

VIEWPOINT

Gazing South With Myopia

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Given half a chance, Central America need not fear a Marxist takeover. It may be denied that half a chance, though.



Campaign rhetoric bears a certain resemblance to the burning of incense. Both serve a ritualistic purpose; neither has lasting effect. As proof, recall the words of John F.

Kennedy in one of his celebrated television debates with Richard Nixon. Kennedy took the Eisenhower Administration to task for permitting the establishment of a Communist base "only ninety miles off the coast of the United States."

Admittedly, this particular bit of campaign rhetoric was translated, later on, into the effort at the Bay of Pigs, but not with any real conviction. That venture will stand as an example of irresolute behavior on the part of the United States. What could have been an easy little amphibious operation was doomed by the last-minute denial of air superiority. The subsequent fiasco put Fidel Castro firmly in place as the USSR's Caribbean surrogate, and the New Frontier went on to other things. Two decades later, we face growing danger to the south.

Our Latin American policy has been one of inconsistency and uncertainty, with the single exception of Grenada, a splendid small triumph carried off too quickly for mobilization of the usual opposition. In all fairness, occasional displays of ineptitude like that of the CIA guerrilla manual have strengthened opponents' hands, but the basic opposition to an anti-Communist Caribbean policy needs no encouragement. It is firmly entrenched in various religious groups, in academia, and in a curious assortment of organizations staffed with the same earnest types who made a career of opposing the war in Vietnam.

Opposition to any decisive Latin American policy has been effective

enough, thus far, at least to make any Central American opposed to Marxist revolution think twice before signing on to a US-backed operation. Congressional abandonment of the Nicaraguan FDN, or *contras*, for instance, stirs up unhappy memories of other halfhearted US ventures into counter-revolution, memories of the Cuban unfortunates at the Bay of Pigs, and— even more poignant—of the hill tribes of Indochina who joined our side.

It should now be clear to most people that the favorable judgments of Castro made early on were dangerous miscalculations, ones that allowed him to consolidate his power under the benign, if myopic, gaze of Uncle Sam. The Sandinistas are presently consolidating their revolution, and so they still talk of pluralism, and press freedom, and other democratic pass- words.

Their actions, however, are the true indication of the direction in which they are moving, which is precisely in the same direction taken by Cuba. Because the *contras*, even with shaky support, have kept the Sandinistas busy, Nicaragua is still a seedy Marxist backwater, unable to do much in the way of exporting revolution, but that is plainly on the agenda. El Salvador first, then Guatemala and Honduras, with the rest falling like ripe mangoes.

It is difficult to understand the emotional support in this country for the Sandinistas and the FMLN revolutionaries of El Salvador. While it is true that government forces have committed atrocities, the guerrillas have caused a great deal more hardship and have had their full share in the killings. General Vidas Casanova has made much progress toward an effective and disciplined Salvadoran military while supporting President Duarte in the best democratic tradition.

Duarte, with his unblemished liberal, even left wing, credentials, should have the automatic support of American liberals in his efforts to end the destructive war. That he has, instead, the concerted opposition of liberal America, along with influential segments of the press and television, is a

reflection either of mass liberal confusion or hypocrisy. Take your pick.

Across the border in Nicaragua, the Soviets are providing Hind helicopters and other modern weapons in quantity to the 50,000-man regular army and 200,000-man militia. Together with the weapons come a few hundred Soviets and East Germans and at least 1,500 Cuban advisors. All this to put down the FDN and, it goes without saying, to keep the population in line. Once the *contras* are taken care of, full attention can be given to El Salvador.

The sad thing about this story is that Central America, given half a chance, need not fear a Marxist takeover. A region once dominated by authoritarian military figures is now increasingly democratic. El Salvador held free elections and chose Duarte. Honduras has a democratically elected president, and even Guatemala will have free elections in 1985. Panama is democratic after its fashion, and Costa Rica has long been a democracy.

South America is moving along on the same path. In all of Latin America, only Chile, Paraguay, and Fidel Castro's Cuba have truly authoritarian regimes. Nicaragua is headed that way, but the Sandinistas have not yet snuffed out the opposition, nor has any real power figure emerged.

The trend is definitely toward freely elected governments and away from dictatorships, either of the right or left. No one can claim credit for this, but a strong United States interest in Latin America must have had something to do with it. Like politicians everywhere, those in Latin America talk one way for publication, another off the record. Off the record, they have been heard to applaud the military exercises in Honduras, the naval presence off Nicaragua's shores, and the new high profile of the US Southern Command, once a tropical old soldier's home.

If there is continued, effective, and nonclandestine US interest in Latin America, the Soviets and Cubans will be left, at best, with a down-at-the-heels Communist outpost in Nicaragua.