

Operational Art in a Low Intensity Theater

Paul F. Gorman

The term operational art, when applied to the commander in chief (CINC) of a unified command, remains ill-defined, despite the outpouring of manuals and articles trying to clarify the definition. It is particularly elusive when the CINC is operating in circumstances amorphaously labeled "low intensity conflict," peaceful competition, or a situation short of war. Such was my lot as the CINC of the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) during the second half of President Reagan's first term.

It does not help much to compare my undertakings as a CINC with the Army's three levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic—because on any given day I dealt with matters which were tactical in focus and I could rely on someone in Washington to involve me in strategy as well. As for the theater—that too was blurred. I had a substantial intelligence staff in the Pentagon, and I spent almost as much time in Washington as I did in my headquarters in Central America.¹ Nonetheless, I herewith apply for credit from the U.S. Army War College by contending that from time to time I did practice operational art: I disposed of forces within my theater, selected objectives and provided guidance for subordinate and supporting commanders, and influenced allies and adversaries to act in ways conducive to achievement of my strategic mission.²

The substance of that mission, taken from my prepared statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, was to:

Exercise operational command over U.S. forces on the land mass of South America and Central America less Mexico, and act therein as the principal agent of the Department of Defense for implementing national security policy and military strategy. Prepare strategic assessments and contingency plans, and conduct training or operations as directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to include coordinating the activities of service components and supporting maritime forces; supporting other unified and specified commands; disaster relief, search and

rescue, or evacuation of U.S. citizens from endangered areas; strategic and tactical reconnaissance; countering international terrorism, subversion, and illegal traffic of arms and drugs; and fulfilling provisions of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance and other mutual security pacts.

Support and assist U.S. Country Teams in the theater.

Monitor security assistance programs in South and Central America, including Mexico, and command the Military Assistance Advisory Groups, Military Liaison Offices, and Office of Defense Cooperation.

Promote mutual security among the nations in the theater and develop operations to maintain peace, strengthen democracy, and advance economic and social well-being; counter the Soviet and Cuban military build up and other de-stabilizing undertakings; encourage standardization and rationalization among prospective allies of the region; provide access to, or acquire as needed for U.S. forces, support facilities, communications systems, and operating, transit or overflight rights; and safeguard U.S. access to raw materials and energy resources.

Provide for the defense of the Panama Canal and for other Department of Defense obligations per the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977.³

When I undertook those myriad responsibilities, I had the distinct advantage of having been the assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for two years, a back-bencher in the highest councils of the government. As a result of that experience I had a firsthand appreciation of how the president and his principal counselors viewed Latin America and their intentions in the area. They were gravely concerned over the deterioration of democracy in Central America. El Salvador's weak interim government and ineffective army was about to crumble before the attacks of Communist guerrillas being aided by Nicaragua and Cuba. Nicaragua, supported by lavish Soviet military and economic aid, was rapidly being transformed into a Communist garrison state in which thousands of Cuban military personnel occupied key positions under a regime determined to surround itself with other Communist governments. To their north, the Sandinistas were stepping up military attacks along the Honduran border both to intimidate the government in Tegucigalpa, and to curtail the activities of the rapidly growing Nicaraguan resistance movement. To their south, the Sandinistas menaced the defenseless Costa Ricans with Soviet tanks and armed

helicopters. The shaky democracy in Honduras was threatened from within both by radical leftist terrorists and by a nationalist military. Costa Rica seemed unable to cope with hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan refugees, and was vulnerable to mounting terrorism. Guatemala's repressive military government was internationally isolated, and under attack from Communist-aided guerrillas. Cuba's Castro, having succeeded after two decades of failures in gaining a foothold on the continent, had spurned U.S. overtures and warnings. Therefore, Nicaragua had to be contained, and the Soviet-Cuban strategic design for the region frustrated. If there were differences among the president's advisers on these matters, they probably were mainly over the degree to which the situation in Central America should be understood and addressed in East-West terms, as opposed to treating it as a regional crisis in which Soviet involvement was but one, not necessarily the decisive, factor.

