Turning the Tide

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U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace

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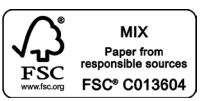

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Free World Vignettes

John Jay, the President of the Continental Congress and the first Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, held that "the people who own the country ought to govern it."[1] His prescription is, in fact, close to the reality. The United States is furthermore unusual in the high degree of class consciousness among the business classes, the extremely low degree of class consciousness (particularly in the current period) on the part of workers, and the general conformity of the intelligentsia. Since World War II, the United States has held a position of dominance in world affairs with few if any historical parallels, though long before, it had become the greatest industrial power by a large margin. US elites were naturally aware of these conditions and determined to exploit the expanded opportunities they offered. They have engaged in careful planning, and have been willing to resort to subversion and violence on an impressive scale to maintain or extend their dominant position, which, according to the reigning doctrinal system, is theirs by right, given the unique virtue of the state that they or their representatives govern.

There are aspects of American history and institutions that lend support to the pretensions of ideologues, but the full story is less pleasant to contemplate, as many have recognized over the years. The founder of the utopian Oneida community, John Humphrey Noyes, described the US in 1830 as "a bloated, swag-

gering libertine...with one hand whipping a negro tied to a liberty-pole, and with another dashing an emaciated Indian to the ground."[2] At the turn of the century, as his compatriots turned from slaughtering Indians to wiping out resisting "niggers" in the Philippines, Mark Twain gave his version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic":[3]

> Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword
> He is searching out the hoardings where the strangers' wealth is stored
> He hath loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored.
> His lust is marching on.

If some Third World revolution today were to reenact US history, with literal human slavery as well as decimation and brutal expulsion of the native population, the reaction would be one of horror and disbelief. We may recall, for example, that the first emancipation proclamation was issued by the British governor of Virginia in 1775, and that slavery was abolished in 1821 in Central America by nations to whom we must teach lessons in "civilization," according to Theodore Roosevelt and other interventionists until the present day.[4] The conquest of the national territory and the exercise of US power in large areas of the world also hardly merit the accolades of the faithful.

No region of the world has been more subject to US influence over a long period than Central America and the Caribbean. The extent and character of US influence are illustrated, for example, by the establishment early in the century of a National Bank of Nicaragua in which the New York Brown Brothers Bank held majority ownership; its board of directors "met in New York and consisted entirely of Brown Brothers' US representatives, except for a token Nicaraguan" while US banks received the revenues of the national rail and steamship lines and a US-run commission required Nicaragua to pay fraudulent "damage

claims" that exceeded total US investment in the country for alleged "damages from civil disorder." Or to take another case, a coup attempt in Honduras in 1923 by a local client of the United Fruit company (which virtually owned the country) led to US military intervention and a settlement arranged by the State Department: "North American power had become so encompassing that U.S. military forces and United Fruit could struggle against each other to see who was to control the Honduran government, then have the argument settled by the U.S. Department of State." The United Fruit client took power in 1932 "and hand-in-hand with United Fruit ruled his country for the next seventeen years."[5] Throughout modern history, much the same has been true.

We naturally look to the Central America-Caribbean region, then, if we want to learn something about ourselves, just as we look to Eastern Europe or the "internal empire" if want to learn about the Soviet Union. The picture we see is not a pretty one. The region is one of the world's most awful horror chambers, with widespread starvation, semi-slave labor, torture and massacre by US clients. Virtually every attempt to bring about some constructive change has been met with a new dose of US violence, even when initiated by Church-based self-help groups or political figures who modelled themselves on Roosevelt's New Deal. We are, once again, living in such a period, in fact, the worst such period, which is saying a good deal.[6]

The region evokes little attention inside the United States as long as discipline reigns. The prevailing unconcern is revealed, for example, by the treatment of Woodrow Wilson's bloody counterinsurgency campaign in the Dominican Republic—or lack thereof; it received its first detailed scholarly examination after 60 years.[7] Or consider the case of William Krehm, *Time* correspondent in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1940s. His book on the region—a rare event in itself—was published in Mexico in 1948 and then elsewhere in Latin America; the original English version

appeared 36 years later.[8] The book jacket states that *Time* refused to publish much of what he submitted for fear of offending large corporations, and that his book was regarded as too controversial by American publishers. Lack of interest, the consequence of lack of credible threats to US control at the time, might well suffice to explain its unavailability. The two books just cited appeared in 1984, a time of challenge to US dominance, hence much concern over the fate of the region. Our lack of interest when the lower orders make no unseemly noises should be a matter of no great pride.

The brutal and corrupt Somoza dictatorship had long been a reliable US ally and a base for the projection of US power: to terminate Guatemalan democracy in 1954, to attack Cuba in 1961, to avert the threat of democracy in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and in El Salvador in 1972.[9] The fall of the dictatorship in 1979, along with a renewed threat to the military regime in Guatemala and the growth of popular organizations in El Salvador, led to increasing US intervention and brought the region to the front pages. Let us consider the picture that comes into focus with this renewed attention.

