

RECENT STUDIES ON
INTERVENTION AND POLITICS
IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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VOTER PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1954-1981: AN EXPLORATION.

By George A. Bowdler and Patrick Cotter. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982. Pp. 260. \$23.25 cloth, \$11.50 paper.)

POWER IN THE ISTHMUS: A POLITICAL HISTORY OF MODERN CENTRAL AMERICA. By James Dunkerley. (London and New York: Verso, 1988. Pp. 691. \$47.50.)

THE MOSQUITO INDIANS AND THE ANGLO-SPANISH RIVALRY IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1630-1821. By Jean Preston. (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1987. Pp. 35.)

ANTI-IMPERIALISM AND INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1920-1929. By Richard V. Salisbury. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1989. Pp. 181. \$30.00.)

CRISIS IN THE CARIBBEAN BASIN. Edited by Richard Tardanico. (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1987. Pp. 263. \$29.95.)

CENTRAL AMERICA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONTEMPORARY CRISES. Edited by Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988. Pp. 310. \$39.95.)

When I first began my research in Central America a quarter of a century ago, I suggested jokingly to my associates that one of the great advantages of working in the region was that there was almost no bibliography to master. Since the late 1970s, however, this situation has changed dramatically. The Nicaraguan Revolution and the ongoing guerrilla movements in Guatemala and El Salvador have put Central America on the front pages. As a result, interest in the region has created a scholarly cottage industry, with books and articles being cranked out at an ever-growing rate. Some few of these works do indeed lend new insights, but many cover old ground and well-worn themes.

To begin with the most general of the six works under review here, James Dunkerley's *Power in the Isthmus* is also the most ambitious in undertaking to trace via historical narration the development of the re-

gion from independence through the 1980s. At the outset, Dunkerley candidly states that he will not focus primarily on the role of the United States because "I am not as qualified to dissect Washington's behavior as I am incensed by it" (p. xi). He does, however, deal with the role of the United States when necessary. Up until now, the standard history of the region has been *Central America: A Nation Divided* by Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.¹ Dunkerley's account differs in some respects: it does not attempt to cover the colonial period, and following an initial chapter covering the whole of Central America from 1820 to 1910, he breaks his materials into a country-by-country study. Dunkerley thus avoids the confusions inherent in Woodward's study, which treats every country in virtually every chapter. Dunkerley's study resembles Hugh Thomas's *Cuba* in its attempt at encyclopedic coverage, despite being only a third as long.² This approach has the disadvantage of causing events of little significance to occupy an unwarranted amount of space.

Covering less extensive ground are two studies of outside involvement in Central America: Richard Salisbury's *Anti-Imperialism and International Competition in Central America, 1920-1929*, and Jean Preston's brief monograph, *The Mosquito Indians and Anglo-Spanish Rivalry in Central America, 1630-1821*. Salisbury's work is valuable in its discussion of the anti-imperialist movement that flourished briefly in Central America during the 1920s, only to be outmaneuvered and scotched by the United States. The issues raised by the Nicaraguan canal route and by Mexican diplomatic ambitions are also well covered. Preston's book, however, remains no more than a sketch rather than a complete study of her subject. It contains little analysis of the complex interactions that must have occurred in creating a bond between an arrogant Northern European nation and a tightly knit tribal people. Some of the material is fascinating, however, and leaves the reader wanting to know more than is available in this brief paper.

The two volumes of essays, one edited by Richard Tardanico and the other by Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., are both the products of scholarly get-togethers. Tardanico's *Crises in the Caribbean Basin* is based on papers presented at the Ninth Annual Conference on the Political Economy of the World-System, held at Tulane University in 1985. Woodward's *Central America: Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Crises* resulted from a seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "The Central American Crises in Historical Perspective," given at Tulane in 1986. Both volumes are highly eclectic. The essays in Tardanico's study range over Central America and the Caribbean, covering subjects as diverse as slavery in the French Caribbean and economic development in nineteenth-century Guatemala (in an essay by Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr.). The Woodward collection sticks to Central America but ranges from Guatemalan Indian labor to poetry in Sandinista Nicaragua. Both collections manage to work the word *crises* into the title, but both deal more

with background materials or peripheral issues than with any immediately apparent crises. Perhaps the term *crisis* should be avoided in this context, although genuine moments of crisis have occurred as in Guatemala in June 1954, when the peaceful revolution was toppled, and in Nicaragua in July 1979, when the Sandinista Revolution won by force of arms. In general, however, it is difficult to distinguish between a crisis and the "normal" situation in Central America, which is continuously plagued by a host of endemic problems.

