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**The Triangle of Fear and Death: Reagan's policy in Central  
America between 1981-89**

A Thesis submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Master's degree in Civilization

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores Ronald Reagan's foreign policy towards Central America. My thesis examines the effects of his policy on El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, throughout his two-terms presidency. The events which took place during the 1980's in these countries trigger further investigation. By the end of his first term, Reagan's hardline policy in Central America witnessed a shift towards pragmatism. This attempts to answer what caused this shift. Earlier research in the field fail to address the topic from a Central American point of view. In depth research in historical documents, newspaper articles and periodicals shows that the Reagan administration hardline policy towards Central America proved to be the most dangerous and the deadliest.

**Keywords:** Central America, Foreign Policy, Communism, pragmatism

*Dedication*

*I thank God first and foremost for enabling me to finish this work.*

*I dedicate this work to:*

*My Loving parents*

*&*

*My two pillars in life*

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Mr. Youcef Benna for his patience and guidance throughout the course of this work.

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## List of Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
Contras	Counter-revolutionaries
FAR	Rebel Armed Forces
FLMN	Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSSD17	National Secretive Strategy Document number 17
UN	United Nations
US/USA	United States of America

## Introduction

Central America has, historically, been regarded as the US "backyard" and sphere of influence. Since the early days of the twentieth century and even prior to that, the United States attempted to keep foreign influence out of the region, expand US interest and dictate Central American countries' politics, economic and ideological tendencies. In fact, the US intervention in the region has its roots, way back to 1945, in the Monroe Doctrine. The latter was a policy statement, issued by James Monroe in 1923, aimed at opposing colonization of newly independent countries in the Americas by European powers or re-colonization of these countries by Portugal and Spain, former colonial powers. The doctrine would soon be used by subsequent administrations to enforce dominance over the region. Whereas a huge bulk of historians refer to the Monroe Doctrine as the root to US intervention in the region, they tend to overlook the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine issued by president Theodore Roosevelt, by end of 1904, to exercise "international police power" in the region, following the Venezuelan Crisis of 1902-03. As a matter of fact, the USA made more than thirty military interventions in the Western hemisphere between 1898 and 1933. This tradition was maintained by US leaders during the cold war to counter what they dubbed Communist subversion in Central America.

Following the guidelines of the George Kennan's report, or what became known as the Kennan Corollary, the Truman administration reasoned that it could not ignore any potential threats of Communism in the Americas, thus reinforcement of repressive regimes in the region could be the solution for that . In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower intervened in Guatemala to overthrow, in a bloody coup, the then Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, creating a state of chaos in the country that would last for decades to come. The 1954 US intervention

in Guatemala marked the first US interventions in Central America after the outset of the Cold War. Central America and the Caribbean basin witnessed many outright military interventions, during the following years of the cold war, as that of president Kennedy in Cuba, in 1961, and Johnson's 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic. However, the Carter administration followed a more of a human-rights approach towards Central America. Even though Carter was not in favor of leftist governments like that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, he realized that there was little to do; any US intervention would contradict with the human rights policy line his administration adopted early on his election to the office. Nevertheless, he changed his approach towards the end of his presidency, in an attempt to prevent the same fate of Nicaragua in El Salvador.

With the advent of Ronald Reagan to US presidency, the US foreign policy towards Central America took a bloody turn. His aggressive attitude towards "international Communism" entailed fighting it everywhere, but first and foremost in the US "backyard". The Reagan administration had to work on generating Congress and public support to conduct its military adventures in the region, which was not an easy task all the time. The administration provided military and financial aid to right-wing authoritarian Salvadoran government to counter insurgencies in the country, which Reagan viewed as Communist infiltration backed by Cuba and the Soviets through Nicaragua. Thus the revolutionary government of the Sandinistas fell under Reagan's fires. Though the administration did not wage an armed war against Nicaragua, the CIA's covert operations in the country proved to be the most dangerous. The Reagan administration would spend much of the 1980s fighting the Sandinistas through aiding the Contras, or "Freedom fighters" as president Reagan would prefer to call them. In Guatemala, the indigenous people's plight seemed to be greater. The Reagan administration helped the

systematic ethnic cleansing of the Mayan people by aiding Guatemalan military regimes. This paper will focus on president Reagan's policies towards Central America, mainly El-Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala between 1981-89, and their effects on these countries.

The United States' history of intervention in Central American countries seems to reflect the former's desire to enforce its dominance over the latter for many reasons. The US post-war foreign policy, especially that of the Reagan's administration, towards Central America proved to be the most dangerous and costly.

Howard Jones in his, *Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Policy Relations Since 1945*, uses a narrative approach to describe and reveal the complex and conflicting nature of the US foreign policies. The book centers around the political figures, security interests and cold war propensities, which played a major role in shaping US foreign policy since 1945. The book, which covers up America's postwar administrations from the Truman to the W. Bush administration, examines the level of understanding US leaders have shown to historical events while defining the lines of the nation's foreign affairs. Jones provides a detailed and comprehensive narrative to US postwar/cold war policies towards the world, including Central America.

In an article entitled *Central America As a Theatre of US Cold War Politics*, The author Susanne Jonas focuses on resistance strife in Central America in relation to US Cold war politics in the 1980s. She divides the cold war era into two: old and new, which according to Jonas, starts with the US defeat in Vietnam. The author cites the 1954 US intervention in Guatemala as an understanding background to the US cold war politics in the early 1980s, as " it reveals the way in which the world, and the position of the United States within the world

has changed since the end of the second world war,"<sup>1</sup> she adds. Jonas maintains that the US cold war policies towards Central America have witnessed a significant change by late 1970s and early 1980s. She explains:

*The Thrust of these changes is that it is no longer possible to view Central America simple in terms of US national interests nor as a simple conflict "in the backyard of the United States", as has historically been the case ( and as was the case still with the 1954 intervention in Guatemala); today the struggle in countries such as El-Salvador and Guatemala is not only being regionalized but is being internationalized, as the world has become transnational<sup>2</sup>.*

In light of the above lines, the author tries to give a comprehensive analysis to the Reagan administration's policies in Central American countries. She argues that the Reagan administration was constrained from direct military intervention in Central America as a result of many factors; first, the US defeat in the Vietnam war. Second, the US fear of outright confrontation with the Soviets in the region. Third, the economic crisis which was plaguing the United States and the leading capitalist countries at the time, and the last reason, Jonas contends, is the anti-interventionist movement the Reagan administration faced back home.

Stephen G.Rabe's *The Killing Zone: The United States wages Cold War In Latin America* is a narrative of the US cold war policies towards Latin American countries. In his book, Rabe explains that the US intervention in Latin America has its roots in a period of time prior to the cold war. Since the late 19th century, the United States has regarded the region as its sphere of dominance, and several US administrations, including the Regan's administration, ordered

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<sup>1</sup>. Susanne Jonas, " Central America As a Theatre of US Cold War Politics," *Latin American Perspectives* 9, no.3(1982):123. [http:// www.jstor.org/stable/2633430](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633430).

<sup>2</sup>. Ibid.

outright military intervention in Central America and the Caribbean basin on many occasions between 1898 and 1933. The book explores the shaping of the US foreign policy towards Latin America in the early years of the cold war. According to Rabe, Latin America was neglected by US policy makers during the early years of the cold war due to US involvement in containing the soviets' expansion in Europe and other parts of the world. The author argues that the US policy makers had a derogatory attitude towards the people of the region, induced by the US elites who were in charge of developing US foreign policy, the like of Dean Acheson and George Kennan. Such a derogatory attitude towards Latin American people would persist throughout the cold war, he explains. The book offers a conventional narration about the US intervention in countries such as Nicaragua, El-Salvador, Brazil, Chile, The Dominican Republic, Guyana and Guatemala, and the support offered by the US to right-wing authoritarian regimes and anti-communist "freedom fighters" in the region during the cold war. Rabe argues that the destruction and bloodshed the region witnessed was the outcome of many factors and not just the US intervention.

The US foreign policy towards Central America has varied, between friendly and aggressive. Yet, towards the end of the cold war, during Ronald Reagan's presidency, Central America has witnessed widespread bloodshed and destruction which many attribute to US intervention in the region. This paper's main concern, thus, is to explore and examine the Reagan administration's policies towards central American countries, mainly Nicaragua, El-Salvador and Guatemala during his presidency's both terms, and their effect on those countries. The present paper will, also, attempt to explore the factors, which shaped Reagan's hard-line policy in Central America. Reagan's hard-line foreign policy towards Central America

witnessed a shift towards pragmatism, by the end of his first term presidency. This paper will try to answer what caused this shift.

In this research, I will examine Reagan's foreign policy towards Central America in both his terms, while exploring the factors which helped shape his policies in the region. Another objective is to give the reader a comprehensive narrative of the events which took place during Reagan's presidency between 1981-89. The last objective is to evaluate the Reagan's administration's policies in relation to Central America.

Even though Ronald Reagan was known for being charismatic and has always occupied a heroic image in the back memory of the American people, his policies, especially towards Central Americans, have generated wide criticism and backlash to the extent of calling him a warmonger by some. In light of this, this research will attempt to focus mainly on the Reagan administration's hard-line foreign policy towards Central America, which was mainly due to the presumed communist infiltration in the US sphere of influence. Reagan's interventionism in the region has left a legacy of trauma and bloodshed that is worth being investigated.

This research will depend on both descriptive and analytical methodologies. The descriptive methodology is used to identify and classify the elements included in my research, while analytical methodology is used to draw the relationship between the elements of the research. Descriptive methods are used to collect, analyze and summarize data, whereas the analytical ones are used for comparing, measuring and evaluating data.

