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During the past four years El Salvador has emerged from the obscure periphery of American concern to center stage in our foreign policy debates. Worries about El Salvador have in the past been dwarfed by periodic American fluctuations between panic and neglect over political instability in Central America that focused on economic and security crises in Guatemala during the 1950s and 1960s and in Nicaragua during the 1970s. Now El Salvador can be seen for what it is: a torn country wobbling toward a possibly democratic future, while under attack by extremist armed groups unleashed by the collapse of a military regime in 1979.

El Salvador’s future depends not only on the reconciliation of the contending internal forces but also, and most notably, on the policies of the United States. The U.S. domestic confusion over events in El Salvador and the political debate over the appropriate strategy toward that country have presented a sharp challenge to American policymakers, a challenge with far greater consequences than simply the political fate of a country the size of Massachusetts. The extension of needed economic and military assistance to El Salvador’s government—or the termination of such assistance—will be the major factor in determining the outcome of the military and political conflict in that country. That outcome will inevitably affect future policies of the United States in Central America, the Caribbean, and the rest of Latin America for years to come.

Although this much might be granted by all those who contend over the fate of El Salvador, what the United States should do now and for the long run is no closer to national consensus than it was
when Jimmy Carter renewed military assistance to that nation at the end of his beleaguered term of office. While Congress does not want to give the president a blank check, neither does it want to accept responsibility for blocking present policy or for proposing an alternative that could provoke a backlash from the American voters in 1984. The serious differences between the administration and certain sectors of Congress are reflected in editorial commentaries across the country, in highly vocal religious communities, and among the general public.

The divided body politic

These divisions, which are not easily breached, were implicit in the charge Secretary of State George Schultz gave to the President’s Commission on Central America—the so-called “Kissinger panel”—when it was sworn in on August 10 of this year:

At this stage in the game we need to raise ourselves up out of the immediate issues of the day and look out over the horizon and say what should the United States be doing, what should we be thinking, what should we be worrying about as we observe the problems of Central America.

On that basis we hope you will find some common ground because any problem that is long-term is going to take a sustained effort, and we can’t have a sustained effort in this country unless we find elements of commonality that cut across not just party lines but across the common sense of the American people.

Although this charge is a proper one, even a cursory survey of domestic reactions to present United States policies, particularly in El Salvador, will make depressingly clear the magnitude of the assigned task.

At least partly to bring pressure on those who provide arms for the guerrillas in El Salvador, Mr. Reagan has dispatched warships to both the Caribbean and the Pacific coasts of Nicaragua, and he seeks congressional approval for additional military and economic aid to Central America, a substantial portion of which is to be directed to El Salvador’s armed forces. Meanwhile the Pentagon recommends a small increase in American military advisors in El Salvador and the right to have these advisors accompany Salvadoran troops short of battle.

As far as most critics of the administration’s policies are concerned, this is merely an extension of what they have already rejected. Although no Democratic presidential candidate has as of this writing called for a halt in military aid to El Salvador, Walter Mondale asserts that President Reagan is “on a course that will lead us into war.” Representative Michael D. Barnes, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Latin America, has said that “long-term
United States interests are not advanced by the United States military intervention, by the big stick approach and gunboat diplomacy." It would be almost willfully naive to believe that the legitimate differences of political judgment expressed by such spokesmen will not, in the presidential campaign, be sharpened for partisan purposes—and not necessarily by or only by the candidates themselves.

The political critics of current U.S. policies are joined by a church leadership that forms one of the strongest voices of opposition. Although many individual church members, lay and clergy, support present policies, in the United States almost every formal church statement has criticized the Reagan administration's approach to El Salvador, often in the most sweeping terms. The bishops of the Catholic Church have repeatedly called on all outside agents to stop supplying weapons to El Salvador, a call that is listened to more attentively in this country than elsewhere. Earlier this year, the leaders of the Latin American Council of Churches wrote to Bishop James Armstrong, president of the National Council of Churches (NCC), declaring that the U.S. churches must try "to change the course of oppressive, militaristic and dishonest policies of your governors." They added that in El Salvador the United States is backing "a corrupt and inhuman regime." At least partially in response, on May 13 the governing board of the NCC approved a resolution on Central America that opposed economic as well as military support for El Salvador.

More recently still, the World Council of Churches, composed of representatives of more than 300 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and independent churches around the world, formally stated at its Sixth Assembly in August 1983 that the United States is trying "to resist the forces of historic change in El Salvador."