1 The Miseries of Traditional Life

Among the many dedicated and honorable Americans who went to see for themselves, one of the most impressive is Charles Clements, a graduate of the US Air Force Academy and former pilot in Vietnam, who was sent to a psychiatric hospital when he refused to fly further missions. A committed pacifist, he went to El Salvador in March 1982 and spent a year as the only trained physician in the rebel-controlled Guazapa region 25 miles from San Salvador, a free-fire zone in which any person or object is a legitimate target. There he witnessed the terror of the US-run war against rural El Salvador at first hand, living with the *campesinos*, "many of [whom] have been tortured and mutilated by tormenters who have been trained in the sophisticated tactics

of violence—often by our own military advisers," in the words of Murat Williams, US Ambassador to El Salvador from 1961 to 1964, when the system of efficient state terror was established by the Kennedy Administration.

Clements observed the attacks on villages by planes and helicopter gunships and artillery, the strafing by US-supplied jets aimed specifically against defenseless peasants, the ruins of villages gutted by government forces, the destruction of crops and livestock to ensure starvation, always imminent. As is the regular pattern, the worst atrocities were carried out by US-trained elite battalions (Atlacatl, Ramón Belloso) and by air and artillery units employing tactics designed by the US in Vietnam and taught by US advisers. He treated the bodies mutilated by torture and the victims of attacks with napalm and gasoline bombs and white phosphorus rockets used as anti-personnel weapons against civilians. He heard the stories of people whose families had been hacked to death by National Guardsmen or who had crawled from under a pile of bodies of trapped civilians cut to pieces with machetes and mutilated by US-trained troops, or who had themselves been subjected to horrifying torture receiving no medical aid, since physicians were unwilling to "endanger their lives by treating someone who had been tortured by the security forces." Using a US-made scanner, he could hear the voices of American advisers directing troops on their mass murder missions.

He also witnessed the courage of the *campesinos*, their "sense of community and hope," their schools and rudimentary health services and community programs in the base Christian communities-a revelation to people who had lived for a century as virtual slaves, ever since the oligarchy had taken over most of the land by a combination of legal chicanery and violence to enjoy the profits of the coffee boom—and their "determination to build their new society even while the Salvadoran government sought to destroy them."[10]

But what seems to have impressed him the most were the words of a lay minister of one of the base Christian communities:

> You gringos are always worried about violence done with machine guns and machetes. But there is another kind of violence that you must be aware of, too. I used to work on the hacienda. My job was to take care of the *dueno*'s dogs. I gave them meat and bowls of milk, food that I couldn't give my own family. When the dogs were sick, I took them to the veterinarian in Suchitoto or San Salvador. When my children were sick, the *dueno* gave me his sympathy, but no medicine as they died.
>
> To watch your children die of sickness and hunger while you can do nothing is a violence to the spirit. We have suffered that silently for too many years. Why aren't you gringos concerned about that kind of violence?

The old man was wrong. We gringos are not worried about violence done with machine guns and machetes. Rather, we devote our incomparable wealth and power to ensuring that such violence proceeds unhindered, and we laud its successes, joined by the suppliers of French tanks, Israeli guns and planes and napalm, German, Swiss and Belgian weapons, and other civilized people whose outrage knows no bounds when the lower orders threaten to break their bonds, but who are otherwise content to look the other way. But his comment is nevertheless to the point. The violence of everyday life in the domains of our influence and control is not deemed a fit topic of attention or concern except at moments when order is threatened.

A vignette of normal life is given by US journalist Tom Buckley, who visited a coffee plantation in El Salvador in 1981.[11] Most of the workers and their families lived in a long one-story building, with a room about 10 feet square for each family of 2 adults and many children, and privies 50 feet down the hill. Some of the new showcase *ranchitos* were a bit larger:

> As residences for agricultural labor go in El Salvador, they were not bad, but the furnishings were mean and sparse, and the atmosphere was one of hopelessness and squalor.

> An old woman sat in front of one of the *ranchitos*. Her left ankle and leg were bandaged with rags halfway to the knee. She said she thought her ankle might be broken. Hernandez [the manager, who ran the plantation for absentee landlords in Florida] asked her if she had been to see the paramedic. She hadn't, she said. She was unable to hobble to the clinic, and he, it seemed, did not make house calls. A younger woman sat in a hammock in front of another *ranchito*. At her side was a cradle improvised out of a basket. An infant lay in it, motionless. Its belly was bloated, and its limbs and face were so thin that the skin was translucent. Hernandez asked what was wrong. "It is his stomach," the woman said. "The food does him no good." She said that she had taken the infant to a physician but that he had told her nothing could be done. Her voice was vague and monotonous, as though speaking taxed her energy unbearably.
>
> "I don't think she took him at all," Hernandez said when we had returned to the station wagon. "It may sound terrible to say, but having children die is so common that it is accepted. It's no big thing to these people."

Hernandez's point is reiterated by Jeane Kirkpatrick, chief sadist-in-residence of the Reagan Administration, on the basis of her vast experience with peasant life in the Third World:[12]

> Traditional autocrats [the ones we do and should support, Kirkpatrick explains] leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources which in most traditional societies favor an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. But they worship traditional gods and observe traditional taboos. They do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations. Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill.