I will use the descriptive methodology to describe and explore the Reagan's foreign policy towards Central America, mainly in Nicaragua, El-Salvador and Guatemala and the motive

behind those policies. Using analytical methodology, I will evaluate the Reagan administration's policies in relation to the region.

## Chapter One: Roots of US Intervention In Central America

"We do control the destinies of Central America and we do so for the simple reason that the national interest absolutely dictates such a course.....until now, Central America has always understood that governments which we recognize and support stay in power, while those we do not recognize and support fall."<sup>3</sup>

---- Undersecretary of State Roberts Olds, 1927-----

### The Monroe Doctrine

Along with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Farewell Address, the Monroe Doctrine was the last myth of the "holly texts" invented by American policy makers for the creation of the American Republic within its first 50 years. The Monroe Doctrine, a policy issued by president James Monroe, the seventh president of the united states, when the country was still in a state of reconstruction, following the 1802 war against the British. In the core sentence of his long 1823 message to congress, Monroe had warned the European powers that "The Americans.....are henceforth not to be considered subjects for future colonization by any European power."<sup>4</sup> That language would change American diplomatic procedure, practice and history through the decades to come and become a corner stone of the U.S foreign policy well into the twentieth century.

Monroe's new policy suggested that Europe and new world had different systems; it was designed to signify the clear break between the two continents. His message clearly stated that the

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<sup>3</sup> . William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1, <https://books.google.dz/books?id=TYYuYxZD2DMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=our+own+backyard&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwje9fX13afiAhUJQhoKHa3tBrsQ6AEIJzAA#v=on>.

<sup>4</sup> . Elihu Root, "The Real Monroe Doctrine," *The American Journal of International Law* 8, no. 3 (1914): 427, doi:10.2307/2187489.

U.S would oppose any European attempts to control new areas in the Americas, and any wrong doing from European countries will be considered as an act of aggression against the U.S. Henceforth, the doctrine had become the symbol for the historical efforts of the U.S in the interest of its own "peace and safety" to assert unilateral United States protection over the entire western hemisphere. It also symbolized America's readiness in order to secure that end to save Latin America's autonomy and impose its hegemony over the region.

The Monroe Doctrine fell out of usage by the U.S policy makers in the second half of the 1902 century. However, it was renewed in the 1890s when the U.S once again by unilateral action and under the umbrella of the doctrine intervened to settle a diplomatic dispute between Venezuela and Great Britain. The issue between the two countries was over the Boundaries that separate Venezuela and the British colony of Guiana in South America. The Venezuelan Boundary Crisis proved a watershed in the history of U.S relation with Latin America. At the beginning of the validation, the U.S was hesitant to side either country despite the many Venezuelan calls to support their claim over the boundary. However, the intervention of the U.S Secretary of State, Richard Olney, in favor of Venezuela surprised both, the Venezuelans and the British in 1895. Olney told the British, "To-day the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition."<sup>5</sup> By citing the Monroe Doctrine as a moral authority, secretary Olney sent the British a clear message that Latin American countries were no longer preys to outside European powers. Thus, it became an American right to speak for Latin Americans and to decide about the region. Washington's choice to defend Venezuelan interests led

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<sup>5</sup>. Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* ( New York: Oxford University Press: 2012), 6 .

the British to succumb to the American claim. For Olney the U.S had now assumed the responsibility to settle regional disputes and enforce the Monroe Doctrine as never before.

By the turn of the ninetieth century the Monroe Doctrine was also cited as an expression of American dominance in the western hemisphere. The William McKinley administration, 1897-1901, followed the track of secretary Olney, and made good on his claim by driving Spain out of the last remnants of its colonial empire, Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Spanish American war of 1898. As historian David F. Healy has noted "what had been a declaration that European powers must keep their hands off the independent states of the Americas [the Monroe Doctrine] became the justification for unilateral United States interventions in the hemisphere at its own direction. In the name of security, the nation now claimed regional hegemony."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Roosevelt Corollary**

The Roosevelt Corollary is often associated with president Theodor Roosevelt's policy in Latin America in the early twentieth century. In fact, Roosevelt new policy came as a reaction against the Venezuelan slack to pay the international debt. President Roosevelt informed the European creditors that he wanted a peaceful resolution to the debt issue, and any military intervention from the part of the European nations to collect debts owed to them by Latin Americans is not allowed. Using the Olney memorandum of 1895, Roosevelt claimed the Western Hemisphere as the US sphere of dominance. In his 1904 speech to congress, Roosevelt drew a new meaning of the Monroe Doctrine. "Under the president Roosevelt, the role of the U.S in the new world was "an international police power" to secure American interests in Latin America, and to

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<sup>6</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 6- 7.

reserve the right of the U.S. to interfere in this region in cases of "chronic wrong doing or an impotence which result in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society."<sup>7</sup> He sought the need to establish Latin American governments that would maintain "order within their boundaries and behave with a just regard for their obligations toward outsiders."<sup>8</sup>

Roosevelt approached a foreign policy based on the principle of "speak softly and carry a big stick."<sup>9</sup> He used the Big Stick Policy in 1903, when he helped Panama to secede from Colombia. He was also responsible for the construction and the supervision of the Panama Canal, which helped the US economic growth. The Panama Canal enabled the United States to police its neighbors towards the South. Other cases in which Roosevelt implemented his big stick policy was in 1906, when he made of Cuba a US protectorate, under the force of the American-imposed Platt Amendment. The latter regulated the US-Cuban relations. One the Platt Amendment's terms dictated that Cuba would not transfer Cuban land to any other power rather than the United States. The Caribbean lands had also been of a paramount importance to the United States, as it lay in the "frontyard." In 1915, the United States marines occupied Haiti in order to push the German forces out of the Cuban land, and prevent them from obtaining any military bases in the Caribbean Basin.

The United States' determination to build the Panama Canal, together with its consistent attempts to free the Caribbean Basin from foreign powers overlapped with the US national security and interests. These efforts flew in the direction of creating an American sphere of dominance, far

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<sup>7</sup>. John David Lees and Michael Turner, *Reagan's First Four Years: A New Beginning?*( Manchester: Manchester University Press,1988), 136, [books.google.dz/books?id=JD28AAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Reagan+s+first+four+years&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjcvJTB4b7kAhW1RBUIHcojAJMQ6AEIKT](https://books.google.dz/books?id=JD28AAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Reagan+s+first+four+years&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjcvJTB4b7kAhW1RBUIHcojAJMQ6AEIKT).

<sup>8</sup>. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia, "Big Stick Policy," Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, inc, Accessed August 17, 2019,

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid

from foreign threats. As diplomat Henry L. Stimson stated, "the national safety of our country had, however, imposed upon us a peculiar interest in guarding from foreign influence the vital sea route through the Caribbean Sea and the Panama Canal, and therefore in seeing to it that no cause for foreign intervention may arise along the borders of that route."<sup>10</sup>

From the Olney Memorandum and well up to the Roosevelt Corollary, the United States emerged as an imperial power, largely defining its sphere of influence, "which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it."<sup>11</sup>

### **The Kennan Corollary**

It was during the Truman administration that the policies for overcoming Communism were laid out. One of those policies was "Containment", which meant obscuring the paths for spreading of Communism on International level. In 1947, the Truman doctrine was presented, ensuring economic and military support to those nations which were the dire target of Communism. Economic aid was further flowed to Western Europe through the Marshall plan, in order to build a fence between Western and Eastern Europe, which was under the Soviet influence. On the other hand, NATO was formed in 1949 comprising of allies in Europe as well as North America. The NATO received more funds from the United States for its defense budget than all other member countries combined.

As the United States was engaged in the Cold War, mainly focused on Asia and Europe, they treated Latin Americans with negligence during the post-war times. Between 1945 and 1952, Latin American nations received less economic aid to compare with Europe. In fact, two small

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<sup>10</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> . *Ibid*, 7.

European countries such as Belgium and Luxemburg received more aid than all Latin American region combined. The Truman administration analyzed the inter-American relations only in the cold war context, leaving the region without any aid program. When Latin Americans raised their concerns against this negligence, they further got worse treatment from the US officials, who stated that Latin Americans were immature, irresponsible and not fully aware of the threats faced by Communism. It was obvious that the Good Neighbor Policy which characterized the US-Latin American relations during the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt gradually eroded with the coming of president Truman. Initially, The Truman administration had no fear over a Communist intervention in the Western hemisphere. However, after the Kennan report of 1950, the administration reasoned that they could not allow any potential grow of Communist movements in the Americas. Thus, they decided to take on board the authoritarian leaders of Latin America who reigned over the Latin American nations, in order to serve their international interest.

In order to assess the on ground situation of Latin Americans, the US decided to send George F. Kennan to Latin America, which is famously known as the “Cook’s Tour,” in 1950. Kennan originally specialized in Russian/Soviet Affairs and served as the lead of the of State Department’s Policy Planning Staff from 1947 to 1950. During his, trip he visited several capital cities of Latin America. According to Hixson, Kennan was “an ardent opponent of militarization and architect instead of a cooperative economic and political internationalism.”<sup>12</sup> Upon his return from the tour, he wrote a ten-thousand words report for the secretary of state.

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<sup>12</sup>. Walter L. Hixson, "Reassessing Kennan after the fall of the Soviet Union: The vindication of X?," *Historian* 59, no. 4 (1997): 851, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1997.tb01379.x>.

