

REPENTANCE AND RECONCILIATION, THE ROAD TO PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Don Sergio Mendes Arceo, the retired Mexican bishop of Cuernavaca, likes to tell audiences in the United States that the American people suffer from a rare disease -- one which, spread by us, is wreaking havoc on the entire human race. This disease is a new strain of an ancient virus, only recently identified. It strikes without regard for race, creed, gender, class or sexual preference. Its etiology is obscure, but there is evidence that it is sometimes spread intentionally by socially irresponsible persons. At times it has affected whole communities. Once contracted, the virus hardens the heart and invades the brain tissues, leaving its victims both handicapped for rational thought and prone to aggressive behavior. The scientific name of this affliction is Anticommunism; and its consequence is interminable war. Don Sergio urges upon his listeners the need for a campaign of research and public information on the disease, and in addition a collective self-examination leading to a change of conscience and comportment by those who suffer and cause others to suffer from it. He calls on the American people to come to our senses, repent of the sins we have committed against humanity under the influence of our chronic anticommunism, seek reconciliation and thereby make peace with our neighbors before it is too late.

Peace is of course what rational human beings desire above all things -- excepting, perhaps, those who profit from war, those whose vocation is war, and those who are so ignorant of war as to find excitement, recreation or romance in it. A majority even of North Americans, accustomed as we have become to taking the preparations for war lightly, would presumably still prefer peace to war in Central America. But war is what we have wrought there; and war is what our leaders currently prefer. How, then, can we find our way to a just and enduring, genuine peace?

Handicaps to peacemaking.

The materials gathered in this volume, examined side by side, suggest that bishop Mendes Arceo's observation about us is less a rhetorical device, an earnest jibe and exhortation, than a thoughtful diagnosis and prescription. Resolute and unreasoning anticommunism is seen here very clearly to be the ideological basis for President Reagan's policy towards Central America. The Santa Fe document, an early formulation of the policy, goes so far as to take as staunch an anticommunist as President Jimmy Carter to task for having so much as suggested to us that we might be capable of overcoming our "inordinate fear" of communism. Most Americans, if the truth be told, have become over the last forty years quite outspoken and pig-headed anticommunists. We see communism everywhere, we are prone to identify almost any unfamiliar way of thinking with communism, and we expect pious expressions of anticommunism and hostility toward specific "communist countries" from our leaders. Anticommunism is taught in the schools, preached from the pulpit, and cultivated by the mass media. Even those of us who see through and oppose that view of the world are deeply affected by it. Anticommunism has, after all, dominated the public discussion of world affairs in this

country, as it dominates the first seven contributions to this book, during all of our adult lifetimes.

Most Americans nevertheless know very little about communism to this day, and we know even less about the Soviet Union or Vietnam or Cuba. Few of us could define the much-abused term in a satisfactory fashion, or provide an accurate description of the operations of government, the economy or the people's way of life in any of those countries. Few of us could explain clearly the changes in the governance of "communist" countries which have been introduced by a Tito or a Deng Hsiao-Ping or a Gorbachev -- even though we are inclined to approve of them. This embarrassing truth notwithstanding, ever since World War II, wherever the charge of "communism" has been raised against a leader, a movement, or a government anywhere in the world by our politicians and public opinion molders, the American people have ceased to view those in question with the normal interest and sympathy that human beings display towards fellow humans struggling against common adversities. We have hardened our hearts, shaken an accusing finger, clenched our fists and prepared (or more accurately, looked around for some poor people in this country or elsewhere to prepare) for a face-off and eventual combat. We have done this always in the name of high principle; but in practice we have given the world a great deal more evidence of what we are against over the past four decades, than we have of just what principles we are for. Worse yet, something similar to that has happened to our own awareness of what we are about and why.

