best interests), will also end up being in our best interests as well!

Domestically, this could be an enormous political opportunity for you. As our Hispanic population reacts favorably, and as our liberal

elements are "disarmed" - your ability to focus on your primary agenda is enhanced! Minimally, what has been an albatross to most recent presidents is lifted off your neck, and you are provided the flexibility and resources to increase the dimensions of your grand strategic vision.

WEAKNESSES. Strategically, some may misunderstand our initiatives and view our actions as relinquishing a leadership role in the region.

Regionally, the elite (status quo maintainers) will initially like the respect, but disdain our lack of financial support for their power base and personal interests. Without a strong U.S. financed power base, they will either have to reform their political systems and economies, or fall victim to someone who will! Obviously, instability and violence will most likely, in the short term, result. (Not that this violence will be any greater than present violence in the region.)

Domestically, interest groups from the conservative right are not going to like this at all - just as they don't understand now, don't hope they will understand an even more sophisticated approach!