Kennan, who is normally known for his realistic approach, rose his superiors' fears over "the allure of Communism in Latin America and put no faith in the capability of Latin Americans to resist."<sup>13</sup> Kennan went on to make some harsh recommendations of how US officials would deal with Latin American nations, during the Cold War. He expressed his derogatory views towards Latin Americans, as he mocked the Organization of the American States and the Pan-Americanism stating that these are "a form of agreeable and easy escapism from the real problems of foreign policy."<sup>14</sup> He further argued that the US should remind Latin Americans "that we are by and large much less in need of them than they are in need of us."<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Latin America, the major challenge faced by the United States was how to stop any potential spread of communism. Kennan believed that "harsh governmental repression" might be the only solution to stop communism. However, Kennan's report was not given much consideration and was neglected until it was declassified in 1976. Kennan at last left his position from policy planning, in 1950.

Although Kennan's report was dealt with negligence, it shed light on the style and substance of the cold war policies of the united states in Latin America. According to Walter LeFeber, the United States reestablished the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe doctrine.

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<sup>13</sup> . Micheal J. Hogan, *America In the World: The Historiography Of American Foreign Relations Since 1941* ( Cambridge, New York: the Cambridge Press, 1995), 442, <https://books.google.dz/books?id=qiwSV1169XYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=micheal+hogan+America+in+the+world&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj0ytqwi9jkAhXEyIUKHa2LCt4Q6AEIK>

<sup>14</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> . *Ibid.*

Moreover, another noticeable historian Gaddis Smith, is of the view that “the U.S. Cold policies be labeled as Kennan Corollary.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The US Intervention in Guatemala**

The cold war era witnessed a big competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to lay their dominance over Third world Countries. The Western Hemisphere was a red line for the Americans. Any Communist infiltration in Latin or Central America was taken as a direct attack on the United States itself. The United States' paranoia over the spread of Communism in the Western Hemisphere grew even more after revolutionary Communists stepped into power in Cuba by late 1950s. Revolutions and radical changes in Latin and Central America were associated with Communism. Thus required US intervention, as in the case of Guatemala, when president Dwight Eisenhower launched a secret war against its popularly elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, in 1954. Even though, US businesses in Guatemala had a greater impact on such a move than Communism did. Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, implemented a different approach. His development programs to help reduce destitution, support literacy programs and many other vital projects, seemed to relieve the country for a while. However, these development programs proved to be dangerous to those in power, as they felt challenged by Indians and poor workers who saw that their labor had been exploited. This situation resulted in a long civil war and turmoil, which lasted for almost four decades. Indeed, the 1954 U.S. intervention in Guatemala marked the beginning of Guatemala's terror quagmire.

According to Michael. E Latham, Professor of history of US foreign relations at Fordham University, “Guatemala emerged as a focus of Cold War concern in the early 1950s, as president

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<sup>16</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 25.

Jacobo Arbenz Guzman launched a nationalist program to create an economy that would be less beholden to US capital,”<sup>17</sup> in addition to other reforms like the one that included the “Agrarian Law Reform” as indicated by Latham. This angered many former land-owners, such as the US-owned United Fruit Company. The changes which Arbenz made drove US leaders to reflect on the potentially serious consequences that may draw out of that. Policy makers in the United States thought that Arbenz's reforms would inspire other Central American countries towards following the same steps, thus putting US economic dominance in the region into jeopardy. Such a thing, the Eisenhower’s administration would not allow to happen anyhow. Moreover, the US administration thought that the reforms made by the Guatemalan president, who was highly supported by the Communist party, may lead to “revolutionary ambitions among an increasingly radicalized peasantry.”<sup>18</sup> As a result of all these events and concerns, the Eisenhower’s administration with the help of the C.I.A organized a military coup against Arbenz, in June 1954. In Guatemala, according to Rabe, "the C.I.A developed the techniques of 'controlled penetration,' infiltrating student, labor, church, women's, business and media groups inciting them to oppose the regime through strikes and demonstrations."<sup>19</sup> Even though Arbenz was not a Communist, the C.I.A branded him as one, in an attempt to turn military officers against him. Arbenz was replaced with Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who led the military coup.

Immediately, Armas put the country back to its old system, before Arbenz’s reforms, in which a small portion of rich people who owned 80 percent of the country’s lands controlled how things run in Guatemala. The new government, supported by the Eisenhower’s administration,

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<sup>17</sup>. Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution, Modernization, Development And US Foreign Policy From The Cold War to The Present*, ( Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), p 127.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 47.

repressed all types of insurgencies which grew as reactionary movements to its policies. Armas's tactics included the imprisonment of rebels, without even trial, and punishing poor peasants for supporting Communists. These policies prompted the creation of military groups who fought back Armas's atrocities, thus pushed the country further into turmoil.

After the assassination of Armas in 1957, the US officials increased their military support to his successor Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes who promised to bring security and order to Guatemala, but instead put the whole country into more turmoil. Not only that, the CIA helped Fuentes suppress insurgencies which opposed the latter's decision "to allow Cuban exiles to train on Guatemalan soil in preparation for the Bay of Pigs invasion."<sup>20</sup>

With the coming of John F. Kennedy, the US foreign policy tried a different approach to address the situation in Guatemala as well as in Latin American countries as a whole. For Kennedy and his advisers, "The Alliance for Progress" was the solution. Indigenous Indians who were rural peasants were often exploited by the oligarchy which intended to tie them through labor contracts, the thing which kept them stuck in the cycle of destitution, thus vulnerable to "insurgent movements." Since Kennedy's Alliance for Progress's goal was to support development programs in Latin American countries, Guatemalan Indian peasants benefitted from financial aid which was directed towards their modernization and structuring their rural life. According to Latham, "by providing peasants with new means to gain credit and build savings, the cooperatives helped make peasants less dependent on land lords and merchants for crop marketing, loans and farm inputs like tools and fertilizers."<sup>21</sup> In addition to offering financial aid to poor Guatemalan peasants, the USA supported cooperatives which worked together with catholic missionaries on fighting

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<sup>20</sup>. Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, p 128.

<sup>21</sup>. Ibid, 130.

illiteracy and raising awareness amongst the poor. Challenged by Indian peasants and appalled by a possible class change, the elites of Guatemala accused "anyone who attempted to organize upland peasants and any program that threatened to disrupt the existing patterns of class and ethnic exploitation"<sup>22</sup> of being Communist. Acts of insurgency organized by the FAR guerillas, with the help of some radical students and missionaries, erupted. As a result, the oligarchy demanded the expulsion of the priests and nuns who were already active in Guatemala. Moreover, the oligarchy "provided the Guatemalan military with black lists, facilitating a campaign of kidnapping and assassination that accelerated over the next decade."<sup>23</sup> When the situation turned bloody in Guatemala, the USA gave up its approach in favor of order and security assured by dictators such as Enrique Peralta Azurdia. The latter pointed himself the head of the state in Guatemala after he organized a successful coup against Fuentes. As best put by Latham," where the Alliance had promised progressive structural change in opposition to oligarchic control, US. Policy makers came to embrace visions of military modernization and threw their support behind a brutal counterinsurgency war."<sup>24</sup>

Even though the Alliance was supposed to bring benefits and liberal reforms to the people of Guatemala, especially those living in rural areas, Guatemala's government's plan was to increase its military power and control over these areas instead, while still receiving financial and military aid from the USA. "Between 1961 and 1963 the United States delivered \$4.3 million in military aid to Guatemala, more than four times the amount supplied by Eisenhower's administration in

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<sup>22</sup>. Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 131.

<sup>23</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>. Ibid.

the previous four years.”<sup>25</sup> The US assistance to the military regime in Guatemala resulted in human rights’ violation. Many political activists and communist party members were either kidnapped or executed. Many others were exiled or imprisoned and tortured. “In October 1966, the army went to deeply US-supplied arms and aircraft in a “scorched earth” campaign, killing up to 8000 peasant communities thought to be aligned with guerrilla forces.”<sup>26</sup> Despite its knowledge of the atrocities that the Guatemalan military regime carried out, the US government kept on providing it with funds and military support.

Indeed the 1954 U.S. intervention in Guatemala marked the beginning of Guatemala's terror quagmire that would last till the 1990s.

### **Jimmy Carter and Central America**

The 1976 US elections brought Jimmy Carter, an engineer by profession, to the White House. Jimmy Carter's foreign policy broke way with that of his predecessors. Emphasis on human rights was what characterized his policies towards third world countries, including Central America. In his Inaugural speech, president Carter asserted that "human rights is the soul of our foreign policy."<sup>27</sup> He believed that a nation's policies should be the mirror of its highest ideals and values. In 1977, shortly after his election, Carter delivered a speech at the University of Notre Dame, in which he stated that:

*For too many years, we've been willing to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles*

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<sup>25</sup> . Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 146.

*and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our own values for theirs. We've fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water. This approach failed, with Vietnam the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty. But through failure we have now found our way back to our own principles and values, and we have regained our lost confidence.*<sup>28</sup>

Carter's words set a precedent to the US Cold-War foreign policy. Carter dealt with third world troubles, including those of Central America, on a North-South basis. Even though, he admitted the Soviets' partial role in what was happening in Central America, Carter contended that not all the problems of Central America were Soviet or Cuban-induced. He reasoned that Poverty and repression were, in fact, the major reasons. The Carter administration, thus, saw that US flow of economic aid would save the region from falling prey to Communists. However, the Carter administration conditioned US assistance on human rights respect, and commitment to reforms. Carter's idealistic vision to US foreign policy did not last for a long time. Division within his administration, soon, rose when Carter's human right policy conflicted with the US national security and interest in Central America and other parts of the world.