Not all church spokesmen, however, see the situation in this light. For example, within the Catholic Church in El Salvador Bishop Pedro Aparacio, vice-president of the Episcopal Conference, who has criticized a number of government actions, has also said:

The Catholic Church supports free elections as the most democratic, humanitarian, and least violent solution to the crisis in El Salvador. We call on all friendly nations to give us moral support to realize our true objectives. We ask them to help us with economic aid, in view of the fact that the Marxist-Leninist guerrillas, in their efforts to create chaos and desperation among the populace, have destroyed the economy of our country.

And Pope John Paul II, speaking of the need for dialogue during his open-air Mass in San Salvador in March 1983—in terms that can scarcely be called veiled—said that

the tactical, deliberate lie that abuses language, employs the most sophisticated forms of propaganda, rarifies dialogue, exacerbates aggressiveness,
must be mentioned. Finally, when some parts are nourished by ideologies that, in spite of their declarations, oppose the dignity of the human . . . and by theologies that see in struggle the driving force of history, in power the source of law, and in the classifying of the enemy the abc's of politics, dialogue is difficult and sterile.

In America, while criticism amidst fears of "another Vietnam" is becoming increasingly vociferous, the general public has had a confused reaction. In spite of the seriousness and prominence of the conflicts in Central America, most people in the United States do not know which side their government supports in El Salvador or Nicaragua. According to Washington Post/ABC News public opinion polls released on May 25, 1983, 80 percent of those polled believed that a rebel victory in El Salvador could destabilize the region and that Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union are working toward that end. By a margin of three to one, however, these same people rejected Reagan's proposed increase in military aid to the government of El Salvador. According to a Gallup poll conducted in June, 71 percent felt it was very or fairly likely that the U.S. would get more deeply involved in Central America—and of these only 20 percent approved of administration policies. According to July polls, people believed simultaneously that the turmoil in El Salvador posed a national security threat to the United States and that American troops should not get involved. This kind of muddled response poses a special problem not only to our political leaders but also to the U.S. military establishment, a number of whose leaders, mindful of Vietnam, resist the prospect of sending troops to the area without public support.

Whatever its sources, the public division on U.S. policies in Central America is clearly very strong and runs throughout our society. How has this administration, and how have we as a people, been brought to this pass? And what are the means that best promise to remedy this situation, to improve conditions in Central America, and to serve United States interests?

The unhappy events in El Salvador

The United States is sufficiently powerful that its actions in one Central American country nearly always reverberate in others. Nevertheless, the Central American nations have their discrete histories and only the largest, blandest generalizations can be applied accurately to all of them. El Salvador, for example, did not, when it might have had the opportunity, follow the relatively more democratic paths traveled by Mexico and Costa Rica. Nor does it have a history of U.S. intervention as does, for example, Nicaragua. The system that prevailed in El Salvador through the end of the nine-
teenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was based on
decision-making by elites, repression of active discontent, and dis­
couragement of political opposition. The oligarchy controlled the
coffee plantations and the governmental decisions that allowed them
to prosper. In the years following the debilitating depression of 1932,
the oligarchy and the military, sometimes in tandem and sometimes
in strong tension, attempted to keep power while accommodating
varying degrees of reform. Several military coups in the late 1940s led
to a thirty-year period of stability but also to a failure to achieve
strong political organization. The coup of October 1979, in which
General Carlos Humberto Romero was overthrown by a progressive
group of officers who proclaimed it their intention to build stable po­
litical structures, was coincident with “revolutionary” uprisings in
other countries in the area. In El Salvador a single-crop economy, a
weakening oligarchy, a divided military, a poor peasantry, an un­
developed political structure, and revolutionary guerrillas all com­
bined with widespread international support for revolutionary ac­
tions in Third World countries to present the Carter and then the
Reagan administrations with real problems that demanded a
response.

Although the tangled roots of U.S.—Central American relations
reach too far into the past for any single administration to be held
responsible for current conditions, the Reagan administration must
bear its share. When it came to power in January 1981, the guerrillas
of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) had
just launched their “final offensive”—and been defeated. To some in
the administration, El Salvador looked like the perfect place to take a
principled stand, to show how the combined power and good will of
the United States could rapidly salvage and improve conditions in
that country, and then in the region. El Salvador was escalated into a
position of high importance in the struggle between the East and the
West, and the rhetoric of then—Secretary of State Alexander Haig
rose accordingly. The prestige, credibility, and perceived effectiveness
of the United States were thus firmly attached to the fortunes of El
Salvador. All were to be enhanced by the relatively easy and swift
victory that was projected.