After I took command, I quickly determined that the situation in the theater had to be treated as a regional crisis. Many Central American leaders I talked to in my initial visits evidently wanted the United States to announce that the troubles of their country were manufactured in Moscow and to intervene directly and massively to foil the Russians. But it became clear to me that most of those troubles stemmed from indigenous failures, especially the unwillingness of those very leaders to recognize their internal weakness and to accept the need for reform. Thereafter, I deliberately down-played the Soviet role, and in dealing with Washington and with Latins I stressed the necessity for vigorous responses by the Central Americans.

In preparing a strategy for implementing U.S. policy in Central America I was not allowed much time to form or present my estimate of the situation because events simply moved too quickly. A few days after I assumed command, an American journalist was killed in Honduras on the Nicaraguan border, bringing the media out in full cry. In a rapid series of secure voice conferences and face-to-face meetings in Washington a strategy was adopted which I have subsequently described as "discriminate deterrence." It was predicated upon a substantial increase in U.S. involvement in Central America to forestall regional conflict. USSOUTHCOM was to act toward two goals: inducing a heightened awareness of the risks and costs of continued aggression in Managua, Havana, and Moscow; and strengthening the democratic governments in

El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. U.S. forces would conduct a series of exercises in the region to convey our military strength to all observers, while at the same time through diplomacy and security assistance the U.S. would bolster the democracies there against internal and external enemies.

Once strategic decisions had been made in Washington to increase U.S. military activities in Central America, I, as the theater CINC, practiced operational art in proposing how, where, and when to provide military support for the strategy. I had to synchronize operations with scheduled elections in El Salvador, Costa Rica, the United States, and Honduras with schedules for Soviet reconnaissance satellites, and with public affairs activities. To illustrate some aspects of operational art in a low intensity theater I have selected three examples: intelligence, training exercises and security assistance, and combined planning.

My foremost concern was providing the strategic and tactical reconnaissance required in my mission. In 1983 the USSOUTHCOM theater was virtually undeveloped as far as coherent collection or dissemination of useful intelligence was concerned, and I knew from my previous assignment that the intelligence on Central America provided to top officials of the U.S. government was both scanty and unreliable. Yet key strategic decisions concerning whether it was in the U.S. interest to act, and if so, when and how, depended crucially upon the cogency of that intelligence. Moreover, the credibility of U.S. intelligence would influence how well the leaders of American opinion, members of Congress, the public, and allies or friends abroad, could be persuaded to support initial commitments and to sustain policies over the longer term.

Since strategic intelligence provides early warning of impending threats and enables reappraisals of American policy in the context of all our interests worldwide, the U.S. intelligence community should have been able to provide such strategic intelligence on Central America from its day-to-day posture. That region, however, had not been very high among its worldwide priorities. The Central Intelligence Agency encouraged some of its foremost experts on Central America to accept early retirement during the 1970s, and in 1979 closed its station in San Salvador. In 1981 the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had asked me to survey the capability of U.S. intelligence to assess what was going on in Central America, and I discovered each of the intelligence agencies involved was

constrained by a shortage of qualified personnel. With the chairman's backing an interagency recruiting and training program had improved that position, but intelligence capabilities were still far from robust when I assumed command in 1983.

Tactical intelligence required new collectors and new communications in the theater. The U.S. Atlantic Command had helpfully maintained a ship off the Salvadoran coast since 1982, supported from USSOUTHCOM's minuscule naval component in Panama. But the extensive, timely, precise information I sought could not be provided from such a platform alone. I was determined to acquire a capability to illuminate all the principal actors in Central American political violence, their operational methods and means, their capabilities, and their plans. I asked the chiefs of each of the services and the secretary of defense to approve diversion of military collection systems—aircraft, ships, computers, communications equipment, and personnel—from other missions and to redirect analytical resources from other targets to exploit the resulting data. The cries of pain from my fellow CINCs were heart-wrenching, but by and large I got what I asked for, and ultimately USSOUTHCOM was able to produce tactical intelligence products useful for each U.S. country team it was supporting and for its host government and its security forces.