The late 1970s civil wars which plagued Central America proved to be disastrous to the region and a source of concern to the Carter's administration. In Nicaragua, The Carter administration implemented a mixed policy of realism and pragmatism, "that for only a brief time seemed to approximate an effective foreign policy."<sup>29</sup> For four decades, The Somoza family dominated the political life in Nicaragua. They managed to remain in power by controlling the

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<sup>28</sup> . "Carter's Foreign Policy," U.S. Department of State, Accessed 18 August, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/carter>

<sup>29</sup> . Jones, *Crucible of Power*, 224.

National Guard and doing favors to the United States. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the last of the Somoza clan, plundered and repressed his people, to an unprecedented level. In 1978, a group of leftist guerrillas, who formed what came to be known as the Sandinista National Liberation Front, rebelled against the Somoza regime, leading the country to a civil war. The Carter administration offered to mediate, after realizing that the Sandinistas had wide support from the people in Nicaragua, and that the Somoza National Guard was not strong enough to crush on the rebels. According to Rabe, "the Carter administration hoped for a moderate solution to Nicaragua's civil war, not wanting its choices to be limited to either Somoza or the Sandinistas."<sup>30</sup> The Carter administration discussed the terms of the mediation and concluded that "the longer Somoza stayed in power, the more likely it was that the Sandinistas would replace him."<sup>31</sup> Carter's mediatory efforts failed as Somoza fought back for power. In 1979, The Sandinistas took over the government in Nicaragua, after they toppled down the Somoza regime. Somoza blamed president Carter for his overthrow and dubbed him a " Communist." Carter was never a Communist nor wished for a Sandinista victory, he was only, true to his own beliefs, not willing to aid a repressive regime nor wanted to pursue an interventionist policy in order to change the course of events in Nicaragua.

The Carter administration, begrudgingly, accepted the victory of the Sandinistas and recognized the legitimacy of their government. While Carter suspended aid to the repressive regime of the Somoza, he asked the congress to approve \$75 million in economic aid to the Sandinista government, as an incentive to make reforms. Despite congressional approval for the aid, there was a heated debate over the president's request, since the Sandinistas' leader, Daniel

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<sup>30</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 154.

<sup>31</sup>. Robert A, Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* ( Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987), 86, [https://books.google.dz/books?id=ySH5F\\_-giJEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=condemned+to+repetition+Robert+pastor&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjpt4zFjNnkAhXD8-AKHed1C1MQ](https://books.google.dz/books?id=ySH5F_-giJEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=condemned+to+repetition+Robert+pastor&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjpt4zFjNnkAhXD8-AKHed1C1MQ)

Ortega was Communist. Carter told congress that the Sandinistas were "an authentic Nicaraguan phenomenon," and that " the Sandinistas' movement represents a societal consensus that radical change was needed in Nicaragua."<sup>32</sup> The Sandinistas, in return, promised to open doors for foreign investments and commit to social and political reforms. However, Carter ordered covert spending, of around \$1 million, for the Sandinistas' political adversaries and critics in media outlets.

Carter's policy in El Salvador, however, seemed to be conflicting as Carter struggled between implementing a policy which promotes human rights and one that sought to prevent another Nicaragua. In the tiny and poverty-stricken country of El Salvador, the situation broke into a revolution. In 1979, a military coup took place and a junta-led government was established. The junta-government, led by Jose Napoleon Duarte of the Christian Democrats, received economic and military support from the Carter administration to counter the leftist insurgents, who opposed the repressive government in El Salvador. According to historian Stephen Rabe, " the administration pushed the junta to enact agrarian reforms and to nationalize banking as a way of breaking the power"<sup>33</sup> of the oligarchy in El Salvador. The administration sought to support the moderate Duarte, in an effort to isolate both, the left and right-wing in El Salvador. The administration wanted to avoid another Marxist victory in Central America. Military repression would propel the people into the hands of the left, the administration reasoned.

Violence intensified when the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, was killed by right-wing death squads. In late 1980, four US female missionaries were raped and killed by Salvadoran security forces. When the Duarte government failed to prosecute the perpetrators, Carter responded

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<sup>32</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 154.

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid, 165.

with cutting off aid to El Salvador. Nevertheless, Carter was forced to reverse his decision because of Cold War considerations. In January 1981, the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador launched an offensive against the Salvadoran government in an attempt to seize power. Few days later, "Carter had resumed military assistance to El Salvador and announced the dispatch of nineteen military advisers to help the moderate Duarte-led junta combat the guerrillas."<sup>34</sup> Carter's \$5 million aid for the Salvadoran government proved to be inadequate to achieve a major victory over the leftist guerrillas. Hence, The Civil war in El Salvador continued to tear the country apart under despite Carter's effort to limit it.

Carter's policy in Central America reflected two conflicting perspectives of the administration. Critics of Carter's policy, including his successor Reagan, maintained that his human rights' approach endangered the US national security and interests in the region.

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<sup>34</sup> . Lees and Turner, *Reagan's First Four Years*, 133.

## Chapter Two: "Our Own Backyard"

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Central America's problems do directly affect the security and the well-being of our own people. And Central America is much closer to the United States than many of the world trouble spots that concern us. So we work to restore our own economy, we cannot afford to lose sight of our neighbors to the South. El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts. Nicaragua is just as close to Miami, San Antonio, San Diego and Tucson as those cities are to Washington, where we are gathered tonight. Strategic Importance. But 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. Two-thirds of all our foreign trade and petroleum pass through the Panama Canal and the Caribbean. In a European crisis, at least half of our supplies for NATO would go through these areas by sea.

**Ronald Reagan, US fortieth president,  
New York Times, April 28, 1983.**

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### Reagan in Office

The 1980 US elections brought Ronald Reagan to the White House as the fortieth president to the USA. As he assumed presidency, Reagan pronounced an end to a decade long of self-doubt and self-wallowing which characterized the 1970's US politics. The Vietnam syndrome and the Watergate scandal left Americans in shock and thus pushed US foreign policy, under the Carter administration, to shift from outright interventionism to a more prudent albeit isolationist foreign policy. On January, 1981, in a speech addressing the nation, Reagan's aggressive tone toward the Soviets seemed to mark a closure to the state of Detente, and ignite the flame of Cold War once more. According to Stephen G. Rabe, professor of History at the University of Dallas, the president "was eager for domestic and international reasons for a victory over what it perceived as the international Communist movement."<sup>35</sup> Central America presented the perfect place to roll back Communism and showcase US strength to foes and

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<sup>35</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 158.

friends alike. To avoid a conflicting policy in the region, Reagan steered away from Human Rights rhetoric-even though this would change later on under the insistence of the congress and moderates within the administration itself- which characterized the Carter administration; the leaving president was criticized by many hard-line conservatives of jeopardizing US national security and interests through his emphasis on human rights. Reagan's secretary of state, Alexander Haig, declared that, " international terrorism will take the place of human rights in our concern."<sup>36</sup> The Reagan administration worked to change ,and in some cases reverse, the Carter administration's policies which were viewed as a fiasco. By the time Reagan became president, revolutions in Central American countries such as Nicaragua has just emerged as triumphant, El-Salvador was threatened to fall in the hands of communists and the situation in Guatemala sounded unstable.

### **Drawing the Policy Line**

The writings of Jeane Kirkpatrick, most notably her 1979 essay "*Dictatorships and Double Standards*", as well as the Santa Fe committee report, amongst many other written documents by ideological and even moderate Conservatives, played a major role in constructing the Reagan administration's policy line in Central America, during his first term. In her essay, *Dictatorships and Double Standards*, Jeane Kirkpatrick, then a professor of political science at Georgetown University, denounced the Carter administration for abandoning US allies, such as Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and the Shah in Iran; thus paving the way for leftist totalitarian regimes like the Sandinistas and Islamic fundamentalists to take over. In this respect, she writes: "the Carter administration not only failed to prevent the undesired outcome, it actively collaborated

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<sup>36</sup>. Holly Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua* ( USA: South End Press, 1988), 67, [https://books.google.dz/books?id=IbFXs7\\_LutMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Washington%27s+war+on+Nicaragua&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiZw-S2sb7iAhUNnxQKHRxfAts](https://books.google.dz/books?id=IbFXs7_LutMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Washington%27s+war+on+Nicaragua&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiZw-S2sb7iAhUNnxQKHRxfAts).

in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion."<sup>37</sup> Neither the Shah nor the Somoza " sought to reform his society in the light of any abstract idea of social justice or political virtue. Neither attempted to alter significantly the distribution of goods, status, or power,"<sup>38</sup> she adds. Kirkpatrick argued that authoritarian governments could possibly, over a course of time, become democratic- an argument possibly built on the transition into democracies made in Latin American countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Chile by late 1970s and up into the 1980s - unlike leftist totalitarian governments, who would always be repressive, offer no hope for their populations to change their internal systems, and present a threat to US national security and interests.. Even though Kirkpatrick's theory did not work all the time - as in the case of China ,where the United States was compelled to reestablish ties with its totalitarian government, especially after relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated- it seemed solid in its logic for Reagan and his administration who would ask the Congress for more military aid to ally dictators in the region. Later on, Jeane Kirkpatrick would be appointed as the US ambassador to the United Nations by president Reagan.

