

301332 April 84  
Updated 2 May

THE CARIBBEAN BASIN AND THE U.S. NATIONAL INTEREST

Gen. P. F. Gorman, USA

Council of the Americas, Washington, D.C.

May 8, 1984

To protect national interests, the Department of Defense has permanently positioned three unified commands with headquarters and forces outside the United States: in Europe, in the Northwest Pacific, and in the Caribbean. Since there is a lively debate concerning the latter, allow me to outline what I perceive to be the five most important of the national interests served by the United States Southern Command.

1. Support for Democracy

The United States has an interest in supporting democracy among its immediate neighbors. Throughout Lat in America, there is evident a strong trend toward democracy: the restoration of constitutional democracy achieved in Argentina and impending in Uruguay and Brazil, elections recently conducted in Peru, and underway in Ecuador. The trend is particularly strong among the Caribbean nations: Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and El Salvador have all held elect ions, and Guatemala, Belize, and Grenada are approaching theirs. The fate of democracy in Nicaragua hangs in the balance.

It does make a difference whenever a society so close geographically, culturally, and ethnically to our own is forced to depart from the norms of participatory democracy, the rule of law, and respect for basic human rights to submit to authoritarian government. It is not easy for Americans to countenance the same relationship with such a government as we maintain with those who patent l y share with us our t rust in popular sovereignty and the rule of law. And this is not a matter of preference alone. It is a reflection of our appreciation that authoritarian governments have achieved in this hemisphere, and easy to trace economic and social tragedy to interventions in the political process by individuals or small groups whose sole claim to power rest s on the possession of guns. Unfortunately, in the United States today many citizens do not understand that the struggle in Central America is fomented by those who believe in force rather than franchise, in bullets rather than ballots, who strive to impose by arms their will upon resisting peoples. In this sense the present strife resembles struggles of the past. But today to that problem of generations in Latin America there has been added the threat of neocolonialism.

The U.S.S.R. pours \$5 billions into Cuba each year, much of this to create a huge military establishment capable of furnishing forces for Soviet clients in Africa. Nicaragua over the past three years has received over \$500 millions in economic aid, and some \$500 million worth of military equipment and military construction.

During those years, under constant Cuban tutelage, the Sandinista commandantes have:

- \* Renewed traditional Nicaraguan claims to the territory of their neighbors.
- \* Supported armed subversion against Honduras and El Salvador.
- \* Imposed universal conscription, and raised armed forces of over 100,000, of which half are kept under arms.
- \* Altered fundamentally the arms balance in the region with an armored brigade strike force of over 90 tanks, as many armored personnel carriers, 50 large artillery pieces, numerous multiple rocket launchers, anti-tank guns, and a profusion of motor transport.
- \* Trained pilots to fly high-performance fights, and allowed Cubans and other foreigners to install intercept radars and to build air bases in Nicaragua—one of which, Punte Huete, will soon be capable of supporting both jet fighters and the heaviest transports in the Bloc inventory.

The long-standing unanimous rejection by the American nations of subservience to extra-hemispheric powers, which faltered with the conversion of Cuba into a Soviet dependency, now threatens to dissolve altogether. It is a tragedy of our times that many in North and South America alike seem prepared to tolerate the consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist garrison state in Nicaragua in the image of Cuba: dominated by Cuban cadres, militarized to a crushing burden on the people, and economically and politically puppeted by the Soviet bloc. It is a tragedy of our times that the victory over the clumsy oppressions of Somoza has been betrayed, without much understanding or protest in the United States, into the hands of a small committee of venal men who have ignored their pledge to restore democracy to their people, and have instead mortgaged the future of their country to Russians, Bulgarians, East Germans and Libyans.

The lessons of modern history are clear: once a society is dominated by a Marxist-Leninist party, democracy is dead. The new totalitarian

governments of the world have been no more successful than the older Fascist states in meeting the aspirations of their people in either a material or a moral sense. The present danger is greater than that posed by Fascism; in the Caribbean Region it is Communist neocolonialism. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said it well:

Communism is something new, unprecedented in world history...

Communism is unregenerate...

It stops only when it encounters a wall, even if it is only a wall of resolve...

It will always present a danger to mankind...

