

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

THE DEBATE OVER CENTRAL AMERICA

While war has flared in Central America—leftist guerrillas are attacking the American-supported regime in El Salvador, U.S.-backed *contras* are harassing Nicaragua's Sandinista regime—American "policy intellectuals" and others have been fighting a battle of words over U.S. policy in the region.

Today's debate really began when the Sandinistas, with Cuban support, toppled dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979.

But instability in the five poverty-ridden Central American nations—Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua—has a far longer history. As Lawrence E. Harrison, a former U.S. foreign aid official, notes in "Nicaraguan Anguish and Costa Rican Progress" (*This World*, Fall 1983), the five nations agreed to form one republic, the United Provinces of Central America, after they won their independence from Spain in 1821. By 1838, bitter feuds had pulled them apart.

Nicaragua has since suffered internal strife under a succession of dictators, Harrison says, while democratic Costa Rica has fared relatively well. One reason: Costa Rica was so poor that Spanish colonizers never fully established the oppressive oligarchical plantation system that dominated Nicaragua.

Frequent direct U.S. intervention in Nicaragua (most recently, the presence of U.S. Marines between 1912 and 1933) stirred strong anti-Yanqui sentiment.

Today, the Sandinistas rally popular support by reminding Nicaraguans of past American interference and pointing to the U.S.-backed *contras*, reports journalist Stephen Kinzer in "Nicaragua: The Beleaguered Revolution" (*The New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 28, 1983). They have welcomed Cuban and Soviet military aid and cracked down on political dissidents, the press, and businessmen.

The Sandinistas, Kinzer adds, "have given many downtrodden Nicaraguans something as precious as it is rare for poor people in Latin America: hope for the future." Yet chronic food shortages and rationing are sowing discontent.

But Arturo J. Cruz, a former member (1980–81) of Nicaragua's five-man coalition junta (dominated by the Sandinistas) says that the United States does not deserve all the blame for his country's plight. In "Nicaragua's Imperiled Revolution" (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1983), he argues that some of the Sandinista leaders were bent on creating a Marxist state from the beginning. "Dogmatism and adventurism," he writes, "seem to have wiped out the democratic and pluralistic ideals which, in 1979, united all Nicaraguan advocates of freedom."

Few specialists now doubt that the Sandinistas are exporting

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

arms and ideology to El Salvador, where 6,000–8,000 leftist guerrillas face a lackluster 40,000-man army and its 55 U.S. advisers. The question is what, if anything, to do about it.

"Change the Agenda" is Abraham F. Lowenthal's solution (*Foreign Policy*, Fall 1983). A specialist on Latin America at the University of Southern California, he argues that the era of "virtually unchallenged U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere is over." While he takes no specific position on El Salvador, Lowenthal believes that resisting leftist revolutions to the south is generally "counterproductive." Washington would gain more by increasing trade and providing economic aid.

Princeton's Richard H. Ullman is "baffled by the [Reagan] administration's obsession with Nicaragua." In "At War with Nicaragua" (*Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983), he argues that Nicaragua's role in the El Salvador conflict is small. Salvadoran discontent is home-grown. Even a Marxist takeover throughout Central America followed by the installation of Cuban or Soviet bases, he contends, would not jeopardize U.S. interests. America's overwhelming military power, he says, could easily "neutralize" such a threat.

Ullman believes that Washington should adopt a "hands-off" policy in Central America and negotiate an area-wide agreement barring the export of either revolution or counter-revolution.

But if Central America is not a vital U.S. interest, what is? asks Johns Hopkins's Robert W. Tucker in "Their Wars, Our Choices" (*The New Republic*, Oct. 24, 1983). He argues that if the United States does not halt Soviet- and Cuban-backed inroads in this region, it will encourage new challenges in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

Yet Tucker fears that a major U.S. military move in Central America would open political fissures at home, as during the Vietnam War. Washington should press El Salvador's regime to bring the guerrillas into the government and then enforce the peace with an international contingent of troops.

However, "Nicaragua is only the most recent example of how a coalition in which Communists are included . . . becomes a one-party regime," asserts *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz.

The 80 percent turnout in the 1982 Salvadoran elections demonstrated, he says, that the Salvadorans don't want the guerrillas in power. "Appeasement By Any Other Name" (*Commentary*, July 1983) is how he sees the position of those Americans who are unwilling to "do whatever may be required, up to and including the dispatch of American troops" to halt the spread of Soviet-backed Marxism in Central America.

Few dispassionate voices are heard when the subject is Central America. Ironically, the growing polarization of the debate—withdrawal versus massive intervention—leaves the White House policymakers occupying what now seems to be the "middle ground."