Unfortunately, some of the intelligence assets dispatched to the theater had to be positioned extremely close to my areas of interest. For example, certain of the collection systems most useful to me were mounted, by inter-service agreement, on short-range aircraft—they still are as far as I know. Others functioned on line-of-sight. I decided that Honduras was the pivotal territory for such purposes and personally selected the sites for each collector. Then I had to persuade the Honduran government to allow us to station a sizeable contingent of U.S. troops in their country—to build cantonments, to erect microwave communications sites, and to operate helicopters at low level throughout the country. Burdening President Roberto Suazo Cordoba with such a politically onerous American presence was a distinct risk, but Ambassador John Negroponte charted a course through the reefs of Honduran politics, and I obtained strong support from the Honduran high command by promising them—and, more importantly, actually delivering—much enhanced intelligence on their neighbors.⁴

Some U.S. practitioners of human intelligence (HUMINT) worked assiduously in Washington to portray the whole USSOUTHCOM undertaking as futile, asserting that no intelligence worth gathering on insurgents or terrorists was likely to proceed from a technology-based collection effort. This canard caused me unnecessary delays and occasioned several bothersome trips to Washington, but ultimately all the high-technology collectors I sought were deployed to the theater. Once in place, we were able to cross-cue collectors of various types, which, together with an appropriate massing of interpretative talent, promptly produced a new, tactically significant understanding of what was happening in the theater.

While I was entirely supportive of HUMINT, I was not convinced that its quality was high enough or its quantity so satisfactory that added U.S. technological collection would have been superfluous. Moreover, I was wary about information from the intelligence services of our beleaguered regional friends; their plight was attributable to a combination of incapacities of those services to collect and analyze information concerning internal and external enemies, their defective view of the effectiveness of their own government, and their armed forces. Most importantly, my tactical intelligence requirements extended to both friend and foe; that is, I directed that USSOUTHCOM collect information on all the protagonists, for otherwise I could not assess risk or detect vulnerabilities. In both the short term and the long term, I believed that U.S. tactical intelligence was essential to assess the situation and make decisions from the operational perspective. Events in the theater proved me right.

El Salvador provides a useful example of the relationship of tactical intelligence to operational art. From the outset of his administration, President Reagan faced daunting obstacles in El Salvador. The Sandinista-backed guerrillas seemed to have military victory in their grasp; most analysts in Washington believed it likely that the Salvadoran Army would collapse within one year. American opinion-makers saw the violence as a local matter, accepted the view that the Salvadoran government was beyond help, and expected the Salvadorans running the interim government to go the way of Somosa. The American public, to the extent it was even aware of El Salvador, opposed U.S. involvement. Congress reflected these opinions, and doled out aid in dribbles, hamstringing the ability of the U.S. country team and USSOUTHCOM to work with the Salvado-

rans on a long-range national plan for countering the insurgency. In two years, however, the situation was transformed. By 1985 there was a constitutional government in place, with a popular president elected under dramatic circumstances. Moreover, there was support within the U.S. Congress for broad, multi-year assistance to defend that fledgling democracy. The major difference between 1983 and 1985 was the contribution of tactical intelligence.⁵

USSOUTHCOM, with plenty of outside help, put together a system which collected, analyzed, and distributed timely tactical intelligence. It was a system capable of storing, sorting, retrieving, and collating large amounts of precise information concerning personalities, organizations, locus, time, and activity; maintaining surveillance over large areas day or night, regardless of weather or terrain; performing in-theater all-source intelligence management, including tasking of collectors, first-order interpretation of results, and timely cross-cuing of other collectors; exploiting, minute-by-minute, the sources of national intelligence in Washington, D.C., as well as theater intelligence, utilizing a combination of unconventional organizations and communications responsive to the needs of USSOUTHCOM and the country teams it supported; and producing intelligence understandable by lay persons for use in informational programs. For rural insurgency—classic guerrilla warfare by organized bands using terrain and vegetation to conceal their base of operations—obtaining useful tactical intelligence meant not only adroit use of human intelligence, but broad use of imagery, electronic intelligence, unattended sensors of various types, and unobtrusive collection platforms. Urban terrorism or insurgency—conspiratorial paramilitary groups, often clandestine, which operate in cities and towns—required a different approach which featured hyper-efficient, police-type intelligence to obtain large-scale data collection by human and electronic means, sifted frequently for indications of presence and warning of attack.