All the works mentioned above feature analyses of historical events, on either a large or a small scale. The study entitled *Voter Participation in Central America, 1954–1981*, by George Bowdler and Patrick Cotter (apparently much more of it by Bowdler than by Cotter) takes a more political approach. It examines the elections held in Central America and the political forces involved in each. The title, however, is somewhat misleading as the study offers little analysis of voters' blocks according to department or educational level or even the extent of voter participation in the process. Most of the book is taken up discussing the political background of each country, the role of the military (or the lack of same in Costa Rica), and the roles played by the Catholic Church, labor movements, the United States, and other forces social and economic. Costa Rica aside, so few open and free elections were held in the region within the time frame of this study that it would be difficult to extrapolate much meaning from the elections themselves. The book's conclusion discusses each of the five countries independently and seems to have found no general theme. *Voter Participation in Central America* is also marred by a number of factual errors, such as naming a certain "Colonel Carmun" as the candidate of El Salvador's National Opposition Union in 1977 (p. 7), when the candidate was Colonel Ernesto Claramount Rozeville. The book also overlooks the painstaking studies of Neale Pearson on elections in Honduras.³

A common theme running through all these studies is that Central America has been shaped more than most of Latin America by outside forces. Although the present Central American states began under Spanish control as parts of the Capitanía General de Guatemala, nations other than Spain strove to play a role as well. French and Dutch buccaneers made some inroads, but it was the British who most consistently attempted to gain a foothold in colonial times, occupying not only Belice, which they managed to wrest permanently from the Spanish, but also controlling the Bay Islands of modern Honduras and the Miskito coast for a while.

Jean Preston's *The Mosquito Indians and Anglo-Spanish Rivalry* recounts the contact between the British and the people she refers to as the "Mosquito-men," which she claims probably derived from "musket men" in reference to the weapons they used with such effect on the Spanish (p. 28, note 6). The Mosquito, their king, and their other leaders, whom they styled "general" and "governor," were not mere puppets of the

British but were capable of independent actions against the hated Spanish. While the British sometimes liked to fancy that they were protecting the natives, often as not the Mosquito ended up protecting the British merchants and settlers (p. 16). The British gradually lost interest in the Mosquito people during the course of the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth, Preston points out, a new English-speaking protector has appeared—the United States (p. 26). The natives of the Miskito Coast indeed helped the U.S. Marines against Sandino, and the situation was again a question of who was using whom. More recently, the people of this region have taken up arms for the U.S.-backed Contras. But in this case, it seems quite clear that the United States is exploiting the natural antipathy toward the “Spaniards” in Managua for its own purposes.

George Castile’s “The Miskito and the ‘Spanish’” in the Woodward collection agrees with Preston on most points. He shows that the Miskito had greater social organization and autonomy than they were given credit for by early-nineteenth-century writers like E. G. Squier, a U.S. citizen with political and ethnocentric reasons for portraying them as backward and subservient to the British (p. 136).⁴ Castile also notes that the United States stepped into the role formerly held by Britain, persisting in it even after Nicaragua incorporated the area into its national state. During the presidency of José Santos Zelaya (who ruled from 1893 until 1910), however, U.S. influence lessened. Paralleling Preston’s observation that shared economic interests kept the British-Miskito connection alive as much as military alliance, Castile argues that the United States developed strong economic ties along the coast after the fall of Zelaya (p. 141).

