

The U.S. and Latin America: Empire vs. Social Change

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The Reagan administration's policy on El Salvador is clear. "The insurgency in El Salvador," the State Department has stated, is "a textbook case of indirect armed aggression by Communist powers." In an interview with Walter Cronkite, President Reagan left no doubt as to who those "Communist powers" might be: "the Soviets are, you might say, trying to do the same thing in El Salvador that they did in Afghanistan, but by using proxy troops through Cuba and guerrillas."¹ Since injustice in that small country "has existed for decades," argues U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, it can hardly be the source of *recent* turmoil there. The source is the "introduction of arms from the outside."² We are told that revolution ("terrorism," in the Reagan lexicon) has come to El Salvador from the outside and has as its ultimate target "the whole of Central and possibly later South America and, I'm sure, eventually North America."³

The policy is clear. What needs explaining is why this policy seems so at variance with what is actually happening in El Salvador. To observers on the scene, to most academics who study the region, to many Europeans, Canadians, Mexicans, and others, Washington's interpretation seems an inversion of reality: the weak and small country transformed into the large and powerful adversary, the indigenous revolutionaries recast as imported terrorists, a brutal regime presented as both reformist and—through particularly bizarre sophistry—the defender of human rights. (Terrorists deny their victims' rights; the junta kills terrorists; hence the junta promotes human rights.) In an interview published in *The New York Times* on December 7, 1980, Kirkpatrick claimed, "it's a terrible injustice to the Government and the military [of El Salvador] when you suggest that they were somehow responsible for terrorism and assassination."

¹ *New York Times*, March 4, 1981.

² *Newsweek*, March 16, 1981.

³ President Reagan at his March 6, 1981 news conference.

Washington preaches this inverted image not out of simple ignorance—although ignorance must be sown to make the image stick—but out of necessity. This is the only way realpolitik can coexist with post-Vietnam public opinion, the only way the competing claims of empire and democracy can be served. Before making this case, however, the paradigm into which Washington fits El Salvador needs some description, a paradigm in which “credibility” is a key concept.

Short of optometric textbooks, the best guide to the official view of the Salvadorean conflict may be the Iliad. Washington sees the world through a mythic vision comparable to Homer’s. If there is fighting on the ground it is not the work of mortals with scores to settle. Rather, visible reality manifests the hidden sparring of the gods, those Olympian superpowers who do so much through proxies. Washington and Moscow signal each other via El Salvador, Poland, Chile, and Afghanistan. Unless one side prevails in all situations to which it has reasonable access, its “credibility” with the other will suffer.

Examined closely, credibility is a mythic concept. We have it when *we* think *they* think we mean business, and we must defend it at every opportunity when we think they might think we have lost it. Viewed from the clouds that encircle the Olympus of geopolitics, “Events that used to be local,” Henry Kissinger remarks, “assume global significance.”⁴ What is actually happening, of course, is a strange giving over of power to others, or at least to our image of them, in a way that is reminiscent of David Riesman’s other-directed man.

While the gods are busy signaling each other, they are also massaging domestic and international public opinion. One of the lessons Washington draws from Vietnam is that sustained intervention abroad, in proxy situations where the “true” adversary is masked, may not be “understood” by the public. Without public understanding, youth refuse induction, Congress grows restive, presidents decline reelection, and our involvement consequently winds down, damaging credibility. To portray the Salvadorean opposition as homogeneously communist, externally supported, and linked to our major adversary leaves nothing to chance. No complex explanations to befuddle the public’s mind. In congressional testimony in February, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, John Bushell, repeatedly referred to “the other side” and “the worldwide Communist network” in discussing El Salvador. What could be simpler?

There is a problem, however, that goes deeper than this difficulty in leading the public through a maze of proxydom and anticipated damage to credibility. It is the dilemma long faced by Britain and now confronting the United States: how to reconcile democracy at home with empire abroad. Concretely, the “friendly” Third World governments that most consistently support Washington are, with

4 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 68.

notable exceptions, among the world's more repressive regimes. It's not easy to accept these governments as fellow members of the "free world." South Africa free? South Korea? Pakistan? Pinochet's Chile? It's harder still to convince taxpayers and parents to expend money and blood to maintain these regimes in power. In the great geopolitical game the rulers of Argentina, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Guatemala bat on our side, albeit low in the order. At home where they have real power, these rulers contradict the very values on which our claim to world leadership is based. That's the contradiction of empire and democracy.