Just like Jeane Kirkpatrick's writings, *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*, famously known as the Santa Fe Report, provided a policy blueprint for the Reagan administration in Central America and the Caribbean. The 1980 report was written by a Committee consisting of five men who belonged to the Conservative think tank, The Council for Inter-American Security. "The Americas are under attack," warned the Santa Fe Committee,

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<sup>37</sup>. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships & Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1979, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/dictatorships-double-standards/>

<sup>38</sup>. Ibid.

who included L. Francis Bouchee, Roger W. Fontaine, David C. Gordon, retired Lt. General Gordon Sumner and Lewis Tambs, a professor of Latin American History at the University of Arizona who helped edit the report. The document claimed that Latin America was being subverted by the Soviets and that the Caribbean rim and basin was "spotted with Soviet surrogates and ringed with Socialist states."<sup>39</sup> The United States needed to keep the Western hemisphere under control, in order to be free to contest the Soviets' adventurism elsewhere in the world. The document claimed that the US was engaged in "World War III" and suggested that in "war there is no substitute for victory."<sup>40</sup> The report called for the revival of the Monroe Doctrine as the foundation of the US policy in the region. This latter meant that the internal affairs of foreign countries were subject to US scrutiny and control. The Committee criticized Containment and Detente as ineffective policies against Soviet threat in the region and called for "a new US foreign policy", as a substitute, for the survival of the republic. The Santa Fe study advocated the abandonment of "human rights which is a culturally and politically relative concept that the [Carter] Administration has used for intervention for political change in countries of this hemisphere. adversely affecting the peace, stability, and security of the region."<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, the United States must provide allies in the Americas with military and economic aid. Some of the members of the Santa Fe Committee would join the Regan Administration.

While these documents influenced Reagan's policy in the Americas, especially the first two years of his presidency, it is worth noting that other influences, also, existed within the

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<sup>39</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 157.

<sup>40</sup>. Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 58.

<sup>41</sup>. *Ibid*, 59.

administration right from the start. White House presidential assistants James Baker and Michael Deaver, as well as moderates such as vice-president George Bush were not in favor of the more ideological voices within the administration the like of Jeane Kirkpatrick and State Secretary Alexander Haig (who, at times, was a pragmatist as well).<sup>42</sup> In fact, this was not a homogenous administration; there was division amongst the Reagan Administration regarding the US policy towards Central America. The White House and the State Department had different stance on how the administration should approach the situation in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Ignorance and unfamiliarity with Central America and Latin America as a whole characterized the people whom Reagan appointed as his ambassadors and attaches in the region. Ideological correctness took the place of professional skill within the administration. " Reagan's assistant secretaries for inter- American affairs, like Abrams and Thomas O. Enders had no professional experience in Latin America, and Enders did not speak Spanish."<sup>43</sup> As a matter of fact, veteran and skilled diplomats such as Robert E. White, who served as the US ambassador to El-Salvador, was replaced with Dean Hinton, a hard-core anti-Communist. Later on towards the end of Reagan's first term, moderates would take the upper hand, especially with the replacement of State Secretary Alexander Haig with George Schultz, and the appointment of Robert McFarlane as a National Security Advisor to the president. The two men favored a more reconciliatory and pragmatic approach towards Central America. The 1984 elections would push Reagan to turn down the rhetorical volume towards the region, Nicaragua especially, for a while, and mark the shift in his policy towards pragmatism.

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<sup>42</sup>. Howard J. Wiarda, *American Foreign Policy Towards Latin America: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush* (London; New York: New York University Press, 1992), 21, [https://books.google.dz/books?id=FPs8DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA22&dq=Reagan%27s+foreign+policy+in+Central+America&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2o\\_KVuc\\_hAhWQHhQKH](https://books.google.dz/books?id=FPs8DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA22&dq=Reagan%27s+foreign+policy+in+Central+America&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2o_KVuc_hAhWQHhQKH).

<sup>43</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 159.

### **The White Paper**

On February 23, 1981, the State Department released the White Paper, *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, based on documents allegedly captured by the Salvadoran military from rebels in El Salvador. The White Paper claimed that these documents provided the Reagan administration with substantial evidence that the Soviet Union and Cuba were supplying the left-wing guerillas in El Salvador with arms and ammunition through Nicaragua. Nicaragua, under the Sandinistas government who toppled down the US-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza, was the "funnel" through which arms and revolution were being exported to the region. "Other countries [in Central America] would fall like dominos"<sup>44</sup>, in the hands of Communism and only the big stick of the USA could prevent that from happening. Reagan's counselor, Ed Meese proclaimed that the United States "will take the necessary steps to keep the peace any place in the world and that includes El Salvador."<sup>45</sup> The White House blamed the Soviets and their allies in Cuba and Nicaragua for inciting on subversion in El Salvador in an attempt to overthrow the government there, thus it is the US responsibility to bring back security and stability to the Central American country. In fact, The United States wanted to prevent another Nicaragua in the hemisphere; the administration feared to lose El Salvador to Communism, which would lead Honduras and Guatemala to follow steps. "There is some evidence the [arms] flow [through Nicaragua] may have stopped in the last couple of weeks,"<sup>46</sup> Assistant Secretary Prudence Bushnell informed reporters, the day the Paper was released. The administration would send military advisers and aid

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<sup>44</sup> . Robin Anderson, *A Century of Media, A Century of War* ( New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 84, [https://books.google.dz/books?id=jviaAmJL\\_a8C&pg=PA84&dq=Reagans+white+paper&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUK Ewje4\\_edh9fhAhXG4IUkHZfQAPIQ6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q](https://books.google.dz/books?id=jviaAmJL_a8C&pg=PA84&dq=Reagans+white+paper&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUK Ewje4_edh9fhAhXG4IUkHZfQAPIQ6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q).

<sup>45</sup> . Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> . Ibid.

to El Salvador a week later. It would, also, assert that negotiations with the government in Nicaragua and the insurgents in El Salvador were not an option.

Regarding the authenticity of the paper, press secretary to Jimmy Carter, Hodding Carter, as per policy analyst and strategist Holly Sklar, said: " the White Paper was swallowed whole and regurgitated in a fashion not equaled since the Johnson Administration's White Paper on Vietnam 15 years ago." His words implied that the White Paper on El Salvador was the next big lie after that of the Johnson Administration's, under which, US military intervention was authorized " to defend" South Vietnam against the aggression of North Vietnam backed by the Chinese at the time.

Later it would be revealed by press and media that the documents contained no evidence on the allegations directed towards Nicaragua. The White Paper was "a political frameup" Nevertheless, the Reagan administration achieved their main goal by placing El Salvador and Nicaragua in a " Cold War context," assuring that the mainstream debate Media specialists around Reagan " realize that first impressions are lasting impressions, that's part of their public relations genius,"<sup>47</sup> explained the *Los Angeles Times'* journalist, Jack Nelson. According to authors Howard Friel and Richard Falk, Jonathan Kwitni, of the *Wall Street Journal*, doubted the accuracy of the captured documents and the White Paper all together. In doing so, Kwitni quoted the main author of the Paper, Jonathan Glassman, who " freely acknowledges that there were ' mistakes' and 'guessing' by the government's intelligence analysts who translated and explained the guerilla documents, which were written in Spanish with code names."<sup>48</sup>As for the captured documents,

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<sup>47</sup> . Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, 67.

<sup>48</sup>. Howard Friel and Richard Falk, *The Paper Record: How the New York Times Misreports US foreign Policy* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 205, [https://books.google.dz/books?id=LM7cRyru0voC&pg=PA204&dq=reagan+white+paper&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiE0vyn79\\_iAhWPEBQKHUa3At0Q6AEINzAC#v=onepage](https://books.google.dz/books?id=LM7cRyru0voC&pg=PA204&dq=reagan+white+paper&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiE0vyn79_iAhWPEBQKHUa3At0Q6AEINzAC#v=onepage).

Kwitni wrote that they "were attributed to guerilla leaders who did not write them. And it's unknown who did."<sup>49</sup>

### **Providing Aid for El Salvador**

El Salvador emerged as another Cold War hot spot and a vital element for the Reagan administration's consideration to reassert US hegemony over its traditional sphere of dominance. A victory in Central America would redeem the US image and credibility globally. Additionally, it would also present a good opportunity for the US to exemplify a stern stance against international Communism. In March, 1981, less than two months after his ascension to presidency, Ronald Reagan asked the US Congress to approve sending military advisers and aid to the small country of El Salvador, then led by Jose Napoleon Duarte, of the Christian Democratic Party. President Reagan claimed that the leftist government in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba was sponsoring the Marxist rebels in El Salvador, thus destabilizing El Salvador. Earlier, in February 1981, his State Secretary Haig had stated that the US "problem with El Salvador is external intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation in this hemisphere, nothing more, nothing less."<sup>50</sup>In an attempt to win voices within Congress, and to persuade the US public of the existence of a Soviet threat in the region, the administration heightened the rhetoric to a level not heard since the early days of the Cold War. "It is time the people of the United States realize that under the domino theory, we're the last domino,"<sup>51</sup> Reagan warned. The United States must act swiftly and effectively to counter the menace of Communists in Central America, the president emphasized. While in fact El Salvador's Civil War had socio-economic roots. The

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<sup>49</sup>. Friel and Falk, *The Paper Record*, 205.

<sup>50</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 167

<sup>51</sup>. William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 147.

country was ruled by oligarchs and military officers for a long time. The economic prosperity which El Salvador witnessed during the 1960s and 1970s increased the level of awareness amongst the different groups of Salvadoran people, who called for political and social reforms. In big Cities, Unions and associations were formed by students, workers, tradesmen, and professionals to express their own demands. In rural areas, as put in the words of Rabe, "desperate, landless peasants also organized. They were aided by catholic priests, nuns, and lay workers who encouraged *campesinos* to pray together, organize and discuss rural issues in Christian base communities or *comunidades de base*."<sup>52</sup>The Country's elites responded with a slaughter similar to that of General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in 1932. Salvador's rulers ordered paramilitary groups and death squads to murder the leaders and organizers of the protests to spread fear amongst people. After the overthrow of General Carlos Humberto Romero in 1979 in a military Coup, and until 1982, the country became under the rule of a Junta consisting of two colonels and three civilians, headed by Jose Napoleon Duarte, who would become the president from 1984 to 1989. Duarte, a moderate Centrist, initiated a land reform that would allow redistribution of land in El Salvador. In response, Death Squads supported by the right wing and Salvadoran oligarchs would murder new land owners, mostly poor peasants. Duarte had little control over Salvadoran military forces, who were the complicit of the Death Squads in most of the brutality and bloodshed the country witnessed. This pitted groups of leftist guerrillas, who called themselves the Frente Fabrundo Marti Para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), against the generals and the ruling elites in El Salvador. The guerrilla men were Marxist Leninists, who were inspired by the revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua. The situation in El Salvador turned into a decade long of civil war and violence.