Alas for this projection, the swift victory was to prove elusive. The
Reagan administration lost the hemispheric solidarity it had antici­
pated, failed to rally strong bipartisan or even full Republican support
behind its efforts, and led potential supporters to believe it was look­
ing for a military rather than a political resolution to the conflict.
Although the guerrillas’ “final offensive” was a dramatic failure, the
dramatic element allowed them to gain greater international attention
and credibility. The FDR/FMLN (the Frente Democrática Revolu­
cionario being the FMLN’s political adjunct) is recognized by the
Socialist International and the British Labour Party, and has been declared a "legitimate political force" by the governments of Mexico and Venezuela. As this suggests, the administration's expected international support began early to erode. The split in the Republican ranks—of which there is much evidence—is well symbolized by the figures of Senators Nancy Kassenbaum and Charles Percy, both of whom have expressed strong public reservations about the course of U.S. policies in Central America.

Some of the responsibility for the public's perception or misperception of U.S. policies must be given to former Secretary of State Alexander Haig. His strident rhetoric about "going to the source" and contemplating military action against Cuba over-dramatized the East-West dimension of these conflicts and obscured the fact that the administration's military options on these matters were severely limited and even opposed by the defense establishment. The discordant notes played by Haig have contributed to the now-popular belief that the Reagan administration seeks military as opposed to political solutions to the conflicts in the region. This has unnecessarily raised the threshold of dissent in this country.

Again, as if to throw sand in the eyes of both critics and supporters, in November 1981 the administration undercut Honduras' peace initiative when Secretary Haig, at the behest of then-President of Mexico Lopez Portillo, had a secret meeting in Mexico with Cuba's vice-president, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. Four months later it was revealed that the U.S. ambassador at large, Vernon Walters, had met with Castro. Such meetings raised speculation that a negotiated settlement was in the works. This only legitimized the view of those who believed that Havana was, indeed, willing to moderate its own behavior in Central America in return for the withdrawal of threats against the island. It was the administration's apparent pursuit of a two-track policy toward Central America—supplying military assistance while pursuing a negotiated settlement—that began the congressional calls for talks among all sides and support for regional initiatives.

Further, the conspicuous absence of the president from public discussion of policy until 1983, some two years after Central America had been raised as a major foreign policy issue, encouraged congressional skeptics and the media to challenge the administration's position that the issue was as serious and important as it claimed.

Cumulatively, these actions obscured the complex and multifaceted approach the Reagan administration had taken toward the region and created a mistaken public perception that the administration's Central American policy diverged sharply from that of the Carter years.

One need not defend the administration's policies as coherent and consistent—which they have not been—to say that they have been
given less than their due. Contrary to widespread opinion and congressional critics, the administration moved rapidly with emergency financial assistance to ameliorate the crushing balance-of-payment problem facing the region's governments and proposed a "Caribbean Basin Initiative" consisting of a twelve-year free-trade zone and investment incentives for the region. The administration, now accused of seeking only military solutions, has provided in the past two years over $2 billion in bilateral economic assistance to the countries of the region at a ratio of eight to one over military assistance. (Soviet aid to the region almost exactly reverses this ratio, being almost eight to one in favor of military aid.) For El Salvador itself, military assistance has constituted only one-fourth of the total economic aid to that country.

The more controversial policy of enhancing military assistance programs, which was given new impetus by the Carter administration in 1980, remains conditioned on the biannual review of human rights progress in El Salvador. Those conditions are that the more flagrant human rights abuses by government security forces be curtailed, that regular elections be scheduled and held, that land reform continue, and that the prosecution of those guilty of killing the four American religious and the two American land reform specialists be carried out. The uneven progress in these areas—and the administration's desire for the most favorable reading, while critics want the reverse—has further divided public opinion and softened support for present policies.

At a time when Democratic members of Congress have moderated their views on Central America for fear of a 1984 electoral backlash, congressional resistance to continued military aid and recent motions to cut in half the budget requests of $110 million in such aid have gained support in both the House and Senate. This dwindling congressional support for present policies follows on two recent occurrences: the wide public exposure of American so-called "covert" actions against the Nicaraguan government (actions that depend in part on past supporters of Somoza) and an assertion by two administration officials that the situation in Central America will require five to ten years to stabilize. The prospects of a long-term American commitment to the region have further eroded the scant bipartisan support the policy has had for the past two years and have made it a corrosive campaign issue. What, then, are the basic elements that must be dealt with both by those who seek partisan advantage and those who have been charged to rise above it?

