

The Arms Race in Central America

The United States has turned the region into a testing ground for Low Intensity Warfare

The new regime that followed the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979 was the key that opened a particularly violent decade for all of Central America. The Nicaraguan example and the revolutionary movements' growing strength in El Salvador and Guatemala, were all perceived as a threat by the United States. The U.S. response was to increase military aid to its allies and to turn the region into a testing ground for what so-called Low Intensity Warfare (LIW).

This program's precedent is in the U.S. strategic defense doctrine known as "flexible response", which during the 60's led to the creation of the Central American

Defense Council (CONDECA). The United States justified its recommendation that this body be set up under the mantle of the Organization of Central American States by arguing that it was necessary to wage a coordinated battle against internal subversion following the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba.

Luis Albarrán, correspondent in El Salvador for the Mexican daily *Excelsior*, wrote on May 9, 1986, that "the U.S. still considers CONDECA an anticommunist army." He also quoted a high-placed Salvadoran official who claimed that "Central Americans tend to regard it as a way of obtaining more aid" for their individual countries.

Around the same time the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA), stated in an article that regarding Nicaragua, CONDECA "might play a similar role to the one played by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States which 'called for' the intervention in Grenada in October of 1983."

The War's Intensity

CONDECA was apparently conceived with specific conjunctural needs in mind. However, despite the alarming magnitude of the joint maneuvers, displacement of

lates is the subordination of military aspects to political ones in order to avoid direct involvement of U.S. troops, it makes sense to view CONDECA's intervention as a possible tactical resource.

Up to now the thrust of Low Intensity Warfare has moved in several directions, operating simultaneously on various levels, influencing U.S. institutions and public opinion as well as the United States' Central American allies. In this sense, the following points are revealing:

1. Significant efforts have been made to create a civilian-military governmental



military forces beyond their own national territory seems to be a last resort option within the framework of Low Intensity Warfare. Considering that one of LIW's main postu-

agency in the U.S. to coordinate the political, diplomatic and military aspects of aid to the contra and to allied governments in the region.

2. There has been an important display of public relations campaigns and psychological propaganda programs designed to obtain the support of Central American public opinion.

3. Considerable emphasis has been placed on exerting pressure and carrying out plans which allied governments in the region can use to secure the adhesion and support of their own people (for example, carrying out elections.)

4. Light-weight weapons for use in irregular warfare by highly mobile units, are being designed and manufactured often with Israeli support.

5. Plans have been drawn

Who Is a Threat to Whom?

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	Nicaragua	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Soldiers	60,000	51,000	56,000	25,000
Militias or paramilitary personnel	110,000	941,000	136,000	
Airplanes	25	77	117	157
Helicopters	16	25	46	55

SOURCE: Council on Hemispheric Affairs (Washington). The New York Times. U.S. State Department. Lieutenant Colonel Edward King (in *EI D'a of Mexico*).

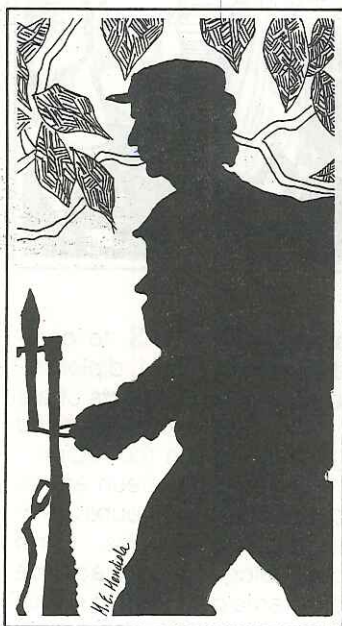
Military installations built by the United States in Honduras have considerably increased the power of the Central American nation's air force.

up to avoid using U.S. troops on foreign soil but which contemplate aerial or naval attacks, and covert action by U.S. Special Operations Forces.