More than most presidents, Carter admitted the dilemma. His human rights policy drew a distinction between friendly governments that shared our basic values and those that didn't. A price had to be paid for this distinction: the alienation of some friendly governments, and the administration's own inconsistency when it came to countries too strategic to offend. Reagan and Haig have reverted to three older ways of trying to reconcile the democracy-empire dilemma. These three tactics, I would suggest, take us a long way toward understanding Washington's distorted presentation of the Salvadorean situation.

One element in this presentation, we have seen, is the renaming of the drama: what is internal becomes international. If we are being tested by "the other side," our very survival is at stake. Under such circumstances, who would question the credentials of an ally? A second tactic is to recast the players, not only turning the rebels into foreigners but turning the rightists into reformers. If our "friends" are reformers, the contradiction between empire and democracy evaporates. Thus Washington's need for friendly reformers in Latin America was voiced by John F. Kennedy two decades ago, when it appeared that the dictator Trujillo's son might try to succeed him in the Dominican Republic.

"There are three possibilities," [Kennedy] said, "in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure we can avoid the third."⁵

Unfortunately, what Washington wants and what Latin America delivers are not the same. From the 1950s on, polarization has grown, leaving little that Washington can comfortably trust to remain in the center. Elected democratic regimes have moved to the left in economic policies, refused to ostracize Cuba, and instituted steps toward democratic socialism (Bosch, Goulart, Allende, Manley). So safety counsels an alliance with the Right, Kennedy's second option, coupled with pressure on that group to clean up its act, at least publicly. The result is what we see in El Salvador today: a rightist regime, its power lodged in the military, with a facade of civilian reform Washington can use to satisfy domestic and international public opinion.

5 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. 704-05.

In and outside of Washington, so much effort has been expended selling the centrist image of the Salvadorean junta that some explanation of this characterization of it as rightist is in order. I shall return to this point later, outlining the evidence for and against the reformist label. Here, however, I take up the third and final way of trying to escape the empire-democracy contradiction: replacing present with future.

Should the Left triumph in El Salvador, Henry Kissinger asserted in a speech delivered March 9, 1981, there will be "infinitely more suffering" than if "the alternative" prevails. Autocracies, Jeane Kirkpatrick lectures us, may evolve into democracies, whereas totalitarianism is irreversible. Almost by definition in Kirkpatrick's scheme, only Marxism degenerates into totalitarianism (so quickly is fascism forgotten). This tactic permits Washington to identify with the people of a Latin American country, claiming to act in their best interests even if they are not cognizant of it. So when the U.S. Senate published irrefutable evidence of high-level Washington involvement in destabilizing the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, President Ford simply said we acted "in the best interests of the people of Chile."

The obvious advantage of this tactic is that it is irrefutable. A prediction about the future cannot be disproved in the present. And if on the basis of that prediction Washington *acts* so as to exclude the feared option, then who is to say whether it ever would have materialized? Kissinger's belief that Allende would have destroyed Chilean democracy, if such were required to keep his coalition in power, now is accepted as fact within the United States. At General Haig's confirmation hearings, a National Public Radio newscaster treated it that way.

These three solutions to the empire-democracy dilemma share one requirement: ignorance. They work to the extent that the U.S. public knows little about Latin America. Perhaps this explains why nearly every incoming administration finds it hard to appoint an Assistant Secretary of State for this region and why the person eventually chosen invariably is unknown to the community of scholars specializing in Latin America.

To know too much about the region is a liability in Washington, as Ambassador Robert White found out. Policy can more convincingly be articulated by men such as William P. Clark, the number-two man at State, initially responsible for coordinating the Reagan administration's response to El Salvador. A friend of Reagan's and a former judge on the California Supreme Court, Clark knows nothing about the region. He lumps Mexico with Guatemala and Belize as dominoes the Cubans hope to topple "in their divine plan."⁶ Never mind that Mexico and Cuba maintain cordial relations, or that Mexico supports the Salvadorean leftist coalition as the force most likely to bring long-term stability to El

6 *New York Times*, March 13, 1981.

Salvador. Even with the aid of most of Central America, Cuba's undermining the monolithic, experienced, and wealthy Mexican regime is as likely as Iceland's toppling the Canadian government.

What obvious truths about Latin America must be suppressed for U.S. policy to make sense to its citizens? Returning to the central question—Why revolution?—the first obvious truth is that armed insurrection has long been part of the Latin American political process. If U.S. citizens talk of “critical elections,” Latin Americans speak of revolutions. In some countries practically each generation has had “its” uprising, attempted or successful. Revolutionary leaders are popular heroes (Martí, Zapata, Sandino, Guevara). Thus revolution is not, as North Americans view it, some immaculate conception that launches a nation, thereafter to be revisited only in ritual.

