

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
and
Institute for Policy Studies



Central America Peace and Security

Central America's modern history is marked by widespread poverty, stark inequalities, political instability, and violent repression. It is a cruel irony that the powerful, "enlightened" democracy immediately to the north has consistently supported the region's worst perpetrators of misery and repression.

U.S. involvement in Central America began in earnest with its post-Civil War industrial boom. Over the next century, the U.S. regarded the region's seven states (British Honduras-now Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador,

Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) as directly within its sphere of influence. Washington trained the isthmus' armies and helped engineer elections and coups when it deemed U.S. interests threatened.

During the cold war, eliminating the "communist threat" became the Washington's key objective in Central America, and only leaders who shared this priority were permitted to rule. Unfortunately, these tended to be authoritarian, brutally repressive, military figures who ruled through fear and intimidation.

Those found to be insufficiently anticommunist were replaced; in

1954, for instance, the CIA organized a bloody coup against Guatemala's democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz, whose attempted land reforms ran afoul of U.S. banana companies. Guatemala only now appears to be emerging from a long nightmare of military dictatorships and civil war that have cost some 200,000 lives, most of them civilian victims of the military or its death squads.

U.S.-supported repression reached a feverish intensity during the 1980s, as bloody civil wars exploded in El

Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. When the Reagan administration came to power, Central America became one of the cold war's main battlegrounds. Forces equipped and trained by the U.S. killed tens of thousands of civilians, while in Nicaragua, the U.S. created a rebel army, the contras, to topple the Sandinista government.

In exchange for massive amounts of aid, the U.S. convinced army-less Costa Rica to militarize its police force and to weaken its extensive social-welfare system. By the mid-1980s the region was devastated, with no end to the conflicts in sight and a U.S. policy singlemindedly opposed to a negotiated solution.

In a major break with history, however, the region did arrive at a negotiated solution despite U.S. reluctance. A peace plan promoted by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias metamorphosed into the Esquipulas II agreement, which leaders of the five traditional Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) signed in August 1987. Esquipulas II committed all nations of the region to negotiate solutions to existing wars and to build and strengthen democracy. While peace was breaking out elsewhere, the U.S. invaded Panama in 1989 to remove its erstwhile client, the drug-dealing dictator Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Though the process was not easy, peace has come to Central America. Nicaragua's contras laid down their weapons after that country's 1990 elections removed the Sandinistas from office. They were followed by El Salvador's FMLN rebels, who gained several concessions and became a political party following the January 1992 signing of the Chapultepec peace accord. In 1996 Guatemala's government and rebels entered in the final stages of peace talks, with the signing of a final accord expected by the year's end. Elected leaders rule in all seven countries, and regional political and economic integration efforts have been revived.

Key Points

- U.S. policy toward Central America during the past century has been guided mainly by threats:
 - During the first half of the century, threats to U.S. investments;
 - During the cold war, the "communist threat."
- A threat-driven foreign policy caused the U.S. to oppose negotiated solutions to the conflicts of the 1980s. U.S. opposition was finally overcome by a Central American initiative, the Esquipulas II agreement.

While the Clinton administration is verbally supportive of the encouraging trends in Central America, in practice its policies are a confusing mix of well-intended programs and repeated mistakes. With the end of the cold war and the region's bloody conflicts, U.S. interest has rapidly declined. This results largely from a lack of threats to U.S. interests—whether real or imagined. As has often occurred in the history of U.S. foreign policy, the lack of a compelling threat has been accompanied by the lack of a unifying vision to guide U.S. actions. The result is a hydra-headed approach in which various U.S. agencies and programs pursue their own, often contradictory, agendas.

Washington's infrequent statements on Central America call for social reconciliation and "enlargement" of democracies. These admirable principles have helped guide U.S. efforts to support elections (particularly in El Salvador in 1994), to reintegrate ex-combatants (in El Salvador and Nicaragua), and to assist United Nations monitoring (in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). Many of these programs have achieved an admirable degree of success.

