

Books

Struggle for Central America

By Mark Falcoff

ROBERT WESSON, Ed. *Communism in Central America and the Caribbean*. Stanford, CA, Hoover Institution Press, 1982.

H. MICHAEL ERISMAN and JOHN MARTZ, Eds. *Colossus Challenged: The Caribbean Struggle for Influence*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1982.

BARRY B. LEVINE, Ed. *The New Cuban Presence in the Caribbean*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1982.

BERNARD DIEDERICH. *Somoza and the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America*. New York, E. P. Dutton, 1981.

THOMAS W. WALKER, Ed. *Nicaragua in Revolution*. New York, Praeger, 1982.

JOHN A. BOOTH. *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1982.

FIVE YEARS AGO, the collapse of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua

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touched off a political earthquake in Central America whose reverberations are still being felt throughout that region. The waves of violence and counterviolence there, and their uncertain implications for the international political order, have also had an impact on the United States, generating perhaps the nastiest foreign policy debate since the end of the Vietnam war.

The current controversy over Central America really consists of three separate but related issues. The first concerns the indigenous causes of Central American instability—in other words, to what degree are events there nothing more than a natural response to poverty, injustice, and economic dislocation? The second concerns the role of outside powers—regional and global—in fomenting or containing political upheaval in the region. And the third centers around differing views about the significance of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions—as if to say, “If those are the ‘worst case’ scenarios, just how much do we have to fear from the falling of further dominoes?”

AT THE OUTSET it might be useful to make one basic point: even in the absence of outside forces, the Central American republics would find themselves in a crisis of major

proportions. Some of the problems stem from economic factors: the tenfold increase in the world price of oil since 1973; the more or less contemporaneous drop in the value of local exports, particularly sugar, cotton, and coffee; and the crisis in credit structures provoked by high interest rates in the industrial countries. Others are long-term maladies that have simply grown exponentially: deficiencies in health, housing, education, and employment.

Nevertheless, however parlous this situation, there is no simple and direct relationship between poverty and the nature or fortunes of revolutionary groups throughout the isthmus. This is the finding of Robert Wesson and his colleagues in *Communism in Central America and the Caribbean*. On the one hand, in countries like Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama, the most revolutionary elements are also among the more prosperous ones, namely, workers in the multinational corporations and some secondary-school and university students.¹ On the other hand, even in poverty-stricken Guatemala and El Salvador, where an active guer-

¹Neal J. Pearson, “Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama,” in the Wesson volume reviewed here, pp. 94–116.

rilla movement already exists, the Left is seriously divided and unlikely to assume power in the near future.²

This does not mean an easy ride for the peoples of these countries (nor for the luckless few who govern them); but it does offer a far less dramatic picture than we are accustomed to getting from the electronic media and the daily press. It also suggests that exogenous actors do—or at any rate, can—make a difference. Who they are and what role they play is the topic of W. Raymond Duncan's essay on "Moscow, the Caribbean, and Central America" in the Wesson volume, and of the contributions to *Colossus Challenged* and to *The New Cuban Presence in the Caribbean*.

I suppose it requires no great brilliance to see that in spite of recent losses, the United States is still the most important single outside power in the area; but few view that fact in quite as jaundiced a light as does H. Michael Erisman, in his opening essay to the collection he coedited with John Martz. Erisman boldly sets forth the thesis that just about everything that is wrong with the countries of the Caribbean basin can be laid firmly at Washington's door—not just the Reagan Administration but very emphatically its predecessors as well. His case rests upon two fundamental premises, both of which must be accepted without reservation in order for it to make any sense. One is that the United States has no legitimate national interests in the area, or at any rate, none that justifies a serious projection of its power and influence. And the second, which follows from the first, is that anything that challenges the status quo (defined

as US hegemony) is bound to benefit the people of the region, and is therefore fully justified—whether done by the Cubans, the Nicaraguans, or anyone else. That is why, Erisman writes, even "conservative" Latin American governments like those of Mexico and Venezuela oppose the drift of US policy.

No doubt there is much in that policy past and present worthy of careful reexamination, but a wholesale indictment of this sort is not terribly useful. How, for example, can one condemn the United States for a hegemony it no longer possesses, while at the same time masochistically celebrating its loss? Erisman also blurs some critical distinctions concerning the regional powers, Mexico and Venezuela—distinctions that fortunately are resupplied by some of his own authors a few pages away.