The great confusion here at home about what we are for and what we are against is evident in our custom of using the most imprecise language we can to talk about politics, so as not to have to think very much or very clearly about them. We talk a great deal, for example, about our support for "freedom" around the world; yet most citizens of the Third World or non-industrialized countries with which we have close relations simply do not enjoy freedom as we define that term. They feel the iron heel of oppression by the very governments we have chosen to see as bastions of the "free world" -- in South Korea, Taiwan, the Phillipines, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa, Zaire, Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala, to name just a few. Yet our politicians, whether Democrats or Republicans, are generally as complacent about the anomaly of that situation as they are eloquent in their advocacy of an apoplectic posture towards the boogie-man of "communism" wherever he is said to have appeared in the world. This has gone on to the point at which it now seems to many of us that knee-jerk anticommunism is the normal or even the only acceptable approach to the conduct of our relations with other countries, and with revolutionary or radical reformist movements anywhere.

A consequence of this attitude toward the struggles for justice and autonomy and well-being of much of the human race is that we now live surrounded by nations who are not only envious of our wealth, but deeply suspicious and resentful of our power -- even where they do not feel safe to express open and explicit hostility towards our pretension to preeminence in the world. Most thinking people in the world detest what Latin Americans refer to as our government's prepotencia -- its constant bullying and lack of good faith, and its inveterate, arrogant assumption born of ignorance, that its own notion of anything is the correct one. We base our foreign policy on a priori thinking of a remarkably uninformed kind, rather than on a thoughtful listening to others. We seek immediate advantage in foreign relations, rather than sustainability. We bribe and

threaten more than we negotiate. Proceeding in this fashion, we have failed to earn the respect and good will of our neighbors during two centuries of interaction with them; and what we have to live with today is their fear and distrust. This is truly a parlous situation; and it suggests that what the national interest most urgently requires in our times and for many years to come is a policy and process of reconciliation with other peoples and other governments, the only reliable avenue to an enduring peace. But we all know that unless some drastic changes are made, such a policy is not what we are going to have.

The painful truth is that rather than being chastened by this country's recent experience of declining influence and credibility in the world, rather than engaging in a much-needed process of public self-criticism and reevaluation, rather than exploring creatively all possibilities for negotiation and reconciliation with other countries, our political leaders have chosen to ignore caution and dig into increasingly defensive positions. Under their guidance, we have fallen as a nation into the habit of boasting inane to ourselves of our greatness, flexing ever flabbier muscles and beating our chests in an effort to intimidate those neighbors who are still obliged by poverty and proximity to pay attention to us. In the process, we have been deceived that our government's clumsy endeavors abroad are essential to the pursuit of a chimerical "national security" which is contingent upon victory (or the appearance of victory) over the "communist" nemesis somewhere. This concern with "security" thus conceived has distracted the attention of our people from the traditional and more rational pursuit of health, well-being and happiness for ourselves and our children. That is the crabbed view of the world, and of the national interest, that requires and has foisted upon us the claim that the Soviet Union threatens the United States through Central America.

American opinion and Central American policy

Belligerent anticommunism is the spirit in which the United States government has conducted our relations with Central America in particular, since shortly after the triumph of the Sandinista Nicaraguan revolution in 1979. It is troubling to have to admit that the Congress, the press and most of our people have supported this bipartisan policy without knowing much about the specific circumstances or objectives of the Central American people's struggles, or about just why it is that our country is so unfriendly towards them. Americans have of course not been unanimous in taking that stance. There is a general suspicion in many of us, reflected regularly in the public opinion polls, that something is not quite right about what the Reagan administration has been doing in Central America, and that whatever the problem there may be, we should stay out of other people's wars and keep our boys at home. But in the absence of an opposition political party ready to advance an alternative to President Reagan's program, in the absence of a mass-circulation opposition press or television network, these public attitudes have been insufficient to change the course of public policy.

