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NORTH AMERICA: OUR NEGLECTED HEARTLAND

by

DONALD E. NUECHTERLEIN

Since World War II the United States has been so extensively involved in world security arrangements that it has lost sight of the crucial importance of its overwhelming national interests in North America, including Central America and the Caribbean. Policymakers use the concept of Latin America, or the Western Hemisphere, to describe an area that is considered to be of special geographical interest to the United States; yet, by using "Latin America" they totally ignore Canada—our most important defense outpost as well as trading partner—and the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean. "Western Hemisphere" is also ambiguous because it suggests that all countries in North and South America are roughly equal in terms of US national interests. Clearly they are not. By no stretch of the imagination is Argentina, Chile, or Brazil as important to the United States as Canada, Mexico, or Venezuela. Nevertheless, the Monroe Doctrine legacy, with its blanket pledge of protection for all of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, lingers on. This misconception was reinforced by the Rio Pact of 1947, which bound all the countries of Latin America together with the United States into a hemispheric security treaty, but excluded Canada.

No other major power in the world takes its neighbors so for granted as does the United States. This is the product of location, size, and population, and, until recently, our invulnerability to attack from abroad. An added factor is that the US economy is so dynamic that all North American countries

have become dependent on it for economic well-being. History has played a part: From 1814 onward, the United States was not confronted in this continent by another great power; the country could grow and prosper because Great Britain found that its own national interest was served by encouraging its ex-colonies to carve out a continental nation and eventually ally with Britain against hostile European powers. Wars against Mexico in the mid-19th century and against Spain in 1898 left the United States as the preeminent power in North America. As a result, it fought two world wars without having to worry that its homeland would be invaded. Emerging from World War II as a superpower, the United States set about creating a new world order and paid minimal attention to its interests in North America. The exceptions were an agreement with Canada to create a North American air defense zone, and the continued occupation of the Panama Canal Zone. Having secured its defenses to the north and in the Caribbean, American foreign policy gave a lower priority to the economic and political problems of Latin America, particularly to countries on our own doorstep.

If one draws a circle around North America that includes Hawaii in the west; Canada, Alaska, and Greenland in the north; and Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela in the south, the area included in the circle constitutes the defense-of-homeland interest of the United States.¹ This circle includes two countries in South America, Venezuela and Colombia; but because they border on what

President Reagan in 1982 renamed the Caribbean Basin, and have large trade and cultural ties to North America, they too are a part of the North American community of interest. This circle also comprises the most important US economic interests: Canada is by far the largest US trading partner, Mexico is third (behind Japan), and Venezuela is among the top ten. Most Central American and Caribbean countries have their primary trading relationships with the United States. In addition, the impact of the Spanish language and culture on the United States is staggering, and illegal migration of Spanish-speaking people to the United States is nearly uncontrollable.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the Caribbean Basin is rapidly becoming one huge melting pot of language, culture, trade, tourism, and sports. It seems inevitable that the economies of North America will be further integrated in the coming decade, and the question then will be: Should a political integration of the North American countries follow?

US INTERESTS IN NORTH AMERICA

The United States is no exception to the rule that all major powers have a deep interest in preventing hostile political forces from gaining control of countries on their borders. In early 1983, for example, Soviet party leader Yuri Andropov commented in an interview with the West German magazine *Der Spiegel*: "Would the United States not care what kind of government rules in Nicaragua? Nicaragua is an enormous distance from America. We have a common border with Afghanistan, and we are defending our national interests by helping Afghanistan."² Mr. Andropov drew the analogy to show that his country's national interest in a neighboring country is just as legitimate as the US concern over what is happening in Central America. Within the whole Caribbean Basin area, however, some countries clearly are more essential to US security than others. This was the nub of the debate within the United States over how to deal with subversion in El Salvador, Hon-

duras, Guatemala, and some Caribbean island nations.

