



A Kinder, Gentler Policy?

When George Bush succeeded Ronald Reagan, promising a "kinder, gentler" America, most observers expected a shift in Washington's approach to Latin America as well. Although Bush had been a loyal supporter of Reagan's policies, he nevertheless seemed more pragmatic than his mentor. Unlike Reagan, Bush seemed to harbor no deep feelings about Central America. As vice president, he conducted crucial diplomatic missions to El Salvador in 1983 (to pressure the army to reduce human rights abuses) and to Honduras in 1985 (to cajole the Hondurans to continue backing the *contras*), but he was never a prominent public defender of the policy. He hardly mentioned Central America during his campaign.

Opinion among the Washington policy elite also favored a less strident approach. Crucial hemispheric issues such as narcotics trafficking and international debt had been left to fester while everyone's attention was focused on the small countries of Central America. Participants on both sides of the policy debate had grown weary of the poisonous partisan wrangling.

Bush's initial appointments confirmed expectations that he would be more pragmatic than Reagan. As national security adviser, he selected General Brent Scowcroft, who had held the same post under President Gerald Ford and won acclaim for his professional, nonideological management of foreign policy. As

secretary of state, Bush appointed his campaign manager and friend of many years, James Baker, whose primary interest in Central America was to get this "bleeding sore" off the national agenda as rapidly as possible so that Bush could attend to the historic changes under way in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.¹

As assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Baker chose Bernard Aronson, a lifelong Democrat and former speechwriter for Walter Mondale who became interested in Central America in the mid-1980s and helped the Reagan White House lobby congressional Democrats for contra aid. He and three friends (Bruce Cameron, Penn Kemble, and Robert Leiken) came to be known as "Ollie's Liberals;" because they cooperated with the White House efforts to lobby Congress on behalf of contra aid.² Aronson spoke no Spanish, had no expertise on Latin America, and had no experience in administration, policymaking, or diplomacy. His one asset was his ability to converse easily with moderate Democratic representatives.³

The Treaty of Washington

After selecting an assistant secretary for Latin America who looked more like an ambassador to Capitol Hill, Baker's first major policy initiative was aimed not at a foreign country but at Congress. On March 2, 1989, Baker met with Speaker Jim Wright to propose a diplomatic plan for Nicaragua. "We want to wind this thing down;" the secretary told Wright. "We are willing to substitute negotiations for military action;" But Bush could not just abandon the contras because he would receive "flack from the right-wing" of the Republican Party. Baker proposed to continue nonmilitary aid to the contras for a year, combined with real support for the Esquipulas peace process.⁴ After twenty-two days of negotiations among administration officials and congressional leaders from both parties, an accord was finally drafted. Like two punched-out prizefighters staggering in a clinch, Congress and the new administration embraced, ending the eight-year fight over contra aid. As much out of exhaustion as conviction, they decided to call it a draw.⁵

Dubbed "the Treaty of Washington" by one senior administration official, the formal agreement was signed on March 24, 1989. It did not really resolve the policy differences over Nicaragua; it simply suspended them for a year, until after the 1990 Nicaraguan elections.⁶ With no hope of convincing Congress to resume military aid, the White House gave up on Ronald Reagan's quest for a contra victory. The partisan rancor of Reagan's approach had been its Achilles' heel. "We all have to admit that the policy basically failed . . . because we were not united;" Baker acknowledged. Now Bush would support the Esquipulas peace process "in good faith" and refrain from military pressure

on the Sandinistas during the period leading up to Nicaraguan elections.⁷ Still, Bush and Baker insisted that the United States must not abandon the contras, because their existence would help to assure that the Sandinistas lived up to their commitments under the Esquipulas agreement.

As their part of the bargain, the Democrats agreed to continue nonmilitary aid, thereby keeping the contras together, "body and soul" as Reagan used to say, in case the Nicaraguan elections went awry. Under the bipartisan plan, the contras would get \$4.5 million in nonmilitary aid monthly through the end of February 1990 (\$66.6 million in total), provided that they did not launch any military attacks before the elections.⁸ To assure that both the contras and the administration lived up to the bargain, four congressional committees (the Foreign Affairs and Appropriations Committees in the House and Senate) were given the right to review the situation in November 1989. If any one of them voted to halt further contra aid, Bush promised to abide by their decision.⁹

The differences between Bush's and Reagan's policies toward Nicaragua were subtle, but real. Bush had the same maximum objective as Reagan—to replace the Sandinistas with a conservative pro-U.S. regime. Bush continued Reagan's policy of hostility unchanged—the threatening military exercises, the trade embargo, and the efforts to block economic aid from Europe, Latin America, and the international banks.¹⁰

Reagan had had no fallback position from his maximum objective. The continued existence of the Sandinista government was simply unacceptable; nothing short of its removal would do. Bush, on the other hand, was prepared to coexist with the Sandinistas if they lived up to their commitments under the Esquipulas agreement—that is, if they held free elections and stopped aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas. With no hope of removing the Sandinistas by military force, diplomacy was the only alternative. "We talked about diplomacy [during the Reagan years];" a senior administration official admitted, "but it began as a cover story for what we were really trying to do. What has happened since then is that the cover story has become real."¹¹

In the wake of the bipartisan agreement with Congress, the Bush administration pursued three objectives in Nicaragua: keep the contras together as an effective fighting force; mount a multifaceted diplomatic strategy to force the Sandinistas to hold a free and fair election in February 1990; and provide the internal opposition with the resources needed to seriously challenge the Sandinistas in the campaign.¹²

Contra Demobilization

In February 1989, the five Central American presidents held another summit in Tesoro Beach, El Salvador. In a new accord, the Sandinistas agreed to

change their constitution and advance the date of national elections from November to February 1990. They also promised complete freedom for the opposition to organize and campaign, along with extensive international observation to guarantee the fairness of the process. In return, the other presidents called, yet again, for the demobilization of the contras.¹³

Washington was unmoved. Shortly after the Tesoro accord, Baker dispatched Undersecretary of State Robert M. Kimmit to warn the Hondurans that if they pressed for immediate demobilization, they would damage Bush's efforts to win more nonmilitary aid from Congress. The contras might then be stranded in Honduras without U.S. assistance. That, of course, was the outcome the Hondurans feared most; the next day, Honduras announced its support for continued contra aid while plans for their demobilization were being formulated.¹⁴

Another Central American summit was scheduled for August 1989 in Tela, Honduras, to review progress on Nicaraguan electoral preparations and contra demobilization. In the days leading up to the summit, Washington lobbied furiously to block a new call for demobilization. The State Department arranged a meeting for contra commanders with the presidents of Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador so the contras could plead their case in person. Bush himself called both President Jose Azcona in Honduras and President Oscar Arias in Costa Rica to lobby against demobilization.¹⁵

But on the eve of the summit, the Sandinistas came up with another diplomatic coup. Knowing that Washington was trying to focus the summit on electoral conditions inside Nicaragua rather than on contra demobilization, the Sandinistas preempted the electoral issue. On August 4, they signed a sweeping accord with their internal opponents, settling almost all the outstanding disputes over the conduct of the upcoming election. "Ninety-five percent of our demands have been met," said an opposition leader emerging from the final negotiating session. In exchange for Sandinista concessions, the opposition endorsed the government's call for demobilization of the contras and repudiated any covert (i.e., CIA) interference in the election campaign.

With the issue of election procedures resolved, the Tela summit focused entirely on the contras. Rejecting the Bush administration's best efforts to dissuade them, the five presidents agreed that the contra army should be demobilized and disbanded by the first week of December.¹⁶ Despite massive infusions of economic and military aid over the preceding decade, not one of Washington's four allies could be relied upon to hold fast against an accord that repudiated a key element of U.S. policy. After a decade of regional strife, Washington's allies all preferred a separate peace with Nicaragua.

The Tela agreement put George Bush on the horns of a dilemma. On the

one hand, he opposed contra demobilization; on the other, he had agreed in the bipartisan accord with Congress that he would support the Central American peace process. Tela made these two positions incompatible. Bush's solution was simply to ignore the obvious inconsistency and declare support for the Tela agreement, with the caveat that he disagreed with the demobilization deadline. When a United Nations official visited the contra camps in Honduras and urged them to accept demobilization, he was vigorously denounced by Secretary of State Baker.¹⁷

Not only did the contras refuse to demobilize, but they stepped up the fighting. Although most contras were in their Honduran camps, some two to three thousand remained inside Nicaragua, occasionally attacking isolated farms and ambushing government patrols. These attacks intensified in October 1989, disrupting election registration in several dozen towns.

At the end of October, all the elected heads of state in the Western Hemisphere, including George Bush, assembled in San Jose, Costa Rica, to celebrate one hundred years of Costa Rican democracy. No one expected much serious business would transpire, but no one imagined that Daniel Ortega would spoil the party by announcing an end to his government's unilateral cease-fire with the contras. In the nineteen months that the cease-fire had been in place, over seven hundred Nicaraguans had been killed by the contras, Ortega declared. He denounced the recent slaying of eighteen army reservists on their way to register to vote as "the straw that broke the camel's back."¹⁸

The Costa Ricans complained that Ortega's bad manners had ruined the summit's festive atmosphere. President Bush delighted in condemning Ortega, referring to him derisively as that "little man," and threatening to resume military aid to the contras.¹⁹ But Ortega was not just being truculent. He hoped the unpopular announcement would force the Central American presidents to face the fact that there had been no progress toward demobilization. All the concessions made by the Sandinistas since the first Esquipulas agreement in 1987 had been aimed at ending the contra war, yet the war continued.

By lifting the cease-fire, Ortega issued a stark reminder that the Sandinistas' compliance with the Esquipulas, Tesoro, and Tela accords was not irreversible.

