

Central
America

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The US and 'the needs of the people'

The terrible unfolding of the El Salvador tragedy, which daily brings news of fresh violence, provides yet another example of the present powerlessness of the super-powers — even in their own backyards. Whether in Afghanistan or in Central America, Moscow and Washington are presently unable to control the development of events. Policies embarked on, perhaps for the best of motives, no longer have clear-cut conclusions.

The crisis in Central America, which goes far beyond the forecourt of the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador, is now reaching dramatic proportions. It began decades ago with the establishment of small banana republics, policed by the American Marines in alliance with the tiny local land-owning elite, and sustained with the benevolent approval of large international firms. Such a framework was never approved by the great mass of the people whose periodic rebellions were crushed with great savagery. But last year the overthrow of General Somoza of Nicaragua by the Sandinista guerrillas threatened to bring the Central American system to an end. General Somoza and his family had been the linchpin of the area for years. With United States support he had kept the whole ramshackle edifice of repressive and corrupt dictatorships together.

With Somoza gone, and a popular government in Managua, the other petty regimes began to tremble — as did the United States.

~~El Salvador, after Nicaragua, is the most important country in Central America to the United States. It provides a headquarters for most American firms that operate in the area, it is the seat of the Central American Common Market, and it has a tough, American-trained army. Relatedly reading the entrails of the Nicaraguan situation, Washington concluded last year~~

that a change of government in El Salvador would be beneficial. The presiding military dictator was elbowed out. But, far from ushering in an era of harmony, conciliation, reform and development, successive juntas have proved incapable of controlling the forces they have unleashed. The scene is set for civil war, with powerful right-wing paramilitary forces regretting that the lid was ever taken off the cauldron, and not-so-powerful left-wing guerrilla organisations being swept along by a rebellious and land-hungry peasantry and by a mass of urban unemployed who have scented the possibility of change.

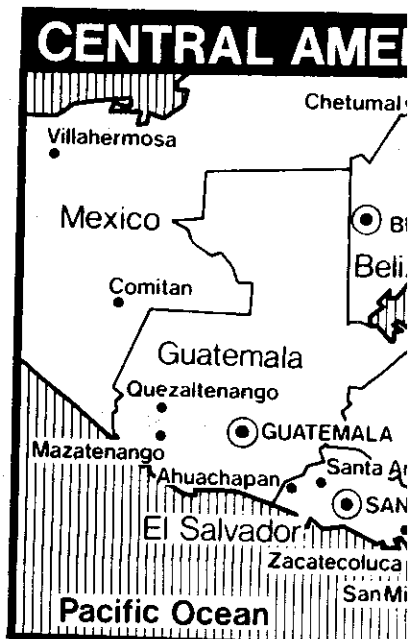
The scenario is not so different, either, in neighbouring Honduras and Guatemala, where the military regimes in power show no sign of giving up without a fierce and bloody struggle. In these circumstances, what can the United States do? Is it to back the dictators until the very last minute to midnight — as happened with Somoza — and then try grudgingly to come to terms with the military victors? Is it to meddle in the internal military politics of each country — as it has done disastrously in El Salvador and is perhaps about to do in Honduras — giving aid and succour to small cliques within the armed forces?

Or is it, as the late Archbishop Romero recommended, prepared to come to terms with the representatives of the popular organisations — "voicing the needs of the people" — laying the groundwork for real conciliation and genuine reform? It is not an easy choice for a superpower, but then the first two choices have not proved to be conspicuously successful. If the whole area is not to go up in flames, in a conflict in which the United States would find itself friendless and alone, the third option offers the best hope. And if America's European allies wish to help it escape from its historical albatross, they could do worse than sombrely to echo the advice of Archbishop Romero.

The peril at the grave

It is twelve uneasy months since Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was put to death; twelve months of unchallenged martial law

ta. They sense the inevitable and the need to lend support to the Begum Bhutto; for



THE PENTAGON has submitted to Congress items wanted for El Salvador. A Subcommittee of the House of Representatives Security Assistance Agency makes almost \$3.9 million in military aid and a list for Honduras including launchers, mortars, and recoilless communication equipment and spare parts.

Jack Anderson

Why another

THE ERA of banana-republic dictators propped up by U.S. military aid is dead, but the Central American administration refuses to give it a decent burial. Instead, the president seems determined to add still another sorry chapter to the chronic Yankee imperialism in Central America. The administration apparently has chosen Honduras to be our new "Nicaragua" — a dependent satellite, bought and paid for by American military and economic largesse.

In secret meetings with the Pentagon emissary, Maj. Gen. Robert L. Schweitzer, the Honduran military junta was told specifically that it is expected to assume the regional leadership for years by Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza — to become a bulwark of opposition to communism against the pressures of popular revolt. Guns and dollars will flow if the junta achieves legitimacy in this month's election.

Unfortunately, that legitimacy will be cosmetic at best. All the evidence indicates that the elections will be a complete sham. The military-backed National Party is the ordained winner. The Christian Democrats do not even have a place on the ballot. Voter registration is a farce. Birth certificates — required