The so-called "low intensity" war which we have been waging by proxy in Central America has gone on for more than six years now, at the cost of many thousands of (mostly civilian) Central American lives and several hundreds of millions of American tax dollars each year. These dollars have been paid out mostly as subsidies to the de facto military dictatorships in El Salvador and Guatemala, on the creation of the vast infrastructure for a permanent U.S. military presence in Honduras, and on the remilitarization of Costa Rica. Payments to the Nicaraguan "contras," whether

acknowledged or unacknowledged, are only a small part of the whole. So the United States is, despite the will of her people, already deeply involved in what looks like an interminable, multi-front Central American war. Like the war in Vietnam, this one is likely sooner or later to require a massive commitment of American air, naval and ground forces if a way is not found to bring it to a conclusion by negotiation. But the government of the United States has refused every opportunity for negotiation, and brought its weight to bear on its Central American client states to keep them from negotiating.

This policy is being pursued even in the wake of the remarkable peace initiative undertaken by the five Central American presidents meeting at Esquipulas in Guatemala in the summer of 1987. The Central American war, in the meantime, is clearly being "lost" by "our" side. It is a war about which there is, moreover, every reason to believe that it cannot (and indeed should not) be "won" by the United States.

President Reagan's warlike policy towards the aspirations of the poor majority in Central America has been vigorously opposed here at home; but even in the wake of the "Irangate" hearings the Congress appears to be mesmerized by the President's resolute rhetoric of righteous anticommunism. Great energy and expense has gone into massively publicized inquiries into a few sleazy details of the implementation of the bipartisan anti-Sandinista policy; yet the political risk of speaking truth to power (for example, by standing up to say in public what every Congressman knows full well -- that Mr. Reagan is an inveterate and bare-faced liar and that his domestic and foreign policies have been a disaster for the long-term real national interest of the United States), is apparently unacceptable to any professional politician. Though the elected representatives of our people have expressed marginal differences with regard to which may be the more appropriate procedure for eliminating the much-reviled Sandinista government, or just how much money to pour into the militarization of Nicaragua's neighbors, they appear in practice to be in solid agreement with President Reagan that the "Soviet communist threat" (that is, the threat of popular revolution) is increasing in Central America, and that it must be stopped at all costs. To seek to "stop" this revolution as distinct from striving to have some influence on its course, is to rely on means which, in the last analysis, can only be military.

The essays in the second and third sections of this volume make it clear that the consensus view of our political elite, that the Soviet Union threatens the United States through Central America, is based very much more on our national ideology of anticommunism than on the actual behavior of the Soviet Union, or on the nature of revolutionary struggle in that part of the world. The Soviet Union is indeed active in Central America; and the Cubans are more active still. They both provide much-needed assistance to the Nicaraguans for their national defense, and for their programs to develop their economy and their social services. They will presumably continue to do this as long as Nicaragua is threatened with war by the United States. But if these activities appear to threaten us it is only because we have chosen to define the process of revolutionary social transformation in Central America as a threat to our national security.

There was an alternative view of the Central American revolution that might have been adopted by the United States. It might be adopted still. This is the view that sees in that rapidly changing situation an unparalleled opportunity for creative foreign policy-making -- an opportunity to assist rather than resisting the long overdue transformation of

tyrannical governments, profoundly unjust societies and backward economies into vital and self-sufficient nations with which we could hope to have peaceful and mutually beneficial commercial and cultural relations over a long period of time. The United States government came with some reluctance to see Yugoslavia and in China in that way, choosing respectful coexistence over belligerence, active trade over embargo. This is an attitude whose intention and consequence has been to expand rather than narrowing our sphere of influence in the world. No country was, and continues to be, a more promising candidate for such neighborly treatment than Nicaragua -- where baseball is the national game, where North American customs, institutions, merchandise and cultural products are admired, and where visiting North Americans are received with extraordinary warmth and hospitality even today.

Some facts about Nicaragua.

It can readily be established by anyone willing to read for a week in the library that Nicaragua is not a communist country, and that to most informed American observers it does not appear to be in the process of becoming a communist country.