Equally indigenous to the region are Marxist movements, which formed in most countries more than half a century ago.⁷ Avowed communists have served in governments, led unions, taught in universities, won Nobel prizes. There have been good Marxists and bad—though fewer corrupt ones than is the norm in other political parties. The point is: Marxism has become as indigenous to the region as the revolutionary and nationalist traditions to which it frequently is joined.

But why do Latin Americans turn to revolution—and sometimes to Marxism—rather than to less costly forms of political change? The answer is simple: the other forms frequently don't work. The Kirkpatrick statement with which we began stated correctly that injustice has a long history in El Salvador, a country where the leading cause of death is “undiagnosed,” followed by gastroenteritis, diarrhea, and dysentery, preventable diseases that arise with extreme poverty and governmental indifference. So why revolution *now*, asks Ambassador Kirkpatrick, if not caused “by the introduction of arms from the outside”?

Part of the reason is the steady accumulation of population exacerbated by the “soccer war” of 1969, which forced many Salvadoreans to return from Hon-

⁷ El Salvador's Communist Party, formally launched in 1930, grew out of attempts to organize peasants and workers in the 1920s. Its leader was Agustín Farabundo Martí, a close associate of Sandino. As with the Nicaraguan leader, Martí symbolizes the link between the current struggle and six decades of opposition to the system. With the plutocracy weakened by the Depression, the Salvadorean Communist Party gained strength in 1930–31. Denied electoral victories at the local level, the party planned an uprising in 1932. The general who recently had assumed power, General Hernández Martínez, was not content to kill off the organizers of the half-aborted outbreak. The killing continued for weeks, until 4 percent of the population, mostly peasants, had been massacred. Death squads active in El Salvador today sometimes take the name of this general. And how did Hernández Martínez attend the problems of the populace during his twelve-year reign? During a smallpox epidemic he had green lights strung throughout San Salvador to stop the disease from spreading.

duras.⁸ (Compare El Salvador's population density of 180 people per square kilometer with the United States's 23.) A large part of the explanation, however, rests with El Salvador's experience with reform. Salvadoreans have seen reforms announced and aborted many times. Civilian reformers never got beyond the ballot box. The all-out test of this strategy occurred in 1972, when the principal opposition parties coalesced in a National Opposition Union (UNO) led by the popular mayor of San Salvador, José Napoleón Duarte. The government stopped counting ballots when it was clear Duarte would win, later announcing the inevitable victory by the official candidate, the inevitable army officer. Duarte accepted the verdict, despite rank-and-file UNO calls for a general strike. Since that time there have been no honest elections in El Salvador.

To many Salvadoreans, the coup of October 1979 offered the last test of one remaining possibility for peaceful reform: a government dominated by younger officers less tied to the plutocracy than their seniors. This strategy also had been tried before and had failed (e.g., 1944, 1960, the reforms of 1976). After half a year, when the principal civilian reformers had deserted this latest effort at army-induced reform, declaring it bogus, it seemed as if the last chapter had been written in a text called "Change from Above: A Farce." What was there left to the Salvadorean people but acquiescence in inequity or revolution?

Reform works when elites are willing to make concessions. Elites resist concessions when the gap between them and the masses is as vast as it is in El Salvador. If democracy were deeply institutionalized, giving the many leverage with the wealthy, concessions might still occur. What North Americans forget is that elections are not binding in Latin America. They are reversed by military coup so regularly that the mere threat of a coup (known as a *planteo*) is sufficient to deter most civilian reformers. All an elite needs to perpetuate its privileged position, then, is an alliance with key officers. In a country such as El Salvador a symbiotic relationship develops, military officers being cut into business and prestige while the "Fourteen Families" (the economic elite) are granted immunity from reform.

The ideology that glues this alliance together and also, if played right, that commits Washington to pick up the tab, is anticommunism. Thus any challenge to the status quo is labeled communist, even if carried out by Catholic clergy. To the Latin American military mind an opponent is an enemy and an enemy is

8 This misnamed war might better be regarded as a precursor of the Malthusian conflicts to come in the Third World. El Salvador has the region's highest population density and population growth. These factors combined with the inequitable land distribution and political repression led a quarter of a million Salvadoreans to resettle in neighboring and less populous Honduras. Resentment over this influx mounted, particularly in the 1960s, when a regional common market generated other tensions between the two countries. The war erupted when the Honduran soccer team was attacked in El Salvador.

to be killed. The free use of the communist label in such polarized situations as El Salvador contributes to the free use of assassination.