Clearly, Venezuela would prefer to keep Caribbean conflicts out of an East-West frame of reference, but this does not mean (as Erisman implies) that Caracas imagines this can be done simply by ignoring the extrahemispheric forces at work. Nor does it mean that Venezuelan leaders of either major party favor the victory of "popular" (i.e., Marxist) forces in the area—far from it. Rather, as Martz points out in his chapter on that country, its leaders believe that their own nation's security is best served by the spread of conventional democratic institutions throughout the Caribbean basin. This automatically creates a tactical convergence with US policy, which—however inconvenient it may be for any Venezuelan government's self-image—is for all practical purposes the same thing as agreement with Washington.³

The case of Mexico is more complicated. Edward J. Williams puts it very well, in his contribution to this anthology, when he characterizes that country's policy (or rather, *policies*) as informed by "a solid strain of inconsistency."⁴ One dimension of that policy—the "revolutionary" one—is well known. It includes a public position of solidarity with Cuba, combined with diplomatic, economic, and political initiatives to assist and encourage revolutionary forces in El Salvador along with the Sandinista regime currently installed in Nicaragua. But often missed is what Williams calls the "prudential" dimension of Mexican policy: diplomatic relations with established Central American regimes of whatever ideological stripe; significant economic aid to same in the form of reduced oil prices; an unprecedented program of modernization for the Mexican military;⁵ and, what is perhaps most interesting of all, military and security cooperation with the Guatemalan army in a few limited matters of mutual interest.

For example, Williams reports that Mexico apparently assisted in the capture of Guatemalan guerrilla leader Marco Yon Sosa. And in 1980, Guatemalan officers participated in military maneuvers in the Mexican states bordering their country—maneuvers that one observer cited by Williams described as "the most important [in the region] in the last fifty years" (p. 157). From this it would appear that Mexico actually pursues two Central American policies—one for

²Daniel Premo, "Guatemala," in *ibid.*, pp. 73–93; Thomas Anderson, "El Salvador," in *ibid.*, pp. 61–72.

³John D. Martz, "Ideology and Oil: Venezuela in the Circum-Caribbean," in the Erisman and Martz volume reviewed here, pp. 121–48.

⁴Edward J. Williams, "Mexico's Central American Policy: Revolutionary and Prudential Dimensions," in *ibid.*, pp. 149–70.

⁵See especially George Fauriol, "Mexican Security," in Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies and Los Alamos Laboratories, *Project on Modern Weapons: Third World Motivations, Capabilities, Absorptions, and Acquisitions*, Washington, DC, September 1983 (mimeo).

Guatemala, from which no revolutionary contagion can be viewed with equanimity; and one for the rest of Central America, where apparently it can. Either that, or the Mexicans are simply hedging their bets.

OF COURSE, when one speaks of external actors in Central America it is not the United States, Mexico, or Venezuela one may now have in mind but the Soviet Union. Here the really important issues are the links between Moscow's strategy and the conduct of its regional ally and pawn, Castro's Cuba. Of the ultimate objectives of Soviet policy there can be little doubt; they are, in Duncan's words, "to project power into an area historically dominated by the United States" (see his chapter in Wesson, p. 4). Over the longer term this strategy is intended to yield very concrete economic, maritime, and geostrategic advantages. But the Soviets, writes Duncan, are in no particular hurry, and certainly not desirous of doing anything that might provoke a direct military confrontation with the United States.

What of Soviet tactics in the meanwhile? Jiri Valenta, in an exhaustive and carefully nuanced chapter in the Erisman and Martz collection, explains that ever since the Cuban missile crisis (but especially since the Nicaraguan revolution), these have become increasingly "refined and subtle," allowing for either violent methods or the "peaceful road"—that is, a prolonged political process during which the anti-American "progressive forces" build national coalitions to challenge US hegemony.⁶ Indeed, as Antonio Jorge points out in his contribution to *The New Cuban Presence in the Caribbean*,

⁶Jiri Valenta, "Soviet Policy and the Crisis in the Caribbean," in Erisman and Martz, pp. 47–82.

over the last decade there has been something of a convergence in Cuban and Soviet tactical thinking; so that if the "violent road" sometimes looks better to Moscow than it formerly did, the Cubans have learned to appreciate the advantages of "peaceful coexistence" and gradual infiltration through aid missions and educational and cultural "exchanges."⁷