6. These forces have increased their role in training and advising anticommunist forces in the region.

The Weapons

The strategic objective of Low Intensity Warfare in Central America is Nicaragua, although revolutionary movements throughout the region are also included. This is why the Reagan Administration



has accused Nicaragua of threatening the region by significantly increasing its weaponry. It has also turned Honduras into an enormous military base and the other countries in the region into bases of logistical support, training, intelligence and propaganda for the contra.

"In less than five years the Sandinistas have built the largest and best equipped military force in Central America," according to the

U.S. State and Defense Departments in a July 18, 1984 publication entitled "Background Paper: Nicaragua's Military Build-up and Support for Central American Subversion." Facts and figures, such as the above, quoted by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) in mid-1985 in "The Military Balance in Central America: An Analysis and Critical Evaluation of Administration Claims", indicate that at that point Nicaragua had 61,800 troops, El Salvador 51,150, Honduras 25,000 and Guatemala 51,600. Costa Rica, for its part, has 9,800 Civil and Rural Guards and a light army of civilian militia comprising some 10,000 men. According to the COHA document, reliable sources report that Costa Rica is un-officially developing armed groups based on the Salvadoran ORDEN model.

As for heavy mobile equipment, Nicaragua has 193 armoured vehicles and tanks, although not all are operational because most date back to the Somoza era, are U.S. manufactured and thus are lacking in spare parts. Honduras has 73 armoured vehicles and tanks, all in good operating conditions, and El Salvador has roughly the same number. Guatemala has 57 of these vehicles.

In terms of air power, the Nicaraguan Air Force has 58 units including both planes and helicopters. Honduras, for its part, has 137 airborne units, including its powerful fleet of 20 French Dassault Super-Mystere B-22 fighter bombers, recently modernized by the Israelis.

It should also be added that U.S. military construction in Honduras has considerably increased their air forces' ability to maneuver. These include the airports at Aguacate, Puerto Lempira

and Palmerola, while the U.S. also built a sophisticated radar station on a hill southeast of Tegucigalpa called La Mole.

The Salvadoran Air Force has over 200 airborne units, among them 41 combat planes and over one hundred helicopters of various models. Guatemala has 131 airborne units including combat and logistical support airplanes and armoured helicopters.

In terms of artillery and anti-aircraft equipment, global data indicates that Nicaragua possesses around 388 pieces

try, while the U.S. State Department insists that there are between 2,000 and 3,000, plus an additional hundred or more advisors from Eastern European and Middle East countries.

The stated figure for Honduras is 100 permanent foreign advisors. However, there were more than 6,000 U.S. advisors and military personnel in that country during the Big Pine II maneuvers in 1983. In sum, more than 85,000 U.S. military personnel have passed through Honduras over the last four years.



Arsenal of a counterrevolutionary group fighting the Sandinista government.

including mortars, howitzers, rocket launchers and cannons of different calibers. In 1981 France sold Nicaragua 7,000 SS-11 land-land dirigible missiles and SS-12 land-land anti-tank missiles. El Salvador has about 50 similar units, Guatemala has 72 and Honduras has 24 fixed pieces, although this does not include artillery used in joint military maneuvers nor the war power the U.S. has set up in that country. On the other hand, Honduras' relatively low artillery power could be tied to the superiority of its air force *vis a vis* Nicaragua.

Finally, the controversial issue of foreign advisors and military personnel in the region can be summed up in the following figures. According to the Nicaraguan government there are 786 Cuban military advisors in their coun-

COHA reports 97 U.S. advisors in El Salvador. But the Salvadoran press agency SALPRESS, on the other hand, indicated that as of 1986 the government of this small Central American nation had only officially recognized 55 U.S. advisors, although other sources quote figures as high as 300, in addition to 100 Israeli advisors.

Costa Rica has over 20 foreign military advisors, and this not counting personnel engaged in building roads and bridges along the Nicaraguan border. Up to the end of 1983, Guatemala had 23 officially recognized foreign advisors.

A final word for thought is in order. If these figures are even half-way accurate, then who is threatening whom.

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