North Americans too fear communism and are prone to talk about it as an ominous force in the world. For most U.S. citizens, however, this remains abstract, distant. Should they meet a visiting Russian or Chinese, they are courteous; most do not advocate a preemptive strike to rid the world of communist power. Received in El Salvador, Chile, or other parts of Latin America, however, this highly symbolic anticommunism becomes deadly real. It leads to the slaughter of "sympathizers," including those who merely call for human rights. More than one U.S. congressman has returned from Latin America stunned to discover that the right wing there is not our right wing. Having dealt with the Salvadorean military at close range for some time, ex-Ambassador White doesn't mince words:

To the extent that you emphasize a military solution in El Salvador, you are going to be buttressing one of the most out-of-control, violent, bloodthirsty groups of men in the world. They have killed—at a minimum—5,000 or 6,000 kids, just on the mere suspicion that they were involved with the leftists.⁹

Couldn't reform come from the private sector, even though the political channel is blocked? The argument for the draconian policies of several Latin American governments parallels that used by supply-siders here: unleash a private sector that will produce an upsurge in production, which in turn will trickle down to the masses in the form of new jobs and products, new opportunities for mobility. But here again, a theory with some grounding in U.S. historical experience does not find an echo in Latin American reality, the key difference being Latin America's turning outward for markets and technologies. This outward orientation has generated economies that provide the opportunities desired by the middle and upper classes. It contains, however, no incentive for income redistribution, for labor absorption, or for production geared to the needs of the poorest half of the population.

Where oriented outward, capitalism fails that portion of the population that doesn't have the price of admission to the market. With unemployment caused by capital-intensive technologies introduced by the multinationals, and without the welfare systems found in postindustrial societies, poor people cannot buy what they need. Few of their skills are marketable in the new industries, while the land on which they might grow food has been taken for large-scale export crops. Aptly termed "the marginals," this 20 to 40 percent of the population—in El Salvador it is nearer the higher figure—may find seasonal employment on

9 *New York Times*, March 8, 1981.

large estates or may sporadically sell services extremely cheaply to workers fortunate enough to hold regular jobs. Beyond this, the poor are redundant.

The pattern repeated throughout Latin America, then, in countries at surprisingly different levels of industrialization, is increasing economic rationality accompanied by increasing social marginality. In human terms, basic needs are neglected while luxuries proliferate. Quite simply, the rich get richer and the poor poorer. That's the way the market functions under *these* conditions—which need not be taken as an indictment of market mechanisms elsewhere. As of 1975, four-fifths of the Salvadorean population earned less than the \$704 estimated in 1980 to be the minimum a family of six (the average size) needs to survive for a year.¹⁰ Two percent of the population, at the other pole, received roughly half the national income. It is hard to believe that the private sector can remedy this inequity, for in Brazil, where there has been a decade of rapid economic growth matched only in South Korea, the richest 1 percent of the population still receives more than the poorest 50 percent. Income inequality has been growing in Brazil, as it has in virtually every other Latin American country experiencing industrialization.

The common element in this description of why reform persistently fails and why, therefore, revolution sporadically flares up in Latin America is the outward orientation of its elites. They make up in support abroad for what they lack in support at home, in their own hinterland and shantytowns. Infusions from abroad sustain a style of economic development that benefits a minority, a repressive apparatus that frustrates democracy, and an anticommunist ideology that is used, more cynically than outsiders realize, to justify these privileges. Fresh infusions from abroad absolve the militaries and the plutocracies from coming to terms with their own national realities.

From this perspective, it is apparent that the external force eroding democracy in Latin America is the United States—its government and several of its large corporations. No wonder, then, that Washington's rhetoric must scramble the picture, recasting the parts and substituting hypothetical futures for the palpable present.

So when President Reagan escalates military aid to the Salvadorean junta from \$10 million to \$35 million and asks Congress for \$213 million for this and surrounding countries next year, he is signaling a commitment to support the Salvadorean right on its terms. By refusing to let his subordinates confer with representatives of the left, Reagan signals the junta that it too need not negotiate a way out of this bloodbath. Introducing Huey helicopters and Green Beret advisers is, again, an escalation that tells the Salvadorean hardliners they need not seek any but a military solution. Against this, the automatic weapons and mortars the guerrillas receive from abroad (purchased from U.S. mafiosos operating

10 Robert Armstrong, "A Revolution Brews," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, March–April 1980, p. 19.

through Panama as well as donated by Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, etc.) are no match.

