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Editorial: Central America & The Bush Administration

by Deborah Tyroler

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LADB Associate Editor What Central American policy will the Bush Administration follow? Are there new opportunities for a peaceful resolution of the Central American wars, or not? This is no academic question. It will determine strategies of the Sandinistas, the FMLN and of the peace movement in the United States. What is the evidence? Some of it is not good. In Guatemala, President Vinicio Cerezo's mask of democracy has become so frayed that even apologists admit the military dictatorship behind it. In El Salvador, the resurgence of the death squads and their collaborators in murder, the military, now openly practice the most brutal policies of the past. In Honduras, President Jose Azcona continues his role as the willing puppet of the interventionists in Washington, even substituting the Honduran military for the contras in continuing military actions along the border with Nicaragua. In Costa Rica, President Oscar Arias retreats from his Nobel winning peace plan, and turns the initiative for Central American policy over to Washington. In Nicaragua bands of contras continue their terrorist assaults on isolated villages, and despite the presumed cutoff of military supplies from the US, somehow find the wherewithal for murder. Is this the last gasp of Reagan and Abrams before the "kinder and gentler" Bush assumes power? Or is it premonitory of the Bush approach to Central America, an approach that he supported during his tenure as Vice President? What is more significant, breakfasts with Jesse Jackson and Mike Dukakis, or John Tower as head of the War Department? The most recent NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America) report is headlined, "The Show Goes On. The Right After Reagan." The analysis suggests that those opposed to Reagan's Central American policies face four more years of the same frenetic mobilizations to prevent one more pro-contra vote in Congress, herculean efforts to provide the desperate Nicaraguan people with the bare essentials for survival and telegrams to President Jose Napoleon Duarte and President Cerezo demanding the release of one more union organizer, journalist or professor. On what is this perspective based? Jane Hunter in "Beyond the Secret Team," finds "'private' operatives and foreign governments still in the business of covert warfare North rides again. There are two tendencies in this approach which are destructive of the effort to promote peace and self-determination in Central America. First, that US policy is a captive of "covert" manipulators, and so has a life of its own that it is somehow above the law, impervious to change. These manipulators lead, not follow, US policy. Second, that past US policy becomes viable without regard to the changes which have taken place in international politics. This is not the evaluation of the Sandinistas or the FMLN who proceed on the assumption that there are new opportunities for peace and reconciliation in Central America. And they are formulating new and creative approaches to foster that end. Crucial to their success in achieving peace in Central America will be the support they can garner in the United States. What do the Sandinistas and the FMLN see that NACLA does not? 1) The Reagan policies in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama have failed. No observer predicts a government victory in El Salvador despite the over \$3 billion the US has spent in that country since 1980. The Sandinistas remain in power. The failure of the contra war has been so great that few believe new military credits will be provided by the new administration. It is doubtful that the contras will ever again be able to mount any organized military action. In Panama, almost a year after Elliott Abrams ordered Noriega to leave, he remains in office even as the old actor goes home to California. 2) Despite the huge infusion of economic and military aid, the economic crisis

that has plagued all of Latin America since 1982 also grips Washington's Central American clients. The displacement of peasants to shantytowns circling large cities is a feature of the deterioration of living standards as inflation and a shattered economy destroy whatever economic viability Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala once had. Nicaragua is by no means alone in its desperate economic condition, though the war, the US blockade and Hurricane Joan have exacerbated its problems compared to neighbors in the region. Even that paragon of democracy and prosperity, Costa Rica, is suffering an economic decline. 3) Even at the height of Reagan's saber-rattling fervor, the US could not organize a Grenada solution to Central America. Low intensity conflict is not only a clever way to achieve military intervention without massive infusions of US troops (which the Vietnam war made a difficult policy option), but reflects the limits of force that the super-powers can bring to bear. Both the United States and the Soviet Union have amply demonstrated the truth of what appears to be a contradiction: the greater the military power the more restrained is its application. Large-scale military actions by the US or the USSR not only run the danger of an all-out nuclear war, but they also earn the condemnation of the world and undermine the prestige that the superpowers require to maintain influence in world politics. 4) Cuba, Angola and South Africa have signed an agreement that is likely to bring independence to Namibia, a major and almost unprecedented victory for a post-colonial society. The agreement includes the assurance that Namibia's struggle for self-determination will not engender a Reaganesque "freedom fighters" counter-revolution. At a minimum there will be a reduction in the intensity of the 13-year old conflict in Angola, with Jonas Savimbi now treading on very shaky political and military ground. Further, a number of steps have been taken by the Cuban government to reduce tensions with the US, including the end of interference with Radio Marti, the release of political prisoners, dialogue between the Cuban government and the Catholic Church hierarchy in the US, and cooperation in the "drug war." The US-imposed isolation of Cuba has failed and, however unwillingly, the US is now considering the development of a more normal relationship with Cuba. 5) The debt crisis in the Third World, amounting to \$1.3 trillion, is a major problem. The threat of non-payment to the banks is secondary to the consequences of the failure of the Third World to overcome the economic crisis that has continued without interruption since 1982. Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and other Latin American debtor nations have formulated proposals to end the blood-letting of the debt. The past US policy on the debt, the "Baker Plan" makes a travesty of any attempt to solve their serious economic problems, a fact that leading US policy makers are coming to recognize. 6) The Cold War, which has been the rationale for US policies in the Third World, is dying. No longer can the cry of "The Russians Are Coming" remain a convincing propaganda ploy. West Germany, France and even Britain are engaging in increasing economic relations with the Socialist Bloc. Popular sentiment in Europe has created, in the words of Henry Kissinger, serious problems for NATO. The US defense budget, even as outlined by Reagan in his swan song, represents a major cut-back from the frenetic build-up that characterized his earlier years. And it is probable that the Bush Administration will be forced to cut back even further. Agreements on conventional arms and on strategic nuclear weapons are in negotiation. The new climate that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has created has even penetrated into the highest echelons of the West German ruling party. It will become increasingly difficult to employ the old methods for avoiding agreement. 7) The US is no longer the dominant economic power and the 1992 European Community agreement promises to erode the US position even further. Increasingly, West Germany and Japan pursue independent economic policies, some with profound political significance in that they involve expanded economic relations with the Soviet Bloc. Already there are voices in Congress that warn that if the US does not get into the act it will lose a great potential market to its Western competitors.