In Washington, the timing of Ortega's announcement rescued Bush from a looming confrontation with congressional Democrats. Under the bipartisan accord, Congress could have exercised a veto over additional contra aid in November 1990. Many liberals felt that the ongoing contra attacks and Bush's refusal to accept the Tesoro and Tela calls for contra demobilization constituted violations of his agreement with Congress. They were prepared to push for a cut-off of even nonmilitary aid to the contras. But Ortega's repudiation of the cease-fire reinforced Bush's insistence that the Sandinistas were

belligerent and could not be trusted. When the time came to review the contra program, the Democrats meekly agreed to continue it.²⁰

Strange Bedfellows

Keeping the contras together and threatening the Sandinistas with the "bogeyman" of renewed military aid, as one White House official called it, was not Washington's only leverage.²¹ Economic pressure was equally important. The Sandinistas had agreed to hold free elections in order to end the war, not because they were losing it, but because it was destroying their economy. Peace would open the way for new economic assistance from Western Europe. Consequently, James Baker made a point of urging the Europeans to withhold any significant aid until after the Nicaraguan election—a strategy that served the dual purpose of ensuring that the Sandinistas would honor their pledge to make the elections fair and preventing them from easing the population's misery. Most European donors postponed new economic assistance until after the election.²²

Washington was also able to muster unexpected leverage from the Soviet Union. Since 1987, the Soviets had been providing the Sandinistas with about \$750 to \$800 million annually—\$450 to \$500 million in military assistance and \$300 million in economic assistance, including virtually all of Nicaragua's petroleum imports.²³ Bush and Baker decided to make Central America a key test of the Soviet Union's "new thinking" in foreign policy. In March 1989, Bush wrote a letter to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev warning that a continuation of Soviet aid to Nicaragua would "inevitably affect the nature of the [U.S.-Soviet] relationship." ²⁴ Gorbachev replied on May 6, announcing that the Soviets had suspended military aid at the end of 1988 because U.S. policy had shifted from military pressure to diplomacy. Military aid from Soviet allies, especially Cuba, continued to flow, however. When Baker visited Moscow in May, he pushed hard for an end to Soviet aid. If Moscow cooperated, Baker pledged that Washington would accept the results of a free election in Nicaragua even if the Sandinistas won.²⁵

Anxious to prevent Central America from interfering with the improvement of East-West ties, Gorbachev made it clear to the Sandinistas that he wanted the 1990 election to proceed fairly and on schedule. Not only did the Soviets halt military aid, but they also refused a Sandinista request for emergency economic aid on the eve of the election. "They wanted money to put consumer goods in the stores, so they could portray the economic situation as improving and attract voter support;" said Yuri Pavlov, the senior official for Latin America in the Soviet Foreign Ministry. "We didn't think it was a good investment."²⁶

The Washington-Moscow concordat on Nicaragua was an astonishing development. After all, it was the fear of Soviet penetration that had animated U.S. policy in Central America since 1981, when Secretary of State Alexander Haig swore that Washington would draw the line there against the spread of international Communism. The specter of Soviet bases dotting the region, directly threatening the security of the United States and the NATO alliance, constituted the Pentagon's main rationale for building up the Salvadoran and Honduran militaries and for waging war by proxy against Nicaragua. Now suddenly, the archenemy, the "Evil Empire" itself, was cooperating with Washington's plans to bring Nicaragua back into the orbit of the United States.

Campaign Contributions

The final element in U.S. policy was support for the internal opposition. In 1984, the Reagan administration had convinced the main opposition parties to boycott Nicaragua's election and then denounced it as a "Soviet-style" sham. Five years later, Washington's strategy was to contest the 1990 election as vigorously as possible.

The collapse of the economy had badly eroded the Sandinistas' popular support. If the internal opposition could unify behind a single candidate and put forward a credible political program, it stood an excellent chance of winning. Previously, however, the opposition had proved utterly unable to take advantage of the public's disaffection with the Sandinistas. It remained splintered in over a dozen miniparties, many based on nothing more than feuding personalities.

To prepare the opposition for the campaign, U.S. officials helped forge a new unified anti-Sandinista coalition, the National Opposition Union (Union Nacional Opositor, UNO), that included fourteen of the twenty-two non-Sandinista parties. Centripetal forces were intense within the diverse coalition, which included both ultrarightists and Communists. UNO nearly fell apart when it deadlocked over who should head its ticket. The rightist parties wanted Enrique Bolanos, president of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP); the moderates wanted Virgilio Godoy, leader of the Independent Liberal Party. As a compromise, they settled on Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the publisher of *La Prensa* and widow of editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, whose murder in January 1978 sparked the insurrection against Somoza.²⁷

Violeta Chamorro, like Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, was the perfect unity candidate. Drawn into politics by the murder of her activist husband, she carried none of the partisan baggage that weighed down other politicians. Even though she had resigned from the Sandinista governing junta in 1980 because of the leftward drift of the revolution, and even though her newspaper

relentlessly defamed the Sandinistas, she nevertheless projected an aura of being above the political fray. She seemed so unconcerned with either political strategy or policy that even her closest supporters wondered if she had the capacity to govern the country.²⁸

Washington also urged exiled contra political leaders to return to Nicaragua to join in the electoral battle. The CIA gave them a not-so-subtle shove by cutting off funds for their political operations abroad and offering to finance their relocation to Nicaragua.²⁹ Few took up the challenge, although one who did, Alfredo Cesar, emerged as a top adviser to Chamorro during her campaign.

Besides advice, the Bush administration also provided material assistance to UNO. The White House's preference was to proceed covertly.³⁰ The manipulation of foreign elections was, after all, a well-established technique in the CIA's repertoire. By aiding conservative parties, the Agency had helped prevent the French and Italian Communist Parties from winning elections in post-World War II Europe.³¹ As recently as 1984, it had helped Jose Napoleon Duarte win the presidency of El Salvador.

Congressional Democrats, however, objected that when the covert aid was disclosed—as it surely would be—the recipients would be discredited as disloyal agents of a foreign power. Besides, the opposition parties themselves had repudiated covert foreign involvement in the election process in their August agreement with the Sandinistas on election procedures.

Faced with a Democratic move to ban covert election aid, James Baker promised that assistance to the opposition would be handled overtly. The administration gave "absolute assurances" that the CIA would not interfere in the election, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren told his colleagues. "It's not going to happen. There's not a glimmer, not a crack, not a loophole of any kind ... that would allow anything to go on."³²

Senator Boren underestimated the CIA's ingenuity. It had already given the internal opposition \$5 million in 1989 as part of its ongoing program of political support, from an account budgeted at \$10 to \$12 million annually.³³ After Baker's promise to Congress, the CIA launched a \$6 million "regional" operation to boost the UNO coalition—training UNO activists in Costa Rica, running foreign press operations to defame the Sandinistas, and funding an anti-Sandinista radio station to broadcast into Nicaragua from Costa Rica. Agency officials justified the program by arguing that they had promised Congress not to conduct covert operations to influence the election *in* Nicaragua; they had not promised to abstain from operations *outside* Nicaragua. Finally, the CIA gave some \$600,000 to former contra leaders to use in the election campaign.³⁴

The **bulk** of U.S. aid to the UNO coalition was overt, however, channeled through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). NED had been pro-

viding aid to Nicaraguan opposition trade unions and media since 1985, with little pretense of being nonpartisan. As one of NED's directors, Sally Shelton-Colby, described its operations in Nicaragua, "The whole thrust of this program is to help the opposition coalesce and overcome their historical differences, and develop a national political structure with a view to getting their message into all corners of Nicaragua."³⁵

Still, NED's charter explicitly prohibited it from giving money to finance the campaigns of candidates for public office, so its funds had to be channeled to opposition trade unions and political parties rather than the Chamorro campaign itself. Recipients were not supposed to use the money for the campaign, but could use it for voter registration and education, poll watching, and "party building" activities. These were distinctions without much difference; no one had the slightest doubt that the aid was intended to enhance UNO's ability to challenge the Sandinistas at the polls. None of the NED money, for example, went to conservative parties that refused to join the UNO coalition, though they were not demonstrably less "democratic" or needy than the recipients of NED's largesse.³⁶

In all, NED provided \$11.6 million to the opposition (\$3.9 million appropriated for fiscal year 1989 and \$7.7 million for 1990)-a program that dwarfed previous NED election support programs in Chile and the Philippines.³⁷ Not counting CIA aid or the undisclosed amount provided to UNO by the Republican Party, NED alone spent \$7 for every Nicaraguan voter-at that rate, the equivalent of spending \$800 million in a U.S. election.

The 1990 Elections

The Nicaraguan campaign was conducted under close international supervision by the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and former president Jimmy Carter's Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government. Sporadic fighting and rock throwing at campaign rallies escalated in November and December, climaxing in a riot at a UNO rally in the town of Masatepe in which one person was killed. The foreign observer missions (especially President Carter's) and the Nicaraguan Supreme Electoral Council stepped in quickly, however, and mediated an agreement between the Sandinistas and UNO to head off further violence. Incidents between the two campaigns subsided, although a number of Sandinista campaigners were killed by contras in conflicted areas.³⁸

As the election approached, the Bush administration maintained a tough anti-Sandinista stance. At every opportunity, spokesmen denounced the electoral procedures as unfair. Every problem was magnified, every advance minimized or ignored. Just days before the vote, Secretary of State Baker insisted

that the administration would make its own judgment on the fairness of the election; it would not necessarily accept the conclusions of international observers. Even if the Sandinistas won a fair election, Baker continued, Washington would not move quickly to improve relations. It would take time to assure that democracy was being consolidated in Nicaragua and that the Sandinistas had stopped aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas. Only then would rapprochement be possible.³⁹ A Sandinista victory, Washington was telling the Nicaraguan electorate, would mean more war and economic misery.

