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# THE TIMES AND CENTRAL AMERICA

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## DISINFORMATION IN L.A.

The paper of record in Los Angeles cannot be believed about Central America. Just why it misinforms and disinforms its readers is an explanation it owes the public.

### BAD TIMES FOR CENTRAL AMERICA:

It was all there in black and white. Seymour Hersh's blockbuster *New York Times Magazine* expose on the covert operation that CIA Director William Casey was running not only on the press, but also inside the U.S. government. The 1981 front-page news story about Libyan hit teams? A total "fabrication" by Casey and Company, Hersh reported. The "irrefutable evidence," cited by the president and quoted by the press, that Libya was behind the West German disco bombing? This evidence, it turns out, was rejected by the German investigative police as inconclusive, and never even handed over to the National Security Agency's own North Africa experts for confirmation and interpretation — instead, it was routed directly to the White House. Nevertheless, on April 14 the U.S. "retaliated" for the unproven or nonexistent Libyan complicity in the disco attack by dropping 2,000-pound bombs on Libyan "terrorist and military installations."

To what purpose? As Hersh reveals, the "primary goal" of the U.S. attack was to "assassinate Qadhafi and his family." In sum, a carefully crafted White House/CIA/State Department campaign of disinformation and deceit was used to cover an American initiative to unseat a Third World regime. We therefore now know the source of the hundreds of "authoritative" reports we have been spoon-fed over the last six years about the "threat" of Libyan terrorism: William Casey's diseased mind. (For more on this subject see the Disinformationgate cover story.)

All this brings me to the tenor of coverage afforded Central America by the local paper of record: the *Los Angeles Times*. No observer with an IQ half his body weight can doubt that the Reagan administration has been employing precisely the same sort of disinformation campaign used in the case of Libya against its other foreign policy obsessions: Nicaragua and El Salvador. Inexplicably, however, the *Times*, despite its aggressive and first-rate pursuit of the Irangate story, continues to act as a simple State Department Xerox machine on Central America. A most telling example was the *Times* of three Sundays ago. Although virtually every day there are new revelations of administration lying and disinformation, the *Times*' front-page lead headline — a two-column banner in most editions — warned: "More Cubans May Be in Nicaragua." Then again, they may not be. Reporter Dan Shannon, in being allowed to revive and rattle the Cuban Commie Bogeyman, could only cite a single source: an "unnamed official" who in turn was quoting unspecified "State Department reports." You cannot get any more transparent. Why would the *Times* so blithely allow itself to be used in such a blatant way to support the administration's latest push for aid to the contras? (Another vote is imminent.) Why would its editors, in the current atmosphere, give front-page lead space to a report not even mentioned in most other papers? To explore this question, one has to know first that the *Times* has a long history of consistently and unquestioningly using its pages to funnel propaganda and disinformation to its readers on the subject of Central America.

A clarification is necessary here: The *Times*' editorial-page position on Central America has been excellent, probably the very best in the country in a daily newspaper. The unsigned editorials that appear as the voice of the paper have been relentlessly critical of the administration's hemispheric policies. Noteworthy too have been some signed op-ed pieces by *Times* staffer Frank Del Omo. Also, the Sunday Opinion section run by Art Seidenbaum has, though with a more mixed record, provided a number of insightful debunkings of Reagan's Central America policy.

The problem, however, is in the news pages: in the day-to-day reporting — or non-reporting — of events on the ground. The defective coverage of Latin America is a long-running characteristic of the *Times*. So negligent was the paper in the early '70s (around the time of the coup in Chile) that Los Angeles-area Latin America scholars and professors organized a collective protest against the paper's foreign news department, to some effect. There can be no question that the *Times* has improved and expanded its coverage in the last decade, and, on the issue of Central America, even ran up a couple of notable exceptions of excellence in Laurie Becklund's ground-breaking series on the death squads (though even that was held up from publication for months by queasy editors) and a 1985 series on the CIA's role in creating the contras. But in general, in no other area of coverage in recent years has the *Times* been so consistently derelict or owed a greater accounting to its readers for the disservice rendered them.