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<sup>52</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 165.

Reagan's main policy in El Salvador entailed offering military and economic assistance to the Salvadoran government to topple down the Marxist insurgents, and thereby prevent another Nicaragua in the region. Even though, Congress approved sending military trainers and aid to El Salvador, according to historian Howard Jones, there were skeptics who contended that the Reagan administration "was taking the same treacherous path that had earlier led to Vietnam: a steady escalation of U.S. economic and military aid, the assignment of advisers.....and administrators and the ultimate dispatch of combat troops."<sup>53</sup>The Vietnam Syndrome became the main obstacle for the Reagan administration to achieve its chief goal in El Salvador. To appease skeptics' concern, Reagan promised that no US soldiers would be sent to El Salvador and limited the number of military advisers to just fifty five. To keep his promise, he would order bringing members of Salvadoran military personnel to be trained on US soil. Reagan maintained that the Soviets had infiltrated Nicaragua and now El Salvador , and if the US remained silent about that, Honduras and Guatemala would be next. Thus ally governments such as that of El Salvador needed US assistance to topple down leftist insurgents, whom the White House considered as Soviet proxies and dubbed as "terrorists". President Reagan claimed that the insurgents presented a threat to US national security and interests since "Two-thirds of all [US] foreign trade and petroleum pass through the Panama Canal and the Caribbean. In a European crisis, at least half of [US] supplies for NATO would go through these areas by sea."<sup>54</sup> The geographical proximity of Central America to the US mainland implied its strategic importance to the United States, thus, it would be too reckless for US policy makers "to ignore the danger of governments seizing power in there with

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<sup>53</sup> . Howard Jones, *Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Relations From 1945* (Lanham, Maryland: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD, 2009), 257.

<sup>54</sup> . Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's Address On Central America To Joint Sessions Of Congress," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/28/world/president-reagan-s-address-on-central-america-to-joint-session-of-congress.html>.

ideological and military ties to the Soviet Union,"<sup>55</sup>Reagan warned. Reagan believed that Duarte-led government in El Salvador would ensure the transfer of power democratically, if they received substantial economic and military support from the United States. The Reagan administration provided El Salvador with \$25 million in military aid, and promised more \$ 131 million in economic aid over the coming two years. However, the \$25 million was an initial aid to what the administration had intended for El Salvador. President Reagan relentlessly requested congress for more military assistance to El Salvador, but Congress often challenged the president's requests, on the ground of human rights violations by the Salvadoran government. Despite repeatedly maintaining that he would not send US troops to the troubled country, Reagan threatened to increase the number of military advisors if congress refused to acquiesce to his demand of sending more military aid. Congress succumbed to the president's demands and approved the provision of more military aid to El Salvador, but required the administration to certify, every six months, that the Salvadoran government was making improvements in human rights, exercising more control over its security forces, and committed to social and economic reforms. Even though the reports submitted by the administration were not totally satisfying, congress accepted the administration's certification and military aid continued pouring to El Salvador. In fact, some congress men feared losing El Salvador to communists by opposing more aid. In February 1982, Reagan had revealed his "Caribbean Basin Initiative", an economic aid package totaling \$350 million, aimed at equally helping various countries such as Honduras, Jamaica, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic. However, the president wanted to circumvent the initial plan, and allocate two-thirds the budget to solely El Salvador. According to history professor, Rabe:

*In the 1980s, El Salvador's military received approximately \$1 billion in military aid from the United States. El Salvador had joined Israel as the major recipient of U.S.*

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<sup>55</sup>. Jones, *Crucible of Power*, 260.

*military aid. El Salvador's military grew from ten thousand to fifty thousand. Officers and men trained at US war schools. The military was equipped with the latest military technology, including A-37 "Dragonfly" jet aircraft for bombing and AC-47 helicopter gunships for combat air support.<sup>56</sup>*

In total, El Salvador received \$3.6 billion in both economic and military aid, making it ranked amongst the largest recipients of US aid. The White House regarded the situation in El Salvador as increasingly dangerous and required further U.S military intervention. Hence, Reagan increased the number of military advisers sent to Honduras to train Salvadoran troops from fifty five to one hundred.

In March, 1982, the Salvadoran Constituent Assembly elections took place. To Reagan's dismay, the far-right, led by Roberto d'Aubuisson, won the election. d'Aubuisson was not only notoriously known for his ties to the death squads, but also a staunch opponent to the reforms initiated by the junta-led government of Jose Napoleon Duarte, including the land reform. However, through increased flow of US military and economic aid programs, "the Reagan administration succeeded in pressuring d'Aubuisson to continue the agrarian reforms, to establish a Salvadoran Human Rights Commission and to proceed with the drafting of a new constitution."<sup>57</sup>A new Constitution was approved by the Constituent Assembly in 1983, and presidential elections were planned to take place on March 1984. The victory of Jose Napoleon Duarte, a figure favored by Reagan for being a moderate reformist, in the presidential elections over d'Aubuisson played a major part in bolstering Reagan's policy in El Salvador. The administration viewed Duarte's victory as a crucial means to convince congress to approve more economic and military aid programs for El Salvador. Additionally, "the Reagan administration was

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<sup>56</sup>. Rabe, *The killing Zone*, 167.

<sup>57</sup>. Lees and Turner, *Reagan's First Four Years*, 136.

hopeful that, under Duarte's leadership, the Salvadoran government would speed up the land reform programme and crack down hard on the death squads of both the right and the left."<sup>58</sup> The administration provided Salvadoran government with \$3 million in aid for the 1984 presidential elections.

Unlike other parts in Central America, Reagan believed in a democracy made through transition in El Salvador. The administration insisted on pouring billions of dollars in economic and military aid to the government in El Salvador to eliminate the leftist guerrillas, yet to no avail. The Leftist guerrillas were still operating, even after Regan left office. The civil war in El Salvador came to an end in 1992, when all parts of conflict agreed to a cease-fire. An agreement between the Salvadoran government and the rebels was finally reached through negotiations. Although El Salvador emerged as a focal point in Reagan's foreign policy toward Central America, the administration was forced to widen its scope of military action to include Nicaragua, given the fact that the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador were being supplied by the leftist government of Nicaragua through Honduras.

### **Launching War Against the Sandinistas**

In 1979, The Sandinistas, a group of leftist revolutionaries led by Daniel Ortega, took power in Nicaragua after they overthrew right-wing dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Throughout his two-term presidency, Reagan, a staunch anti-Communist, attacked the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Reagan's stance on the Sandinistas was that they were Marxist-Leninists, whose main aim was to subvert the whole region by spreading the Soviets' ideology of communism. As a candidate, Reagan called for a cut-off to any financial assistance aimed at the Sandinista

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<sup>58</sup> . Lees and Turner, *Reagan's First Four Years*, 136.

government. Once he took office, Reagan suspended the \$75 million of economic aid that the Carter administration intended for Nicaragua. The charge was that the Sandinistas was funneling arms to leftist insurgents in El Salvador, in an attempt to destabilize the Salvadoran government. In November 1981, Reagan issued NSDD 17, the National Secretive Decision Directive, which authorized the C.I.A to secretly overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. William J. Casey, then the chief director of the Central Intelligence Agency, organized an anti-Sandinistas military group, mainly consisting of Nicaraguan exiles. The fighters came to be known as the Contras, an acronym for counterrevolutionaries. The Contras, initially numbered five hundred fighters before their number went up to ten thousand through the 1980s, were funded and trained by the United states on the Honduran soil. However, some of their leaders were trained in Florida. "The senior military command of the contras was composed of former officers of the Somoza National Guard and was led by Colonel Enrique Bermudez."<sup>59</sup>

The Contras waged a dirty war against the Nicaraguan government and people. In 1982, the content of NSDD 17 became public, after it was leaked. The administration defended its position by claiming that the fight in Nicaragua was indigenous and that the US aid to the Contras was only aimed at interdicting arms supply to the leftist insurgents in El Salvador. US Ambassador to the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick stated that "the United States isn't invading anybody."<sup>60</sup> However, The Reagan administration continued to flow more military aid to The Contras, as part of its scheme to overthrow the Sandinistas. Despite the fact that the Contras never succeeded in seizing territories or towns in Nicaragua, they engaged in acts of torture, murder, rape, and destruction. They operated, mostly, in the countryside killing farmers, unarmed civilians and public officials. When

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<sup>59</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 160.

<sup>60</sup>. Jones, *Crucible of Power*, 260.

confronted with the horrors committed by the Contras in Nicaragua, president Reagan often denied the incidents as fake.