How this works in practice is explained in this volume in another chapter written by Robert Pastor, a former US National Security Council official in the Carter Administration. While

the Cubans do make tactical foreign policy decisions, ... strategic decisions such as those that involve Cuban troops require Soviet consent. Scholars or policymakers are hard-pressed ... to find an area in which Cuban and Soviet policies have diverged since 1968—certainly not in Angola, Ethiopia, Central America, the Caribbean, or the Non-Aligned Movement. In areas where Cuban interests might lead them in a different direction—like Afghanistan, Poland, or China—the Cubans have dutifully supported the Soviet position....

That does not mean that the Soviet Union gives instructions—it generally does not have to, as was shown, for example, by the vote on Afghanistan. Soviet instructions are not necessary because Cuba is pursuing a set of interests that coincide with those of the Soviet Union.⁸

⁷Antonio Jorge, "How Exportable Is the Cuban Model? Cultural Contact in a Modern Context," in the Levine volume reviewed here, pp. 211–34. For some particularly revealing examples of this process, see Anthony P. Maingot, "Cuba and the Commonwealth Caribbean: Playing the Cuban Card," in *ibid.*, pp. 19–42.

⁸Robert Pastor, "Cuba and the Soviet Union: Does Cuba Act Alone?" in *ibid.*, pp. 191–210, at p. 207.

Thanks to the Cubans, the Soviets can have it all ways—they can effectively probe the region for revolutionary opportunities, reserving the option to withdraw or engage as the situation warrants. And even in the worst of cases they need not fear direct confrontation with the United States.

This is the real significance of the Cuban Revolution—indeed, it is difficult to see what else it could be. Twenty-five years after Castro's triumphal entry into Havana, even some authors who consider themselves socialists are not anxious to point to Cuba as a model for Caribbean development;⁹ one supposes that by now the record of dismal economic and political performance is just a bit too complete. This is most definitely not the case with Nicaragua, whose revolution occurred just in time to provide certain Western intellectuals with a new focus for their innocence.

BEFORE THE BAR are three examples. Bernard Diederich, author of *Somoza and the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America*, is a native of New Zealand who settled in Haiti in the 1950's and for some years edited that country's English-language weekly; he subsequently wrote (with Al Burt) an amusing and highly informative biography of the dictator François Duvalier, *Papa Doc*.¹⁰ For the last two decades he has been *Time*'s bureau chief in Mexico City, traveling constantly throughout Central America and the Caribbean. He spent long periods in Nicaragua during the civil war and personally witnessed many of the episodes he describes.

Presumably this is just the man to write a biography of Anastasio

⁹See, for example, Gordon K. Lewis, "On the Limits of the New Cuban Presence in the Caribbean," in *ibid.*, pp. 235–40.

¹⁰*Papa Doc: The Truth About Haiti Today*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Somoza. Unfortunately, the book itself is simply awful. First of all—and this is the part most difficult to believe—it is actually *dull*, relieved only by snatches of salacious gossip about the dictator's personal life that do not come often enough to keep one's attention steadily focused on the pages. Second, this account appears to have been written at enormous speed, and as a result, it suffers from a lack of focus and organization. Too many events that could be described in summary form are strung out in long and tedious narrative. Third, so much has happened since the book went to press in early 1981 that its central theme—that Somoza alienated all sectors of Nicaraguan society and that the United States was criminal in its failure to recognize this earlier than it did—is simply no longer relevant. In fact, were Diederich to write his book today from the same perspective, many of his "heroes" would presumably be "villains": Eden Pastora ("Comandante Zero"), Alfonso Robelo, Adolfo Calero, Msgr. Miguel Obando y Bravo, and Arturo Cruz, among others, have all crossed over to the opposition, some even to the "infamous" *Contras*. These are the Nicaraguan moderates whose judgment of Sandinista intentions Diederich rated so much higher than that of Washington; subsequent events have not been very kind to them—or to him.