The Sandinista government has not abolished free enterprise or private property, freedom of speech or religion; it does not hold political prisoners without trial or practice torture or capital punishment; it does not deny the public an opportunity for active participation in the political decision-making process. It has not expropriated the holdings of American corporations, nor has it acted in a manner hostile to the U.S. It is not in fact an enemy of the United States. It has joined no alliances against us, carried out no acts of war against us, broken off no diplomatic relations, cut off no trade. Much less is it a "Soviet satellite" suffering under an autocratic pseudo-revolutionary regime imposed from abroad, with key public policy decisions being made in a foreign capital. U.S. citizens enter Nicaragua freely without visas, whether as individuals or in groups; and once there they travel, take pictures and talk to people freely --wherever they like outside the war zone and military installations.

The few restrictions on the right of expression by Nicaraguan citizens are measures easily understood, however difficult to condone, as having been taken in the interest of national defense under a state of emergency in a time of war. The U.S.-subsidized opposition newspaper, La Prensa was closed for a year, for example, and two seditious hierarchs of the Roman Catholic church were sent into exile. These measures were taken after those in question had given open support over an extended period of time to the military intervention of the United States in their country. Nicaragua does not have a drab or humorless monolithic or repressive public culture; its government does not operate in blatant disregard for public opinion by means of a system of police repression. Nicaragua is, on the contrary, a fiercely independent country with a popular and (since 1984) freely elected government, one which is determined above all else to resist the hegemony of the United States as it would that of the Soviet Union or of any other "superpower." What is absolutely unacceptable and non-negotiable to the Sandinistas is the North American pretension (tantamount to the Soviet pretension in Poland) that because we are powerful it is our prerogative to place limits on the sovereignty and the self-determination of small countries in the interest of our national security. That aside, the first major objective of the Sandinista government has been to eliminate the extreme

social inequality which Nicaragua has inherited from four and a half centuries of colonialism, foreign intervention and dictatorship. Their second objective has been to accelerate the production and improve the distribution of goods and services so as to raise the abysmally low standard of living of most Nicaraguans -- particularly in the areas of health, education, housing, transportation, energy, communications and recreation. Modest progress has been made on both these fronts during the past eight years (though social inequality persists, and though in many places newly acquired goods, newly-built installations and newly-trained personnel have been ruthlessly and purposefully wiped out by the "contras").

The most important real accomplishment of the Sandinista revolution (apart from its sheer survival in the face of the hostility of the United States) is, however, not a material but a spiritual one. It is to have restored to the Nicaraguan people the sense of dignity and self-esteem, and the faith in a Christian (and socialist) ideal of loving community, which are evident today to any visitor. These are precious gifts indeed. The Nicaraguans had lost them in the course of a long history of humiliation and alienation, both personal and national, at the hands of the rich and powerful. But they have them today, and that is why visitors envy rather than pitying them, even in the midst of their terrible suffering and privation.

What is wrong with U.S. policy?

None of the actual undertakings of the government of tiny and impoverished Nicaragua seems, upon close examination, to represent a threat to the national interest of the United States -- at least as that interest would be defined after a bit of reflection by any thinking American. Yet our government has committed this country to a policy of implacable hostility towards the Sandinista revolution, and towards like-minded revolutionary movements everywhere -- a policy of "destabilization," of sabotage, of economic embargo, of international isolation, of "low intensity" war. Tens of thousands of Central American people have met violent and unnatural deaths as a result of this policy; hundreds of thousands have been driven from their homes into extreme privation and permanent anguish. This is indeed a serious crime against humanity.