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The *Times*' coverage has been "marked by a self-restraint in challenging the official government version of events in Central America," says Dr. Marjorie Bray of the Cal State L.A. Latin American Studies Center. "They go with the flow. At best they nibble at the edges," she adds. Dr. Blase Bonpane, director of the Santa Monica-based Office of the Americas, agrees: "I have been impressed by the editorial stance of the *Times*, but their news coverage is weak on Central America. They have failed to show an understanding of the hopes of the Nicaraguan people. They play the game that El Salvador, that Guatemala, that Honduras are democracies. This is unacceptable." From the *Times*' history of Central America reporting, some ugly illustrative examples:

**LIBYAN HIT SQUADS, NICA MIGS AND CUBANS:** The Cuba story of three weeks ago was an exact replay of the November 1984 Nicaraguan MiG Crisis, in reality no crisis at all except in how it affected the credibility of the U.S. press. "Reagan Warns Against Any MiGs in Nicaragua" was the headline that kicked that campaign off, just two days after Nicaragua's first free elections in half a century. The origin of the MiG-scare story was literally a fourth-hand unconfirmed source: "intelligence reports" (read: disinformation) broadcast by NBC and CBS, then picked up by the *Associated Press*, and then run by the *Times*. The next day of the "crisis" the *Times* put its own Doyle McManus on the story, bannered with a two-inch-high bold headline screeching: "U.S. Warns Soviets on Jets: Might Strike Bases." McManus, who has been doing some penetrating reporting as of late on *Irangate*, on that occasion failed to produce even one source for the "possibility" (as he put it) that such jets even existed. More accurate headlines for the above two stories on the MiG scare would have been: "Reagan Threatens Nicaragua Again" and "Reagan Poised To Attack Nicaragua: No Evidence Cited."

The MiG scare was generated by the White House because Nicaragua *dared* to have elections that further legitimized the Sandinista government.

And why was the *L.A. Times* right there next to Reagan, Shultz and Abrams, kicking and pummeling the Sandinistas? One can only conclude that the *Times* had a *pre-conceived* notion about the impossibility of free elections and was now out to prove it. That the elections were to institutionalize a *de facto* revolutionary regime, that they would lead to the creation of a national parliament (based largely on the U.S. Congress and not on the model of the

"people's democracies"), that the new elected assembly would write a constitution, that opposition parties not only were permitted to run but received public financing for their campaigns and were given equal air time on Sandinista television, and that, in general, Nicaragua had gone as far as any revolutionary government in history in moving quickly and seriously toward democratic institutions, was all turned on its head — either distorted or for the most part ignored — by the *Times*. On the impact of the vote on Nicaragua's future, reporter William Long editorialized in the news section on election eve that the expected Sandinista victory would give the government the "confidence to radicalize." Long made no effort in his article to substantiate the sweeping charge, and his editors let the statement go unchallenged. And while the last two years of history have proved Long dead wrong, given Sandinista moderation on regional peace talks, on the Miskito question and on revised land-reform policies, very little on the Sandinistas' shift has appeared in the *Times*' news columns. (And since it certainly doesn't appear on TV, readers might question whether these events took place — I assure you they have.)

Long also listed every complaint lodged by the right-wing coalition that boycotted the election, a coalition that we later learned — from the *London Times* — had been paid to do so by the U.S. Embassy. The same coalition that was led by the "moderate" Arturo Cruz, who we have now learned was receiving a \$7,000 per month salary from one Lt. Col. Oliver North. Long's election-preview piece also found time to quote President Reagan calling Nicaragua a "totalitarian dungeon." Long finished his "analysis" of the Nica election by reminding us that Daniel Ortega "lacks charismatic spark . . . his speeches drone . . . and he seems ill-suited for a political ruler." All these epithets were repeated two days later in an election follow-up and then, if you can believe it, 15 months later in a Long-written "profile" of Ortega.

The *Times* report on the election itself was co-written by Long and Dan Williams, but might as well have been co-authored by Alexander Haig and Elliot Abrams. Its lead sentence began: "Mustered to the polls by Sandinista Self-Defense Committees and Youth Brigades, Nicaraguans voted Sunday . . ." They did so, readers were told falsely, because "rumors circulated [*How's that for good sourcing?*] . . . that people who didn't vote . . . would be punished." There was no mention of a national assembly, of a constitution, or of evidence, gathered by so many other reporters for so many other publications, that the Nicaraguan population by and large seemed eager to vote, and to vote two to one in favor of the Sandinistas.

**BALLOTS AND BULLETS:** Two years before, when El Salvador staged demonstration elections in order to qualify for an increase in U.S. aid, the *Times* was, by contrast, *ecstatic*. Its simplistic news frame: Budding U.S.-supported democracy overcomes communist guerrilla subversion and holds remarkably "free" elections leading to the promise of a better life for all. Compare Long and Williams' lead on the Nica vote with the late Dial Torgerson's deliriously joyous dispatch from San Salvador on March 29, 1982, headlined "Salvadoran Voters Jam Polls": "Defying guerrilla warnings . . . Salvadorans jammed polling places as El Salvador struggled toward a legally elected government." Further on: "Foreign experts said it was probably the most honest election in Salvadoran history." Those "experts" are later identified as the official team of U.S.-chosen observers on a State Department-paid junket. Why not ask the Salvadorans instead of the Americans what they thought about the elections? Had Torgerson done so he might have gotten the kind of answers many other reporters did, including me as I reported on the voting for *The Village Voice*. "Voting is an obligation. What would happen to me if I showed up at work and they checked my ID card and found that I didn't vote?" an accountant told me as he waited in line in Santa Tecla. Or maybe he'd have gotten a response like that of a 19-year-old student who told me, "I'm here because I am afraid. There's a lot of people here just like me." In none of the *Times*' coverage of the Salvadoran elections was there any mention of the televised speech (not a rumor) by then-defense minister General Guillermo Garcia warning Salvadorans that if they *didn't* vote they would be considered subversives. This at a time when 500 "subversives" a month were being murdered, many found with their sliced-off genitals stuffed in their mouths. Nor did the *Times* mention that all voters had their ID cards stamped with indelible ink for future checking, which would have revealed the primary reason that Salvadorans felt the "life-saving"