Few Americans doubt that the United States has vital³ interests in Canada. This commitment goes back at least to 1940, when President Franklin Roosevelt held a historic meeting with Prime Minister Mackenzie King in Ogdensburg, New York—after the fall of France to German armies—and agreed that the two countries would cooperate to defend North America against the Axis powers. After the war, they continued their close defense relationship by joining the North Atlantic Pact in 1949 and concluding the North American Air Defense Accord in 1958, which established a joint military command to provide for defense of North America. Canada is the largest customer for US exports and is the source of a huge amount of tourism. Private US companies have invested nearly \$40 billion in Canada. Together, the United States and Canada constitute a zone of 260 million democratically governed people. American presidents and Canadian prime ministers meet frequently on both official and unofficial visits, and their foreign and defense ministers are in constant contact. Americans may be divided on whether to use US forces to defend distant parts of the world, but there is no doubt among them that

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a military threat to any part of Canada would be a threat to US territory. This strong defense link was reinforced in April 1983 when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, during a visit to Washington, asserted that Canada would approve the testing of cruise missiles on Canadian soil—despite strong public protests by peace demonstrators in Canada.

In sum, Canada and the United States form one of the strongest bonds of friendship on basic defense and foreign policy matters existing between neighboring countries anywhere in the world. Even though there are strains in economic relations, and interest groups in both countries carp at each other for exploiting the relationship, the United States and Canada are deepening their close strategic ties. This was pledged by Canada's new Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, whose Progressive-Conservative Party won a landslide victory in the elections of September 1984.

The consensus that exists in the northern part of North America does not, however, extend to the southern region—Mexico, Central America, the islands of the Caribbean, and the northern tier of South America. These countries have a strong national interest in resisting US encroachments on their sovereignty. The history of US military intervention in the Caribbean Basin area since the turn of the century (longer in the case of Mexico) makes these countries suspicious of US intentions—especially as their economies are closely tied to US markets. Whereas US security interests in Central America are rising rapidly, because of Marxist revolutionary inroads made with the support of Cuba and the Soviet Union, there is no correspondingly strong interest by most of these countries to draw close to the United States. Unlike Canadians, who know that the US government will not send troops to Canada unless there is an attack from outside North America, the people and governments south of the US border have no such confidence. They recall covert US intervention in Guatemala in 1954, covert US involvement in an invasion of Cuba in 1961, and overt US military intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. Revelations in

1984 about covert US support of anti-Sandinista groups operating within Nicaragua reinforced the concerns of leaders throughout the region that the United States was preparing again to intervene in a major way in Central America to force the ouster of the Sandinista government. The US invasion of Grenada in October 1983 further heightened these fears.

On 27 April 1983, President Ronald Reagan made an extraordinary effort to focus US public attention on Central America by addressing a joint session of Congress. The President said that in the past Presidents had addressed joint sessions of Congress in order to resolve crises, but that he had sought this forum in order "that we can prevent one." He asserted that "Central America's problems do directly affect the security and well-being of our own people," and that the area "is much closer to the United States than many of the world trouble spots that concern us." Pointing out that El Salvador is closer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts, the President said that "nearness on the map does not even begin to tell the strategic importance of Central America, bordering as it does on the Caribbean—our lifeline to the outside world."

Mr. Reagan summed up his belief that the United States needed to become serious about the depth of its national interests in Central America with this statement:

I say to you tonight there can be no question: The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble and the safety of our homeland would be put at jeopardy. We have a vital interest, a moral duty and solemn responsibility. This is not a partisan issue. It is a question of our meeting our moral responsibility to ourselves, our friends and our posterity. It is a duty that falls to all of us—the President, the Congress and the people. We must perform it together. Who among us would wish to bear the responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?'