Fourth and finally, Diederich suffers from a peevish, single-minded anti-Americanism that nearly succeeds in its apparent objective—to obscure the purely Nicaraguan elements leading to the rise and rule of the Somozas. To treat these adequately would require a book apart, or perhaps several. For neither corruption nor personalistic rule was new to Nicaragua when

the elder Somoza seized power in 1934. What was new was the methodology introduced to consolidate a patrimonial police state: the perversion of a professional military establishment created by the United States with a very different objective in mind, namely, to stop a cycle of civil wars among "private" armies. Once the Somoza system was fully fleshed out and securely in place, Washington was confronted with serious policy dilemmas that it never successfully resolved.¹¹ But that is a very different story from the one told by Diederich, in which the United States is unfailingly malevolent and invariably wrong.

Of the other two books about Nicaragua reviewed here, *Nicaragua in Revolution* is a compendium of short studies by academics and para-academics on the social and human aspects of the new regime; *The End and the Beginning* attempts a full-dress history of Nicaragua and the Sandinista movement, carrying the story up through mid-1981. Both books are examples of the kind of "committed" scholarship that characterizes so much of Latin American studies in the United States today, in which vulgar Marxism is combined with Latin American nationalism in irregular (and sometimes inconsistent) amounts.

Nicaragua in Revolution is full of material on health, housing, education, and social services in what the authors persist in calling the "new Nicaragua." The record looks very impressive—partly, of course, because that is exactly what the authors intended it to be. However, one major caveat should be borne in mind. Most regimes of this type

generally go through two phases: an initial burst of generosity and euphoria, in which services are brought to the people at apparently little or no expense; and a second period of retrenchment when the ordinary laws of arithmetic reassert themselves. The latter phase is normally accompanied by a burst of repression that never quite manages to go away. This book was quite clearly prepared in 1980–81, when the Sandinistas were still receiving massive amounts of aid and credit from an astonishing variety of sources, including the United States. Since then, the general economic picture has changed, and it would be surprising indeed if a survey of this sort would produce so sunny a picture today.

The End and the Beginning is the most ambitious of these three books, and just because of that the most disappointing. Part of the problem is stylistic. John Booth is a remarkably humorless writer, deadly earnest from first page to last, without the slightest sense of the unexpected in human affairs. This gives the narrative a strangely unilinear, two-dimensional quality; every event in Nicaraguan history inevitably leads to the victory of the Sandinist National Liberation Front (FSLN). Further, too much information, too densely packed, often makes it difficult for the reader to see the forest for the trees.

But the real problem is a deeper, almost methodological one. Booth is so indignant over the malefactions of the old regime that he simply cannot bring himself to see the disturbing features of the new. Is it wishful thinking or deliberate deception that leads him to omit all mention of Cuban arms shipments? To gloss over (p. 184) the real reasons for the resignation of Violeta Chamorro, the independently minded owner of *La Prensa*,

¹¹See, for example, Mark Falcoff, "Somoza, Sandino, and the United States: What the Past Teaches—and Doesn't," *This World* (New York), No. 6, 1983, pp. 51–70.

from the revolutionary Junta of National Reconstruction? To claim (p. 198) that "the revolution generally respected human rights, both rhetorically and in fact"? To misrepresent entirely (p. 203) the position of the Church toward the Sandinista movement, and to omit altogether any mention of the latter's attempt to create a schismatic "Church of the Poor" that they could control? To attempt to excuse (p. 201) the new regime's treatment of the Miskito Indians? To assert (pp. 209-11) that the Sandinistas created a large army only in response to the policies of the Reagan Administration, when in fact Nicaraguan mobilization and massive acquisition of weaponry (on a scale utterly unheard-of in Central America) began even before the present US administration took office? One could go on endlessly with such examples.

Even more disturbing are the author's Orwellian political concepts. For example, he comments approvingly that

by democracy ... the Sandinistas did not mean liberal, representative constitutionalism, but a broader corporatistic participation in political and economic areas (including the workplace) in addition to elections. The transition to electoral democracy would have to

await the establishment of national institutions capable of defending the revolution. (p. 184)

One could be forgiven for translating this passage to read: "The Sandinistas have no intention of allowing the kind of political participation that would endanger their control of the state, and they certainly have no intention of holding elections until they are certain they can control the results." If this is not Marxism-Leninism, it is something almost equally sinister: the ideology of a Central American police state with left-wing trimmings. While such an eventuality may be less serious for the United States than some in Washington now suppose, for Nicaraguans it is surely no cause for celebration—nor should it be for an author so outraged (and properly so) by the depredations of the Somoza regime.