Tactical intelligence provided both a prod for Salvadoran political and military action and assurance that the Salvadorans, when they acted, did so prudently, with due respect for human rights. It furnished the country team and USSOUTHCOM important rationale for our entire aid program, helping to underwrite a significant shift of opinion in Congress in favor of aid. To be sure, there were other factors, such as the favorable impression of President Jose Napoleon Duarte formed by members of Congress after his

meetings with them. Yet Duarte used talking papers based on USSOUTHCOM intelligence in those meetings. Other USSOUTHCOM intelligence products presented to Congress in mid-1984 played an important role in convincing members on both sides of the aisle to support the administration's proposal for a long-term aid program underwriting the Salvadoran national plan.

I suppose that some readers will react to the foregoing with the conviction that intelligence planning is not a proper focus for a CINC's efforts and might better be left to his J-2 intelligence staff or to intelligence agencies in Washington. To them I say simply that intelligence underwrote my personal relations with ambassadors, with my superiors in Washington, and with members of Congress. It was central to my exercise planning and provided the basis for combined planning with allies. I simply could not leave so important an activity to the staff, let alone to Washington agencies—although I believe I used my J-2 and the intelligence community to advantage. Intelligence may well be the single most important element of operational art in a low intensity theater.

The next example of how I practiced operational art in a low intensity theater is the use of exercises and security assistance. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of USSOUTHCOM's operations under my command was using exercises for U.S. military forces as legitimate occasion for them to deploy to the theater and to perform useful missions. One of the difficulties I faced is that USSOUTHCOM had virtually no resources of its own, and responding to the requirements of the national strategy meant that I had to use forces from other commands. I believed that U.S. military exercises were a quick, direct, cost-effective way to provide economic, humanitarian, and military assistance to allies and friends in Central America. At the same time, I knew that the exercises would give very valuable, virtually irreplaceable, training to the U.S. forces involved. But almost immediately I ran afoul of bureaucratic resistance, as well as laws and regulations, in making good use of this tool.

The bureaucratic resistance came chiefly from within the Army, and mainly from senior personnel who viewed my requests for the use of Army forces as an unprogrammed, unapproved intrusion into their domain. Some of that opposition no doubt included concerns that the Reagan administration was skirting the provisions of the War Powers Resolution, or that forces were being

diverted into a theater of tertiary importance. There were few precedents for what I proposed, and there was some risk. But I acted with confidence that I was following the guidance of the president and the secretary of defense, and that my requests had all been properly submitted through the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The major legal constraint I faced was the so-called anti-deficiency provisions of law that meant that Security Assistance could not be funded from money appropriated for U.S. military operations and training exercises.⁶ The law has been interpreted to mean that U.S. armed forces could provide assistance to a foreign nation in the course of a training exercise only if that assistance were incidental to the original purpose for which the exercise was funded. Disputes arose about what constituted assistance, about the definition of incidental, and about how much the host nation should be charged for assistance that was considered a marginal addition to the exercise. The controversy extended to whether a country's participation in combined exercises with U.S. forces should be paid for by U.S. exercise funds, or by the country's Security Assistance funds, or—as was often the case—by some combination of both.

One such heated discussion arose over an exercise in which a light artillery battalion of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) deployed from Kentucky to Honduras and conducted combined training with a Honduran artillery battalion. On the USSOUTHCOM side of the ledger the Hondurans were provided a superb role model of a wholly professional American outfit that could move, shoot, and communicate flawlessly and, more importantly, conduct its activities with esprit, discipline, and cohesiveness. On the other side of the issue the Hondurans, who had been equipped with mortars, had not yet received the howitzers they had purchased with U.S. Security Assistance funds, and in training with the U.S. unit they used the U.S. guns, ammunition, and other materiel. I found out that new howitzers were available in the U.S. for issue to the 101st Airborne Division, so I ordered the Americans to turn over some of their howitzers to the Hondurans, rather than wait for the Security Assistance system to fill their order. But ultimately the Hondurans had to pay for my expedient through deductions from their Security Assistance funds.