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need to have voted.

While the *Times* didn't fail to mention that the Nicaraguan vote took place with some censorship imposed on the rightist U.S.-financed paper *La Prensa*, it omitted the fact that in El Salvador any remnant of the opposition press had been *dynamited, bombed, and its editors killed or driven into exile*. While the *Times* reported "Sandinista mobs" disrupting opposition election rallies, it failed to report that the Salvadoran vote took place at a time when the opposition was completely outlawed and when, in the previous 12 months, as many as 10,000 real or suspected oppositionists had been butchered by death squads (which the *Times* itself would later report were tied directly to the U.S.-trained army). And while it refused to report accurately the changes in the system that Nicaraguans were voting on, in the case of El Salvador the *Times* gave ample space to buttressing the massive propaganda effort undertaken by the administration to "sell" the Salvadoran elections — and the ghoulish regime they legitimized — to the Congress and ultimately to the public at large. Two days before the vote even took place, the slavishly pro-administration **Robert Toth** led his *Times* report with the statement, "Top administration officials said . . . that the U.S. expects any [Salvadoran] government elected on Sunday to continue land reform and other reforms already underway." Toth, of course, didn't specify the nature of those reforms because, as virtually the entire informed world knows, they existed only in the minds of the State Department.

**A SONOVABITCH, BUT OURS:** More than two years after the first Salvadoran vote, *Times* reporters were still singing the marvels of U.S.-financed democracy. During the March 1984 Salvadoran presidential elections, the vote was again portrayed as a democratic challenge to guerrilla violence. Here's a gem: **William Montalbano**, 48 hours before the vote, writes that "the specter of stepped-up guerrilla violence clouded last-minute preparations for the elections." We then hear from a "U.S. official" who congratulates the democratic army of El Salvador for having "done a damn good job" of preventing guerrilla attacks. But, curiously, in the 32nd of this article's 36 paragraphs, we read that the guerrillas announced they were planning *no* attacks (and none took place)! Why, then, the article in the first place? Clearly it was *only* because **Montalbano**, for whatever his and the *Times'* reasons, chose to reinforce the U.S. Embassy's official line, even though that line was manufactured purely to set the "proper" atmosphere for reporting on the "brave" U.S.-financed democrats about to elect themselves to office.

Six months later, with **Napoleon Duarte** already in office, **Dan Williams** was still swooning over Washington's favorite Salvadoran, describing Duarte as "the Third Force personified . . . He has a non-radical approach . . . and has suffered at the hands of the right." Williams didn't notice that "non-radical" Duarte presided over the military-civilian junta during the period in which 18,000 civilians were murdered by security forces; nor that Duarte is the man who decreed the state of siege under which all civil liberties continue to be suppressed; nor that at the time Williams wrote his piece Duarte was condoning the underreported air war against Salvadoran civilians, which caused thousands of casualties and forced tens of thousands to flee their homes. Rather than being a man who has "suffered" at the hands of the right, Duarte has perpetuated the suffering of the Salvadoran people by renting himself out as a democratic fig leaf for one of the most retrograde, vicious right-wing power elites in the hemisphere.

**THEIR DISSIDENTS AND OURS:** Let a Nicaraguan contra leader visiting Washington so much as sneeze and *Times* reporters are all over the place measuring wind velocity, decibel range and environmental impact. But what kind of press treatment is given to opponents of "friendly" regimes like El Salvador's? "When it comes to human-rights questions, when it comes to representatives of Salvadoran human-rights groups or church groups coming through L.A., we get no coverage from the *Times*," says **Sara Stephens**, human-rights director for local refugee-assistance center **El Rescate**.

