

Can the U.S. live with revolution in Central America?

EDITOR'S NOTE: (Central America no longer grabs headlines in the U.S. but revolution continues to spread throughout the region. Richard Millet, chairman of Latin American Studies at Southern Illinois University, sees a fundamental shift in foreign policy underway as the U.S. learns to live with revolution in its own back yard).

By Richard Millet

While American attention has been riveted on revolutionary events in the Middle East, U.S. policy appears to be undergoing a revolution of its own in an area much closer to home. In Central America -- where El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala seem ready to follow Nicaragua's lead -- the U.S. has shifted from its historically interventionist policy to one of live-and-let-live.

The Carter Administration has made efforts to slow the pace of revolution and to pressure existing regimes for basic reforms which might defuse massive discontent. But U.S. also seems to have accepted the necessity of some degree of revolution in the region.

The fundamental problem we share with our neighbors is not that defending stability in the face of revolution," under Secretary of State Warren Christopher told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in December. "It is to build a more stable, equitable and pluralistic order. That is the challenge of Nicaragua, and it is the challenge throughout the region."

In fact, Nicaragua has been the acid test for the new policy. Few nations have had so long or sorry a history of U.S. intervention in their internal affairs. With the exception of one year, marines were stationed in that nation from 1912 until 1933. During that time, the U.S. managed Nicaragua's custom's revenues, gained a treaty securing U.S. control over potential canal routes, and spent more than five years fighting Nicaragua's national hero, Augusto Cesar Sandino. By invoking his name and image, Nicaragua's current rulers have made opposition to U.S. domination a central part of their program.

The U.S. appears willing to accept this attitude and shows no inclination to return Nicaragua to its former client-state status. There has been no effort to protect the economic interests of the Somozas or their supporters, nor to discourage Nicaragua's move to a non-aligned position in world affairs. The administration seemed satisfied and a bit relieved when Nicaragua abstained during UN voting on the Afghanistan issue.

Instead of threatening big stick diplomacy, the Carter Administration evidently prefers trying to convince Nicaragua that as long as a significant degree of economic and political pluralism is encouraged, along with a respect for human rights, the U.S. will not impede its social revolution.

Such an attitude stands in stark contrast to that of previous administrations. Under Eisenhower, the CIA helped deny Cheddi Jagan an electoral victory in Guyana, promoted a revolution to topple a left-leaning regime in Guatemala, and began efforts -- expanded by Kennedy -- to overthrow Castro in Cuba. Lyndon Johnson sent more than 200,000 troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965 to prevent a leftist revolution. And from 1970 to 1973, the Nixon Administration engaged in a massive and ultimately successful campaign to topple the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile.

"The fundamental mistake we make," said Sen. Ed Zorinsky (D.-Neb.), chairman of the subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, "is to back governments or regimes which enjoy little or no popular support...The upshot of it all is that U.S. policy becomes identified with the tyrants and dictators of the

world rather than with the aspirations of the masses and the democratic principles we otherwise profess."

In the near future, however, events in El Salvador, and perhaps in Guatemala, could push the new non-interventionist policy to the breaking point. Rumors abound that the U.S. was deeply involved in last October's Salvadorean coup. Whatever the truth of such reports, it is obvious that the State Department placed considerable hopes on the new regime's ability to promote reform and calm discontent.

But with violence increasing, and El Salvador's new rulers unable or unwilling to control the far right, or to implement real economic and social changes, prospects for a moderate solution seem more and more remote. If full-scale civil war

erupts, the dilemma for the United States will be acute. The forces on the left will be more radical than those in Nicaragua and will not have the middle class or unified church support enjoyed by the Sandinistas. And the government in power will be neither as palpably evil nor as irrelevant to hopes for positive change as was the Somoza regime.

It will be extremely hard for any U.S. administration to stand idly by in the face of such a conflict, especially with the potential effect this could have on the increasingly unstable situations in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras, to say nothing of the effects on the U.S. electorate in an election year.

Yet to intervene would signify to intransigent rulers throughout the region that, in a crisis, they can once again count on U.S. support.

Intervention would also destroy incentives for meaningful reforms, isolates moderates, and virtually ensure continuing conflict throughout Central America.

Nicaragua, Iran, and now El Salvador and Guatemala demonstrate that years of close identification with repression and a policy of stability at any price ultimately bears very bitter fruit for the U.S.

The Carter Administration did not create these conditions, but it must respond to them. By distancing itself from unpopular regimes, encouraging reform and indicating a willingness to try to live with revolution, it has begun a basic transformation of policy toward the Third World.



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