According to historian Howard Jones, the Reagan administration used a strategy in which it "would treat the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in the same way it treated the U.S. supported government of president Alvaro Magana: because the Sandinistas sought Magana's overthrow, the United States would help the guerrilla group in Nicaragua.....seeking to oust the Sandinistas."<sup>61</sup> The administration used all means available in its war against the Sandinistas. In addition to aiding the Contras, the United States imposed a trade ban on Nicaragua, in an attempt to weaken its economy. The Reagan administration compelled the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to turn down the Nicaraguan government's requests for any potential loans. As a result, The economy of Nicaragua headed towards bankruptcy and "inflation soared out of control, hitting 33,000 percent in 1988."<sup>62</sup>Such a policy was aimed at generating criticism and blame against the Sandinistas for the economic fiasco. Furthermore, The Reagan administration pressured right-wing politicians in Nicaragua not to take part in the 1984 elections, as a way to give credence to its propaganda that the Sandinistas were a totalitarian government. The US invasion of Grenada in 1983, together with the occasional military maneuvers along the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua, were intended to be a warning message to the government in Nicaragua that the United States was ready to use force if needed.<sup>63</sup>

In late 1983, the secret war waged against the Sandinistas became public and endangered to reach a closure. Dozens of people were injured and several neutral ships were damaged by

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<sup>61</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 261.

<sup>62</sup>. Ibid, 161.

<sup>63</sup>. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 442.

explosions planned by the C.I.A in various harbors in Nicaragua. The C.I.A's covert operations in Nicaragua were exposed, which caused the congress to take stringent measures. The administration ignored the Boland Amendment of 1982, suggested by politician Edward Boland of the Democratic party, which banned the use of public funds to undermine the Nicaraguan government, and continued its war against the Sandinistas. The latter filed a complaint to the World Court accusing the United States of violating Nicaragua's sovereignty. The administration, however, refused to deal or cooperate with the Court. In 1986, The World Court found the United States guilty of all charges, and ordered Washington to make compensation to Nicaragua. An outraged congress responded with suspending all aid to the contras by late 1984. The mining of Nicaragua's harbors brought the administration to shame and embarrassed the rest of the nation.

In March 1984, The Reagan administration appealed for more military aid to the contras. Suspicious of Daniel Ortega's visit to the Soviet Union, congress approved \$100 million in aid, "but restricted the package to 'nonlethal' aid."<sup>64</sup> When congress stopped all finances to the contras, the Reagan administration resorted to wealthy people and oil magnates for funding, in addition to allied countries such as Israel, Vietnam and Saudi Arabia. The Reagan administration also sought money to the contras by illegally selling arms to terrorist groups in Iran. The affair, famously known as the "Iran-Contra Scandal", generated wide criticism to the Reagan administration, and strengthened the already existing public and congressional opposition to its policies in Central America. Fourteen members of the Regan administration were prosecuted as a result of the scandal.

Reagan claimed that the Sandinistas presented a great threat to US national security. His argument for that was that "the Soviet Union became a major arms supplier to Nicaragua."<sup>65</sup> Even

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<sup>64</sup> . Jones, *Crucible of Power*, 265.

<sup>65</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 163.

though the Soviet aid to Nicaragua was intended to help the latter to defend itself against the contras, Reagan contended that the Soviets were planning to use Nicaragua as a military base for Communist expansion in the region. Throughout his presidency, Reagan showed no interest in negotiating with the Sandinistas. Hardliners within the administration blocked the way for any possibility for negotiations to take place. In fact, in historian Kenneth Roberts words, "these negotiations were designed not to reach settlement with Nicaragua but to induce congress to support contra aid."<sup>66</sup> The president himself said in a meeting with National Security officials ,on June 25, 1984, that "if we are just talking about negotiations with Nicaragua, that is too far- fetched to imagine that a Communist government like that would make any reasonable deals with us, but if it is to get the congress to support the anti-Sandinistas, then that can be helpful."<sup>67</sup> Reagan's words indicate that his administration was not willing to deal with the leftist government of the Sandinistas, unless it became democratic, the thing which he ruled out. Thus any mention of Nicaragua, in the United States, would only be limited to aiding the contras.

Unlike El Salvador, the Reagan administration pursued a policy, which sought a forced democracy in Nicaragua. Throughout the 1980s, Reagan spent \$1.6 billion in aid for the contras, in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinistas, but his efforts failed. The Sandinistas were still in power by 1989. Nevertheless, he succeeded in destroying Nicaragua. The election of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, of the right-wing coalition, in the 1990 presidential elections, marked the end of the US military intervention in Nicaragua. With the help of president Oscar Arias Sánchez of Costa Rica, a peaceful settlement to the crisis between El Salvador and Nicaragua was attained.

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<sup>66</sup>. Kenneth Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining: The United States, Nicaragua, and Conflict Resolution in Central America," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (1990): 80, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538866?read-now=1&seq=14#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538866?read-now=1&seq=14#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>67</sup>. Ibid, 80- 81.

### El Mozote Massacre

During the 1980s civil war, the Salvadoran military and its allied death squads often killed students and union leaders and threw their amputated parts on the roadside to spread fear amongst the rest of the population. Mass massacres were a common practice against unarmed peasants who lived in the countryside, mostly for succoring leftist rebels. The worst massacre occurred in the village of El Mozote. On December 10, 1981, the units of Atlacatl Battalion, a military force trained and funded by the United States raided the village of El Mozote and detained its people in their homes for the whole night. The following day, the Battalion divided the villagers into three groups: men, women and children. "Survivors later reported hearing the screams of women and young girls being raped. The soldiers then gunned down each group and burned the homes, the church and convent where the families were being held."<sup>68</sup>The massacre came under what it became known as the "scorched earth" operation, launched by the Salvadoran military to cut-off the guerrillas' source of supplies. Almost one thousand villagers were killed in El Mozote and the surrounding areas, only in a matter of two days, the majority of whom were women and children.<sup>69</sup> In the aftermath of the massacre, Raymond Bonner of The New York Times, who started reporting from El Salvador since December 1980, moved to the set and recalled seeing "skeletons...being picked by vultures, [and] the stench of death carried by the breeze."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>. Anna-Cat Brigida, "El Mozote massacre: Waiting for justice nearly 40 years later," *AlJazeera*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/el-mozote-massacre-waiting-justice-40-years-181210151727647.html>.

<sup>69</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>. Raymond Bonner, "What did Elliot Abrams Have to Do With the El Mozote Massacre?" *The Atlantic*, February, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/ilhan-omar-elliott-abrams-and-el-mozote-massacre/582889/>

Reports and news about the El Mozote massacre spread in the United States. However, the Reagan administration vehemently denied the news and called it an FMLN propaganda to defame the Salvadoran government and military. Hinton, US ambassador to El Salvador and his team "used deceptive language in their reporting to Washington, neither explicitly confirming nor denying the massacre."<sup>71</sup> Elliot Abrams, who was then the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in Latin America, stated that the circulating news about a massacre were "not credible." Reagan and his administration contended that the government in El Salvador was never a part in the violence which plagued the country. US officials secretly admitted that the Salvadoran security forces were behind most of the acts of killing and torture. However, a Communist takeover in El Salvador was what the administration feared the most. This was better explained in the words of Abrams, "whatever you think of us from a human-rights point of view, what you think of us from a security point of view is determinative."<sup>72</sup> It was clear that Reagan chose to overlook the atrocities committed by militaries of allied governments as part of his own policy to eliminate any Communist presence in the Western Hemisphere.

### **Operation Sofia**

Violence and unrest, borne out of a civil war induced by the 1954 US intervention, had characterized life in Guatemala for decades. However, the civil war intensified during the 1980s. José Efraín Ríos Montt, who headed a three-man junta government between 1982 and 1983, ordered the massacre of thousands of Mayan people in a counterinsurgency campaign codenamed Operación *Sofía*, that was launched during the summer of 1982. Guatemalan Security forces obliterated 600 villages of indigenous people suspected of succoring leftist guerrillas. The ethnic

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<sup>71</sup>. Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 170.

<sup>72</sup>. Ibid.

cleansing of the Mayan population included fierce tactics such as torture, rape and body mutilation. In the words of the UN Truth Commission, "agents of the state committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people."<sup>73</sup> Mayan villages were wiped out even when no guerrilla groups existed in the areas. The brutality of the Guatemalan military forces was no less than its counterpart in El-Salvador, often using the same ghastly tactics. Guatemalan commandos admitted to The U.N Truth Commission that "they had killed the younger children by grabbing hold of their legs and swinging them so their heads smashed against a wall."<sup>74</sup> During the rule of Riós Montt and his predecessor, General Romeo Lucas García, rural Mayan communities in Guatemala witnessed the worst type of state terrorism. State forces were deemed responsible for 93% of the violence. The total number of casualties in Guatemala's civil war exceeded 200,000, 83% of the victims were indigenous people.<sup>75</sup> It was clear that the Mayan genocide was but a reflection to the culture of exclusion that historically characterized the Guatemalan society.<sup>76</sup>

Riós Montt's military brutal strategy towards the insurgents in Guatemala was fostered by the Reagan administration's unconditional support. In the words of Greg Grandin, history professor who writes for the New York Times, "the White House was less concerned with the massacres than with their effectiveness, or with countering the bad publicity, stemming from reports about the atrocities."<sup>77</sup> Expectedly, Reagan put the blame on the left for the mounted violence in

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<sup>73</sup>. United States Institute of Peace, *Truth Commission: Guatemala*, February, 1997, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1997/02/truth-commission-guatemala> .

<sup>74</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 173.

<sup>75</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> . *Report of UN Truth Commission: Commission for Historical Classification*, February, 1999, 13, <https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CEHreport-english.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup>. Greg Grandin, "Guatemalan Slaughter Was Part of Reagan's Hardline," *The New York Times*, May, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/05/19/what-guilt-does-the-us-bear-in-guatemala/guatemalan-slaughter-was-part-of-reagans-hard-line>.