The current situation

To start with El Salvador itself: the Salvadoran situation has evolved to a new level of conflict in the past two years. During that time the guerrillas have maintained the initiative, putting govern-
ment forces on the defensive by a tactic called the "continuous offensive," which disperses government forces around the country and allows the guerrillas to attack economic targets without the necessity of holding territory. With training and logistical support from Cuba and Nicaragua, the Salvadoran guerrillas have moved from simple hit-and-run tactics to the use of special commando forces and forces coordinated into a semiregular army. These actions foreshadow fighting a positional war, the last stage in a guerrilla struggle.

As a fighting force, the guerrillas have made impressive gains, some of which their sympathizers in this country do not like to see spelled out. They have in the past year killed 2,292 government soldiers and wounded 4,195 more. And in the last two years, they have managed to destroy much of El Salvador's economy, increasing unemployment from 25 to 40 percent. They have also swelled the ranks of the refugees, hundreds of thousands of whom are classified as displaced persons within the country, with others fleeing to the United States and elsewhere.

The demoralization of the Salvadoran military has led to three major mutinies by commanding officers in the past two years and to the replacement of overall military commander General Garcia by Colonel Vides Casanova. Government forces have now adopted new tactics intended to pacify and protect regions of agricultural production. The goal is to form a shield against guerrilla actions that are aimed at major population zones. And the increased casualty rates can be read as a sign that these forces are being more aggressive. If such tactics fail, it is very likely that the conflict will become nationwide, with the momentum almost entirely with the guerrillas. If the program is successful, as it shows promise of becoming, the conflict will stabilize. Which course the fighting takes depends primarily on the effectiveness of the Salvadoran forces, but that in turn rests partly on the kind and extent of aid they receive from the United States. It depends also, of course, on the coordination and effectiveness of the guerrillas and on their ability to continue to receive arms.

The progress being made in other areas of special concern to political leaders, civic leaders, and the general public is not sufficient to please anyone, and there have been nowhere near enough changes to reduce the anxieties or moderate the positions of the harshest critics of present U.S. policies. The number of civilians assassinated each month is down from a 1980 high of 800 to 100 a month. This is a significant reduction, but it is clear that thuggish paramilitary forces still murder with impunity. The inability of the Salvadoran government to bring to trial and judgment those responsible for the deaths of the four women religious and the American labor leaders underlines both the extent of corruption in the judicial system and the impotence of
the United States when faced with such a system. It also shows the long road that must be traveled before a sound legal and judicial system becomes an accepted reality.

As for the land reform program, it has—against entrenched resistance, intermittent setbacks, and a destructive war—made progress. A word of caution about what “progress” means in this situation is probably in order. In general, land reform programs are difficult and marked success is rare. Such programs are even more difficult to carry on during a war. In El Salvador the first observably helpful effect would be political, not economic; that is, the reform should allow more people to enter the arena in which political decisions are made before the economy itself shows signs of recovery and improvement. Further, even highly successful land reform would not bring an end to the present conflict, since the rebel forces are clearly not to be so readily satisfied. With these cautions and expectations in mind, one can say that the progress that has been made is encouraging and that the programs deserve continuing support. Recent amendments to the new constitution may jeopardize the continuation of the program, however, and could lead to serious dissent by Christian Democrats and members of the labor coalition.

Building on the remarkable elections of March 1982 and subsequent events, the Salvadoran government is now planning future elections. The March elections were remarkable for several reasons. The great outpouring of voters showed that they wished to engage in a democratic process and that the large majority of the Salvadoran public repudiated the course chosen by the guerrilla Left, which boycotted the elections in favor of militancy. Although the leadership of the constituent assembly that was subsequently formed was not wholly pleasing to many American supporters of the elections, the election itself provided a degree of stability and legitimacy under most trying circumstances. The Salvadoran government now plans to hold presidential elections in February 1984, mayoral elections in April, and elections for a national assembly in 1985. Over the protest of some of the parties who participated in the March 1982 elections, the future elections are intended to replace the transitional national unity government under President Magana with a constitutionally elected president. The program for the forthcoming elections includes legal and security mechanisms to secure the participation of political forces aligned with the guerrillas. Under the pacification laws there has also been established an amnesty program guaranteeing employment and security for guerrillas who surrender to the government; similar programs have had marginal success recently in Colombia and Venezuela. Under the auspices of the newly established human rights commission, the Salvadoran government has also released 500 of its 650 known political prisoners and is expediting the trials of those re-
maining in custody. Additional people have, however, been detained and as of this writing the number of political prisoners in El Salvador is close to 400.