I argued vainly that such legalisms confuse bean counting and strategy, and I told a congressional committee that any exercise I conducted was designed to meet three criteria: the exercise must provide sound training for all U.S. participants, advancing their

readiness for their assigned missions better than any other uses of the same training time and dollars; the exercise must meet the requirements of the host country—after all, they provide the territory, airspace and waters upon which the exercise takes place, it is their populace who must suffer the inconveniences and dangers inherent in all military maneuvers, and it is their government who must bear the political consequences of accepting a U.S. military presence—and the exercise should contribute to U.S. theater strategy. If the exercise met the first and second criteria, then any benefit which accrued to the host government ought to be considered incidental. In fact, little of the cost of exercises so planned underwrote foreign participation, but the effectiveness of the training was often crucially determined by the extent of the non-U.S. participation.

There was another major furor surrounding landing strips for C-130 cargo aircraft scraped out of fields and forests in Central America by U.S. Army engineers. U.S. accountants held that these were airfields usable by the host nation after U.S. forces departed, and therefore chargeable as Security Assistance. The fact is that the engineer units participating had wartime missions of constructing exactly such emergency strips for another U.S. theater CINC, and that the Environmental Protection Agency and other constraints on training in the United States foreclosed practicing for such missions there. USSOUTHCOM had a contingent need for C-130 crews and logistic forces trained to use a similar hasty infrastructure. The CINC's training requirements neatly matched requests from the host country that the exercises train its forces in strategic re-deployments from one section of the country to another, using fixed-wing aircraft. Far from the United States charging the host country's Security Assistance account for the airstrips, which were usable only a few weeks at best without engineering maintenance, the host country might well have submitted a maneuver-damage claim against the United States for the physical disruption of, and noise pollution in, its countryside, or charge us for the use of its airspace.⁷

The armed forces of Central America learned a great deal by participating in combined exercises with U.S. military forces. The exercises did much to dispel ghosts of the gringo invaders of yesteryear. Central American military forces acquired the attitudes and demeanor of military professionals, as well as specific military skills. But there can be little doubt that U.S. troops usually benefited far more than host nation forces, receiving realistic training

under conditions that would be impossible to duplicate in the United States. Exercises rewarding for both parties were designed for U.S. combat service support units as well as combat support and combat units; combat service support units could both train with corresponding units of the host country military and, as an incidental by-product, they together could provide politically remunerative humanitarian assistance to the people of the host country.

Part of operational art for a CINC in a low intensity theater is coordinating military activities to attain politically useful goals, and combined exercises accomplished that. I directed four types of exercises in the theater: interoperability exercises, training for special operations forces, medical exercises, and construction exercises. At times all four types of exercise were going on concurrently.

Since one of my missions was to ensure that the United States and its allies are prepared to fight as coordinated partners in the event of war, interoperability exercises were critical. We needed to evaluate host nation forces in the field so we knew how to tailor Security Assistance for them, and we needed to teach them techniques which would enable them to take advantage of our help in an emergency, such as using airlift or ingesting tactical intelligence.

Training non-U.S. forces in unconventional warfare is a specified mission of U.S. Army Special Forces, and one wartime mission of U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy Special Operations Forces (SOF). The Central Americans well understood that U.S. SOF could impart a wide variety of military skills, and they were therefore sought after as trainers particularly knowledgeable in subjects of interest. By actually training foreign troops, U.S. SOF participants were required to work through linguistic barriers and past cultural inhibitions to communicate skills and knowledge. They thereby practiced in a realistic environment the very skills they would be called upon to use in a wartime emergency. U.S. SOF personnel operating as trainers were totally immersed in the host culture—an experience impossible to replicate in the United States.⁸