These accomplishments are subverted and contradicted, however, by other facets of U.S. policy. A neo-isolationist opposition to all forms of foreign aid has been especially painful in Central America. Nonmilitary assistance to the region has been cut by 90% since 1990, wreaking macroeconomic havoc. Those working to strengthen democracy have frequently been frustrated by U.S. intransigence. Economic aid to impoverished and war-devastated Nicaragua has been held up by the demands of congressional Republicans for the return of properties confiscated by the Sandinista government (1979-90). Honduran civilians' search for the truth about military human rights abuses during the 1980s has been blocked by U.S. noncooperation and foot-dragging. Although the State Department has provided some documents as part of a year-long "expedited review," the other five agencies from which Honduras Human Rights Commissioner Leo Valladares has requested information have yet to hand over a single page. In El Salvador, funding for compliance with the 1992 peace accords has fallen precipitously, despite increasing signs that initial progress on many fronts is eroding. Meanwhile, Guatemalan officials complain that the U.S. has committed only \$6 million so far for compliance with their country's peace accord.

While Oscar Arias and others have launched a campaign to demilitarize Central America, the U.S. has maintained a close relationship with the region's armed forces. Central American military personnel regularly attend training courses in the U.S., both as part of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and as guests of the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) in Fort Benning, Georgia. While many courses now include the essentials of human rights and democratic processes, these remain a sideline to combat

and counterinsurgency techniques. Worse, as we learned in September 1996, the SOA used training manuals with explicit instructions for murder and torture as recently as 1992.

As revealed by recent scandals involving Guatemala, the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies continue covert relationships with some of the most reprehensible human-rights abusers in the region's armies. The June 1996 Intelligence Oversight Board (IOB) report revealed that, as late as 1995, the CIA station in Guatemala paid \$1 million a year to what it calls "unsavory assets" or informants. One CIA asset has been implicated in the murder of an American innkeeper and the guerrilla husband of a U.S. lawyer. The necessity of maintaining such accomplices in an era of scarce economic aid and no security threats defies rational explanation.

Every few months, the U.S. army holds high-profile joint military exercises with Central American armed forces. These exercises often include "civic action" programs such as road and bridge construction or the provision of medical, dental, and even veterinary services. Encouraging such noncombat roles is counterproductive when civilian leaders are struggling to reduce or eliminate armies' meddling in internal affairs. Washington also supports risky military role expansion by urging Central American armies to participate in the domestic fight against narcotrafficking. This is especially problematic in Central America, where many high-ranking military officers have been exposed as being involved in drug trafficking and money laundering.

The U.S. still maintains military bases in both Panama and Honduras. While the Panamanian bases are scheduled to be vacated by 1999, U.S. policy makers' frequent calls for renegotiation threaten this agreement. Meanwhile, Southern Command chief Gen. Wesley Clark recently announced that he will soon increase the U.S. presence at the air base in Soto Cano, Honduras.

There is little evidence that U.S. military cooperation and bases are helping, as Washington claims, to "professionalize" armed forces in Central America. The net effect instead is to provide more sophisticated hardware and training to armies whose top officers continue to be involved in human rights abuses, drug trafficking, smuggling and other crimes. U.S. military support helps legitimize these armed forces, making it more difficult for Central America's fragile new democracies to assert effective civilian control.

Key Problems

- In the absence of perceived threats, U.S. policy toward Central America today is confusing and contradictory. Support for reconciliation and democracy is undermined by several parallel policies:
 - A steep reduction in economic aid;
 - Lack of cooperation with the region's true advocates for democracy;
 - Continued strong links with Central American militaries, among them training, joint exercises, military bases and intelligence.

Now that the U.S. perceives no threats to its national security in Central America, it is time for Washington to pursue a new foreign policy in the region. Since the region has become a lower security priority for the U.S., national security cannot be used as an excuse to keep cooperating with undemocratic sectors. Instead, a new policy should be consistent in its support for those working to support the transition to democracy and the rule of law.