Despite this rhetoric, administration officials expected the Sandinistas to win and were prepared to live with it. Assistant Secretary of State Aronson had already begun discussions with Nicaraguan vice minister of foreign affairs Victor Tinoco about a step-by-step process for normalizing relations between the two countries after the anticipated Sandinista victory.⁴⁰

The expectation of a Sandinista triumph was widely shared. In the months before the election, several major independent public opinion polls showed Ortega running far ahead of Chamorro; only Chamorro's own polls showed her leading. Some reporters had doubts about the polling results because they seemed to contradict the population's widespread discontent with the economy, but in most cases, the doubts were submerged by the extraordinary Sandinista campaign, which was far more extensive and sophisticated than UNO's.⁴¹

Sandinista organizers, banners, and assorted paraphernalia were everywhere, while UNO was virtually invisible until just before the election. Sandinista rallies were routinely much larger than UNO's, culminating in the final FSLN rally of 200,000 people on February 21—almost five times the size of UNO's closing rally.⁴² In most elections, such stark differences in the quality of two campaigns would be enough to settle the outcome. In Nicaragua, however, the campaign itself meant very little.

The election was a referendum on ten years of Sandinista rule, and no campaign could overcome the government's record of economic disaster. The Sandinistas tried to defuse the economic issue by appealing to nationalism, linking UNO with the contras and the United States. By focusing on the war, the Sandinistas hoped to escape, Houdini-like, from the political consequences of the country's economic collapse. It didn't work.

On February 25, 1990, 86 percent of Nicaragua's registered voters turned out to cast their ballots under the watchful eyes of some two thousand foreign observers. To the surprise of almost everyone—the Sandinistas, the Bush administration, most of the press corps, and even many top UNO officials—Chamorro and the UNO coalition won a stunning victory. Chamorro took 54.7 percent of the popular vote for president, to Daniel Ortega's 40.8 percent, and

UNO won fifty-one seats in the ninety-three-member National Assembly, to thirty-nine for the Sandinistas.⁴³

After the election, Washington's first priority was to ensure that the Sandinistas honored the result and transferred power to Chamorro. The transition proceeded with surprising smoothness. The stunned Sandinistas accepted defeat, albeit grudgingly, and prepared to transform themselves from governing party into loyal opposition. Transition teams from the outgoing and incoming administrations negotiated agreements on key issues, such as control over the armed forces and maintenance of the agrarian reform program. The main obstacle to a peaceful transition was the continued existence of the contra army, which Washington had so vigorously resisted demobilizing.⁴⁴

Both the UNO transition team and the Bush administration urged the contras to disarm and repatriate to Nicaragua, but the contras themselves were reluctant to lay down their weapons while the Sandinistas retained control of the armed forces. Negotiating with the contras was no easy matter. In February, field commanders had finally succeeded in ousting Enrique Bermudez as commander-in-chief, and central control over the contra army disintegrated forthwith.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the Chamorro transition team opened talks with the contra field commanders. As the inauguration approached, between three and six thousand contra combatants were in Nicaragua, threatening to remain armed indefinitely.

On April 19, the Sandinista government, the Chamorro transition team, and the contra commanders signed new agreements for a cease-fire and demobilization of the contra army beginning on inauguration day and concluding three weeks later, by June 10.⁴⁶ The contras agreed to turn over their arms to United Nations forces who would insure their safety. Chamorro promised to provide war veterans with land and economic assistance to reenter civilian life. By the end of June 1990, Nicaragua's long and bloody conflict had finally come to an end.

On April 25, 1990, Violeta Chamorro was inaugurated president in the national stadium, which seemed a microcosm of the Nicaraguan polity. Sandinista supporters and UNO supporters sat on opposite sides of the field, jeering at one another, but refraining from violence. As bitter as Nicaragua's political rivalries were, everyone had had enough of the war.⁴⁷

The Bush administration rejoiced at Chamorro's election, lifted the economic embargo Reagan had imposed in 1985, and asked Congress to provide \$300 million in economic assistance for the new government in 1990 and another \$241 million in fiscal year 1991.⁴⁸ In Congress, there was broad agreement that the United States, having financed the contra war for nearly a

decade, had a responsibility to help pay for economic reconstruction. But with new demands on the limited foreign aid budget coming from Eastern Europe and Panama, debate developed over how much aid Washington could afford to spend in Nicaragua. With the Sandinistas out of power, Nicaragua's importance in Washington faded fast. When Chamorro came to the United States in April 1991 and addressed a joint session of Congress to request desperately needed economic aid, so few members showed up to listen that the leadership had to scour the halls for staff members and pages to fill the empty seats. "Like Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, issues seem to suffer the same plague," lamented Senator Christopher Dodd. "A few months ago, Nicaragua was the hot international issue. Now it's been forgotten."⁴⁹

The Decline and Fall of José Napoleón Duarte

As Nicaragua moved off the American political agenda, El Salvador reappeared. El Salvador had not been a focal point of partisan debate in the United States since Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte was elected president in 1984. But as Duarte's term in office drew to an end, the fragility of his regime became increasingly apparent. Despite good intentions, he had failed to win either the war or the peace. He managed to hang on to his office despite the oligarchy's hatred and the military's distrust, but he could claim little substantive progress beyond mere survival.

In March 1988, El Salvador held elections for its National Assembly and municipal governments. They were the electorate's first opportunity in three years to render a verdict on the Christian Democratic Party's (Poe) performance. Washington expected some Christian Democratic losses, but was surprised by the magnitude of the party's defeat. The PDC lost its majority in the National Assembly and most of the country's mayoralty contests to the rightist National Republican Alliance (ARENA). Ambassador Edwin G. Corr, who had replaced Thomas Pickering in 1985, was such a booster of the Christian Democrats that he saw Duarte's government through rose-colored glasses. Corr had "a penchant for excluding bad news ... from the cable traffic;" the State Department inspector general later concluded, thus leaving his superiors badly uninformed about the depth of Duarte's difficulties.⁵⁰ To make matters worse, shortly after the Poe's electoral debacle, Duarte was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. The disease and its treatment rendered him a caretaker president for the final year of his term.⁵¹

The dual shocks of electoral defeat and Duarte's incapacity capped a three-year decline in the political fortunes of the Christian Democrats. The March election also marked the exhaustion of the Reagan administration's seven-year effort to win the war by combining large-scale military aid with support for a

moderate reformist government. Since Jimmy Carter's presidency, Washington's strategy for holding back the tide of revolution in El Salvador had been based upon Duarte and the Christian Democrats. By 1988, that strategy, like the political health of the PDC and physical health of its leader, was spent.

While inefficiency and corruption corroded the Christian Democrats' popular image, the PDC lost its social base among the urban and rural poor because Duarte failed to live up to the "social pact" he made with them during his 1984 presidential campaign.⁵² Instead of a negotiated peace, Duarte continued the war. Despite \$1 billion in U.S. military aid, the war went grinding on through hundreds of small engagements and acts of economic sabotage, punctuated by an occasional dramatic guerrilla assault. The Salvadoran army was no closer to eradicating the insurgency in 1988 than when the war began.

Instead of the promised social reforms, Duarte imposed an austerity program whose cost fell mainly on his own constituents. The primary impetus for the program came from the United States, which threatened to curtail essential economic aid unless Duarte reduced his government's fiscal deficit and devalued the currency. Unable to pass a tax increase to raise revenues because of rightist opposition, Duarte was forced to cut spending, increasing unemployment. The cumulative damage from capital flight, guerrilla sabotage, and the 1986 earthquake left El Salvador with over 50 percent unemployment and underemployment, 40 percent inflation, and a standard of living far below what it had been a decade before. Economic aid from the United States—\$2 billion since 1981, \$328 million in 1988 alone—kept the economy afloat, but real recovery could not begin until the war ended.⁵³

Popular disenchantment with the Christian Democrats also produced alienation from the electoral process. Only half the registered voters participated in the 1988 election (down from an 83 percent turnout in 1982 and 70 percent in 1985).⁵⁴ The guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) saw these disillusioned voters as a potential base of support, but were not very adept at organizing them. The revival of urban political activism during Duarte's administration, especially by trade unions, produced sharp confrontations with the government over economic issues, but most of the newly mobilized groups resisted efforts by the guerrillas to politicize them further.

The guerrillas' civilian allies, the politicians from the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), returned from exile in late 1987 after the Esquipulas peace accord and quickly set about building an electoral alliance on the left. The Democratic Convergence (Convergencia Democratica) was composed of the newly organized Social Democratic Party, Guillermo Ungo's National Revolutionary Movement (affiliated with the Socialist International), and Ruben Zamora's Popular Social Christian Movement.

The Convergence planned to participate in the upcoming 1989 presidential election, even though ARENA seemed poised to triumph. Poorly organized and underfunded, the Convergence had no chance of winning, but it hoped to get some 10 percent of the vote. If the contest between ARENA and the Christian Democrats was close and a runoff was required, a strong showing would enable the Convergence to demand concessions in return for its endorsement in the second round of voting. The Convergence nominated Guillermo Ungo, the veteran social democrat who ran as Duarte's vice president in 1972.⁵⁵

Without Duarte's dominant personality to lead them, the Christian Democrats split over their presidential nomination. Duarte's longtime political fixer, Julio Adolfo Rey Prendes, quit to form his own party after losing the nomination to Washington's perennial favorite, Fidel Chavez Mena.

On the right, ARENA nominated Alfredo Cristiani, the soft-spoken, U.S.-educated coffee grower who took over leadership of the party from Roberto D'Aubuisson after the ARENA's disastrous defeats in the 1984 and 1985 elections. Cristiani ran on a platform that echoed the 1984 program of the Christian Democrats: He promised economic recovery and a quick end to the war. He even pledged to negotiate peace with the guerrillas—an amazing policy reversal for ARENA that reflected how desperately the population wanted peace.

On March 19, 1989, Cristiani swept to a decisive first ballot victory, winning 53.8 percent of the vote to Chavez Mena's 36.6 percent. Ungo managed a paltry 3.8 percent. The Christian Democrats simply could not recover from the liability of their own record, and the Democratic Convergence could not shake its association with the guerrillas.⁵⁶

Back to the Future

George Bush had been in office just two months when Cristiani won the Salvadoran presidency. A decade of Washington's efforts to promote a stable centrist regime had instead produced victory by the extreme right. Even though Cristiani represented a more moderate, less violent faction of ARENA than D'Aubuisson, the victors were still unquestionably the political representatives of the Salvadoran upper class. ARENA in power was not likely to undertake policies of social and economic reform that would address the deeper grievances that gave rise to the Salvadoran insurgency in the first place.