In May 1986 **El Rescate** sent a team to El Salvador to investigate the impact of U.S. training on Salvadoran police methods and practices. The team's research found, unsurprisingly, that torture was a routine part of both interrogation and imprisonment for political detainees; that detainees are denied legal aid as well as trials; and that the American embassy has done little, if anything, to ameliorate the situation. When the **El Rescate** group returned to L.A. they held a press conference to detail their findings. The *Times* didn't come. Nor, according to **El Rescate**, has any reporter from the *Times* bothered to make a single follow-up call about the "human-rights bulletins" sent out by **El Rescate** on a regular basis during the past year. "We have gotten adequate coverage on human-interest stories, refugee stories, you know, individual cases," says Stephens. "But on human rights we get no response."

In a similar vein, last fall the **Marin Interfaith Task Force** sent out a detailed report called "Torture in El Salvador," which centered specifically on the torture of imprisoned human-rights officials. The *Times* news department ignored the report. A copy was sent to the Opinion editor, **Art Seidenbaum**, who, in rejecting publication of the report's findings, told its authors, "We really have . . . no staff for making a 1,500-word article out of a large series of reports." Given that Seidenbaum could have asked a staff reporter, or a freelance academic specialist, or even an intern, to review the report, what he really meant was he had *no desire* to print it.

"The biggest problem with the *Times* is whenever anti-intervention activities take place here in L.A., it is almost always conspicuously ignored," says **Bobbi Murray**, who from 1984 to '86 coordinated **Information Central America**, a task force of local activists trying to "enhance the media's understanding" of El Salvador and Nicaragua. Murray complains that, for example, **Medical Aid for El Salvador's** 1984 campaign to expose the use of incendiary explosives (napalm and white phosphorus) by the Duarte regime was all but ignored by the *Times*. "In June 1984 **Medical Aid** held a press conference with [actor] **Mike Farrell** to show the pictures we had gotten of civilian burn victims and to read firsthand testimony of white phosphorus use. Our info made it onto TV, but again, the *Times* reported nothing." Two months later, **Medical Aid** sent a delegation — including a staff and a Harvard medical specialist — to El Salvador to more closely investigate napalm use. In an interview with then-**Medical Aid** director **Cristina Cortright**, U.S. Ambassador **Thomas Pickering** admitted for the first time that, indeed, the Salvadoran Air Force had "stockpiles" of napalm. This story was broken prominently by **Wayne Biddle**, reporting for *The New York Times*.

Murray says she then called the *L.A. Times* to point out the story and to show that it even had a "local" angle in that the revelation of napalm stocks was the result of an investigation by a Los Angeles group. "I explained all this to the Metro desk," says Murray, "but all I got was a snide response. I was told, 'We don't have our man in El Salvador, **Dan Williams**, risking his life so we can be breaking Salvador stories here in L.A.' In other words, a brick wall." A year and a half later, when Cortright returned from another trip to El Salvador, she submitted an op-ed piece to the *Times* recounting her witnessing of the bombing of the civilian population. Op-ed editor **Bob Berger** rejected the piece without explanation.

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**SO WHAT?:** Even if all the tanning parlors in town withdrew their ads from the *L.A. Weekly* and that space was turned over to this column, there still wouldn't be room to detail all of the sins of commission and omission in the *Times'* coverage of Central America. In future columns I will review Contadora, the air war, the Miskitos and more. But some conclusions can be drawn from the examples cited above: A clear double standard is at play in the *Times'* respective treatment of El Salvador and Nicaragua. It is the same double standard with which the administration justified its arms-to-Iran-for-hostages deal. Put simply, it is this: *Anybody* — and I mean this quite literally — anybody who deals with us is a priori declared a “moderate.” Likewise, anyone uppity enough to challenge our world view is a radical, a subversive, a creature lacking any consideration, credibility or legitimacy. The **Iranians** might be theocratic obscurantists and killers, but the day they decide to cooperate with us they will be — in fact, they already have been — transmogrified into “moderates.” The Salvadorans can bomb, butcher, murder, rape, torture and starve their people, but they don't vote against us in the U.N., they respect private property (as long as it is U.S.-owned), and they gladly accept our dominance of the hemisphere. They are also “moderates”!

Conversely, in the *Times'* eye, Salvadoran guerrillas and Sandinistas both come from that horrible murky swamp of human spiritual degradation known as Marxism. Nothing, therefore, but absolutely nothing they do or don't do in the realm of political policy will ever be able to compensate for that original sin. That the demonification of the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran guerrillas, along with the concurrent glorification of the murderous Duarte regime, is just one more administration disinformation campaign, one no less insidious than the Casey-Shultz prevarications about Libya, seems to have had no chastening effect on the *Times*. Perhaps it will take another 10,000-word article by Seymour Hersh (hopefully before and not after a U.S. invasion of Central America) to force the *Times* to see to what degree it is complicit with official deceit and to begin to do justice by its readers on the crucially important subject of Central America. ■