This would imply a much clearer emphasis on demilitarization than exists today. As the region's armed forces become increasingly irrelevant to regional security and political evolution, U.S. ties with the military officers and informants should be drastically reduced, if not severed. Support for scaled-down militaries—and, where feasible, their outright abolition—should be unambiguous. The bases in Honduras and Panama should be closed and turned over to civilians, while joint military exercises and military/civic action programs should be halted. Military aid, including IMET funding, must be zeroed out, and weapons sales to the region's armies

must be discouraged. Antinarcotics programs must not encourage military involvement in internal security; armies whose officers participate in the drug trade with impunity must be excluded from future antidrug collaboration. If it is not closed outright, the School of the Americas should reinvent its curriculum, as urged in legislation introduced by Rep. Joseph Kennedy (HR 2652), to serve as an "Academy for Democracy and Civil-Military Relations." Those responsible for the use of offensive training manuals should be investigated and prosecuted.

With fewer security concerns, the U.S. can and should link respect for human rights to aid, trade, and other relations. Countries where abuses are systematic and impunity

reigns must be given the pariah status they deserve.

Those in Central America who have shown the courage to confront authoritarianism, corruption, and human-rights abuses deserve high-profile moral and financial support. All U.S. agencies that have been involved in

the region must cooperate with Central Americans' efforts to achieve justice and to learn the truth about the crimes of the recent past. Those working to strengthen the rule of law and the integrity of institutions—human rights ombudsmen, nongovernmental organizations, local community leaders—deserve direct and specific assistance.

Countries recovering from civil wars must not be abandoned; the mere holding of elections is not a sufficient indicator of a healthy democracy. Where needed, UN or OAS monitoring missions must enjoy sufficient resources and clear approval of their activities. Societies must be reconciled, and excombatants thoroughly reintegrated; both processes require money and cooperation from the region's northern neighbor. New civilian police forces will also require funding and extensive training based on respect for human rights and service to the community.

Though economic aid is politically unpopular, its downward trend must be reversed. More support is needed to help nongovernmental organizations and governments meet the basic needs of the Central American poor. At the same time, the U.S. should end its support for structural adjustments programs (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. These SAPs worsen the poverty and inequality that fueled conflicts in the past. At the regional and national levels, U.S. assistance can do much to guarantee the success of initiatives for economic and political integration, sustainable development and collective security. At the local level, aid that emphasizing self-help, training, and participation in project design, will assure that a larger portion of shrinking development assistance dollars directly goes to beneficiaries.

Since Esquipulas II, Central America has served as a laboratory for many new ideas, among them regional integration, United Nations monitoring, reintegrating excombatants, creating civilian police forces, and even abolishing national armed forces. As the U.S. searches for a rationale to guide its policy toward the region, the laboratory metaphor remains relevant. Today, Central America should become the proving ground for a new approach to developing countries: one that sees security and development as complementary, not contradictory, goals.

Written by Adam Isacson, Center for International Policy.

Key Recommendations

- Clear, unambiguous support for demilitarization, including:
 - Drastic reductions in all ties with the region's existing armed forces;
 - Support for military reductions or abolition;
 - An end to military aid and training, including closure of the School of the Americas.
- Closure of U.S. military bases in Panama and Honduras.
- Open support for the region's advocates of human rights and democracy.
- Generous and active assistance for postwar reconstruction and reconciliation.