The President's dramatic statement that the United States has a vital stake in Central America set off a national debate—as it was designed to do—around the issue of what policies the government should pursue in support of that interest. Congressional Democrats chose Connecticut Senator Christopher J. Dodd to reply on national television to the President's address. Surprisingly, his view of US interests in Central America did not differ significantly from those of the President. But his recommended policies to support these interests were quite different:

We will oppose the establishment of Marxist states in Central America. We will not accept the creation of Soviet military bases in Central America. We will not tolerate the placement of Soviet offensive missiles in Central America—or anywhere in this hemisphere. Finally we are fully prepared to defend our security and the security of the Americas, if necessary, by military means. All patriotic Americans share these goals. But many of us in Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, disagree with the President because we believe the means he has chosen will not fulfill them. Those of us who oppose the President's policy believe that he is mistaken in critical ways. To begin with, we believe the Administration fundamentally misunderstands the causes of the conflict in Central America. We cannot afford to found so important a policy on ignorance—and the painful truth is that many of our highest officials seem to know as little about Central America in 1983 as we knew about Indochina in 1963.⁵

The Washington Post was generally favorable to the President's call for efforts to prevent the collapse of El Salvador, but it cautioned that the United States should not try to dictate the solution:

In brief, just as the United States cannot walk away from Central America because the region is too important, so it cannot take charge and dictate a solution because of the immense weight of its past involvement,

which Latins remember more keenly than Americans do. That leaves the administration with a requirement to conduct a continuing policy but a limited one.⁶

The New York Times entitled its editorial, "The Issue Is Salvador, Not the Alamo." It agreed with the President that the United States has "legitimate, important interests" in Central America, but asserted that "they do not justify open-ended commitments." The *Times* believed that the President had overstated the crisis in Central America and wondered why he had promised *not* to use American troops if the stakes were as high as he thought:

Washington's political dilemma in Central America has been plain. With Cuba and probably Nicaragua lost to the Soviet bloc, any President will do his utmost to prevent the loss of another country. Yet, after Vietnam, every Congress will fear pouring lives and billions into a new quagmire. Both branches respond to the same electorate.

The *Times* suggested that the Reagan Administration's responsibility in these circumstances was to teach the American people that "Central America is neither the Sudetenland nor South Vietnam: neither the place to draw rigid lines against big-power aggression nor the certain graveyard of good intentions."⁷

THE SPECIAL CASE OF CUBA

The most crucial security dilemma for the United States in the Caribbean Basin is Cuba. This has been so since Fidel Castro gained control of that island by force in 1959. The irony is that Cuba was "lost to Communism" during the conservative Administration of President Dwight Eisenhower. Basically, the Eisenhower cabinet thought in 1958 that the corrupt Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista had outlived his time and that Cuba was in need of significant social reform. This Republican Administration, which prided itself on its realistic foreign policy, was persuaded that a charismatic

Cuban revolutionary named Dr. Fidel Castro, who had returned from exile in Mexico and set up a guerrilla base in the Cuban mountains, could be induced to follow a friendly policy toward the United States. Once in power, however, the Castro leadership proceeded to confiscate American private investments, round up and execute political opponents, and start an intense anti-American propaganda campaign while opening up relations with Moscow. Within a year, Washington realized it had made a serious mistake, and the President ordered that planning begin for the ill-fated, CIA-backed Bay of Pigs operation.

From the time John Kennedy entered the White House in January 1961 until Ronald Reagan followed him 20 years later, the question of what to do about Cuba has been a key foreign policy problem for all US Presidents. In terms of national interests, the question has always been whether Cuba constituted a vital threat to US interests and needed to be contained by military force, or whether Castro posed a lesser problem and should be ignored until he decided to seek better relations with Washington. Different Presidents have viewed Cuba each way: John Kennedy was not willing to use American armed forces in support of Cuban exiles, who tried at the Bay of Pigs to precipitate a national uprising against Castro, but he threatened nuclear war with the Soviet Union when it tried in 1962 to install nuclear missiles there. In 1970 Richard Nixon threatened retaliation if the Soviets built a submarine base in Cuba, but otherwise he left Cuba alone. When Cubans were sent to Angola in 1976 to help a Marxist faction come to power, the Ford Administration wanted to use covert aid to support anti-communist Angolan factions. Congress banned such aid out of fear that Angola might become another Vietnam. The Carter Administration tried to improve relations with Castro, but by 1980 it came to realize that Castro's links with the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and his aid to revolutionaries in El Salvador were undermining the US position in Central America. Furthermore, Carter was humiliated in 1979 when he charged that the Soviet

Union had established a "brigade" of troops in Cuba, only to have Moscow inform him that the troops had been there since 1962 to train Cubans to defend their territory. Mr. Carter quietly dropped the issue. In sum, the United States treated Cuba as an important, but not a vital, national interest from 1962 until 1980 because it did not appear to be a military threat to US friends in North America.