8) Military expenditures have contributed to the erosion of US economic predominance. The debt that military spending has engendered and the 25 million citizens who have been forced into poverty have produced a strong counter-reaction. The Jackson presidential campaign proved that a powerful political force is developing in the US that threatens the Pentagon and its wealthy civilian supporters' ability to continue their programs at the expense of the poor and the lower middle class. When Bush speaks of a "kinder and gentler" America he takes cognizance of the political pressures that are building against these domestic economic policies that were the trademark of the Reagan years. 9) Ecological problems are mounting. The greenhouse effect, the pollution of the oceans, acid rain, the destruction of the rain forests, the depletion of the ozone layer and the decimation of biological species, are problems potentially serious enough to threaten the very existence of humanity (and other biological creatures). Yet no single country or local group of nations can meaningfully address them. The international accords reached on Antarctica are a model for agreements that are desperately required to solve the global problems presented by environmental degradation. The cooperation such agreements engender cannot but influence relations on other levels. In sum, objective conditions are forcing even a new Republican Administration to engage in "New Thinking." Good will or not, the Bush Administration cannot stand on the policies of the early years of the Reagan presidency, which even Ronny had to modify. US foreign and domestic policies are not a subjective matter. They respond, though sometimes slowly and only in part (and it is here that proponents of peace and justice have their role) to objective conditions for long-term self-preservation. Ultimately, reality must be faced. What is the outlook for the immediate future? First, that objective reality does not immediately impose its necessities on the political process. Old ways of thinking have a staying power that cannot be dismissed. We can expect, with certainty, that steps toward lessening world tensions, and permitting Third World nations to deal in a constructive way with their political and economic problems, dealing with the ecological crisis, will be opposed by the cold warriors. In domestic policy, the "privatizers" and the military-industrial complex will continue their attempts to raid the wealth of the country. Second, the pursuit of past foreign policy, and increasingly, past domestic policy, is not viable, no matter how reactionary Bush may appear to be upon "reading his lips." Important policy makers are numbered among those who recognize the challenge and the new political realities that are developing. The solid ranks of reaction of the early Reagan years are showing serious cracks. Specifically, how does this affect Central America? The principal objective, as far as Nicaragua is concerned, is lifting the economic embargo, not only on the transfer of US goods to Nicaragua, but the de facto embargo that exists in the international finance community which continues to refuse loans that country. It is a scandal that the richest nation in the world should employ starvation as a tool of its foreign policy, as the US has done in Nicaragua and Panama. There is little doubt that had the Central American summit taken place, the Sandinistas would have presented specific proposals that would promote reconciliation both on domestic and international issues. But that will soon come. The Nicaraguans understand that without a more normal relationship with the US they are doomed to poverty, even without war. Yet, there is a danger that the compromises the Sandinistas are sure to make will weaken their support among some in the US who imagined that this tiny nation could continue to exist indefinitely as the sworn enemy of the US. Support for the forthcoming Nicaraguan proposals is crucial if the attempt by the right to prevent any change in US policy is to be overcome. In El Salvador, the FMLN continues to demand an end to the inconclusive war. The rebels call for talks with the Salvadoran government and the US to achieve a kind of compromise that will permit the war-decimated country to begin a period of peaceful reconstruction. The recent increase in military activity by the FMLN demonstrates the futility of any program that envisages outright military victory over the guerrillas.

The FMLN's offensive, no doubt, is designed to make this point. The rebels are aware, as is the FDR, that they have no possibility of winning an outright military victory any more than does the Salvadoran military, short of a US invasion. Talks to end the killing and promote the formation of a new unity government that will begin to heal the horror of what otherwise appears to be an endless war is now on the agenda. Those who fantasized about an outright left military victory (usually non-Salvadorans) will balk at the compromises that will be promoted by the guerrilla movement. Yet the active support for such a settlement is crucial for its success. Third, for Latin America a respite debt payments, including interest, is their foremost objective. Military coup rumors are rampant throughout the region. Even financiers with a lot of money to lose believe that some meaningful response to the debt crisis is needed. A turbulent Latin America holds forth little prospect for future profits. Proposals for debt relief, and trade and financial agreements that will promote economic recovery, are already under discussion and their implementation depends, in part, on the support that can be mobilized for them by progressive Americans. Disarmament, normalized relations between the US and the Socialist Bloc, an end to regional conflicts and a people-oriented domestic policy are realizable. People's movements now have the possibility of turning from defense against a relentless assault to the offense. The prospects for peace, for the solidification of self-determination of countries so long beset by various "freedom fighters" are better now than they have been for a long time. Progressive Americans can help make them a reality.

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