A Marxist-Leninist state is what it professes to be: authoritarian and totalitarian. Society is closed; dissent is not tolerated; the state is all encompassing. And Marxists ruthlessly maintain themselves in power. In contrast, Latin military governments have been transitory phenomena. Both are an affliction of the body politic, but while recovery from the latter is possible, the former is invariably fatal. And in this hemisphere, Marxism-Leninism of the Castroist variety is distinctly militarist, and aggressively expansionist. My countrymen who abhor, as do I, military intervention in domestic politics, should remember that the Sandinista Army, the largest, most elaborately armored military force in Central America, is under direct control of the political party which exercises exclusive power over what may accurately be called a garrison state. It is very much against the interests of the United States that Nicaragua continues its course toward Cubanization, and very much against the interests of its democratic neighbors as well.

## 2. Prosperity

It is also contrary to the interests of the United States that the Caribbean region remains depressed and debt-ridden. It is the fourth largest market for U.S. goods and services—coming after the European Economic Community, Canada, and Japan—and when the Caribbean Basin is impoverished, workers in the United States lose jobs. Moreover, banks in the United States hold debts of over \$130 billion from the Caribbean region. Prosperity for the region then is very much an interest of the United States.

## 3. Regulating Migration

Political violence is, of course, inimical to prosperity. But it militates against the interests of the United States in another way: it causes migrations. One out of every two new Americans today is an immigrant, nine of ten coming from the Caribbean region, most from

Central America, and most illegally. The present violence in Central America has prompted at least 1,000,000 people to immigrate to the United States. Among the proliferating American Republics, there are only four nations with a greater Hispanic population than the United States; by 1990 there will be only one. Many U.S. citizens are concerned whether their community can continue to absorb immigrants at the rate they have been coming from the south. Yet the United States is but one of many countries afflicted with large refugee populations which place unprecedented demands on social services already overtaxed by high birthrates: Costa Rica harbors both Nicaraguan and Salvadoran refugees, as does Honduras; Panamanian leaders have talked about a "population bomb" in referring to the migrants entering their country; Mexico, Guatemala, Belize all have displaced people in significant numbers. It is in the interests of the United States that these displacements be regularized by the restoration of peace and respect among the nations of the region.

#### 4. Control of Narcotics

The latest generation of North and South Americans share a problem different from any in the past: narcotics trafficking. Today consumers in the United States spend between \$50 and 80 billions each year on illegal drugs, something like \$350 per capita, more than the annual per capita income for many nations of the region. U.S. importers of illicit drugs pay out at least twice as much as all our coffee importers. One single Caribbean nation furnishes half of these illicit substances to the United States' market, as measured by putative value; by volume, more than three quarters of the cocaine sold in the U.S., three quarters of the marijuana, and much of the methaqualone. It used to be commonplace to hear Latins deplore those U.S. importers and consumers as the cause of this phenomenon, and to say that they made it exclusively a U.S. problem. But we have all learned that any nation which tolerates drug traffickers in its midst commits societal suicide, and invites the suborning of democratic political institutions, the corruption of public officials, and the devastation of education for the young. Moreover, the traffickers in drugs are conduits for subversion. It is very much in the interests of the United States to curb this vicious trafficking, and to cooperate with Latin nations willing to attack the distribution systems at their sources.

#### 5. U.S. National Security

The Caribbean Basin engages serious, still-compelling military interests of the United States: the Panama Canal remains a strategic defile which our security—as well as our treaty obligations to Panama—dictate that we defend; the sea lines of communications through the

region carry half the peacetime commerce of the United States. In the event of an attack on NATO, 50% or more of the planned reinforcements of men and materiel would transit the Caribbean; in a major war in the Far East, 40% would transit the area. In this era of electronic warfare and cruise missiles, the security of the United States is substantially impaired by the Soviet air and naval facilities, listening posts, and potential jammers in Cuba, and would be further impaired were these positioned on the continental land mass.

Concerning the present violence in Central America, I agree with the report of the National Bipartisan Commission, which reached the conclusion that "...even in terms of the direct national security interests of the United States, this country has large stakes...They include preventing:

- \* A series of developments which might require us to devote large resources to defend the southern approaches to the United States, thus reducing our capacity to defend our interests elsewhere.
- \* A potentially serious threat to our shipping lanes through the Caribbean.
- \* A proliferation of Marxist-Leninist states that would increase violence, dislocation, and political repression in the region.
- \* The erosion of our power to influence events worldwide that would flow from the perception that we were unable to influence vital events close to home..."

I am keenly aware of critics who perceive that U.S. policy and presence in the region overly emphasizes military undertakings. But like the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, I see no way of separating political and economic from security measures on behalf of our interests.

But our interests are congruent with interests of most, if not all, nations in the region: freedom, prosperity, stability morality, security. Acting alone the United States can assure none of these. What we need today as never before is a regional coalition to protect those interests. At the very least, we must together build what Solshenitsyn called a "wall of resolve".