In Washington, both congressional and executive officials worried that extremists in the army or in ARENA itself might see Cristiani's triumph as a mandate for repression and reactivate the death squads. Political killings had never entirely stopped, and the harassment and persecution of trade unionists and other civic leaders continued throughout Duarte's presidency. Neverthe-

less, the wholesale slaughter that characterized El Salvador in the early 1980s had subsided.⁵⁷

Concern about the rise of ARENA prompted the first congressional debate about El Salvador since 1984. As in the early 1980s, liberals proposed making military aid conditional on the government's human rights performance and its willingness to seek a negotiated end to the war. In the summer of 1989, the House of Representatives added these certification requirements to the foreign aid authorization and appropriation bills. But like the earlier certification, the president was given the power to decide whether the conditions had been met.⁵⁸

In the Senate, the Appropriations Committee reported a foreign aid bill that included even more detailed certification conditions than the House had approved. But during the floor debate, Christopher Dodd surprised his colleagues by arguing the administration's case. Although Dodd had been one of Reagan's toughest critics on El Salvador in the early 1980s, he was now convinced that Cristiani sincerely wanted a political solution to the war. "I believe at this moment we ought to give President Cristiani an opportunity to succeed, to say we appreciate and support what he is doing, and we stand behind him," Dodd declared. The conditionality provision was soundly defeated, 68-32. Instead, the Senate passed an amendment cosponsored by Dodd and Robert Kasten (R-Wis.) that gave El Salvador the full \$90 million in military aid requested by the Bush administration. Late in the year, the House-Senate conference committee accepted the aid levels and weak conditions passed by the House. The consensus on El Salvador had wobbled a bit, but in the end it held—at least for the time being.⁵⁹

Having weathered the congressional debate, Bush was inclined to simply continue Reagan's policy of supporting the incumbent regime in San Salvador. So long as the Cristiani government permitted no egregious deterioration in the human rights situation, the administration could portray ARENA as nothing more than supply-side Christian Democrats. The situation on the ground seemed under control.

Washington's status quo policy rested on two key assumptions: that the Salvadoran armed forces, bolstered by U.S. military aid, were gradually winning the war; and that the Salvadorans were slowly building a democracy to replace the nation's traditional military dictatorship.⁶⁰ Strengthened by U.S. aid, the Salvadoran armed forces kept the guerrillas off-balance and prevented them from launching major offensives. Adjusting to the army's new capability, the guerrillas had returned to small-unit hit-and-run tactics—a strategy that allowed them to continue a war of attrition without exposing themselves to the

government's superior firepower. But this strategy made the war less visible. From Washington, it appeared that the tide of battle had shifted in the government's favor.

On the political front, the guerrillas seemed to be in retreat as well. Cristiani's election marked the sixth successful balloting since 1982, all conducted despite guerrilla opposition and sporadic efforts at disruption. The civilian politicians on the left in the Democratic Convergence had finally decided to participate in the March 1989 presidential election, thereby giving the process broader legitimacy. Then they lost decisively, undercutting the left's claim to represent a significant sector of the population. Finally, the election itself crystallized the growing division between the politicians on the left and the guerrilla combatants when the Democratic Convergence decided to stay in the election even after the guerrillas called on their supporters to boycott it.

The guerrillas themselves recognized that circumstances had changed since the early 1980s. Few of them still believed that defeating the government on the battlefield was possible. No matter how well the guerrillas performed, Washington could always counter by pouring more resources into the armed forces. Endless war was not a viable strategy; the weary population was losing patience with both sides. A January 1989 opinion poll found that 68 percent of Salvadorans favored a negotiated end to the fighting. Even guerrilla factions that had resisted talks earlier in the decade were ready to pursue negotiations seriously.⁶¹

As president, Cristiani kept his campaign promise by reopening negotiations in September 1989. But with both military and political events apparently moving in the government's favor, Cristiani's representatives were not disposed to make any concessions. As in earlier sessions, the government's position was not negotiable: the guerrillas should simply lay down their arms and join the existing political process. Despite major concessions offered by the FMLN, the talks remained stalled.⁶²

El Salvador's Tet Offensive

The FMLN concluded that negotiations would achieve nothing until the government was convinced that the only alternative to a negotiated compromise was perpetual bloody stalemate. To shock the government out of its intransigence, the FMLN launched a major urban offensive.⁶³ Attacks began on November 1, 1989, when guerrillas occupied six poor neighborhoods along the northern rim of San Salvador. When the army was unable to dislodge the guerrillas by ground assault, the high command began to worry that it was losing control of the situation. The air force unleashed its full firepower, bombing and rocketing poor neighborhoods, producing over a thousand civilian casu-

alties, and leaving thousands more homeless. The guerrillas dug in, fought the army house to house in some neighborhoods, and after two weeks withdrew in orderly fashion to their strongholds in the north.

The most dramatic confrontation of the offensive developed at the Sheraton hotel, where twelve U.S. Special Forces advisers were trapped when guerrillas overran the wealthy neighborhood of Escalon. An army counterattack left the guerrillas surrounded but still in control of the hotel-except for the one floor where the Green Berets had barricaded themselves in. Both sides judged, under the circumstances, that discretion was the better part of valor, and no one opened fire. While the Catholic Church began negotiations to resolve the stalemate, President Bush deployed some two hundred elite U.S. troops from Delta Force to rescue the advisers if need be. Overnight, however, the dozen or so guerrillas occupying the hotel slipped away despite a cordon of several hundred Salvadoran soldiers. The Green Berets quickly went back to Honduras, where they were officially stationed (so that they wouldn't count against the fifty-five-adviser limit).

64

At the height of the offensive, some Salvadoran officers feared they might be on the verge of losing the war. Frustrated and angered by the guerrillas' unexpected strength, senior officers decided to settle accounts with people they regarded as guerrilla collaborators-journalists, relief workers, clerics, and intellectuals. Censorship was imposed on domestic media outlets, and journalists were harassed and fired at by troops. Death squads went back on the prowl, murdering prominent members of the revitalized popular organizations. Government security forces raided churches and refugee relief offices of all denominations, ransacking files and arresting dozens of staff members, including foreign-born missionaries, many of whom were deported.⁶⁵ In the heat of the war, the army's vaunted human rights improvement was evaporating.

After a meeting of the high command on the night of November 15, Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides called together three lieutenants for a special mission. "This is a situation where it's them or us," he told his subordinates. "We are going to begin with the ringleaders. Within our sector we have the university, and Ellacuria is there."⁶⁶

Benavides was head of the military academy, but during the offensive, he was named commander of a special security zone that included the academy, the Defense Ministry, and the armed forces' joint command headquarters. It also included the Jesuit-run Central American University. The Salvadoran right had long hated the Jesuits, who were regarded as the "intellectual authors" of the insurgency because of their concern for the poor. No single Jesuit was more despised by the right than university rector Ignacio Ellacuria, an internationally known theologian and vocal advocate for a negotiated end to the

war. Both Duarte and Cristiani had sought Ellacuria's help in finding a settlement, and at times (during the kidnapping of Duarte's daughter, for example) he had served as a formal mediator between the government and the FMLN.

On Benavides's orders, several dozen soldiers from a special elite commando unit of the U.S.-trained Atlactl Battalion occupied the university campus in the early morning hours of November 16. They roused Ellacuria and five other Jesuits from their beds, forced them to lie face down on the ground in their backyard, and then executed them. The soldiers also murdered the Jesuits' housekeeper and her fifteen-year-old daughter, so as not to leave any witnesses. The unit then staged a phony firefight, scrawled graffiti on the walls implicating the FMLN in the killings, and withdrew. When word of the murders reached a meeting of senior Salvadoran intelligence officers a few hours later, the assembled group let out a spontaneous cheer.⁶⁷

The Bush administration's instinctive reaction to the guerrilla offensive was to denigrate it as a "desperation move" and proclaim that the armed forces had everything under control.⁶⁸ President Bush absolutely rejected any suggestion that military aid to El Salvador be reduced or subjected to conditions because of the killing of the Jesuits or the ferocity of the aerial attacks. On the contrary, when Cristiani requested emergency military aid to replenish depleted stocks, Bush promised to speed up weapon deliveries.⁶⁹

U.S. Ambassador William Walker even defended the government's raids on religious and relief groups, comparing them to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. And although the State Department condemned the murder of the Jesuits and demanded a full investigation, Walker's first instinct was to believe the cover story that the guerrillas had done it.⁷⁰

In January, however, a U.S. military adviser reported that a Salvadoran colleague had told him that Benavides had ordered the killings. Shortly thereafter, Cristiani admitted that the murders were the work of the army and ordered the arrest of five enlisted men and four officers-including Colonel Benavides and the three lieutenants he sent on the mission.⁷¹

If the Bush administration evinced relatively little public concern over the implications of the offensive, the same was not true for Congress. Stunned by the intensity of the FMLN attacks, some members began to wonder whether the picture of political and military success painted by the State Department since 1984 was anything more than a Potemkin village. Congress was especially horrified by the murder of the Jesuits. Several of the victims were internationally prominent scholars, and the university was a routine stop for U.S. visitors seeking a cogent analysis of El Salvador's *coyuntura*. Even Republicans who opposed placing any conditions or limits on aid to the Cristiani government demanded a full and rapid investigation of the killings. In the House, the

new Speaker, Thomas Foley, appointed Rules Committee chairman Joe Moakley (D-Mass.) to head a task force to follow progress in the investigation.⁷²

Although many in Congress raised their voices in bitter protest over the slayings and the indiscriminate air attacks, neither the House nor the Senate was willing to take any immediate punitive action. Members were too angry at the guerrillas for launching the attacks and too fearful that the army might be tottering. While the offensive was under way, the House narrowly refused (on a vote of 215-194) to consider a proposal to temporarily withhold 30 percent of the \$85 million in military aid approved for El Salvador in FY 1990, pending an investigation of the Jesuits' murders. A similar move also failed in the Senate.⁷³ But El Salvador was moving back toward the top of the foreign policy agenda.