The United States need not take sides in Latin American civil wars. All we need do, to paraphrase a Reagan campaign slogan, is get our government off their backs. Once done, getting other governments to follow suit will not prove difficult. But apparently the Republican administration believes the Salvadorean left will walk away from the struggle once it discovers how outclassed it is in hardware. But why shouldn't the revolutionaries counter with a request to the Soviet Union for sophisticated weapons to match those of the U.S.-supplied junta? While one might not know it from Washington's rhetoric, so far the rebels have not requested matériel aid of the Soviets. As several commentators have pointed out, including the anonymous "dissidents" within the U.S. government, the Reagan-Haig policy risks creating the very outcome it claims to want to avoid: the introduction of real Soviet influence into Central America.

Thus far little evidence has been given for saying the Salvadorean junta is miscast as a reformist center. Again, some sense of the historical trajectory of this and other Latin American countries is necessary before discrete facts, such as promulgation of land reform, can be understood. Of the many who rush into print to extol El Salvador's "sweeping land reform," how many, I wonder, have taken the trouble to find out that agrarian reform was tried in El Salvador once before (in 1976), with little lasting effect?

Casting the Salvadorean junta in a centrist, reformist role is a viable interpretation—for a brief period from the October 1979 coup to the following April. In no case can this fiction be sustained past the purging of Colonel Adolfo Majano, leader of the reformist element in the army, later in 1980. Virtually every member of the original junta who was serious about reform resigned in the first year, perceiving that real power lay in the hands of Minister of Defense García and his fellow rightists, such as Colonel Gutierrez. After leaving the junta, key reformers have been assassinated by death squads that move through government security cordons with impunity. Others left the country, some to assume leading roles in the coalition supporting the revolutionaries, seeing this as the only remaining vehicle for reform.

Neither in title nor in reality is President José Napoleón Duarte in command of the military, which is dominated by right-wing officers. He joined the junta after the principal civilian reformers resigned and was cast in the presidential role to placate Washington's need for a centrist, civilian image. While leader of the opposition coalition in 1972, Duarte's present political base is small, for the simple reason that many who backed him then now support the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), which is linked to the guerrillas. Even a portion of Duarte's own party, the Christian Democrats, has gone over to the FDR, leaving

him with fewer than four thousand active supporters inside his own party. As long as Washington insists on a centrist façade before giving aid to the junta, officers García and Gutierrez will tolerate Duarte.

The rightist nature of the junta is most apparent in its unwillingness to curb the vigilante violence of both its own security forces and the death squads. The latter operate with impunity during the nightly curfews policed by the former. Indeed, there is probably considerable overlap in personnel. Amnesty International found "no evidence that such groups [the death squads] exist or operate independent of the government's own security forces."¹¹ Duarte publicly acknowledged that little is being done to curb vigilante violence, saying to do so might undermine the military's morale. While the pro-reform Colonel Majano was forced into exile, ex-major Roberto D'Aubisson can hold press conferences inside the country threatening a coup should Duarte begin talks with the left.

The best case for the junta being reformist rests on the agrarian reforms announced in March and April of 1980. To date just under three hundred of the largest estates have been transformed into cooperatives owned by those who worked on them. While impressive, this reform affects less than a sixth of the rural population, and many of the new cooperatives are dominated by salaried employees of the old owners, not by field-workers. A second reform (Decree 207) transfers small holdings to the peasants who had been working them as tenants or sharecroppers. Progress under this "land-to-the-tiller" program has been problematic: few titles have actually been transferred, and many tenants are being evicted before they lay claim to their land. Those who know the situation well doubt that peasants used to rotating the parcels they rented can make a living tied to a single plot that is typically around two acres. The U.S. architect of this program, Roy Prosterman, whose previous experience has been in Asia, believes more intensive cultivation will result, generating higher yields on less land. Much of Salvadorean soil is poor, however, suggesting that more intense use will exacerbate erosion and sterility.

Phase two of the agrarian reform affects estates in the 370-to 1,235-acre range, which includes most of the valuable coffee lands. James C. Stephens, Jr., the Oxfam-America consultant on rural El Salvador, correctly describes phase two as "the heart of the agrarian reform process."¹² Unless this decree is implemented, the power of the rural elite will not be reduced and little progress will be made in ameliorating the plight of that half of the rural population not affected by either phase one or land-to-the-tiller. To date phase two remains a dead letter, no doubt because military officers themselves own many of the coffee estates. Duarte lacks the power to push ahead on this front. Empowering him would re-

¹¹ *AI-USA*, January 1981.