U.S. military medics with firsthand experience with battlefield trauma, or indeed with tropical medicine, have all but passed from the ranks of our armed services. Exercises in Central America provided unparalleled training opportunities for U.S. military medical personnel and units. Most countries found it easier to accept combined training with medical units than any other type. In U.S. efforts to help Guatemala back into the Central American

mainstream, only medical exercises were initially permitted by our government, but these provided USSOUTHCOM opportunities to assess the situation in Guatemala and to contact key military leaders. Invariably, the people of the countryside enjoyed having U.S. medics in their midst, because for many, being treated by a medical professional is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In one combined medical exercise in Honduras, for example, U.S. helicopter-borne medics, in all instances accompanied by officials of the Ministry of Health, inoculated over 100,000 children against five basic diseases. In any country facing an active insurgency, military medical training can provide immediate vital benefits. Usually the entire system of combat medical support needs to be revamped, and there are few easy fixes. U.S. Security Assistance in training medics, aidmen, nurses, surgeons, and medical administrators, and in improving the evacuation system, demonstrably made a major difference in El Salvador, and soon other Central Americans began to seek similar training.⁹ USSOUTHCOM found that the El Salvadoran Army did not have a military medical service system that could provide early care and evacuation for combat casualties. The result was very high combat mortality, which greatly reduced morale and combat effectiveness, and which imposed grave political and economic costs on the government in raising and training replacements. In 1983, Salvadoran mortality from injuries sustained in combat was above 45 percent. The problem was neither the lack of good doctors, nor of excellent hospitals, but the absence of a military medical service corps to provide first aid, stabilize the wounded, and move them rapidly by helicopter to professional medical treatment. After the U.S. introduced a Security Assistance program to train company-level aidmen and to develop a battlefield evacuation chain, combat mortality was reduced to 5 percent of overall casualties, a proportion comparable to U.S. results in Vietnam. In effect, U.S. aid presented President Duarte with a brigade's worth of trained troops.

In Central America, U.S. military engineers obtained training otherwise denied them by building roads and airstrips, digging wells, assessing and upgrading water supplies, and controlling flooding. Each such exercise was responsive to the host government's interests and consistent with the country's American ambassador's general plan for developmental assistance. The legal thickets surrounding

such exercises included the numerous laws and regulations bearing on military construction, as well as the Security Assistance system.

It is possible that the exercises I directed would have occasioned less debate had USSOUTHCOM not used units from the reserve components of the U.S. armed forces. Reliance on reservists was nothing new to USSOUTHCOM. For years, the bulk of its inter-theater and intra-theater airlift had been flown very competently by reservists on two-week annual training tours. Over the past decades force-structure decisions have allocated to the reserve components a progressively larger portion of combat engineers, construction battalions, medical service units, and civil affairs detachments—the very sort of units which fit well into my exercise plans. Hence, it was to be expected that the armed services would task reservists to meet USSOUTHCOM exercise requirements. But since President Reagan's Central American policies were not universally popular, in a few states objections arose to sending reservists into what some termed a war zone, others an incipient Vietnam.¹⁰ As a result I found myself dealing with governors to reassure them that, should they concur in the deployment of their guardsmen to my command, the units would be well and securely employed. As an example, I directed my Army component commander to devise an exercise with the Honduran Army designed to raise their competence and confidence in antiarmor tactics and techniques. The trouble was the Hondurans had no tanks, at least no vehicle which could simulate the Soviet T-55 tanks arrayed across the border to their south. To show the Hondurans what a comparable tank looked like, how it operated, its strengths, and its vulnerabilities, I wanted the exercise to include, as an opposing force, a contingent of M48 tanks. The Army selected the Texas National Guard for the mission, and I ended up having to assure personally the governor of Texas that his guardsmen would not be used to attack Nicaragua, or to defend Honduras, but only as a training aid to instruct Hondurans to defend themselves. I told the governor that I thought the Nicaraguans would leave the unit strictly alone, but I also pointed out that they would be very respectfully watchful to see whether any of those M48A5 tanks remained behind in the hands of Hondurans. The Texans came, accomplished their mission with style, and took all their tanks home with them.