IF THERE IS one theme that emerges from all these books, it is the *diversity* of forces for change at work in Central America and the Caribbean: peasant unions, professional associations, industrialists, and various organizations of the Roman Catholic church (as well as Protestant missionary groups). The issue is not whether the forces of change will prevail in the end, but *which* forces, to whose benefit, at what cost.

Some months ago, *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker took the US government to task once again for allegedly attempting to foist its own economic and political institutions on the allegedly unwilling and helpless nations of this region. What was needed, he wrote, was a respect for Central American realities and a willingness to work through them.¹² Unfortunately, Wicker did not say what those "realities" might be. Was the "authentic" Central American paradigm democratic Costa Rica? Or was it right-wing Guatemala? Or "revolutionary" Nicaragua? Perhaps Wicker would prefer Washington to choose the latter, but all three represent different facets of the same environment. The ferment in the region does not surge in any single direction, and holds out a number of different political possibilities.

Moreover, the Central American drama must be played out in the context of international tensions and the quest for spheres of influence. To deplore such outside influence is one thing; but to pretend it is not a reality is merely to shut one's eyes to an irreversible fact—namely, that impersonal factors like international commodity trading or the invention of jet planes have drawn these tiny countries into the mainstream of world affairs. Their struggle for progress and order thus becomes, perforce, part of our own.

¹²The *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1984.

Unlikely Conspiracy

By William Hood

PAUL HENZE. *The Plot to Kill the Pope*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983.

CLAIRE STERLING. *The Time of the Assassins: Anatomy of an Investigation*. New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983.

COULD IT BE that the KGB and the highest Soviet authorities agreed that Pope John Paul II should be assassinated, and gave the Bulgarian intelligence service the contract? Two well-documented books, published almost back to back, strive to prove that on May 13, 1981, when a 23-year-old Turk pumped two bullets into the Pope, he was acting on behalf of Bulgarian intelligence, a KGB surrogate.

Perhaps. But when the attempted assassination is examined as a secret operation, the scheme has few of the characteristics that might plausibly mark one of the most potentially explosive covert operations in recent history.

To be sure, both of our authors are well qualified to investigate this sensitive and murky subject. Paul Henze's credentials are impeccable. He is a veteran of 30 years in US government and government-related organizations ranging from

Radio Free Europe, to the US embassies in Ethiopia and Turkey, to the National Security Council under Zbigniew Brzezinski. He knows Turkey well and speaks its language fluently. His book is crammed with facts.

Claire Sterling, an American foreign correspondent, has published extensively on international terrorism. She is a lively writer and an aggressive journalist. In reading this nimble account of her investigation, one can almost see the police and security officials gritting their teeth when faced with the prospect of interrogation by her.

The research for both books was underwritten by the publishers of *The Reader's Digest* magazine, headquartered in Pleasantville, NY. Sterling was told to "take as long as you like, go wherever you please, spend as much as you must to get as close to the truth as you can." Doubtless Henze was given a similar brief. Both writers returned from their months of travel and scores of interviews with the same opinion: When Mehmet Ali Agça shot Pope John Paul II, he was acting for the KGB through its Bulgarian proxy.

AGÇA FIRST attracted public attention in 1979, when he was arrested for the murder of Abdi İpekçi, a well-known Turkish editor. Immediately after his arrest, recalls Henze (p. 145), Agça said:

I am against the present system and I killed İpekçi because he was a defender of this system. I have no connection with any organization. I killed him just to cause terror....

Later, Agça, speaking "as casually," Sterling reports (p. 48), "as if he were discussing the weather," confessed on Turkish national television once again that he had killed the editor. But as he was to do with subsequent confessions and statements, Agça later withdrew this admission.

In November 1979, before his trial was over, Agça escaped from a Turkish maximum-security prison. To make his getaway, the young murderer had to pass through a series of guarded gates. It was an escape that could only have been engineered by a well-funded and politically powerful group. Although Agça's supporters have never been firmly identified, his only apparent political affiliation in Turkey was with the neo-fascist paramilitary organization known as the Gray Wolves.

After his escape, Agça may have murdered a student possibly responsible for his arrest, and he may have been smuggled across the border into Iran in early 1980. From that point on, Agça's trail becomes even more obscure. He may have spent some time in Iran, he *might* have slipped into the

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