Like the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, the FMLN's offensive was less a military success than a political one. Although it did not fundamentally alter the military balance, it mocked conventional wisdom in Washington. The strength and tenacity of the offensive shattered the illusion that the Salvadoran army was winning the war, and the army's brutal response shattered the illusion that the trappings of Salvadoran democracy constrained the men in uniform.

The offensive clearly demonstrated that the guerrillas were far from being defeated. The military was able to regain control of occupied neighborhoods only by virtue of its willingness to strafe and bomb guerrilla positions regardless of civilian casualties. The offensive also revealed a greater degree of political support for the FMLN than many observers expected, though less than the guerrillas themselves had hoped. The attack did not spark a massive popular insurrection; the instinct of most civilians was to flee the combat zones any way they could. But the FMLN had managed to infiltrate as many as two thousand combatants and tons of arms into the city and conceal them until the offensive was launched—operations that could not have been carried out without significant civilian collaboration.⁷⁴

The offensive also wrecked the regime's pretense of democracy. Despite the steady decline in the number of death squad killings since the dirty war of the early 1980s, the attitude of the military had not really changed. They still couldn't distinguish between dissent and sedition. When their backs were to the wall, the armed forces reverted to type, treating everyone from the center of the political spectrum to the left as subversive. The cold-blooded murder of the Jesuits symbolized the core problem of El Salvador: the military had no respect for the rule of law, and civilian political institutions had no way to hold it accountable.

Behind the public facade of confidence displayed by U.S. officials during the November offensive, some were shaken enough by events to seriously contem-

plate negotiations as a way out. In February 1990, General Maxwell R. Thurman, head of the U.S. Southern Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Salvadoran army would not be able to achieve a military victory over the FMLN and that the war ought to be ended at the negotiating table. The State Department also began voicing support for new negotiations facilitated by the good offices of U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar.⁷⁵ Secretary Baker, looking back, acknowledged that the rebel offensive proved to be a "catalyst for negotiations."⁷⁶

For the first time since Carter's presidency, the United States seemed genuinely open to a settlement that was not merely a disguised FMLN surrender. "El Salvador needs peace, and the only path to peace is at the negotiating table;" Assistant Secretary Aronson told Congress in January. "Let both sides commit to come to the bargaining table ... and stay and negotiate in good faith until the war is over."⁷⁷

In April 1990, the government and the guerrillas resumed negotiations with new seriousness. Cristiani and the moderate right seemed genuinely interested in reaching a settlement. Unlike the traditional oligarchy, this "modernized" segment of the private sector believed that its economic interests could be safeguarded in a democratic system. ARENA's victories in the 1988 and 1989 elections seemed to prove them right. But the consolidation of an ARENA electoral majority required, first and foremost, reactivation of the economy. That was impossible without peace, and the strength of the guerrilla offensive proved that peace could not be won through military victory. If Cristiani could manage to both end the war and begin economic recovery, ARENA's political fortunes would be bright indeed. If the war went on indefinitely, however, ARENA would risk the same fate as Duarte's Christian Democrats—continued economic crisis and an eventual debacle at the polls.

Within the armed forces, however, hard-liners still opposed any negotiated concessions to the FMLN. That problem was mitigated to some degree when Cristiani's ally Colonel Rene Emilio Ponce, the army chief of staff, managed to send air force commander General Juan Raphael Bustillo into diplomatic exile as military attache to Israel. Bustillo, the leader of the far right faction in the officers corps, was Ponce's main rival for the position of minister of defense. Several months after ousting Bustillo, Ponce won the cabinet post, giving Cristiani a much freer hand to negotiate.⁷⁸

International circumstances also favored a diplomatic settlement. The collapse of Communism removed the Salvadoran conflict from the East-West struggle. In fact, during 1990 and 1991, Moscow and Washington became partners in an effort to resolve the conflict, just as they cooperated on the Nic-

araguan elections. The Soviets urged the FMLN to show flexibility at the bargaining table and, behind the scenes, pressured the Cubans and the Sandinistas to stop shipping Soviet-supplied arms to the guerrillas.⁷⁹

In addition, the demise of Communism weakened the ideological underpinnings of the guerrillas' revolutionary socialism, making them more willing to participate in a political system based on pluralist democracy and a modified market economy. Finally, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in February 1990 robbed the Salvadoran guerrillas of their main regional ally and complicated their logistical situation. "We cannot deny reality," said a guerrilla commander. "The FMLN is feeling the need to end the war."⁸⁰

The changing international environment put pressure on the Salvadoran government as well. In 1981, Ronald Reagan had invoked national security as the rationale for committing the United States to El Salvador, arguing that the indigenous civil conflict there had been transformed by Cuba and the Soviet Union into a case of "indirect Communist aggression." Washington had an overriding security interest in preventing a guerrilla victory, Reagan argued, regardless of the imperfect human rights record of the government. If the guerrillas won, they would establish a Communist regime, ally themselves with Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, and export violence to their neighbors. With the end of the Cold War, such security concerns evaporated, making Congress and the executive branch less willing to accept the Salvadoran army's depredations, or finance an interminable war.

The new attitude in Congress was not long in appearing. Repentant for his opposition to renewed certification in the fall of 1989, Senator Christopher Dodd introduced a bill in 1990 designed to give both the government and the guerrillas incentives to bargain seriously. Dodd's bill (cosponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy) cut military aid by 50 percent immediately and required an end to all remaining military aid unless the government made a serious effort to investigate the Jesuits case and to reach a negotiated settlement of the war. On the other hand, the bill allowed President Bush to restore full military aid if the FMLN refused to negotiate in good faith or launched an offensive that threatened the government's survival.⁸¹

The Dodd-Leahy bill picked up support in April when Congressman Moakley's task force issued an interim report on the investigation of the Jesuits' murder. The inquiry was at a "virtual standstill," the task force charged, and the Salvadoran military showed little interest in examining the possibility that senior officers had ordered the killings. Critical evidence had been destroyed in an apparent cover-up attempt. Moreover, the report concluded, this case was symptomatic of the broader pathology of Salvadoran politics. Moakley himself

recounted his conversations about the killings with senior Salvadoran officers during a trip in February. "They said it was a stupid thing to do, but no one had any sorrow in their hearts."⁸²

On May 22, the House voted by a surprisingly wide margin (250-163) to attach the Dodd-Leahy language to the supplemental foreign aid authorization that included funds for Panama and Nicaragua. "Enough is enough," said Moakley during the floor debate. "The time to act has come. They killed six priests in cold blood. I stood on the ground where my friends were blown away by men to whom the sanctity of human life bears no meaning."⁸³

Shortly after attaching the Dodd-Leahy language, the House rejected the foreign aid bill on final passage, so the military aid cut did not become law. But it was a somber warning to the Bush administration that Congress was finally fed up with the war in El Salvador. The House had reached a "watershed," Speaker Foley said.⁸⁴

In June, the House approved the regular FY 1991 foreign aid appropriations bill with the Dodd-Leahy language, and in October, the Senate voted 74-25 to add the Dodd-Leahy amendment to its version of the bill, despite President Bush's threat to veto the measure. In conference committee, the Democrats refused to compromise.⁸⁵ In the end, the veto threat was a bluff; the foreign aid bill had many provisions that Bush liked, and he signed it. For the first time since the war in El Salvador began, Congress had significantly cut the amount of military aid flowing to the government, from \$85 million to \$42.5 million. For Salvadoran rightists who never really believed Washington would abandon them, the 50 percent aid reduction was sobering evidence that the well was finally beginning to run dry.

Just two months after the Dodd-Leahy language became law, President Bush invoked an escape clause in the bill and restored full military aid to El Salvador on the grounds that the FMLN was engaging in terrorism and receiving military support from abroad. Two developments prompted Bush's action. During 1990, the FMLN had begun purchasing shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles on the international arms market and from sympathetic officers in the Sandinista army in Nicaragua. The missiles significantly altered the military balance, preventing the Salvadoran air force from flying close combat support for troops on the ground and limiting the army's air mobility. After several helicopters were brought down by missiles, some Salvadoran pilots refused to fly during daylight. A surge of fighting in the countryside late in 1990 demonstrated that without air power, the army might soon find itself in dire straits.⁸⁶

The broader aim of restoring military aid was to reassure the skittish Sal-

vadoran military forces that the United States remained committed to their survival. Nevertheless, the administration did not actually disburse the renewed aid for another six months. Despite having opposed the Dodd-Leahy provision, administration officials were happy to use it as leverage to push forward both the investigation of the Jesuits case and the peace process.⁸⁷

Talk, Talk Is Better Than War, War

With active mediation by U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar and his personal representative, Alvaro de Soto, the new Salvadoran talks made real progress. Both the government and the guerrillas seemed finally to have come around to Winston Churchill's admonition that "talk, talk is better than war, war." In July 1990, the two sides signed a preliminary agreement to end human rights abuses against civilians and prisoners and to have U.N. observers monitor compliance once a cease-fire was in place.⁸⁸ Then, however, the talks deadlocked around the issue of reforming the Salvadoran military. The FMLN demanded major reductions in the size of the army, a separate civilian police force to replace the existing security forces (the Treasury Police, National Police, and National Guard), and a "purification" of the armed forces by removing officers guilty of human rights abuses.⁸⁹

In August 1990, the FMLN escalated its demands (partly in response to complaints from guerrilla field commanders that their negotiators were giving away too much), insisting on the removal not just of human rights abusers in the military but of the entire high command. They also insisted on "exemplary punishment" for past human rights violations and proposed not just a reduction in the armed forces, but its complete elimination, leaving El Salvador with only a police force, like Costa Rica.⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, the army summarily rejected that idea. Hopes that the war might end soon enough for the FMLN to participate in the March 1991 legislative elections were disappointed.