The policy toward revolution in Central America that we have been following under President Reagan, and under a Congress unwilling to risk effective political opposition, is of course especially exasperating and painful to behold for those Americans who have been interested enough in Nicaragua and Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador to know something about those countries. This includes the great majority of the several thousands of professional scholars and university professors represented by the Latin American Studies Association in the United States, who have consistently opposed the policy in our public resolutions; and it includes the tens of thousands of American citizens from all walks of life who have visited or travelled or worked in Nicaragua since 1979, seen the havoc wrought by this undeclared war, read the Nicaraguan newspapers, and talked with ordinary citizens as well as with the public officials there about what the Sandinista revolution is about. We have come back home (or out of our libraries!) to find with horror that the all-too-fragmentary information that makes its way from press and government sources into the public discussion about Nicaragua is mostly "disinformation" -- that is, information which is generally (and intentionally) so badly distorted as to mislead, and very often downright false. We see our people being lied to

about Nicaragua and the rest of Central America every day. We see our people being called upon to support a counter-revolutionary program that we know from first-hand observation to be nothing more than a relentless campaign of terrorism against the poorest people in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, urged on by the very American politicians who claim that their principal foreign policy objective is to fight terrorism all over the world. The Central American war is an expensive campaign of terrorism, paid for by all of us, which is directed against the majority of Central America's people. There is another, more political, dimension to the dismay felt by Americans knowledgeable about Nicaragua who are in opposition to President Reagan's war in Central America. We have read much and then gone to Central America to see for ourselves what is happening; and as Americans we have been ashamed and angered by what we have found. We have protested the administration's policies by every legal means available to us; for a great many of us this has been our principal off-hours activity or even a full-time activity during most of the 1980's. We have organized and marched and written to Congressmen; we have written in the press and spoken in public, millions of words on tens of thousands of occasions; some of our number have even testified before Congressional committees. But despite the fact that we are the best-informed, the only well-informed Americans on the particular subject in question, the only Americans who have seen the Sandinista revolution at work and are therefore in a position to provide some of the information necessary for the rational formulation of a constructive policy toward Nicaragua, we have not been consulted and we have not been heard -- or if occasionally heard, we have been unable to bring about an open and informed public discussion of U.S. policy in Central America, to prevent the acceleration of the war and the wanton killing of Central Americans, or to persuade a single member of Congress or high-ranking government official to risk his career by speaking out in unequivocal opposition to this manifestly unjust war.

The reason for this resistance to information, to open discussion and to clear thinking in high places, appears to be that the American political and journalistic elite, like most of the rest of the population of our country, is so deeply "invested" in the ideology of anticommunism that when confronted with any kind of movement for social justice and national sovereignty in a Third World country, it functions just as Don Sergio Mendes Arceo warns us that it does: it becomes incapable of rational thought and prone to aggressive behavior. One cannot imagine a more convincing image of what we are up against in this regard than the zealous Marine and self-described patriot Col. Oliver North, who was offering unapologetic testimony to a congressional committee as these lines were written, about his efforts to facilitate the mass murder of Nicaraguans by subverting our national institutions -- and who was allowed by the legislators who purported to be investigating his misdeeds, to make yet another impassioned appeal over the national TV networks for U.S. aid to the "contras".

This situation, in the view of citizens well enough informed to be deeply opposed to the present policy of war in Central America, is a critical problem for the future of our country. It is obviously a serious handicap for the conduct of foreign policy that informed opinion and conscientious criticism not be consulted in its formulation or its implementation; but more broadly speaking, the present practice seems a serious threat to our democracy itself, and with it to the still fragile hope of an emerging international system of law and order which dawned with the signing of the U.N. charter in San

Francisco in 1948. Without accurate and generally available information, making it possible for reality to inform public participation in the political process, how can any democracy function? Without a genuine working commitment to peace, to respect for the autonomy of peoples and to the resolution of differences through honest negotiations rather than by threats and violence, how can any community of nations function? It is apparent from their public statements with regard to Central America that President Reagan and his principal collaborators may actually believe that in some manner of speaking the Soviet Union threatens the United States through Central America, and that this threat is manifest in the revolutionary nationalist movements which they believe the Soviet Union to have launched, managed and sustained there. Our leaders may even believe that if we do not stop this "red tide" of revolution, the consequence will be revolution in the remaining "free" countries of Central America, then in Mexico, and eventually in the United States. But let us be clear that this anticommunist argument is based not upon an understanding of Central America, or of revolution, or of Soviet foreign relations. It is the fruit of their bizarrely conceived anticommunist notion of "national security" as a good deriving entirely from military power and geopolitics -- rather than as a state of grace and well-being rooted in the economic productivity, the increasing social justice and the general quality of life in the United States. Such "national security" thinking has been basic to United States policy towards Central America since the Eisenhower administration. Yet the policy as practiced appears to be impossible to defend with reasoned arguments in an open discussion at the bar of an informed public opinion. Astonishingly, for nearly forty years in our free country it has seldom been put to that test. The government avoids discussing the policy in forums where it cannot control the terms of debate.