In another essay in the Woodward collection, Thomas Leonard depicts U.S. policy as “keeping the Europeans out”—and not merely out of the Miskito Coast but out of all of Central America. Citing this attitude in his title, Leonard tackles the persistent question of a canal across the isthmus, which was put on ice as far as Britain and the United States were concerned by the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 until the end of the century, when the Hay-Poncefote Treaty gave the U.S. permission to build. Leonard also discusses the Bryan-Chamorro treaty between the United States and Nicaragua, which was designed less for building a Nicaraguan canal than for preventing its being built by other powers (p. 11). But as Woodward points out in his introduction to this volume, U.S. policy since 1945 has shifted from keeping the Europeans out to fending off communist subversion (p. 2). The bottom line, however, has remained the same: U.S. hegemony must be protected at all cost. As Robert Matthews observes in his essay in the Tardanico collection, “Sandinista Relations with the West,” the United States is not really concerned about democracy or economic issues in Nicaragua but only about maintaining its hegemony (p. 192).

Prior to the cold war, the tendency was to perceive Britain as the

major foreign contender for control of Central America, and some of the writers under review here provide useful correctives to this view. Thomas Schoonover's "Metropole Rivalry in Central America, 1820s to 1929" (in the Woodward collection) points out the strong role played by Germany in the isthmus prior to World War I. It was partly economic penetration, most noticeably by German coffee growers in Guatemala, but the German presence also had strategic implications. Bismarck sought in 1868 to obtain a base in Costa Rica, while Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz had his eye on a canal across Panama (p. 29). France, which actually began such a canal, was less interested in Central America than fascinated by the personality of Ferdinand De Lesseps (p. 38). In Schoonover's opinion, it was Germany rather than Britain or France that represented the greatest threat to U.S. geopolitical and economic interests in Central America (pp. 44–45).

World War I knocked Germany out of the running for control of the isthmus and left Britain and France too exhausted to play any role in Central America. This outcome, however, left the field open for other powers to test U.S. hegemony. One contestant was Mexico. As Hugh Campbell points out in his essay in the Woodward collection, "Mexico and Central America," Mexico had pursued a strong policy toward Central America since the early twentieth century (p. 219). One motive was the desire of postrevolutionary Mexican governments to undercut their own domestic left by following apparently leftist policies abroad. Mexican initiatives have continued well into the 1980s, when Mexico joined the Contadora group of nations seeking to end the regional crisis.

Perhaps at no time was Mexico more vigorous in pursuing a Central American policy than during the 1920s, as Richard Salisbury points out in *Anti-Imperialism and International Competition in Central America*. Mexico supported Salvador Mendieta's dream of reunifying the isthmus, while the United States opposed such a union (p. 23). The United States, which viewed the government of Plutarco Elías Calles as much more left-leaning than it really was, actually accused the Mexicans of trying to "bolshvize" the region (p. 68).

More surprising than the role of Mexico, which borders the region after all, is that outlined by Salisbury for Spain in the 1920s. While Mexico's influence slipped toward the close of the decade, Spain's prestige increased. In fact, Spain attempted to trim U.S. influence in Nicaragua by mounting an anti-interventionist campaign in the League of Nations (p. 91). This effort failed, however, and Nicaragua remained a client state of the United States until 1979.

The current Central American situation has demonstrated the continuing dominance of the United States. Robert Matthews points out in his essay in the Tardanico book how this policy of attempting to maintain domination over Nicaragua increasingly forced the Sandinista government to seek help from the Soviet bloc as the United States systematically sought

to cut off all sources of credit and military supplies available to the Sandinistas in the Western world. This course of action was particularly effective in the case of France, which had looked favorably on the Nicaraguan Revolution and sought to aid the Sandinistas but was bullied by the United States into a more reserved attitude (p. 200). Frank Kendrick's contribution to the Woodward collection, "The Nonmilitary Neutrality of Costa Rica," discusses Costa Rica's role as a tool of U.S. policy. Faced with what it perceives as a hostile Nicaragua, the United States has attempted to foist arms on the neutral and unarmed state of Costa Rica in "a remilitarization that is not a remilitarization" (p. 257). On the whole, the United States comes off very badly whenever its foreign policy is discussed in any of these volumes.