A feature of operational art in a low intensity theater is combined planning. A concomitant of combined exercises was close,

continuous interaction between USSOUTHCOM staffs and the commanders and staff officers of Central American armies in planning and conducting the exercises. Beyond that, in Honduras and in El Salvador, we organized periodic meetings in which the ambassador and I, with a few key subordinates, would meet with the minister of defense and his subordinates. On occasion, the president himself would join us. These meetings usually had an agenda set in advance, with a combined staff study of some significant problem set for presentation. But the real value of the meetings were in the discussions which ensued—frank, pointed, comments and questions were the norm, and both sides welcomed the meetings as an opportunity to raise tough issues. It was in such a meeting that I could present my critique of operations, training, or force structure, and recommend ameliorative action, or that the ambassador could analyze regional political developments, or discuss reactions in Congress and the American media to recent events. Our hosts could vent their ire at this or that aspect of our policies, or this or that American visitor. Those meetings showed our hosts how the ambassador and I related to one another, providing an example of U.S. civil-military relations which we felt was beneficial for the local military. Moreover, the meetings led to our planning together, thinking ahead, fashioning strategy, allocating resources, and producing answers to thorny questions. For me the payoff was being able to elicit feedback on the overall effect of my operational art on specific strategic objectives. They convinced me that we achieved much of what we set out to accomplish in both countries.

My ability to assess the impact of our operations on the Salvadoran guerrillas or the Sandinistas was one advantage of our improved intelligence. Ernesto Sandino won his fame in warfare against U.S. Marines in the 1920s; many Central Americans, and more than a few U.S. experts, had been convinced that there would be a major political convulsion when again Marine boots trod Central American soil.¹¹ The Sandinistas of the mid-1980s were, I had reason to believe, more than a little disquieted over the reappearance of the U.S. Marines in Honduras. In one exercise in 1983, a Marine battalion landing team and a Honduran infantry battalion made a combined landing on the north coast of Honduras, and the commandant of the Marine Corps visited one U.S. Marine position within sight of Nicaragua. The Sandinistas were even more dismayed, knowing the deep-seated enmity between

Hondurans and Salvadorans since the Soccer War of 1969, to witness Honduras acceding to training Salvadoran Army units at the Regional Military Training Center in northern Honduras, a Honduran military facility manned in part by U.S. SOF trainers. And when Costa Ricans and Guatemalans, as well as Salvadorans, took part in combined exercises with U.S. and Honduran troops, they complained of a regional conspiracy aimed at invading Nicaragua.

USSOUTHCOM's operations during the years 1983 to 1985 met the U.S. policy objectives in the theater by giving the Sandinistas pause, and buying time for the Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Costa Ricans. In closing allow me to quote at some length from a judgment published elsewhere on what transpired in Central America during those years.

In early summer of 1983, amid doubts about the very survival of fragile democracies [in Central America], many Central American leaders—and a number of U.S. observers as well—had concluded that a regional war was possible. Cubans and East Europeans were pressing construction night and day on a large new air field at Punta Huete, Nicaragua, a very long concrete runway capable of landing the heaviest Soviet aircraft, with extensive fuel storage, and revetments for a squadron of jet fighters. The Sandinista Army was bombarding Honduras with 122mm. Soviet-made artillery and rockets, and had positioned forward Soviet-supplied tanks and armored personnel carriers. One Honduran general expressed the fear that, literally in hours, the Sandinistas could drive along the Pan American Highway through Honduras into El Salvador to link up with an anticipated final offensive by the guerrillas—a replay of Giap's final offensive in South Vietnam. While U.S. estimates assigned a low probability to such an aggression, it is true that such a thrust would have had a decisive strategic impact on Honduras: it would cut that nation off from the Pacific, and position the Nicaraguans to dictate the end of Honduran support for "Contras" and to resolve in its favor long-standing border quarrels. Honduras was on the verge of national mobilization, and the Salvadoran Army was torn between prosecuting its internal war against increasingly powerful guerrilla units and readying itself to defend against a Nicaraguan armored onslaught from the south.

In that circumstance, the United States adopted a deterrent strategy aimed at bolstering our friends and in-

stilling caution in their foes: a warning was repeated that the United States would not tolerate advanced aircraft in Nicaragua. A U.S. carrier battle group appeared off the Pacific coast, and U.S. Air Force aircraft, specialized for top-down attack of armored vehicles, landed in Honduras. U.S. troops were sent to train Hondurans in constructing anti-armor defenses along the Pan American Highway and to participate in a newly built, regional military training center on the north coast of Honduras. At the highest level, the United States provided strong reassurances to both Salvadoran and Honduran leaders, urging on them priority for internal defense and development rather than preparations for regional conflict.