The March election, however, gave new impetus to the peace process. The leftist Democratic Convergence did surprisingly well, winning 12 percent of the vote (about three times its vote in the 1989 presidential election) and eight seats in the new National Assembly. The success of the Convergence showed the guerrillas that the electoral system offered real possibilities for the left, and it confirmed Cristiani's belief that ARENA's political health depended upon ending the war.

Within a month, the negotiations produced a major agreement on constitutional changes that strengthened the independence of the judiciary, reorganized the security forces into a single civilian-controlled police force, and created a Truth Commission to investigate the human rights abuses of the

1980s. Although the changes would not take effect until a cease-fire was signed, agreement on these political issues left military reform as the main substantive stumbling block to a final settlement.⁹¹

The April accord led the FMLN to abandon its demand that the entire armed forces be eliminated along with the guerrilla army. Its fallback position was more practical; it called for a reduction in the size of the military from 56,000 to the prewar level of 12,000. However, the guerrillas still wanted the removal of officers guilty of serious human rights abuses and the merger of FMLN combatants into the regular army.⁹²

The deadlock over military reform was finally broken in September 1991, during a marathon negotiating session in New York attended by President Cristiani and all five of the FMLN's principal military commanders. Under pressure from Washington, Cristiani made significant concessions, agreeing to reduce the size of the armed forces by half and to create an independent civilian commission (the Ad Hoc Commission) to review the human rights records of individual officers.⁹³ In exchange, the guerrillas agreed to accept participation in the new civilian police force rather than the military. With the signing of that agreement on September 25, all the fundamental political and military issues dividing the two sides had been resolved in principle. However, the delicate details of implementation, especially the cease-fire, still remained to be hammered out. And like the earlier accords, the compromises agreed to in September would not actually take effect until a cease-fire was in place.

Just one day after the agreement was signed, the Jesuits case went to trial. For the first time in modern Salvadoran history, two officers were convicted for the politically motivated murder of civilians. Most significant, Colonel Benavides, the highest-ranking officer charged, was found guilty of ordering the killings. In January 1992, the two officers convicted were given maximum sentences of thirty years in prison. Yet Salvadoran justice remained imperfect. Seven other soldiers directly involved in the killings were acquitted despite their own confessions and overwhelming physical evidence against them. Three officers convicted of perjury and conspiracy for covering up army complicity in the murders were given suspended sentences.⁹⁴ The price for getting the army to accept Benavides's conviction was that the rest of the participants be exonerated and that the investigation proceed no further.

In December, the Salvadoran negotiators returned to New York in hopes of crafting a final accord before the January 1, 1992, retirement of U.N. Secretary General Perez de Cuellar, whose personal interest in the process had been an important stimulus. A "group of friends" (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Spain) pressured the FMLN commanders to make concessions, and the United States pressured the Salvadoran government. Despite opposition from the

right wing of his own party and from hard-liners in the military, President Cristiani again came to New York personally, along with Defense Minister Ponce, to push the talks forward.

In the final hours before Perez de Cuellar's departure, the two sides announced that they had reached a settlement. When the final accord was signed in Mexico City on January 16, Cristiani came down from the dais and shook hands with FMLN's high command, a gesture that moved some of the battle-hardened guerrillas to tears. "The conflict," said Cristiani, "is behind us!"⁹⁵ In San Salvador, thousands of FMLN supporters rallied to celebrate, surprising many people by their numbers. As if to punctuate the coming of peace, on February 21 news came of Roberto D'Aubuisson's death from throat cancer.⁹⁶

The peace agreement ran to more than eighty pages and established an elaborate timetable for implementing various elements of the accord. A cease-fire would take effect February 1, after which the 6,000 to 8,000 FMLN combatants and the 63,000 government soldiers would gather in separate zones. The FMLN would gradually demobilize, completing the process by October 31. The armed forces would begin its 50 percent force reduction by disbanding the rapid deployment battalions and the security forces. The cease-fire and demobilization would be overseen by 1,000 U.N. peacekeepers.⁹⁷

Credit for the accord was widely shared. Cristiani had pursued peace doggedly, despite resistance from the right. The FMLN had given up its demands for powersharing and social reform, settling for changes in the armed forces and participation in a democratic polity. The Bush administration had lobbied the Salvadoran government and military hard to get them to sign an agreement. Congressional Democrats deserved a measure of credit, too. The Dodd-Leahy 50 percent cut in military aid in 1990 and the threat of even more drastic cuts in 1991 forced the Bush administration to adopt more aggressive diplomacy—just as the congressional cut-off of contra aid had forced it to support the peace process in Nicaragua.

The only clear loser in the Salvadoran settlement was the armed forces. It had to accept a 50 percent cut in manpower, the dismantling of its elite battalions and security forces, the loss of its intelligence functions to civilian agencies, the loss of its jurisdiction over internal security to a civilian police force, a purge of the officer corps by the civilian Ad Hoc Commission, and investigations of past human rights violations by the Truth Commission. In addition, with the end of the war, the flow of U.S. military aid—a lucrative source of graft—would quickly subside.

"This is the closest that any process has ever come to a negotiated revolution," commented U.N. mediator Alvaro de Soto.⁹⁸ The peace process promised a truly revolutionary shift in the basic dynamic of Salvadoran politics.

Since 1931, when General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez seized power and exterminated some 10,000 to 30,000 peasants in El Salvador's first anti-Communist crusade, the military had been the dominant force in Salvadoran politics. Through the years, they suffered civilians just barely. At the core of the state, behind the thin veneer of party politics and elections, stood the army. Above the rule of law and beyond all civilian authority, the army was El Salvador's Leviathan. The oligarchy had willingly surrendered authority to it in the 1930s in the vain hope that military authoritarianism could protect them from class war. In the 1970s, the war came anyway, accelerated by the very repression that the rich had hoped would maintain order. With beneficent aid from the United States, the Salvadoran army grew immense and increasingly autonomous. For the civilians to tame it would be a historic achievement. As the conservatives of ARENA and the radicals of the FMLN searched for common ground upon which to base a peace agreement, one point of accord was their common interest in harnessing the armed forces.

Return to Normalcy

The principle difference between George Bush's approach to Central America and Ronald Reagan's was in the degree of importance they attributed to the region. For Reagan, Central America was the focal point of his tough new foreign policy. It was the place where Washington would draw the line against the spread of Communism in the Third World, where the post-Vietnam decline of American power would be reversed. George Bush, on the other hand, seemed to regard Central America's problems as the troublesome bequest of his predecessor rather than as issues of intrinsic significance. His main priority was to get Central America off the foreign policy agenda so he could concentrate on important matters such as U.S.-Soviet relations, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf War.

The low priority Bush accorded to Central America did not mean that his goals differed fundamentally from Reagan's. On the contrary, in Nicaragua he too sought the ouster of the Sandinistas, and in El Salvador the survival of the U.S.-crafted regime. Bush was no less willing than Reagan to pursue his aims by resorting to force, as the 1989 invasion of Panama and continuing military aid to El Salvador demonstrated. But Central America's subordinate place on Bush's agenda meant that he was not willing to pay a heavy political price to achieve his aims.

As a result, U.S. policy took a more pragmatic turn. Bush was willing to accept compromises when necessary to prevent his policy from stirring up controversy with Congress. By simply conferring with Congress, Bush and Secretary of State Baker were able to diffuse the visceral bitterness evoked by

Reagan. Congressional Democrats were so delighted at the contrast with Reagan's habit of ignoring or denouncing them that they demanded relatively small concessions from Bush as the price for striking bipartisan agreements.

As George Bush ended his term in office, his Central American policy seemed to be remarkably successful compared to Reagan's. Bush encouraged a diplomatic-electoral process that defeated the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, where Reagan's military strategy had failed. Bush came around, albeit belatedly, to support a diplomatic settlement in El Salvador, where Reagan had vainly pursued military victory. As the Central American wars sputtered to an end, the network news programs stopped covering it, the columnists stopped writing about it, the pollsters stopped asking about it, and Congress stopped debating it. For better or worse, the region resumed its traditional place near the bottom of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The end of the Cold War was certainly a key factor in the declining urgency Central America's conflicts held for Washington. With the "new thinking" of Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy, U.S. policymakers could no longer see Central America as pivotal in the global struggle between the superpowers. Indeed, Gorbachev was anxious to settle the region's brushfire wars—even on terms favorable to Washington—to eliminate them as an obstacle to super-power concordat.

For conservative Republicans, compromise on Nicaragua and El Salvador became a bit easier to swallow when it no longer signaled the retreat of American power in the face of a Soviet challenge in our own backyard. Once the end of the Cold War had drained the regional crisis of its symbolic content, all that remained were five small countries of little economic or strategic import, riven by domestic conflicts. Nothing, save habit, impelled Washington to remain at the center of the region's turmoil. It was easier to declare victory and retreat from engagement after our global adversary had already abandoned the field.



Why Were we in Central America?

For decades, Central America had been a backwater of U.S. foreign relations, a region so unimportant that Washington often assigned its least promising diplomats there. Then suddenly, in the 1980s, the United States became so obsessed with the small countries of the isthmus that they dominated not just hemispheric policy, but all of foreign policy. Central America occasioned the most bitter domestic political debate since Vietnam and ignited a scandal that rivaled Watergate. How could the United States have become so alarmed about such a small place?

In part, it was an accident of timing. Ronald Reagan came to Washington in 1981 determined to restore America's global stature by taking the offensive in the Cold War. At that very moment, the accumulated grievances from decades of social inequality and political repression in Central America exploded in revolutionary violence. Historically, Washington had sided with the region's elites, subordinating democracy and human rights to the exigencies of national security and stability. The revolutionaries, most of them Marxists, saw the United States as an imperialist nemesis and looked to Washington's global adversaries for support.