Kirkpatrick adds further that "Such societies create no refugees": only 20% of the population of the Caribbean who have come to the United States, many illegally, to escape grinding poverty and oppression (40% from Puerto Rico where access is

easier), including 40,000 from Haiti since 1979, many of them "boat people" whom the Carter Administration attempted to force back to the misery from which they fled "with full regard to the Administration policy of human rights," so its spokesman assured us—not to speak of a huge flow of refugees from the terror-and-torture states established since the 1960s with US backing, including some 20% of the population of Uruguay, well over 100,000 victims of Somoza's terror by 1978, 140,000 boat people fleeing the Philippines to Sabah in the mid-1970s, and on, and on; and the even greater numbers of internal refugees fleeing state terror or herded into "secure areas" by the state terrorists.[13] This vast flood of refugees furthermore increased dramatically as a direct consequence of the policies to which Kirkpatrick was to make a notable contribution soon after having delivered herself of these pronouncements, which much impressed Reagan's staff. In El Salvador, "approximately one quarter of all Salvadorans have fled [or have been forcibly expelled] from their homes," including many who flee in terror to the United States, where US authorities seek to return them to privation, torture and assassination. In 1984, only 93 Salvadorans and no Guatemalans, of the 1 million who had fled these countries, were legally admitted to the US as refugees; only 1% of Guatemalans and 3% of Salvadorans were granted asylum as compared with 52% of Bulgarians and 51% of Russians, countries where the miseries of ordinary life, or the very threat to existence, do not begin to compare with what is endured in these long-term beneficiaries of US solicitude.[14]

The picture described by the lay minister in El Salvador or by Tom Buckley can be duplicated in large parts of the world. The "habitual patterns" are captured by a character in Ignazio Silone's rendition of peasant life in southern Italy in his classic *Fontamara*, describing the hierarchy of "traditional life":

> At the head of everything is God, the Lord of Heaven.
> Everyone knows that.

Then comes Prince Torlonia, lord of the earth.
Then come Prince Torlonia's guards.
Then come Prince Torlonia's guards' dogs.
Then, nothing at all.
Then, nothing at all.
Then, nothing at all.
Then come the peasants. And that's all.

Adapting the picture to our domains, it is only necessary to insert the United States, a shade removed from the Lord of Heaven and doing His holy work, as our leaders have often told us.

2 Challenge and Response: Nicaragua

What Buckley saw is the kind of society that we have helped to create and sustain through a century of intervention, and that we are now attempting to secure or restore. Sometimes, these habitual patterns are threatened, as today in Nicaragua, where the priorities of the Sandinista government "meant that Nicaragua's poor majority would have access to, and be the primary beneficiaries of, public programs" in accordance with the "logic of the majority," a concept which "implies redistribution of access to wealth and public services" to the benefit of the poor majority, and support for "mass organizations" that "involve very large numbers of people in the decisions that affect their lives."[15] At such moments, normal life undergoes some changes: two kinds of change, in fact. Let us look further into each of these.

One kind of change is illustrated in a report by Jethro Pettit, Desk officer for Latin America of Oxfam America:[16]

> "Before the revolution we didn't participate in anything. We only learned to make tortillas and cook beans and do what our husbands told us. In only five years we have seen a lot of changes—and we're still working on it!"
>
> Esmilda Flores belongs to an agricultural cooperative in the mountains north of Esteli, Nicaragua. Together with seven other women and 15 men, she works land that was formerly a coffee plantation owned by an absentee landlord.

> After the revolution in 1979, the families who had worked the land became its owners. They have expanded production to include corn, beans, potatoes, cabbages, and dairy cows.
>
> "Before, we had to rent a small plot to grow any food," Flores said. "And we had to pay one-half of our crop to the landlord! Now we work just as hard as before—both in the fields and at home—but there's a difference, because we're working for ourselves."
>
> Women in Nicaragua, as in most of rural Latin America, carry an enormous workload, [as throughout the Third World]. Not only are they a mainstay of the agricultural labor force (40 percent of Nicaragua's farm laborers are women), but they are responsible for child care, food preparation, and most domestic chores.
>
> Women's roles did not suddenly change with the revolution. But there has been a pronounced shift in cultural attitudes as a result of their strong participation in Nicaragua's social reconstruction. Women have taken the lead in adult literacy programs, both as students and teachers. They have assumed key roles in rural health promotion and in vaccination campaigns...

Pettit goes on to describe the new rural organizations that aim to improve living and working conditions for farm laborers, offer training, technical advice, credit, seeds and tools, and so on. Clements reports similar developments in the rebel-held area of El Salvador where he worked, as have many others, though rarely in the US press.[17]

But these are not the only consequences that ensue when the pack animals who endure traditional life fail to appreciate properly that its miseries are quite bearable in Washington. Here is an example of a different kind of change, reported by a mother of two from Estell, near Esmilda Flores's cooperative:[18]

> Five of them raped me at about five in the evening...they had gang-raped me every day. When my vagina couldn't take it anymore, they raped me through my rectum. I calculate that in 5 days they raped me 60 times.

The "freedom fighters" dispatched from Washington also