Partly because of problems of definition and partly because of secrecy, comparable numbers for Nicaragua are difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that when the Permanent Human Rights Commission of Nicaragua presented its report to the First World Congress on Human Rights in Costa Rica last December, it said that when the Sandinistas assumed power they arrested 7,000 to 7,500 persons for allegedly having committed political crimes during the regime of Anastasio Somoza. These people were not brought to trial and a list of internees was not released. The report went on to say that many prisoners were transferred at night to undisclosed detention centers, that many were killed, and that all of this was kept secret. At present, the U.S. Department of State estimates that there are about 3,600 political prisoners in Nicaragua. A private monitoring group, Americas Watch, gives a much lower figure. In a report published in April of this year it stated: “Under the State of Emergency that has been in effect since March, 1982, prisoners may be detained without charges for security-related reasons. Several hundred such detentions have taken place during the past year. Some of those detained have since been released.”

Outside influences

Considered in isolation from other countries in the area, El Salvador presents enough hard problems for any policymaker. But, of course, it cannot be considered adequately in isolation. Although many of the severe problems are indigenous and the guerrilla leaders are homegrown, they have not been nurtured solely at home. Ideological, political, and material support is funneled through an extensive system that includes Nicaragua, Cuba, the Soviet Union, Libya, other countries, and other agencies. Although a number of critics of U.S. policies discount such aid, Fidel Castro and Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega are glad to acknowledge that they have provided help. The complete record of support would be extensive and the various means of delivering it could be seen to be complex. Nicaragua alone, which is a conduit for much of the aid, received eleven shiploads of arms from Soviet bloc countries in the first six months of 1983. And both in rhetoric and action Nicaragua is becoming increasingly a Marxist-Leninist state whose policies parallel those of the Soviet Union and oppose those of the United States. For example, the emergency laws of March 1982 mean no elections, no dissent, no habeas corpus, and no discussion of controversial measures. Nicaragua has supported the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan and the suppression of Solidarity in Poland.
Thus in the context of Central America, the problems posed by El Salvador are regional but also strategic. The strategic issue was well put by Commonweal, an influential Catholic magazine. In an editorial critical of Reagan's policies, the editors asserted:

Let us be clear: if the Soviet Union were to install weapons aimed at the U.S. or establish a military force in Central America that posed a direct threat to U.S. security or American ability to supply NATO through the Gulf of Mexico, or which threatened the independence of Mexico, Colombia or Venezuela, then the United States would be justified in taking immediate military action, unilateral if necessary, against those installations or forces.³

Following this assertion, a number of questions arise: can American policies be based upon the premise that we can safely wait to see if the Soviet Union would so act were there no opposition? And in an era of proxy agents and Soviet satellites in the Caribbean basin, can we afford to be complacent about the latent threat posed to U.S. interests there? Consider that nearly half of U.S. trade and two-thirds of our imported oil goes through the Caribbean Sea or the Gulf of Mexico, and that part of NATO strategy depends upon being able to shift forces through the Panama Canal. Consider further that during World War II, German U-boats—without regional ports or air cover—sank 260 merchant ships in the Caribbean area within six months. With friendly ports in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada, Soviet naval and/or air forces could do much better—or worse. Conclusion: the Caribbean area is of strategic importance to the United States and the time to secure those interests is now. The question we, as a nation, should be dealing with is how to do so.

Possible solutions

Over the last several years, a number of proposals to deal with problems of El Salvador and associated strategic issues have been offered by a variety of observers and participants. Ranging from complete American withdrawal to direct U.S. military intervention, they include most of the elements and possibilities that any plan—including that to be drawn up by the Kissinger panel—must consider. Among the most significant of the plans are the following:

A Zimbabwe solution. The popular Zimbabwe solution calls for a multilateral negotiation process with the United States, regional countries, the Salvadoran government, and the FMLN guerrillas. Put forth by several Democratic congressmen, this proposal calls for a cease-fire with forces in place, an OAS or UN peacekeeping force to monitor cease-fire violations, the creation of a new constitution that would guarantee free elections, a modicum of human rights, the reorganiza-
tion of the army, and a foreign policy of nonalignment. After the formation of a coalition government, this process would eventually lead—it is planned—to nationwide elections in which both pro-government political parties and the guerrillas would participate.