That situation changed when the Reagan Administration came to power and concluded that Castro was intent on establishing Marxist regimes throughout Central America and in the Caribbean. This was reinforced by Mr. Reagan's view that the Soviet Union was prepared to support Castro's ambitious plans with large amounts of military assistance. For the Reagan Administration, Castro constituted a serious threat to US economic and security interests, but it remained unclear whether Cuba by itself constituted a vital security threat to the United States.⁸

In short, there was little doubt by 1984 that US national interests in Central America and the Caribbean were seen by the President and Congress as vital, particularly as they affected the security interests of the United States; yet, US policy toward Cuba remained ambiguous.

POLICY TOOLS TO SUPPORT US INTERESTS

This analysis of US national interests in North America leads to certain conclusions about US policies toward neighboring countries. First of all, the United States has such a high intensity of interest in Canada and the Caribbean Basin that it should not compromise with military threats to any part of this area. Furthermore, it means that the US government should insure that the political, economic, and social value system enjoyed within the United States is strongly promoted in all countries within North America. This level of interest also mandates that the United States can no longer follow a "benign neglect" attitude in the Caribbean Basin. There may be no security threat posed by Cuba and the Sandinista regime in

Nicaragua, but just as the Soviet Union cannot accept an anti-Moscow regime in Eastern Europe or Afghanistan, so the United States should not be expected to countenance an anti-American regime in its neighborhood—particularly if such a regime invites the Soviet Union to establish a military presence. This level of interest has little to do with the fact that the United States is an open political system and the Soviet Union is not; but it has much to do with the reality that *any* great power has the right to expect that none of its immediate neighbors will become a hostile military base, or a source of insurgency, against it.

In view of its high level of interest in Central America and the Caribbean, the United States should be prepared to employ all measures, including a blockade and conventional military forces, to prevent a hostile outside power from threatening the countries and sea-lanes in this area.⁹ In the cases of Canada and Mexico, the United States would be justified in undertaking general mobilization and employing all measures, including a threat to use nuclear weapons, if either country were threatened with attack. This is because their territory, air space, and the waters off their shores are absolutely critical to the defense of the United States. President Kennedy clearly saw this issue during the Cuban missile crisis and was prepared to use US nuclear weapons to prevent the Soviet Union from placing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Would a US President do less today if the United States, Canada, or Mexico were similarly threatened by the Soviet Union?

The United States also has a vital interest in preserving its trade and investments with the North American countries and its access to the energy resources and raw materials of Canada, Jamaica, Mexico, and Venezuela. Mexico in 1983 became the largest foreign supplier of crude oil to the United States; Canada provides oil, natural gas, essential minerals, and wood products for American industry; and Venezuela provides oil and iron ore as well as aluminum for the American market. The Reagan Administration's decision in August 1982 to launch a crash program to save Mexico from financial

collapse, following a worldwide recession and the decline in world oil prices, indicated a vital US stake in preserving economic and political stability in this southern neighbor. President Reagan also showed by his Caribbean Basin Plan, approved by Congress in 1983, that the United States is prepared to treat the Central American and Caribbean countries as part of a US free-trade zone for most products.