Assessing deterrence is difficult at best, for claims that the strategy succeeded must skirt the fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. But in this case, the Salvadorans turned their attention from the feared invasion by Sandinista armor back to their real war and to the National Plan they had drawn up with U.S. assistance. The Hondurans pulled back from the border and commenced constructive training exercises with U.S. forces. Punta Huete airfield remained unused, and the Sandinista armor withdrew southward. Deterrence, then, seems to have had the effect of limiting the conflict in terms of intensity, and, by narrowing the options for a would-be aggressor, created a context within which U.S. allies could pursue their own strategic objectives—offensive in the case of the Salvadorans, defensive in the case of the Hondurans. Whether or not U.S. actions intimidated the Sandinistas and their communist backers, they had the effect of heartening democratic friends throughout the region.¹²

One of the primary characteristics of operational art is that it attains strategic objectives which support policy. My experience as the CINC in the Central America theater from 1983 to 1985 provides a clear example of some of the considerations for practicing operational art in a low intensity theater.

NOTES

1. My aide-interpreter Maj. Carl Freeman calculated that I flew over 200,000 miles and spent 30 days aloft in doing so.
2. D. L. Adams and C. R. Newell, "Operational Art in Joint and Combined Arenas", *Parameters* 18, no.2: 33-39.
3. USCINCSO, Prepared Statement, U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, February 23, 1984. Statement was cleared by OSD, but subsequently the Panama desk within the Department of State refused to clear a cable which would have distributed the statement to U.S. country teams within my theater, stating that proper interpretation of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977 limited USCINCSO's authority essentially to defense of the Canal. But the statement expresses what the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs instructed me to do.
4. One key site selected was an austere air base at Palmerola, where the Honduran Air Force gave its pilots their primary training. The United States spent some \$40 million upgrading the facility, and it was fortuitous that the strip was located a few miles from President Suazo's home town, where he had been a physician. U.S. forces brought to Palmerola a mobile Army hospital with first-class laboratory and surgical equipment, and erected a sign to its front proclaiming it the "Roberto Suazo Cordoba Hospital Militar"; the president was delighted and spent much leisure time there exploring its medical capabilities and trading professional insights with our doctors.
5. Report by the Regional Conflict Working Group, Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, Supporting U.S. Strategy for Third World Conflict, Washington, D.C., 1988, p.60.
6. Paper of the Regional Conflict Working Group, Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, Commitment to Freedom—Security Assistance as a U.S. Policy Instrument in the Third World, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 42-45.
7. Beginning in Fiscal Year 1987, Congress appropriated for Department of Defense between \$1 million and \$2 million to pay for participation by developing countries in combined exercises. DOD has interpreted this to mean JCS-directed exercises, but for these, the funds may pay for transportation, rations, quarters, food, and ammunition. Something less than \$1 million was also provided to conduct seminars and planning meetings, and perhaps twice as much to underwrite humanitarian and civil assistance projects in conjunction with combined exercises. This is a small but extremely useful remedy for the aforementioned difficulties.
8. Recent legislation has eased proscriptions against SOF participating in such training of foreigners abroad, but Security Assistance payback provisions remain that can make it difficult for host countries to support SOF-provided training at the levels desired by the United States. Thus, CINCs walk a legal tightrope as they attempt to give their SOF personnel the fullest possible opportunity for quality training and cross-cultural experience.
9. Recent legislation indicates Congress is more tolerant of extending "humanitarian aid" without incurring Security Assistance charges, but again, U.S. commanders must walk a narrow legal line.

10. Certain governors have since denied permission for their state's National Guard units to deploy to Central America, and the matter has been referred to the courts for adjudication.
11. As recently as 1981, the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa denied liberty for Marines aboard an LST on port-call in northern Honduras on just those grounds.
12. Supporting U.S. Strategy for Third World Conflict, *op.cit.*, pp. 23-24.