One strong indication that the Reagan Administration's policy is indefensible is the fact that it has for the most part been carried out in secrecy through "covert" operations; another is that public statements about it by government officials (even those of the President on national TV, and statements made in closed sessions to Congress) have frequently been lies; another is that the policy enjoys very little support abroad, even among our more faithful Western European and Latin American allies; another is that it has been found in violation of international law by the World Court. But the most serious shortcoming of the policy from the point of view of many thinking Americans is one that comes to many of us as something of a surprise: when the "national security" foreign policy of the United States is subjected to close scrutiny, it turns out to be startlingly un-American! The policy has, in fact, been conceived and executed in direct and intentional violation of some of the most commonly held values of our people:

1) It is unlawful. The policy has led us to train and equip large numbers of people in Central American countries to perform terrorist and other criminal acts against their own people -- acts which are illegal in this country and illegal where they are performed. Implementation of the policy has also involved regular violations of the spirit if not always the letter of the Constitution and of U.S. statute governing the relations between the executive and the legislative branches of government, specifically removing from Congress in practice the right to declare war and control the purse-strings. The policy is also in violation of many treaty obligations of the United States which have the force of domestic law -- in particular, of the U.N. Charter.

2) It is unpeaceable and warlike. The basic principle on which the anticommunist foreign policy towards Central America is based is that our wealth and our military might make us strong enough to force others to do our will, whether or not we have arguments with which to persuade them. The honest negotiation of differences is therefore unnecessary. This is the policy of the schoolyard bully, not of the respected member of a community.

3) It is unbusinesslike. The policy has led us into activities characterized by poor planning, by enormous expenditures poorly (if not altogether fraudulently) accounted for, and by incompetent execution -- activities which have produced no benefit to ourselves at a great cost to our good will in the world. It has moreover committed us to throwing good money after bad for a long time still to come.

4) It is dishonest. In its public formulation and implementation the government has regularly, even usually, lied to the American people, to Congress, to our allies, to the Nicaraguans and others, and as the Irangate hearings suggest, frequently even to itself -- alleging, for example, that it has not been its purpose to overthrow the Sandinista government, or that it supported negotiations and the Contadora process, or that Nicaragua has expansionist designs upon its neighbors, is supplying arms to the Salvadoran rebels, is a key link in the international drug trade, or performs genocide upon the Miskito Indians.

5) It is undignified. The consequence of this policy has been to raise serious questions about the sincerity, the probity, the constructiveness of purpose, the knowledge and capability, the military effectiveness, even the sanity of our national leadership in the eyes of most world opinion.

6) It is un-neighborly. Instead of offering a helping hand to needy neighbors, and acting out of respect for their dignity, their privacy and their property, we have lied to them, threatened them and rained destruction upon them in addition to speaking ill of them at every opportunity.

7) It is un-Christian. Every aspect of this policy is in direct contradiction to the principles of human conduct and the ideal of a human community in covenant with God, which evolved through the early history of the Jewish people as recorded in the Bible, and which found maximum expression in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom most Americans profess to believe.

8) It is unsuccessful. None of its publicly acknowledged objectives have been achieved, or appear to be achievable.

This is a policy which, when its true nature and consequences are revealed, must fill any well-informed, thinking and conscientious American citizen with shame. It should also fill us with alarm.

