

JOTTINGS

Central America: nothing new under the sun

With Central America looming large in our news in recent months and, from all indications, promising to remain a major concern in the future, assessing current developments in the countries to our south may be put in better perspective and seen in more enlightened ways if we know something of the area's past history.

Most of us know that highly-developed Indian cultures and civilizations, dating back more than 2,000 years, existed on the Central American isthmus and among our immediate neighbors, the Mexicans, and that several Central American countries are archeological treasure-houses of the world.

After Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes landed at Veracruz in the sixteenth century and, in 1519, conquered the Indians led by Montezuma, the territory, called New Spain, stretched from Guatemala in the south to the present-day states of California, New Mexico, and Texas, and included, as well, parts of Utah and Colorado, in the north. Spain claimed this entire enormous area as its colony, converted the Indians to Roman Catholicism, and held the people in virtual slavery until 1821.

In 1810 a Mexican priest, Miguel Hidalgo, initiated a rebellion against the Spanish yoke that culminated in 1821, under leadership of Agustin de Iturbide and Vicente Guerrero, in driving Spain from Central America. Iturbide

became emperor, ruled for a year, but was then deposed. The Central American Federation, a union of the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, was established in 1822; the federation survived until 1838 when it was dissolved and the member countries became republics. Not until 1940, however, did Mexican affairs achieve political stability.

In Mexico, succeeding decades were marked by political turmoil, divisions, and disputes; finally, after the Mexican War with the United States (1846-48), Mexico was forced to cede almost half its territory to our country.

Sparsely populated Nicaragua shares Mexico's early history; shortly after Columbus arrived in 1502, Nicaragua, then a part of Guatemala, fell under Spain's control; so it remained until the 1821 expulsion of Spain from Central America. From 1822 through 1838, when the Central American Federation was dissolved, the country was a member of that union.

Civil strife has marked Nicaragua's history from that day to this, culminating in the overthrow by assassination of dictator Anastasio Somoza who ruled with an iron fist from 1937 to 1956. He was succeeded first by his son, Luis; second, by Rene Schick, a man endorsed by the official Somoza party. Schick served as president until his death in 1966. Another

son of Somoza, also Anastasio, assumed the presidency at Schick's death. In the late 1970s, Somoza was deposed by the pro-communist Sandanistas. Nicaragua, about the size of the state of Iowa, 50,198 square miles, has a population of around 2,500,000.

El Salvador, the smallest (8,261 square miles) country of the isthmus, is its most densely populated with over 4,000,000 people. Before the Spanish conquest, El Salvador was called Land of Jewels; it was the home of Aztec-related Pipil Indians. When Spanish rule terminated in 1821, El Salvador was absorbed into the Mexican Empire. Like Nicaragua, El Salvador joined the Central American Federation in 1822; when it collapsed in 1838, El Salvador became a republic.

Internal strife, military dictatorships, and international rivalries followed one after another until 1931 when General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez took control of the government; he held power until 1944, but neglected land, tax, and social reforms. The military seized the government in 1961 under Col. Rivera who ruled more benevolently until 1967, when agitation for further reforms toppled his government. The country has known nothing but political turmoil ever since.

At the moment, our foothold in Central America seems set in Honduras, a small country with an area of 43,277 square miles, and a population of about 3,000,000.

A center of Mayan civilization before 900 A.D., Honduras' mountains, some topping 7,500 feet, suffered invasions by rivaling Spanish, French, and Mexicans until, like its neighbors, it declared independence in 1821, and later joined the Central American Federation. Honduras, too, knew decades of internal political battles for control of government as well as external interferences from neighboring states, particularly from Nicaragua and Guatemala. In this century's first quarter, American marines were sent several times to protect United States lives and property there. Dictatorships, revolutions, and military coups have been common in Honduras throughout the 20th century.

Into this muddled sea of struggle for power, the United States, once again, has dipped its oar of political and military influence; Congressional investigators, concerned that our laws are being broken, have learned through questioning CIA and Pentagon spokesmen the following:

CIA briefers report that most of the logistics involved in the U.S. campaign to curb growing leftist movements in Central America are controlled by the Honduran military, commanded by General Alvarez. Alvarez has detailed a small group of his brightest officers to serve as liaison with Americans and Nicaraguans. The Honduran army initially armed Nicaraguan rebels (anti-Sandanistas) with supplies of weapons and munitions which Washington promised to replace. United States operatives now arrange shipments of newer and more powerful weapons to the Nicaraguan rebels through Hondurans. These are delivered by the United States to the Honduran army which, in turn, puts them in Nicaraguan rebels' hands. Soviet weapons, captured by Israelis in Lebanon and by anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan, are shipped to Honduras, providing fire power far beyond, proportionally, the 2,000 to 3,000 Miskito Indians who are fighting the Sandanistas in the northeastern portion of Nicaragua.

Pentagon spokesman, Col. Burch, confirms that AWACS aircraft have operated in the Caribbean and over Central America and may do so in the future.

Honduran military sources confirm that U.S. military aircraft, loaded with sophisticated monitoring equipment, patrol the Honduran-Nicaraguan border in addition to air and sea lanes between Nicaragua and Cuba. President Reagan does not deny these reports. He says the U.S. campaign continues to "interdict" the flow of weapons to El Salvador and to gather intelligence on Sandanista and Cuban activities in Nicaragua.

Congressional sources say President Reagan signed in November, 1981, a "presidential finding" certifying the need for a covert CIA campaign to stem the unrest that he accused Nicaragua and Cuba of sowing throughout Central America. The finding was accompanied by a \$20 million budget to expand CIA operations.

Complicating the intervention in Central America by the United States is the voiced Soviet threat to station nuclear missiles in Nicaragua if the U.S. bases new missiles in Western Europe.

Congress has been told by the CIA that virtual day-to-day control over guerrillas fighting the Sandanista government in Nicaragua, pinpointing their targets, and plotting their attacks, has been assumed by agents of the CIA. Also, that the CIA role shifted, in recent weeks, from armslength contacts with the guerrillas to face-to-face and daily direction of the rebel forces who vow to overthrow the Nicaraguan leftist Sandanista government.

The United States Congress is now investigating the CIA operations because there is serious fear that the agency's covert operations may be out of control and, in addition, be in violation of this country's laws. By law, the CIA is limited to using the Nicaraguan rebels to interdict alleged weapons shipments from Nicaragua to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

There you have it.

By refreshing our memories with a brief and sketchy review of the territory's historical background, we Americans may be better equipped to decide how deeply involved we wish ourselves to become in Latin American politics and civil strife.

Clearly the United States is already playing a major role in the internal affairs of several Central American countries where turmoil has been a geo-political reality for over 150 years.

Are we to remain involved, or are we to withdraw and allow Central Americans to settle their own affairs? Or will the intervention of the Soviets in these same affairs inevitably draw us more deeply into conflict?

What is our commitment? Are we prepared to fight to win?

It appears, today, that our leaders run the risks of muddying the waters while at the same time pretending to rest on their oars as they assure our citizens that our presence in Latin America is limited to observation and advisory capacities.

It all has a familiar ring. That's how we started in Viet Nam. That's how we started in the Middle East.

If these are our concerns, our wars, let's get on with it and, if necessary, fight to win. If we're not prepared for that, let's beach our boat, pick up our oars and other gear, and skedaddle for home.