It is debatable, however, whether and under what circumstances the United States should use its own armed forces to defend countries in the Caribbean and Central America, if there is not an overt military threat. If Central America is a vital interest for the United States, it follows that some American military action should be employed to prevent Cuba and Nicaragua from causing the downfall of the governments of neighboring countries, such as Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. This possibility was raised in 1983 by the departing US Commander of the Southern Command, General Wallace Nutting, who told *The Washington Post*, "Central America is at war" and the United States, whether it likes it or not, "is engaged in that war." Nutting said the United States may ultimately have to send troops because, "If we give up, it may be the last time."¹⁰ However, President Reagan did not believe that Cuba would be so reckless as to send its own combat forces to Central America. If Castro should make such a decision, with Soviet support, this would clearly call for US military action, including a blockade of Cuba, the prevention of Cuban air shipments to Nicaragua or other sites in the area, and the possible threat of air strikes against Cuba itself if it did not stop the armed intervention. Short of outright Cuban intervention, however, the use of American military forces in Central America or the Caribbean would probably be counterproductive; it would rekindle old fears of "Yankee imperialism" and turn moderate Latin American opinion against the United States. It could bring anti-US governments to power in some key countries.¹¹

Just as there is no national consensus in the United States about the use of force, there is also divided opinion about how strongly

the US government should insist on progress in human rights and social justice by its southern neighbors. Supporters of former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick have argued that it is naive to think that Central American countries, which have never known democracy and social justice, can suddenly transform their societies into an American-style democracy. They believe democratization will be a slow process and must be built on the conservative groups that already are in power. On the other hand, liberals believe, as Senator Dodd stated in his reply to President Reagan, that there is little hope of providing peace and stability in Central America unless a dramatic change takes place in the political and social systems of the corrupt and unjust societies existing there. They argue that the United States has not only a responsibility, but a vital interest in promoting rapid progress in this direction.

OUTLOOK

The early 1980s convinced most American political leaders that North America, long neglected as a priority in US worldwide interests, had assumed huge proportions in terms of the basic interests of the United States. Still unresolved was the relative priority this heartland area should receive in terms of the resources and attention of top policymakers, compared with US interests and commitments in Western Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and South America. Congress's belated recognition of the need for comprehensive immigration legislation to tighten the restrictions on the flow of illegal immigrants into the country was one illustration of the public's growing awareness of the vulnerability of US southern borders to a massive flow of refugees if civil war engulfed Central America and Mexico. There was also a new willingness in Washington to increase efforts to curb the flood of illegal drugs into the United States because of the serious effects the drug trade has on crime rates and public health. Senator Alan Simpson, cosponsor of the Senate's 1984 immigration bill, asserted that this legislation was needed because "the

first duty of a sovereign nation is to control its borders—and we don't."¹²

At the end of 1984, there was growing public and congressional recognition that the United States could no longer take the countries of Central America and the Caribbean for granted, that the danger of doing nothing was too great. The report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, known also as the Kissinger Commission, raised public consciousness about the political, economic, social, and security dangers in this vital region. Although the report did not produce a bipartisan approach in Congress, it did legitimate the Reagan Administration's determination to pursue a much stronger policy to cope with Cuban- and Nicaraguan-supported insurgencies in Central America, and it laid the groundwork for a long-term strategy toward the area. The fact Congress voted in mid-1984 to grant most of the Administration's aid requests for El Salvador suggested that the US public mood was coming to accept greater efforts to prevent the spread of Marxism-Leninism in Central America. This trend continued in 1985 when both houses of Congress voted to support non-lethal aid to *contra* forces fighting against the pro-Moscow government of Nicaragua. It was a significant political victory for President Reagan in his determination to isolate and force the Ortega regime to modify its policies and to include non-Marxist political groups in the Nicaraguan government.

In mid-1985 the outlook for political stability and economic progress in North America is better than it has been for six years. To the north, Canada resolved its serious internal political dilemma by bringing Quebec more fully into a new constitutional framework, and Canadian-American cooperation has never been closer than it is today. To the immediate south, Mexico is slowly emerging from near bankruptcy, which threatened to have dangerous political consequences for both countries. And in the Central American region, the outlook for democracy and economic advancement is good in all the countries except Nicaragua, where a Marxist-Leninist regime seems