This proposal has several flaws. Unlike Ian Smith's Rhodesia, which was a renegade British colony with no international legitimacy, the nation of El Salvador has been independent from Mexico for nearly 163 years and is represented by a legitimately elected government. The objective of the original Zimbabwe negotiations was to establish black majority rule in that southern African country, legitimize the country's independence, and as a result end the war between the guerrilla forces and the white minority government. Such a solution applied to El Salvador would negate the popular expression of the Salvadoran people in March 1982 for the evolution of a democratic system through the constituent assembly process. It would legitimize the internationalization of the current conflict and establish a precedent for conflict resolution that is outside the current inter-American system. It would also legitimize the guerrillas as a political force of equal standing with the government, something that even the French-Mexican resolutions do not do.

The short-term effects of this solution would be to hasten the flight of capital from El Salvador, demoralize the Salvadoran military and middle class even further, erode the current consensus among the labor coalition, and cause the collapse of all progress that has transpired in the past two years. It would inevitably lead to a rapid escalation in violence by the extreme Right and Left as the political forces jockeyed for position at the negotiating table. Also, the negotiations themselves would most likely be as protracted as were those in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Vietnam—taking anywhere from four to ten years to complete. In other words, the Zimbabwe solution would not in any way shorten the time of American commitment in Central America. It would simply raise the involvement to another, more political, level.

The long-term effects of such an agreement would mean a deeper commitment by the United States to the economic reconstruction of the country, requiring sums that would dwarf current aid levels, and the creation of a government antagonistic to American foreign policy initiatives. Also, such a solution would fit perfectly into the long-term guerrilla purposes, since the insurgents understand full well that negotiations might guarantee them eventual control of the government they now hold under siege.

_U.S. out of El Salvador._ This slogan is supported by a proposal that the United States terminate all military assistance to El Salvador. It is a bad proposal. El Salvador has made remarkable advances toward the creation of a democratic system since the Carter administration
first applied pressure by terminating aid in 1977. As has been demonstrated in the past, resuming military assistance to a country is much more difficult than cutting it off. In the case of El Salvador, it took a year of accumulating evidence of East bloc support of the guerrillas and the prospects of an all-out guerrilla offensive to finally persuade the Carter administration to renew military assistance.

The summary termination of aid to El Salvador would have no ultimate objective other than to wash American hands of any responsibility for the aftermath in a region where the United States by geographic proximity and strategic concerns is necessarily involved. It would set a poor precedent for future Third World conflicts in which the United States sought to exert its influence. One could not expect any country in the future to purge its army, alter its political system, and radically change its socioeconomic system for the mere promise of American aid. Nor could the United States expect a country to embark on such a course without firm assurance of support and a reasonable time frame to reach those goals.

The termination of military assistance would essentially remove any controlling force on extreme right-wing terrorist squads or those conservative elements coopted into the political process. It is likely that one of the three following possibilities would result. First, the right-wing elements in the military, with outside aid from sympathetic governments, would be likely to embark on a terror campaign against moderates and alleged guerrilla supporters. Christian Democrats and the UPO labor group would advocate negotiations with the guerrillas to forestall the creation of a government completely controlled by Marxist-Leninists. This would foster conditions similar to those that led to the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. The second possibility is that through a rapid collapse of the military, the guerrillas would gain a quick victory. This would lead to a revolutionary government with extensive ties to the Soviet Union, East bloc countries, radical Arab states, and Cuba, and it would have an immediately destabilizing effect on other countries in the region. Third, it is conceivable that neither side would gain an overriding advantage and the country would effectively be subdivided into areas of competing states, a sort of New World Lebanon.

*The San Jose agreement.* Since last October, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador have called for the creation of a democratic pluralist system in Central America, an end of intervention in the affairs of neighboring countries, the termination and removal of all foreign military advisors from Central America, a verifiable end to illegal arms trafficking, and a reduction in the region’s military buildup.

From the beginning, the liabilities of this agreement have been the perception that it was an American-inspired plan (which it was), the failure to gain any agreement from Nicaragua to participate in these
discussions, and the fact that none of the countries has any means to enforce the agreement.

The Contadora approach. In this approach, named after the Panamanian island where they met, the foreign ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama called for negotiating a lessening of tensions in Central America and a gradual solution of specific issues. They are supported by Cuba and the Socialist International. Despite strong recent leadership from Felipe Gonzalez, Spain's prime minister, the group has as yet offered few concrete proposals and has little means to enforce any negotiated settlement. Within the group there are difficulties: both Colombia and Venezuela are encountering guerrilla activities, and both Panama and Venezuela face elections this year, making them uncertain factors in achieving settlements of any weight.

