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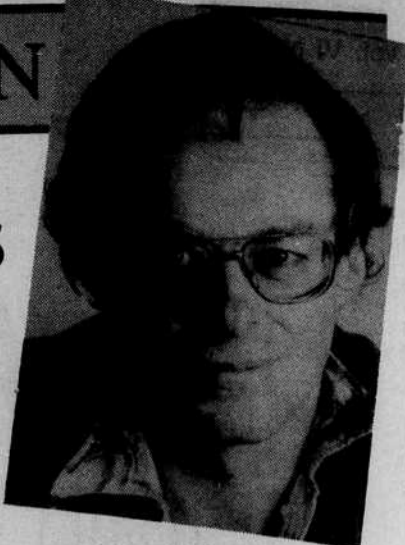
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OPINION

ASHES AND DIAMONDS

by Alexander Cockburn



I suppose we should be pleased that President Arias got the Nobel peace prize. The White House would like to extirpate his peace plan from human memory, so there's no doubt that in the short term the fact that the deviser of this same plan is a Nobel Laureate will help in beating back the administration's attempts to renew contra aid and to limit the scope of any peace plan to the demand that the Sandinistas relinquish power.

But in the longer perspective Arias is no beacon of progress and his country, Costa Rica, is signally dependent on U.S. economic support. Arias can as well use—already to a certain degree has use of—the “standing” afforded him by the prize to demand that the Sandinistas negotiate directly with the contra leadership, hold fresh elections, abrogate their constitution and so on.

The degree to which the U.S. media have turned this Arias plan into a document applying solely to Nicaragua rather than to those of all five signatories, is fairly amazing, even by normal depraved standards. The U.S. journalists and politicians now fanning out across Nicaragua to test Sandinista adherence to the plan's provisions for internal democratization and respect for human rights have shown a marked disinclination to make similar forays in El Salvador, Honduras or Guatemala.

They would not have to press such investigations with any great energy.

Inquiries into the future of a free press in El Salvador would be greeted with the news that the two main opposition papers in the country have long been closed, with the editor of one murdered and the other forced to flee the country. There are no plans to reopen them and no pressure from any of the *La Prensa* groupies to do so. *Americas Watch* recently reported that human rights in El Salvador fell far short of the provisions of the plan. In El Salvador the reconciliation committee (which in Nicaragua is headed by Cardinal Obando y Bravo) is a joke, stocked with a right-wing former president and also with a member of ARENA, the party of Roberto d'Aubuisson.

The situation in Guatemala and Honduras is just as grotesque, with peace plan provisions on refugees,

human rights, and internal democratization all being flouted.

It would evidently be appropriate for President Arias, weighted with his new international distinction, to draw attention to these failures and to the double standard which centers scrutiny on Nicaragua alone. Thus far he has shown a marked disinclination to put his mouth where his Nobel money is.

Footnote: At least Arias proposed a plan. His predecessor as recipient of the Peace Prize, Elie Wiesel, seems to have taken the honor as a signal to remain entirely silent on any constructive proposals for peace and justice in the Middle East.

Stop Me Before I Kill Again

At the moment when he should have been in El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras attempting the kind of reporting suggested above, Ed Rabel was filing the following report back

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to NBC Nightly News, during the second week in October:

“For the first time since the Contras began fighting six years ago, the United States-backed guerillas have established a foothold in Central Nicaragua. The territory in which the Contras have set up semi-permanent bases is located in the hilly grasslands roughly 130 miles east of Managua. Contra fighters boast of their successes in maintaining superiority over Sandinista troops in the area.

“The people of this region, independent farmers and ranchers, have sympathy for the contras. They say the Sandinistas tried to impose Marxist policies on them and confiscate their land. Supplies clandestinely air dropped over Nicaragua by the United States also enable the Contras to keep their foothold. The air drops have been increased dramatically recently, some regional military experts say, because of fears the U.S. Congress may cut off aid altogether.

“Bloody fighting to maintain superiority by the Contras in Central Nicaragua has left many rebel dead and wounded, but the contras say it was worth it. Their presence has forced the Sandinistas to look for peace, they say: and they don't intend to give up.”

The area in question is Chontales province, largely given over to cattle breeding and not heavily populated. It is traditionally conservative and under Somoza was a recruiting ground for the national guard. The contras have been in the area in small numbers (150-220) for two years, so to say now, as though something sensational has occurred, that they have “established a foothold” is nonsense.

The contras in the region have never been able to mount any effective military operation and if they were a serious threat they would be speedily overrun. They have no fixed base and have been conspicuously timid, outside risk-free slaughter of defenseless civilians. They have never managed to cut the “Rama Road” which runs from Port Rama, where some Soviet military supplies arrive,

to Managua. In two years, according to one private consultant on Central American military affairs, they have never managed to ambush a single convoy.

Civic Lessons

In one of ABC's “Space Bridges” between the United States and the Soviet Union the following exchange occurred on September 22:

Rep. Chic Hecht (Nevada): “We have one set of laws in America—our constitution, which we are now celebrating our two hundredth year. We have had an open society for 200 years. We try to study the Soviet philosophy, Karl Marx, Frederick Engles [sic, in ABC transcript] who have embraced dialectical materialism along with Lenin, which has resulted in a closed society. Now, with Mr. Gorbachev, we find glasnost, which is an open society. Please explain to us—are you abandoning Karl Marx, Frederick Engles [sic]? What is your philosophy at the present time?”

Deputy Lev Tolkunov [in translation]: Marx and Engles [sic] and Vladimir [sic] Illich Lenin, they founded our state. They saw socialism as a society of developed democracy. Unfortunately in our history, we have the prewar period, the war period, the postwar period when we were forced somewhat to pinch our democratic rights to strike a blow against German fascism which threatened all of mankind. But right now, in developing democracy, in developing glasnost, we are basing ourselves fully, entirely on those indications left to us by Vladimir Illich Lenin. He stated during the last years of his life that socialism is unthinkable without the broadest possible democracy.”

Rep. Claude Pepper (Florida): “Mr. Chairman, sensible men wonder how did the arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States ever get under way. The United States has not had a record of going around the world attacking people and taking their countries away from them.

... Except for a little intrusion on our part during your revolution we've never threatened your country. ... I think the time has come for both of us to come under the scrutiny of common sense and get down to business about stopping this arms race and getting back to a sensible, friendly relationship. ...”

It's fun to listen to this kind of thing, though sometimes I have to rush back to the works of Karl, Fred and Vladimir, to remind myself that there is a difference, indeed a fundamental contradiction, between capitalism and socialism and the cold war is not about to be ended by a manly handshake between Gorbachev and Reagan.

Anyone wishing reassurance that the spirit of glasnost has not meant utter eradication of sound historical materialist principles may care to study the declaration of the Federation of Socialist Clubs, promulgated during a meeting of 50 groups in the Soviet Union on September 12 of this year, in a Moscow conference hall loaned for the occasion by the Communist Party. The declaration began with an expression of support for the “socialist model of developments,” called for legal status for independent organizations and movements along with democratization of the electoral

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