determined to move that country in a totalitarian direction. In the Caribbean, all the countries with the exception of Cuba are friendly to the United States, and most are improving democratic institutions and free-market economies. In sum, the political, economic, and security situation in North America, with the exceptions of Cuba and Nicaragua, is better than it was in 1979. If the new bipartisanship that is emerging in Congress over US policy in Central America continues, there is reason for optimism that the communist cancer that grew in Nicaragua early in this decade and threatened to overwhelm its neighbors will recede in the next few years, as enormous economic and political pressures are brought to bear on the government there to move toward political pluralism instead of Leninism. The growing appreciation in the United States that the country has vital interests at stake in this region is probably the single most important factor that promotes economic and political progress there as large amounts of economic and military assistance are forthcoming. Political and economic progress in turn will contribute to an improved security situation. Cuban and Soviet escalation of their involvement in Nicaragua could, however, lead to US military intervention; but this is not a likely scenario so long as the United States remains firm in containing the Nicaraguan cancer through economic and political pressure and continued support for the *contra* forces.

NOTES

1. The United States, like all great powers, has four basic national interests which I define as follows: *defense-of-homeland*, meaning protection of a country's territory, population, and political institutions; *economic well-being* of the country, including the ability to carry on trade and commerce, the ability to invest in foreign countries, balance-of-payments stability, and access to raw materials abroad; *favorable world-order*, comprising the establishment of collective security mechanisms to enhance the country's feeling of security in an unstable world; *promotion of values*, wherein a country seeks to enhance acceptance of its political and economic system abroad. These basic interests, and their use in a matrix framework to define specific national interests and

policy objectives, are described in Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Overcommitted: U.S. National-Interests in the 1980s* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1985), ch. 1: "National Interest as a Basis of Foreign Policy Formulation."

2. John Tagliabue, "Andropov Compares Latin Policy of U.S. to Moscow's Afghan Role," *The New York Times*, 24 April 1983, p. A10.

3. I define *vital* interests as follows: "A vital interest is at stake when an issue becomes so important to a nation's well-being that its leadership will refuse to compromise beyond the point that it considers to be tolerable. If political leaders decide they cannot compromise an issue beyond what has already been done and are willing instead to risk economic and military sanctions, the issue is probably vital." *America Overcommitted*, p. 11.

4. "President Reagan's Address to Joint Session of Congress on Central America," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1983, p. A12.

5. "Text of Democrats' Response to Reagan Speech," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1983, p. A13.

6. "The President's Speech," *The Washington Post*, 29 April 1983, p. A28.

7. "The Issue is Salvador, Not the Alamo," *The New York Times*, 29 April 1983, p. A30.

8. Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig recalls in his book *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984) that he stood virtually alone in 1981 in the National Security Council when he argued that Cuba was the prime source of the US problem in combatting communism in Central America: "In the other camp, which favored giving military and economic aid to El Salvador while bringing the overwhelming economic strength and political influence of the United States, together with the reality of its military power, to bear on Cuba in order to treat the problem at its source, I was virtually alone. In my view that the strategic gain that could be achieved by this combination of measures far outweighed the risks, and that the United States could contain any Soviet countermeasures, I was also isolated" (p. 129).

9. In *America Overcommitted*, I list 20 policy tools that are available to a President to defend or enhance US national interests, depending on the degree of interest involved. Eleven of these are in the category of political/economic instruments of policy, and nine are military instruments—including military show of strength, expanded military surveillance, blockade or quarantine, localized use of conventional forces, and partial mobilization. To support a vital security interest of the United States, the President would be justified in using all of these measures. See ch. 2, "Instruments of Foreign and National Security Policy."

10. Karen DeYoung, "General Urges Aid to Central America," *The Washington Post*, 22 May 1983, p. A1.

11. President Reagan stated publicly in March 1985 that he opposed sending US troops to Central America because "they are simply not needed. Given a chance and the resources, the people of the area can fight their own fight . . . All they need is our support." The President called the anti-Sandinista rebels (*contras*) "our brothers, these freedom fighters, and we owe them our help." Lou Cannon, "Reagan Says U.S. Owes 'Contras' Our Help," *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1985, p. A1.

12. Robert Pear, "Senate Approves Immigration Bill with Hiring Curb," *The New York Times*, 19 May 1983, p. A1. Regrettably, Congress did not pass the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill in 1984, and it is questionable whether it will reconsider the legislation in 1985.