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

Editors
Martha Honey (IPS)
Tom Barry (IRC)

Production
Grant Moser

Communications Director
Erik Leaver (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506
Phone: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor	IPS Editor
Phone: (505) 388-0208	Phone: (202) 234-9382/3
Fax: (505) 388-0619	Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org	Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org
Website: http://www.zianet.com/infocus	

sources for more information

Organizations

Center for International Policy
1755 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Ste. 312
Washington, DC 20036-2102
Voice: (202) 232-3317
Fax: (202) 232-3440
Email: cip@igc.apc.org
Website: <http://www.us.net/cip>

Hemisphere Initiatives

130 Prospect Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
Voice: (617) 354-1896
Fax: (617) 287-6511
Email: spence@umbsky.cc.umb.edu

Institute for Central American Studies

1220 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
Voice: (202) 363-5699
Fax: (202) 966-0286

Interhemispheric Resource Center

Box 2178
Silver City, NM 88062-2178
Voice: (505) 388-0208
Fax: (505) 388-0619
Email: irc1@zianet.com
Website: <http://www.zianet.com/irc1>

Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico

3053 4th St. NE
Washington, DC 20017-1102
Voice: (202) 387-7652
Fax: (202) 328-3369

Resource Center of the Americas
317 17th Avenue SE
Minneapolis, MN 55414-2077
Voice: (612) 627-9544
Fax: (612) 627-9450
Email: rctamm@ma-roon.tc.umn.edu

Latin America Working Group

110 Maryland Avenue NE
Washington, DC 20077-8170
Voice: (202) 546-7010
Fax: (202) 723-3413
Email: lawg@igc.apc.org

National Labor Committee in Support of Worker and Human Rights in Central America

c/o ACTWU
15 Union Square West, Ste. 524
New York City, NY 10003
Voice: (212) 242-0700
Fax: (212) 255-7230

Nicaragua Network Education Fund

1247 E Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
Voice: (202) 544-9355
Fax: (202) 544-9359

School of the Americas Watch

P.O. Box 3330
Columbus, GA 31903
Voice: (706) 682-5369
Website: <http://www.derechos.org/soaw/>

School of the Americas Watch (D.C. Office)
1219 Irving St., NW
Washington, DC 20010

SHARE Foundation

Box 16, Cardinal Street
Washington, DC 20064-0001
Voice: (202) 319-5540
Fax: (202) 319-6090
Email: sharedc@igc.apc.org

Washington Office on Latin America

400 C Street NE
Washington, DC 20002-5823
Voice: (202) 544-8045
Fax: (202) 546-5288
Email: info@wola.org

Witness for Peace

110 Maryland Avenue NE, Ste. 311
Washington, DC 20002
Voice: (202) 544-0781
Fax: (202) 544-1187
Website: <http://www.w4peace.org/wfp>

World Wide Web

For a list of organizations in Central America, see:
<http://www.us.net/cip/dialogue/afiliad.htm>.

For Central America-related links see:
<http://www.us.net/cip/demlinks.htm>.

Subscription Information

You can subscribe to *In Focus* at one of three levels, you can receive *In Focus* in one of five ways, and you can choose which categories of *In Focus* you want to receive. Please mark the level of subscription you want, how you want *In Focus* delivered to you, and the topic categories you want. There is no extra charge for email delivery to mail and fax subscribers. (Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the US are double the listed prices.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

Level

- \$15 10 briefs
 \$30 20 briefs
 \$60 50 briefs

Delivery

- Regular mail only
 Fax only
 Email only
 Regular mail and email
 Fax and email

Topic Categories

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All (receive all briefs) | <input type="checkbox"/> Economic Aid | <input type="checkbox"/> Mexico |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign Policy Overview | <input type="checkbox"/> Global Governance/United Nations | <input type="checkbox"/> South America |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trade and Investment | <input type="checkbox"/> International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Debt | <input type="checkbox"/> Africa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government Agencies | <input type="checkbox"/> Food and Farm | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle East |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military and Peace | <input type="checkbox"/> Border and Immigration | <input type="checkbox"/> Asia/Pacific |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Human Rights and Democracy | <input type="checkbox"/> Central America | <input type="checkbox"/> Western Europe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environment | <input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> Central and Eastern Europe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Labor | | <input type="checkbox"/> Former Soviet Union |

Name		Institution	
Street Address			
City	State	Zip Code	
VISA/MasterCard Number		Expiration Date	
Signature	Daytime Phone	Fax Number	Email Address