¹² *NACLA Report on the Americas*, January-February 1981, p. 38.

quire the mobilization of the peasantry, some heavy leaning on the military by Washington, or both. The army is firmly opposed to the former, while the Reagan administration has explicitly said it will not push social reform in Latin America.

The head of the largest peasant union was assassinated last January, inside an international hotel with supposedly tight security. Some twenty field-workers from the government's Agrarian Transformation Institute have met a similar fate, as have dozens of peasants who stepped forward to assume leadership roles in the cooperatives. Only in name has the junta dissociated itself from the continued attacks on grass-roots rural organizations by the paramilitary ORDEN, the Treasury Police, and other security forces.

Successful agrarian reform in Latin America never has been, as Prosterman describes his land-to-the-tiller program, "self-implementing."¹³ A strong commitment by the central government always has been necessary to fight legal battles over titles, to supply credit and technical assistance, and to counter intimidation by a rural constabulary in the pay of large landowners. This commitment, in turn, rarely has held firm without the political mobilization of the beneficiaries of land reform. The political clout necessary to make this tentative beginning in agrarian reform in El Salvador was supplied, in large measure, by the Carter administration and the ambassador on the scene, Robert White. While saying it supports the reform, the new administration has removed White, shifted emphasis from economic to military assistance, and, as stated above, given clear signals that it will not actively promote social reform in Latin America.

The prognosis for agrarian reform in El Salvador, then, is for a repetition of the experience of the Alliance for Progress. Then as now, no regime laying claim to a reformist image could afford to be without agrarian legislation. Only to the extent that the reforms extricated landlords looking to bail out, however, did this plethora of paper have any positive impact upon the peasantry. Successful agrarian reform in Latin America is rare and always has required a strong, sustained commitment by a unified coalition in unchallenged control of the state.

The Reagan administration, I have argued, is served by the *appearance* of reform in El Salvador, even though many of Reagan's supporters view any reform as socialistic. The *substance* sought by the Reagan team, however, is stability achieved by pacification, in contrast to the long-term stability that requires the extirpation of old inequities. Had they been in office at the time, according to a paper written by Jeane Kirkpatrick, "the administration would have been inclined to greet the coup of October 1979 . . . with mixed feelings," since conservatives view El Salvador as a country in which "authority . . . is weak, stability fragile and order much easier to destroy than reconstruct."¹⁴ In short, had they been in

¹³ *New York Times*, February 8, 1981.

¹⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "The Hobbes Problem," paper delivered at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., December 1980.

power then, the Reagan team might have aided General Romero, the specialist in repression who unleashed the death squads on El Salvador, instead of supporting the junta that gave rise to the limited land reform we see now.

Not written for general public consumption, Kirkpatrick's paper provides a glimpse of how the conservatives in power regard Central America. As its title, "The Hobbes Problem," indicates, the overriding concern is with order. Order is the "highest value," and while Kirkpatrick lays claim to the Western philosophical tradition, citing Rousseau and John Stuart Mill among others, little is said of other values in our tradition, such as justice and representation. For whatever reason, Central America is treated as an area where order is enough. To achieve this end, apparently all forms of force are justified. I say "apparently" because Kirkpatrick claims Carter's "doctrine of human rights . . . makes illegitimate the use of force by governments." But surely that doctrine was critical of only some forms of force, not all. Kirkpatrick's censure of the human rights policy on these grounds does not make sense unless one assumes that she believes that all forms of force—including systematic torture and murder—are necessary for a state to maintain order and are, by virtue of their necessity, justified. I would argue that any state that cannot maintain sufficient order without terrorizing its own citizens is, almost by definition, illegitimate, inept, or both. Such states deserve to fall rather than to be perpetuated.

If we enter Central America by the constricted path Kirkpatrick lays out, concentrating on order, we still confront the following anomaly, which weakens not just the U.N. ambassador's analysis but, more importantly, Reagan's policy. By any objective criteria, the three most stable regimes in the Central American-Caribbean area today are the Mexican, Cuban, and Costa Rican. In all, the precondition for stability was revolution, including the destruction of the old military establishment. The regimes the Reaganites support in Central America do not meet this precondition. If long-term stability is what the Reagan administration seeks, it is backing the wrong parties and processes. Over the long haul, there is a practical, no less than moral, association between order and social justice—if we recall that the justice that matters is situational, defined by people in material conditions unlike our own.