Direct U.S. military involvement. Although this option can never be dismissed, it requires widespread support that the administration currently lacks. Furthermore, it would need to be an operation of relatively short duration if it were not to provoke a violent domestic backlash and severe criticism within Latin America. Currently the Pentagon maintains that such involvement is not desirable and the OAS would be unlikely to rally behind it.

Including Salvadoran guerrillas in the democratic process. In spite of recent meetings between Richard B. Stone, the special American envoy, and Sandinista rebel leaders, the chances of inducing the FOR to participate within the burgeoning democratic electoral process are slim if not totally out of the question. Participation would diminish their possibilities of eventually taking control of the government. (Their claim of widespread support in the country is without foundation.) The incentive to participate is simply lacking. They might be brought to reconsider if their continued supply of arms were to be severely reduced, or if the diverse guerrilla groups were to splinter and the more moderate Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in the FDR were to turn elsewhere. Some possibility of such events occurred after the March 1982 elections when, in light of the popular rejection of the guerrillas, both Cuba and Nicaragua expressed reservations about continuing the armed struggle. That opportunity was not seized and it may not soon recur.

Obstacles to progress

To select from these proposals and suggestions those elements that in combination are most likely to lead to a successful resolution in El Salvador, one has first to discard a number of myths that now govern much of the popular discussion. Two of these are of particular importance.
The first myth is that in assessing the cause of El Salvador's present plight, one must choose between long-standing indigenous problems and the more recent intrusion of Soviet and Cuban interests. This is a false choice. Both are real factors. Even without Cuban and Soviet meddling, the problems would be severe; with such opportunistic meddling they are made worse and hold out the prospect of long-term regional conflicts. The indigenous problem that demands resolution—if one may put it in the frankest terms—is to draw competing elites into the political process so that economic modernization can be accompanied by democratization. Otherwise all talk of necessary and continuing economic growth will be fruitless.

The second myth is that the variety of Marxist and non-Marxist components among the guerrilla command structure and political front indicates a pluralist grouping more nonaligned than pro-Cuban or pro-Soviet. This notion is sheer nonsense and betrays a misunderstanding of current revolutionary situations in Central America. To better understand what is happening in El Salvador, one would do well to recall the role of Communists and their sympathetic allies in the Spanish Civil War.

Third, it is often argued that additional U.S. aid should be absolutely conditioned on significant progress in the human rights area. Indeed, human rights violations in El Salvador continue to be horrible. They should not be slighted or covered up, and pressure for their improvement should be continued. But the one central truth about U.S. aid to El Salvador is that it has been in any case too little and too late. The severe restrictions on that aid have served to prolong the conflict and extend to the government a lifeline that is simply inadequate.

A fourth critical error is the assumption that Hispanic cultures are not fertile grounds for establishing democracies. In both liberal and conservative circles in the United States there is a condescension toward Latin cultures and a distinct preference for order and stability in the Third World regardless of political system. Currently there are spokesmen on both sides who argue that the Panamanian or Mexican models are viable for Nicaragua or El Salvador. Such a notion speaks volumes about their commitment to human rights, for what they envisage is an irrational world in which rational order is to be achieved only by negotiations between Third World elites and superpowers in order to determine a country's political system, without consultation with the general population. This potent myth is based upon notions about cultural forces and economic development that are currently becoming unglued around the world. It is particularly inapplicable to the Caribbean area, where democracy has deep roots and two-thirds of the countries hold elections regularly.

Our domestic debate over El Salvador has revealed rather than cre-
ated some of the divisive premises upon which our foreign policy is precariously structured. In debating about this strategically important area we are unable to agree on basic criteria for human rights and for judging their significant violation. We are unable to agree on whether the Soviets and Cubans are merely probing opportunistically or actually have a coordinated global strategy along the lines that have been developed in their available theoretical works. We are unable to agree about the value—or danger—of "ideological pluralism" in the Caribbean Basin. We seem unable to recognize that the Democratic Left is a myth, as the overall bankruptcy of American Third World policy should serve to remind us; a strategy depending upon the Democratic Left has not been viable since the early 1960s when the United States covertly bankrolled such political forces.

The inability to agree on such fundamental questions runs through many sectors of our society, including Congress. Congressional resistance to the Reagan administration's Central American policy over the past two years has ranged from the reasonable to the ridiculous—the fault for which lies on both sides of the political divide. The delay in passing the much-needed Caribbean Basin Initiative—aimed at alleviating the region's balance-of-payment deficits and encouraging long-term economic growth—was fueled by the objections of such diverse entities as American labor, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, the sugar beet farmers in Louisiana, and even the Screen Actors' Guild. Ironically, many of the same Democrats who argued that the unrest in the region was the result of socioeconomic conditions objected to this far-reaching plan to address those very conditions.