Aside from the issue of outside intervention in the region, some interesting insights can be found in these books, especially on the subject of Guatemala. Woodward's contribution to the Tardanico volume, "Economic Development and Dependency in Nineteenth-Century Guatemala," discusses the liberal period of the late nineteenth century and its social and political results. The Guatemalan liberals sought to free individual entrepreneurs from the constraints of government regulation. The previous conservative governments had kept the price of basic foods unnaturally low, but with the coming of the free market, prices were allowed to rise, thus working a considerable hardship on the poor. The liberals were also determined to bring European culture to Guatemala and promoted a "triumph over folk culture" (p. 72). The liberals succeeded in their chief objective of creating a successful export economy, but as Woodward points out, measuring economic development only in terms of exports and trade balances "often overlooks the inherent condition of the population" (p. 73).

The last liberal regime in Guatemala, that of Jorge Ubico, was swept away by the Guatemalan Revolution of 1945. The new regime of Juan José Arévalo was "liberal" not in the traditional nineteenth-century sense but in the modern U.S. sense of the term. One of the policies of the nineteenth-century liberals had been to disestablish and curb the influence of the Catholic Church. As Hubert Miller points out in "Catholic Leaders and Spiritual Socialism during the Arévalo Administration in Guatemala" (in the Woodward volume), the revolution had to develop its own church-state policy. The new constitution of the revolution, much to the disgust of the church, retained the anticlerical provisions of the 1879 constitution. Archbishop Mariano Rossell Arellano, who had been remarkably close to the dictator Ubico, and the lay group *Acción Social Cristiana* soon began to criticize Arévalo's "spiritual socialism" and drift to the left as communistic. By the end of Arévalo's term, the rift between church and state in Guatemala was complete (p. 104).

The opposition of influential sectors of the church probably contributed only marginally to the overthrow of the revolution in 1954 by

Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The new leader immediately dedicated himself to turning back the clock. Lands taken by the 1952 land reform were largely returned to their owners. In addition, campesino organizations were thoroughly destroyed, an outcome that Dunkerley asserts was as important to the elite as getting their lands back (p. 142).

In 1960, what had started as a failed *cuartelazo* turned into a Marxist guerrilla insurgency that has plagued Guatemala to the present day. An important leader of this movement was Luis Turcios Lima, a former lieutenant in the army. Lawrence Yates's article in the Woodward collection, "The United States and Rural Insurgency in Guatemala," examines the first ten years of this struggle. He identifies an important turning point as Turcios Lima's execution of a wounded officer who had been his classmate, an act that brought the wrath of the military down on the guerrillas (p. 59). Yates concludes that the guerrilla movements, having been stifled by 1970, made a comeback because important infrastructure reforms backed by the United States had not been carried out. He points out that those who claim the United States achieved a "success" in Guatemala in the 1960s would do well to look back at how illusory that victory proved to be (p. 62).

While all these volumes are welcome additions to the rapidly growing store of literature on Central America, Dunkerley's *Power in the Isthmus* makes the greatest contribution in filling a major need for an analytical regional history. Dunkerley makes no pretense of being dispassionate, but considering the dark history of modern Central America and the role played by the United States in making it darker still, it would be difficult to write without a certain passion. On the microcosmic level, Salisbury's *Anti-Imperialism and International Competition in Central America* also fills an important gap in the history of the region. The other works, to a lesser but still important extent, are also useful in their way.

NOTES

1. Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
3. Neale J. Pearson, "Honduras: The Impact of the 1980 Constituent Assembly Elections," paper presented at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Pittsburgh, 17-19 Oct. 1980; and Pearson, "Pressure Groups and Agrarian Reform in Honduras, 1962-1977," in *Rural Changes and Public Policy*, edited by William P. Avery et al. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980).
4. Here Castile sides with Michael D. Olien, "The Miskito Kings and the Line of Succession," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39 (Summer 1983):198-241; and Olien, "E. G. Squier and the Miskito," *Ethnohistory* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1989):111-33. Castile thus aligns himself in opposition to the view of Craig L. Dozier, *Nicaragua's Mosquito Shore: The Years of British and American Presence* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1985).