To Reagan, the Marxist ideological bent of Central America's radicals and their willingness to solicit Soviet aid branded them as enemies. Urged on by

Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Reagan declared Central America the place to draw the line against the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World, a test case of Washington's assertive new foreign policy. Over the next eight years, U.S. policy never wavered from the core premise that Central America's wars were Cold War battles that Washington could not afford to lose. "Central America is the most important place in the world," Jeane Kirkpatrick solemnly avowed in 1981.¹

In this Manichean struggle between good and evil, anything short of victory amounted to defeat. Negotiated solutions were not good enough; you could not negotiate with Communists, administration officials said repeatedly. You could not bargain with the devil. In El Salvador, the objective was to prevent the Salvadoran guerrillas from seizing power by force, or gaining any share of power at the bargaining table. In Nicaragua, administration hard-liners were not content with containment. They wanted to reverse Communism in the Third World, and Nicaragua became the test case for the Reagan Doctrine.

Reagan's political appointees tended to be committed ideologues of the Republican right, eager to unleash the military power of the United States, both overtly and covertly, in hopes of rolling back the "Evil Empire" at the periphery. Not everyone in the government shared this zest for fomenting "low intensity conflicts." Foreign policy professionals generally saw the Reagan Doctrine as reckless. Pragmatic by instinct, they tended to be more cautious about embroiling Washington in multiple brushfire wars around the world.

The balance of power between pragmatists and hard-liners shifted to and fro as Reagan's staff played musical chairs through two secretaries of state, two U.N. ambassadors, four White House chiefs of staff, and six national security advisers. But despite having more government experience and foreign policy expertise than most of the hard-liners, pragmatists (such as Thomas Enders, Deane Hinton, Philip Habib, and George Shultz) could never quite get the upper hand. In the end, the hard-liners always prevailed, even after their chieftains (Alexander Haig, William Clark, Jeane Kirkpatrick, William Casey, John Poindexter, and Caspar Weinberger) departed, because they accurately reflected the emotional commitment of the president himself. Ronald Reagan was the premier hard-liner, pursuing victory in Central America as single-mindedly as Ahab pursued the whale.

Did Washington Win This Time?

How successful was Ronald Reagan's policy? Assessments were as sharply divergent in hindsight as they were when the policy was first formulated. Conservatives were quick to credit the president with having saved Nicaragua from the Sandinistas and El Salvador from the guerrillas of the Farabundo

Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Liberals retorted that both the Nicaraguan elections and the Salvadoran peace accord were produced by diplomacy, not the military initiatives favored by Reagan. Both were half right.

During the protracted debates over contra aid, the conservatives warned that the Sandinistas were Communists who would never hold a free election or surrender power peacefully; they could be driven out only at the point of a bayonet. If liberal Democrats refused to give the contras military aid, conservatives insisted, they were condemning the Nicaraguan people to the "the endless darkness of Communist tyranny."² When liberals replied that diplomacy was more likely to produce Sandinista concessions, conservatives derided them for the foolish prattle of weaklings. As it turned out, the hard-liners were wrong on every count—wrong about the consequences of ending military aid to the contras, wrong about the efficacy of diplomacy, and wrong about the Sandinistas' willingness to accept free elections. Had the hard-liners prevailed, continuing contra aid, Nicaragua would have remained a garrison state at war.

On the other hand, liberals were reluctant to acknowledge that the duress Ronald Reagan and the contras inflicted on Nicaragua was the main reason the Sandinistas held an election in 1990 and lost it. The contras never came close to winning a military victory, but the war and Washington's financial pressure destroyed the Nicaraguan economy. Had the Nicaraguan economy been in better shape, perhaps the Sandinistas would not have felt compelled to change their constitution and advance the electoral timetable by almost a year. Had the economy been in better shape, perhaps they would not have lost.

A certain unintended symbiosis emerged from the bitter battles between liberals and conservatives over Nicaragua. When the Iran-contra revelations led Congress to halt military aid, the White House had to shift policy away from relying exclusively on the ineffectual exile army. Unable to continue the war, President Bush had no alternative but to accept a diplomatic approach as outlined in the Esquipulas peace process. To Bush's great surprise, it worked.

But Washington's strategy carried a heavy price for Nicaraguans. Some 30,000 died in the contra war—proportionate to population, this was more than the United States lost in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined.³ Over a hundred thousand Nicaraguans were turned into refugees. Millions suffered economic privation as real wages fell 90 per cent, inflation spun out of control, and unemployment afflicted a third of the labor force. Even with international help, it would take a generation for the Nicaraguan economy to recover. In official Washington, these costs were downplayed amid the euphoria of the Sandinistas' defeat. But if Ronald Rea-

gan wanted credit for having saved Nicaragua, he also had to take responsibility for having destroyed much of it in the process.

In El Salvador, too, the verdict on U.S. policy was mixed. As in Nicaragua, Reagan failed to win a military victory. Despite over a billion dollars in military aid, the Salvadoran armed forces could not defeat the guerrillas. While the two sides fought to a stalemate, some 80,000 people died, most of them innocent civilians killed by the military and the government's security forces, armed and bankrolled by Washington. Three billion dollars in U.S. economic aid prevented El Salvador's economy from collapsing like Nicaragua's, but the war still took its toll-over a billion dollars in lost production and destroyed infrastructure, another billion lost to capital flight. ⁴ In 1991, though the Salvadoran economy was growing at a healthy 3.5 percent rate, a third of the population was unemployed and 90 percent lived in poverty, not earning enough to adequately feed a family of four.⁵

Yet Washington succeeded in denying the guerrillas victory, which they almost certainly would have won in the early 1980s if the Salvadoran government had not received massive U.S. aid. By giving the government the where-withal to avoid defeat, the Reagan administration met its minimum objective. When the two sides finally sat down to negotiate an end to the war, the FMLN won key concessions from the armed forces, but they received no guaranteed share of political power in return for laying down their arms.

Could a similar outcome have been attained in the early 1980s if the Reagan administration had been willing to accept a diplomatic settlement? Both the guerrillas and the armed forces still thought they could win the war then, so finding sufficient common ground to sustain a settlement would have been difficult. Nevertheless, the possibility of a negotiated settlement was visible as early as 1981. Sobered by the failure of their "final" offensive, the guerrillas made their first serious peace proposal that year-a proposal similar in many regards to the agreement signed a decade later. Christian Democrats in the government were disposed to begin talks in 1981, but the army wouldn't let them. Mexico and the Socialist International were prepared to press the guerrillas to make compromises for peace, and European Christian Democrats were willing to do the same with the government. The missing piece was the United States. Only Washington had the power to force the Salvadoran military to make the concessions necessary to stop the war, but the Reagan administration had no interest in a negotiated settlement. Only after a decade of inconclusive combat was Washington willing to acknowledge that military victory was unattainable. Once the United States put itself squarely behind the negotiating process, the armed forces fell into line, albeit grudgingly.

In El Salvador, even more than in Nicaragua, congressional opposition forced changes in the president's policy that ultimately helped it succeed. To win aid increases from Congress, Reagan embraced Jose Napoleon Duarte, despite conservatives' initial suspicions about the Christian Democrats' "communitarianism." The certification requirements imposed by Congress in 1981 forced the administration to pay attention to agrarian reform and human rights, despite Reagan's initial instinct to downplay both. Although the facts of Reagan's certifications were questionable, the need to certify led the administration to pressure the Salvadoran regime into undertaking real change, if only to make the semi-annual ordeal of certification less onerous. Eventually, U.S. pressure produced significant reductions in the number of political murders. That, in turn, created enough political space for the reemergence of an unarmed, dissident politics—an essential first step in the process of moving El Salvador's conflict off the battlefield and into the political arena. Toward the end of the war, Congress's decision to cut military aid by 50 percent in 1991 and the threat to cut it even further in 1992 compelled the Bush administration to support a compromise peace agreement.

In the end, Washington neither won nor lost the wars in Central America; it grew tired of fighting them and, with the waning of the Cold War, settled for diplomatic solutions not fundamentally different from ones it had resisted for years.

The Past Is Prologue

"Too often in our history, we have turned our attention to Latin America in times of crisis, and we have turned our backs when the crisis passed," said Deputy Secretary of State Clifford Wharton in early 1993. "That is shortsighted and self-defeating. This administration will not make that mistake," Wharton was giving the first Latin American policy address of Bill Clinton's presidency. But the circumstances belied the message. Wharton was standing in for Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who had been scheduled to give the speech, but was called to Europe on more urgent business—conferring with NATO about the escalating war in Bosnia. The history of U.S.-Latin American relations was ever thus: until a Latin country erupted in crisis, someplace else was always more important. As the wars that swept Central America in the 1980s subsided, Washington's attention drifted away, Wharton's brave rhetoric notwithstanding.

Nothing was a better indicator than the foreign assistance budget. In the mid-1990s, scarce foreign aid dollars flowed away from Central America, toward Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. For fiscal year (FY) 1998, President Clinton requested just \$169 million in economic assistance for all of

Central America-down 86 percent from the peak level of \$1.2 billion in 1985. Military assistance virtually disappeared; none of the Central American countries were slated for any in FY 1996, other than a few hundred thousand dollars in military training funds-a total of just \$1.6 million regionwide.⁶

Costa Rica "graduated" from AID programs in 1996 and thus was slated for no economic assistance at all. Nicaragua and El Salvador suffered dramatic declines in aid despite the danger that economic difficulties could undermine their fragile democratic institutions. Nicaragua, which received almost \$300 million in 1990 after the Sandinistas lost the election, was slated for just \$24 million in FY 1998. El Salvador, which received almost \$500 million annually in the late 1980s and \$230 million as recently as 1993, was slated for just \$35 million.⁷

For Central Americans, Washington's shifting priorities came as a shock. After the tumultuous 1980s, when U.S. foreign policy seemed to hinge on events in Central America, the disinterest of the 1990s was disquieting. "It is as though a hurricane passed through;" a Honduran businessman said, "and all that is left is the bad aftermath"-an aftermath that the United States expected the Central Americans to clean up themselves.⁸

Vital Interests and the war at Home

Washington's abrupt loss of interest in Central America suggested that perhaps it had not been quite so "vital" to U.S. national security as Ronald Reagan proclaimed. No doubt the Soviet Union saw the region as a point of vulnerability for the United States in the 1980s and was happy to stir up trouble there. But the Soviets were never eager for a direct confrontation with Washington in its own backyard, where all the geostrategic advantages lay with the United States. They were reluctant to supply the Salvadoran guerrillas with arms and gave the Sandinistas significant military aid only after the contra war began.⁹ Moreover, the Soviets were always stingy with economic assistance; their financial help fell well below what the Sandinistas needed to prevent economic decay. Much as the Soviets may have enjoyed seeing Washington squirm in Central America, they had no interest in paying for another Cuba. Such an adventure was just too expensive.