The anticommunist policy of the Reagan administration toward Central America and the rest of the Third World, like the policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations toward Vietnam on which it is modelled, has indeed been a dismal failure. It has spread untold death and suffering; it has committed us to the maintenance of tyrannical governments inimical to every value held dear by Americans; it has sabotaged our genuinely constructive efforts to assist some peoples in solving their pressing problems of chronic hunger and poverty; it has ruined our reputation (established at the cost of many American lives during World War II) as defenders of peace and freedom; it has cost us a great deal of money; it has distorted our economy and

political system by tilting them towards war and away from the well-being of the American people; it has given us a trillion dollar budget and made us the principal debtor nation in a debt-ridden world; it has engendered among us the habit of public dishonesty and the habit of self-deception. We have in fact already paid a terrible price at home in reduced public services and lowered public morale, for our blind persistence in pursuing this policy abroad for more than two decades.

The policy has, of course, succeeded in the limited way envisioned by the more cynical of its authors. It has greatly increased the cost in suffering to those peoples who attempt revolutionary social transformation (and are therefore defined by us as enemies); it has slowed down the process of social transformation for some of them. But it has not prevented any revolution; it has not provided a viable alternative to revolution; it has not obviated the need for revolutionary social change in most of the world's poor countries, nor has it discouraged hungry patriots from struggling for freedom anywhere. What it has done is make of the United States of America, a nation born of revolution, the principal barrier and bete noir for all peoples everywhere who struggle for social justice and national liberation. It is hard to see how such a policy could ever have recommended itself to any American -- if it had not been hidden in the proclamation of our demented and disinformative, deadly and dysfunctional national crusade against "communism." But it was presented to us in that way, and we bought it; and as a result we have we been saddled for a quarter of a century with this wrong-minded and belligerent, un-American foreign policy, this policy which opens and exacerbates rifts rather than cementing healthy relationships with our neighbors.

Alternative paths.

How may we hope to restore a semblance of peace among the Central American nations and between them and us, so as to be able to devote our energies, and encourage our neighbors to devote theirs, to the search for lasting solutions to the real problems -- the problems of survival and the problems of improving the quality of life -- which our people and all other peoples face in common?

The situation that we face after four decades of an ineffective and un-American anticommunist foreign policy in Central America is a difficult one, but it is perhaps not as hopeless as it sometimes appears. Americans in crisis have generally turned for solace and enlightenment to the Bible; and were we to do so today we might turn to the passages in which the prophet Isaiah speaks to the idolatrous people of Israel "calling them to account for their transgression." The people of Israel were proud of their righteousness, but complained that God seemed not to be heeding their prayers. God observed that for all of their piety they were working to serve their own interests rather than living in harmony according to God's plan. They made their employees work harder than was just, and their conduct in the world led "only to wrangling and strife, and dealing vicious blows with the fist." That was no way to live. Rather:

"Is not this what I require of you . . .
to loose the fetters of injustice,
to untie the knots of the yoke,
to snap every yoke
and set free those who have been crushed?"

Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,
taking the homeless poor into your house,
 clothing the naked when you meet them
 and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn
and soon you will grow healthy like a wound newly healed;
 your own righteousness shall be your vanguard
 and the glory of the Lord your rearguard.
Then, if you call, the Lord will answer;
 if you cry to God he will say, 'Here I am.'
 If you cease to pervert justice,
to point the accusing finger and lay false charges,
 if you feed the hungry from your own plenty
 and satisfy the needs of the wretched,
then your light will rise like dawn out of darkness
 and your dusk be like noonday;
 God will be your guide continually
 and will satisfy your needs in the shimmering heat;
 he will give you strength of limb;
 you will be like a well-watered garden,
like spring whose waters never fail.
The ancient ruins will be restored by your own kindred
 and you will build once more on ancestral foundations;
your shall be called Rebuilder of broken walls,
 Restorer of houses in ruins.