Resistance to the administration's policy in Congress and even in certain circles in the executive branch is not simply the handiwork of the left wing of the Democratic party, although it is highly visible in the public statements of Senators Dodd and Tsongas and Representatives Mike Barnes and Stephen Solarz. Even presidential contender John Glenn and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, generally considered stalwarts on security issues, have objected to what they perceive as a lack of focus and clear-cut objectives in the administration's policy initiatives. Congressional opposition to continued covert assistance to the Nicaraguan rebels is based as much on the perception that the operation is ill-conceived, politically maladroit, and a "slow Bay of Pigs" as it is on the sensibilities of congressmen still shocked by the Church committee's revelations about previous CIA escapades in the mid-1970s. Centrist and moderate congressmen fault the operation for failing to achieve its publicly stated goal of the interdiction of arms to the guerrillas. To avoid a head-on collision with the president, both the House and Senate have proposed a compromise position to fund overtly the friendly governments in the region in their own efforts to stop the arms flow. This, however, would mean creating such
capabilities from scratch in those countries and it would have no real
effect for a number of years—too late to address the issue adequately.

The inability of the Reagan administration to muster significant
bipartisan support for its Central American policies will come dra­
matically to the forefront when Congress deliberates over sup­
plemental aid requests for El Salvador and Honduras and con­
tinued covert support for the Nicaraguan rebels. The administra­tion’s
requests for an additional $50 million in aid to the contras for fiscal
year 1984 have been turned down twice by a House vote this year.
Although the Republican-controlled Senate supports the financing,
both houses will have to adopt compromise legislation to resolve the
issue.

With Congress constantly chipping away at aid requests, the ad­
ministration has finally abandoned its strategy of summoning con­
gressional support through persistent lobbying by high-level officials
and has gone on a frontal attack against the opposition. This change
in tactics was heralded by Under Secretary of Defense Fred C. Iklé’s
September assault on congressional opponents to the administra­tion’s
policy. Arguing that “Congress has denied the President the means to
succeed,” Iklé’s speech reflected the resolution of a year­
old squabble within the administration on whether to
make Congress take the public blame for any failure in
policy.

With the battle lines now drawn for 1984, the bipar­
tisan policy being drawn up by the Kissinger Panel will
probably remain a paper study. Neither party appears to have com­
prehended the severe political costs likely to be incurred if assistance
is summarily terminated by Congress or if the executive further an­
tagonizes congressional leadership. If either of these occurs, Central
America will remain indefinitely a story without an ending, defying
any simple solution. It is likely that a highly volatile political brew of
sharp partisan polemics and a refusal to address the long-term issues
facing the region will dominate the 1984 domestic scene, to the detri­
ment of the formulation of any worthwhile policy.

**El Salvador’s need for U.S. aid**

We are aware that in these reflections on El Salvador we have
raised a number of issues that deserve much more extended com­
mentary. As usual, the problems and difficulties are clearer than the path
to their desired resolution. It is possible, however, to state the desir­
able goals in such a way that they suggest the overall direction our
policies should take.

The fact that the United States has often been indifferent to or
abusive of the interests of countries in the Caribbean area does not
mean that the United States does not itself have direct interests there.
It does, and those interests must be safeguarded; but this must be done in a way that enhances the interests and well-being of the people in the region. This will best be done by a program that provides an adequate commitment of financial resources and technology transfer to the Latin American and Caribbean countries, an alleviation of their staggering debt burden, the creation of alternatives to the socialist developmental model, and a bipartisan sustained willingness to participate in the construction of genuine democracy in the regime. El Salvador is a crucial element in this necessary and long-term enterprise. The people of El Salvador are ultimately responsible for and must forge their own destiny, but at this particular point in their history they need the protection provided by U.S. military aid and the support provided by economic aid if they are to have and keep the freedom necessary to good government.

1. For example, Phase I of the land reform program, which is designed to redistribute the largest estates (1,235 acres or more), has been completed. Phase III, designed to redistribute holdings of 100 acres or less in portions no greater than 18 acres, is progressing. According to the AIFFD (American Institute for Free Labor Development), at the end of September 1983, out of a potential 125,000 applicants, 70,742 have applied for land titles; 45,639 have been granted provisional titles, and 3,512 have been given definitive titles. Unfortunately, because of the lack of funds, compensation to the original owners is very slow, and this has led to conflicts between them and the new claimants.