But the Reaganites were reacting as much to the symbolic threat posed by the Soviet Union as to the actual threat. Here was a region, close to home, where the United States had traditionally held sway. Suddenly, it was rising in rebellion against regimes that historically aligned themselves with Washington, rebellions led by insurgents who identified ideologically with the rival superpower. Could the United States defend its interests in Central America, or would this region, like Southeast Asia before it, slip into the orbit of the

enemy? And if the erosion of American power and influence could not be halted here, in our own backyard, where would it end?

The memory of Vietnam was fresh when Central America erupted in revolution. To conservative Republicans, the Vietnam syndrome was the Achilles' heel of American national security. Could they reestablish an activist, interventionist posture or would liberal Democrats ratify the nation's post-Vietnam reluctance to entangle itself in other people's insurgencies? If the advocates of intervention could not maintain domestic support for the use of force abroad, the United States would be unable to meet the Soviet challenge in the Third World, with catastrophic consequences.

Liberal Democrats thought Reagan was exaggerating the threat to U.S. security posed by the upheavals in Nicaragua and El Salvador, just as President Lyndon B. Johnson had exaggerated the importance of Vietnam. As Reagan became more and more committed to the Salvadoran regime and the Nicaraguan contras, Democrats worried that the president was taking America down another slippery slope. Unlike the Cold War liberals, who stifled their doubts about Johnson's war, the Democrats of the 1980s were determined to use the power of Congress to prevent "another Vietnam" in Central America.

That was something Ronald Reagan would not tolerate. The Reagan Republicans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of congressional activism in international affairs. To them, foreign policy was the president's job, and he would brook no interference. Washington itself had become a crucial front in every brushfire war. The struggle for Central America was more likely to be lost in the halls of Congress than on the battlefields of the region itself—just as the war in Vietnam had been lost in Washington, according to conservative mythology. Convinced that the global stakes were enormous, the Reaganites were determined to prevail over congressional resistance by any means necessary.

Add to these high stakes a slightly conspiratorial mentality, a touch of the paranoid style in American politics, and some conservatives became convinced that domestic opposition was being fueled clandestinely by America's global enemies. To them, the line between loyal opposition and treason became indistinct. The epic struggle between good and evil was no longer simply the United States versus the Soviet Union. Some of "us" had joined "them;" or acted as if they had, which amounted to the same thing. The battle lines were no longer drawn along national boundaries, but between Democrats and Republicans, between liberals and conservatives, between Congress and the White House. One result was the corrosion of civility in the foreign policy debate, epitomized by the Republican right's incessant red-baiting of opponents. Another was the erosion of the rule of law caused by the executive branch's flagrant flouting of statutes that did not comport with policy.

From Reagan's first weeks in office, he treated Congress as an adversary to be subdued. To evade congressional scrutiny of his aid program for El Salvador, he invoked presidential emergency powers to send military assistance without congressional approval. When Congress imposed certification requirements on aid, he blithely certified that things were getting better regardless of the facts. When Congress refused to fund police training for the Salvadoran security forces, Reagan went ahead anyway, using the regular military aid program and pretending the police were actually regular military units. He refused to comply with laws governing the deployment of U.S. military advisers to El Salvador and Honduras, and he used the CIA to send U.S. soldiers into covert combat in El Salvador and Nicaragua without complying with the War Powers Resolution. When Congress refused to fund the construction of new military bases in Honduras, the Pentagon built them anyway under the cover of military exercises.

Nowhere was Reagan's contempt for Congress more manifest than on the issue of contra aid. From the beginning, administration officials lied to Congress about the real intent of the not-so-secret war against Nicaragua. Despite repeated assurances, the operation was never aimed at interdicting arms smuggled from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas. When Congress passed the Boland amendments to halt contra aid, the administration simply ignored the law, using every artifice to continue the war-rerouting money from the Pentagon, soliciting funds from foreign countries, and diverting profits from Iranian arms sales. And through it all, administration officials lied about what they were doing-publicly, privately, repeatedly, and egregiously.

From 1983 on, the White House's secret efforts on behalf of the contras were carried out by a clandestine foreign policy apparatus under the Orwellian code name Project Democracy. By setting up this secret network, the Reagan administration subverted the constitutional balance between the branches of government and thereby posed a greater threat to democracy in the United States than Nicaragua ever could. Moreover, when the Iran-contra scandal revealed how deceitful the White House had been, neither Reagan nor most of the responsible officials were contrite. On the contrary, they defended their actions as necessary to defeat Communism in Central America-an imperative that took precedence over telling the truth to Congress or obeying the law. Most Republicans endorsed this rationale, praising the inauguration of the new Imperial Presidency.

In point of fact, the Democrats were much less implacable foes of Reagan's Central America policy than one would think from reading the president's speeches. Liberals in Congress tried mightily to block Reagan from taking the nation down a path that they believed led to disaster, but they were not in full

command of their party. On foreign policy issues, conservative southern Democrats invariably sided with Reagan, often giving him an ideological majority that rendered the Democrats' partisan majority meaningless. At critical junctures—the 1984 House votes on military aid to El Salvador and the 1985 and 1986 House votes on contra aid—divisions among the Democrats handed victory to the White House.

Despite consistent public opposition to Reagan's policy, Democratic leaders in Congress were slow to mobilize the party to challenge the president precisely because the issue exacerbated the Democrats' internal ideological split. Some Democratic leaders were themselves ambivalent about the policy. Jim Wright opposed Reagan on Nicaragua more effectively than anyone—so much so that angry Republicans attacked him mercilessly and drove him from the Speaker's chair in 1989. But Wright supported the president on El Salvador. Senate Democratic leader Robert Byrd vacillated between support and opposition, never taking an active role in the Central America debate, wishing it would simply go away. But even among Democrats who consistently opposed Reagan's policy, many were reluctant to stand up to the popular president for fear they would be tarred with having lost Central America to Communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy was thirty years dead, but his ghost was still enough to give Democrats a fright.

In short, Congress largely failed in its institutional responsibility to serve as a check on executive behavior. Democrats were reluctant to protest too vehemently or look too closely at what the White House was doing, even when they knew it was improper; Republicans made transparently partisan excuses for their president. The foreign policy process would have been healthier had Democrats brought more backbone to it and Republicans brought more conscience.

The press and public also proved imperfect bulwarks against executive malfeasance. Except for a few investigative journalists who gave Reagan headaches, most of the media reported the Central America story from the official point of view. Administration efforts at elaborate public relations campaigns to manage the press or, failing that, to intimidate it succeeded more often than not.

Throughout Reagan's eight years in the White House, polls showed that a large majority of the public opposed every aspect of his Central American policy. In fact, administration officials suffered from a Vietnam syndrome of their own—the fear that direct military action might trigger the sort of mass public opposition that made the war in Vietnam untenable. Significant organized grassroots opposition to Reagan's policy from the religious community and the peace movement foreshadowed what might happen if direct involve-

ment produced significant U.S. casualties. But so long as U.S. troops stayed out, most voters paid little attention to Central America, and the White House could ignore the polls.

One lesson of the experience in Central America was that values expressed in policies abroad invariably seep into politics at home. The only way to assure that foreign policy remains consistent with American values is to subject it to the same close public scrutiny and debate as domestic policy. Although the foreign policy process has become more open than in the heyday of the Imperial Presidency, it was not democratic enough to prevent Ronald Reagan from disregarding the law. Congress, the press, and-most especially-the voting public need to pay more attention to foreign affairs, not less. Only their vigilance can hold presidents to account when ideological certainty convinces them that they alone understand the national interest and that the ends of securing it justify the means.

Like Vietnam, the Central American crisis ended without policymakers reaching any consensus about how the United States should deal with similar conflicts in the future. To be sure, with the end of the Cold War, those issues seemed less compelling. Third World struggles that Washington once viewed as proxy wars with Moscow ceased to have any larger meaning, and successful interventions elsewhere-in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf-boosted America's confidence in its ability to go to war and win.

Yet much of the Third World, Latin America not excepted, still holds the tinder for social upheaval-privileged classes and political elites unresponsive to the majority's demands for democracy and social justice. If the past is any guide, the United States is unlikely to stand aloof from such conflicts, especially in its own backyard. Although the imperative of superpower rivalry is gone, other interests-in immigration, narcotics interdiction, oil supplies, humanitarian aid, or "promoting democracy"-tend to pull Washington in. And like Banquo's ghost, the questions raised first in Vietnam and again in Central America will reappear: What national interests are compelling enough to justify the use of force abroad; how can we use force in ways consistent with the laws of war and our own sense of moral decency; and how can we do it without undermining the foundations of our own democracy?

In the end, Central America proved not to be another Vietnam, at least not in the way that people feared in 1981. Neither the worst nightmares of the conservative Republicans-a Communist Central America toppling dominoes from Panama to Mexico-nor those of the liberal Democrats-a quagmire on our doorstep-came to pass. Washington avoided the slippery slope in part just by knowing it was there.

We went to war in Central America to exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam and to renew the national will to use force abroad. These imperatives, more than the Soviet threat, Fidel Castro's menace, or the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutions, shaped U.S. policy-how it was conceived, struggled over, and executed. Central America's misfortune lay in being the stage upon which this American drama was played out.