Guatemala. In late 1982, Reagan met with president Riós Montt in Honduras. Reagan said that Riós Montt was "a man of great integrity and commitment..... he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice. My administration will do all it can to support his progressive efforts."<sup>78</sup> Later on in a press conference, Reagan added that Riós Montt was falsely charged by his own critics. It was obvious that the military regime in Guatemala had Reagan's blessings for its dirty war. Declassified information revealed that the State Department had all prior knowledge about the massacres perpetrated by the state forces ahead of Reagan-Riós Montt's meeting. Despite the ban on military assistance initiated by president Carter in late 1970s, the Reagan administration continued its military aid and training to the Guatemalan army. Regarding the role of the United States in Guatemala, the UN Truth Commission's report concluded that "military assistance was directed towards reinforcing the national intelligence apparatus and for training the officer corps in counterinsurgency techniques, key factors which had significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation."<sup>79</sup> Given the large scale of violence and poverty in Guatemala's rural areas, US humanitarian aid kept on pouring to the ravaged country. The administration officials hoped that Guatemala's security forces would succeed in ridding the country of the guerrilla rebels, without having the United States associated with the abuses. Not all US officials were in favor of the bloodshed, though. Some of them criticized the US silence towards the atrocities committed by the forces of Riós Montt. According to Kathryn Sikkink, professor of human rights policy at the Harvard Kennedy school, Reagan's authorization to Riós Montt was "a gratuitous, thoughtless gesture made for a man guilty

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<sup>78</sup> . Stephen Kinzer, "Efraín Riós Montt, Guatemalan Dictator Convicted of Genocide Dies at 91," *The New York Times*, April, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/obituaries/efrain-rios-montt-guatemala-dead.html>.

<sup>79</sup> . Ibid, 19.

of mass murder of his population."<sup>80</sup> Indeed the United States was a complicit in the genocide of the Mayan population in Guatemala. In 1996, UN peace talks brought an end to violence in Guatemala.

### **The Henry Kissinger's Bipartisan Report**

On July 1983, president Reagan invited Henry Kissinger, former State Secretary in the Nixon administration, to head a national bipartisan commission of twelve members. The aim of the commission was to write policy recommendations "on what (the US) must do in the years ahead to meet the underlying problems of peace, poverty, democracy and dictatorship"<sup>81</sup> in Central America. During his first term, Reagan's hardline policies in Central America generated wide criticism from the US public and strong opposition from the congress. On the outside, Reagan's move seemed to indicate a shift in his policy towards the region. However, the underlying aim behind this change was related to the upcoming presidential elections of 1984. Other purposes seemed to underlie the Henry Kissinger report too. "I think it is imperative that we avoid the bitter debate that characterized the Vietnam period,"<sup>82</sup> Kissinger said, as he accepted the invitation of the president as the head of the commission. Kissinger appeared to understand that he was given the task to prevent future opposition to Reagan's policies in Central America, and create a bipartisan consensus to the president's plan for the region. The report echoed that aim, as it emphasized that "there is no room for partisanship,"<sup>83</sup> and that both parties should unite to

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<sup>80</sup> . Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 174.

<sup>81</sup> . Lees and Turner, *Reagan's First Four Year*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> . William M. Leo Grande, "Through the Looking Glass: The Kissinger Report on Central America," *World Policy Journal* 1, no. 2 (1984): 251, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209164>.

<sup>83</sup> . Ibid.

overcome the threat of Communism in the US sphere of dominance. In the words of Leo Grande, "the report makes the best case that can be made for Reagan's policy toward the region."<sup>84</sup>

The report tried to please both, Conservatives and Democrats. "It reads, in fact, as if it were two documents interwoven: a liberal one calling for social reform and human rights improvement and military aid to fight Communism."<sup>85</sup> However, when closely examined, it is obvious that the Democrats' agenda contradicts with that of the report's. The report called for more economic and military aid to "friendly regimes", in Central America, who were threatened by leftist insurgencies fostered by Cuba and The Soviets. " Both the national interests of the United States and a genuine concern for the long-term welfare of central America create a powerful incentives to provide all necessary assistance to defeat totalitarian guerrillas,"<sup>86</sup> the report explained. The commission conditioned US aid with human rights improvement. Nevertheless, "conditionality" of aid should not be emphasized " in a manner that leads to a Marxist-Leninist victory."<sup>87</sup>

In addition to Guatemala and Honduras, the report recommended more assistance to El Salvador, especially. More progress, "imperfect" though, had been made by the Salvadoran government in its endeavors to transform the Salvadoran society into a democratic one, the commission claimed. Thus any decision by the congress to block military aid to the Salvadoran military would hinder the government's efforts to "pursue a more consistent and humane counterinsurgency strategy."<sup>88</sup> The commission, justifiably, explained that the abuses made by the

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<sup>84</sup> . Ibid, 252.

<sup>85</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> . Christopher Dickey, *review of the Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, by Henry A. Kissinger , *Foreign Affairs*, 1984, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1984-03-01/report-presidents-national-bipartisan-commission-central-america>.

<sup>88</sup> . Ibid, 272.

Salvadoran security forces were, mainly, attributable to the lack of experience and training. On the other hand, the report recommended the elimination of both, revolutionary movements and governments- the like of the Sandinistas- by means of negotiation or force, if necessary. The report also called for the creation of development programs, similar to Kennedy's Alliance for Progress to relieve the region and block the way for local revolutions.

Indeed, the report pushed Reagan to reconsider his hardline policy towards Central America and caused, in addition to congress pressures, its shift towards pragmatism. The report, however, failed to give an answer to how US security interests in the region would be met, without having to endorse military regimes that often abused human rights, and came between their people and radical change.

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## Conclusion

Since the early days of the Monroe Doctrine, Central America had been the focal point of the US foreign policy. Several US leaders had, historically, used the Doctrine as a pretext to expand the US borders and influence, in the Western Hemisphere. Thus defining Central America and the Caribbean Basin as the US sphere of influence. While many historians trace the US more recent interventions in Central America to the Monroe Doctrine, it was actually the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which laid the ground for those interventions. Such an interventionist policy would persist throughout the Cold War.

The Post-War times' "Good Neighbor Policy" which characterized the US-Central American relations seemed to wither with the outset of the Cold War. Truman's preoccupation with containing Communism in Europe and Asia offended Central and Latin Americans, as they felt neglected and left with no aid programs to resolve their economic problems. The Kennan Corollary further reinforced the derogatory attitude of US policy makers towards Central Americans. In 1954, the administration of Dwight Eisenhower planned the overthrow of Guatemala's president, Jacobo Arbenz, in a military coup, deemed to be the first in Central America during the Cold War. The military coup marked the beginning of a civil war in Guatemala, that would last till the 1990s.

With the advent of Jimmy Carter to presidency, US- Central American relations seemed to slightly improve. Carter's emphasis on respect of human rights and commitment towards reforms shaped his policy in Central America. However, Cold War imperatives propelled Carter to pursue an conflicting approach, as in the case of El Salvador. He helped the repressive regime in El

Salvador against the leftist guerrillas, in order to prevent another Marxist victory in the region (the previous being in Nicaragua).

Reagan's foreign policy towards Central America, however, proved to be the most dangerous. Reagan pursued a hardline policy towards his Southern neighbors. His hardline policy in Central America was shaped by many factors. One of these main factors was Communism. Reagan wanted to block the way for any Soviet presence in the Western Hemisphere. Polishing the US image, tarnished by its defeat in the Vietnam war, seemed to top Reagan's priorities. In doing so, Reagan sought to use Central American countries as a test case to show a stern course against Communism worldwide. His administration reasoned that if the Soviets see that the United States remained soft towards Communism in its backyard, what would they do elsewhere. To prevent any further spread of Communism in Central America, Reagan supported brutal military regimes over their helpless people. Despite US military and economic aid to these regimes in Central America, Reagan failed to reach his underlined goals in the region. In El Salvador, the leftist guerrillas were still operating by 1990. In Nicaragua, Reagan's effort to overthrow *the Sandinistas* failed. The *Sandinistas* were still in power even after he left office. However, he succeeded in demolishing the country. In Guatemala, Reagan's endorsement of General Riós Montt proved to be disastrous to the country's indigenous people. Under General Riós Montt, Mayan Communities were wiped out. US silence made it complicit in the genocide and embarrassed the Reagan administration even further. The death toll and the large-scale destruction which Central American countries witnessed, as a result of Reagan's aggressive policies seem to be appalling. By the end of his first term presidency, however, Reagan's hardline policy shifted towards pragmatism as a result of public and Congressional pressure.

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## ملخص

تبحث هذه المذكرة في سياسة رونالد ريغان الخارجية اتجاه أمريكا الوسطى. تدرس مذكرتي آثار سياسته اتجاه كل من السلفادور ونيكاراغوا و غواتيمالا خلال فترتي رئاسته. إن الأحداث التي حصلت في هاته الدول خلال الثمانينات تستدعي مزيدا من التحقيق. شهدت سياسة ريغان المتشددة اتجاه دول أمريكا الوسطى تحولا نحوى البراغماتية مع نهاية عهده الأولى. لهذا فان هذه المذكرة تسعى للإجابة عن سبب هذا التحول. لقد فشلت البحوث السابقة في طرح هذا الموضوع من وجهة نظر أمريكا الوسطى. يظهر البحث المتعمق في الوثائق التاريخية ومقالات الصحف و الدوريات أن سياسة إدارة ريغان المتشددة اتجاه المنطقة كانت الأكثر كارثية و دموية.

■ الكلمات المفتاحية: أمريكا الوسطى - السياسة الخارجية - الشيوعية - البراغماتية