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No Going Back To Square One In Central America

by Deborah Tyroler
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[The article below was distributed by Pacific News Service on 03/05/89. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Roger Burbach* If Secretary of State James Baker’s call for renewed humanitarian aid to the contras is a real sign of what the new Bush policy on Central America is going to be, then the US will face a debacle in the region as bad as that suffered by its predecessor. The new reality which the Bush administration can ignore only at its own peril is that Central America has changed dramatically since the early Reagan years. The region is war-torn and exhausted; the US allies are increasingly undependable; and the revolutionary forces, especially the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua and the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador, are showing a maturity that has enable them to seize the political and diplomatic initiative in recent months. The starting point for any assessment of the region is that US allies in Central America have failed abysmally. In the name of democracy the Reagan administration backed Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador and the contras in Nicaragua. Both are now in a state of disarray. The current Honduran government of Jose Azcona, which is second only to El Salvador in US aid received by Latin American countries, is widely viewed as the most corrupt government in Central America. The Bush administration knows that no viable policy is possible without bipartisan consensus in Congress. It may hope, as did its predecessor, that proposed humanitarian rather than lethal aid to the contras may help bring about such a consensus. Yet it was not lack of consensus in Washington that produced failure under Reagan. Until the Iran-contra scandal, the Reagan administration pretty much carried out its agenda in Central America, providing extensive funding for the contras while securing Congressional support for full-scale military and economic assistance for El Salvador and Honduras. Reagan failed simply because his Central American allies, and not Congress, did not deliver. The failure produced an enormous gap between rhetoric and reality. The Reagan administration insisted that it supported "democracy" and "human rights" in Central America and that its "Freedom Fighters" were bent on "stopping totalitarianism." The rhetoric was noble, but the local allies did not advance the proclaimed ideals. The Bush administration ignores the fact that the regional actors who show the greatest capacity to move towards these ideals are the very forces that Reagan most ardently opposed the Sandinista government and the FMLN in El Salvador. Of the three Central American countries that face internal insurgencies Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua the latter has by far the best human rights record, even though the Sandinista government has at times clamped down on the opposition as it waged war on the contras. The multi-party political system existent in Nicaragua today is a far cry from the single party state that exists in Cuba and other socialist bloc countries. In their struggle to win the ideological battle with the Reagan administration, the Sandinistas have devised a new political model that incorporates many of the values enunciated by Ronald Reagan. In El Salvador the FMLN today is a far different animal from that which existed in 1981. For over eight years the guerrillas have maintained a working alliance with the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), which is dominated by Social Democrats and Social Christians. The FMLN peace initiative envisions the establishment of a coalition government based on free and open elections in which all political parties in El Salvador would participate. Leaders of the FMLN, seeing how the Nicaraguan economy has been devastated by its confrontation with the US-backed contras, have repeatedly stated that they want...
an accommodation with the United States. They are insistent in declaring that El Salvador has no
future in tying itself to the socialist camp. The most overwhelming desire in Central America today
is for an end to conflict and war. Over 140,000 people have died in the past decade and well over
a million one out of 15 people in the region as a whole are refugees. It is not only the economy of
Nicaragua that is in dire straits every country in Central America has experienced economic decline.
Hunger and malnutrition are spreading. Recognition of the regional war weariness is clearly a
major factor behind the peace initiatives the Sandinistas and the FMLN have launched. The Bush
administration, if it does fund the contras and throws more money at the Salvadoran and Honduran
militaries, is actually moving down an old policy path that is doomed to fail. Central Americans
will not support these old protagonists of war. They will support those in the region that endorse
democracy, human rights and economic development. But Bush and Baker have yet to recognize
that the political movements in Central America most capable of implementing these goals are the
very forces the US government still regards as its archenemies. [Burbach is director of the Center
for the Study of the Americas, Berkeley, Calif., and co-author of "Fire in the Americas." He has been
following developments in Central America since the late 1970s, and recently returned from a two-
week trip to the region.]

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