There is hope for any sinning people who can acknowledge error, be repentant and change direction. And we the North American people are free even now to do just that.

What we need now, it is clear, is a fresh new policy toward Central America -- one which is not based on anti-communism or on anti-anything. We need a policy which is an expression of the best and not the worst values we share, one which is just in the terms familiar to most American people and which has a clear and constructive purpose, one which seeks to alleviate suffering rather than causing it -- a policy of which Americans may rightly be proud. How can we arrive at such a policy? How can we change direction when we have been so long on our present disastrous course? How can we restore the breach that we have opened in our relations with our nearest neighbors, and help create a system of community with other nations in which the interests of all may be peaceably served? What would such a policy consist in?

The profound change in foreign policy that this country needs will indeed require a radical change in outlook. But it is not utopian to argue for such a change, if we keep in mind that the present policy is in fact an absolute failure from the point of view of everyone who does not actually profit from it, that a new policy is required by our long-term real national interest in viable coexistence with other nations, and that this new policy has to be based on new principles if it is going to lead to a new kind of behavior. The new and different policy which can be derived directly from the commonly held values of the American people is therefore a realistic and pragmatic one, conceived with an eye not to Armageddon, but to the peaceful and prosperous future which we all desire

for ourselves and our children.

In the first place, we must abandon the pretension of hegemony -- that attitude toward the world which in its sublime expressions speaks of the "special responsibilities" of power, and which at its most vulgar is Teddy Roosevelt's big stick, or the Kissinger Commission's plan for "managing" Central America, or President Reagan's fantasy that the Sandinista government might turn around to his tawdry "Freedom Fighters" and "say 'uncle'." The United States is not and cannot be the arbiter of the destinies of other nations. Hegemony is as non-viable a relationship between nations as it is between groups and individuals in any neighborhood -- particularly in these rebellious times. It breeds bitterness and opposition in the weak, and shame and fear in the strong. So the first thing we need is a policy that explicitly abandons the claim to hegemony in Central America or anywhere else in the world, one which recognizes that in foreign relations we can expect to enjoy the respect and influence that we have earned by our friendly behavior towards other nations, and no more.

A second needed change is a reevaluation of our view of revolution by desperately poor people in countries with tyrannical governments -- that is, perhaps, most people in the world still today. Revolutions are not what we have been told they are. Here are some truths about them which, once assimilated, can help us develop a policy toward revolutions that works:

- 1) Revolution in some countries is necessary. The unjust social order which is the product of colonialism and neocolonialism in Latin America, for example, is intolerable by 20th-century Western world standards. It is also incapable of transforming itself into a just social order by means of moderate reform programs, even when these are supported by the United States. That was a lesson of the Alliance for Progress of the 1960's. This order requires radical transformations which cannot be carried out under the leadership of presently ruling elites, and which may be accomplished either by violent or by non-violent means.

- 2) Revolutionary movements neither cause nor prefer violence; their goal is the radical transformation of society at the least possible cost in human suffering. But they are frequently obliged to recur to violence in the face of violent repression by an unyielding authoritarian government. The degree of violence that accompanies a process of revolutionary social transformation is in large measure a function of the past and present capacity of the government for repression. The U.S. could have contributed greatly to diminishing the violence which has accompanied the revolutions in Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador, among many other countries, had we refrained from providing military assistance to the tyrannical governments of those countries.

- 3) Revolutions cannot be exported from one country to another, though citizens willing to attempt revolution in any country may be provided with weapons and training from abroad. No amount of foreign assistance can make a revolution unless conditions in the country are ripe for it -- unless misery and injustice are great, the government has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the people, ordinary citizens are sufficiently exasperated to take the enormous risks involved in supporting a revolutionary movement, and a movement appears whose program and conduct are persuasive to a large proportion of the people.

- 4) Revolutions are nationalist. Every revolution places the interests of the nation as understood by its leaders ahead of those of any foreigners; and it demands the recognition by other nations of its sovereignty. Such a movement is hostile to the U.S. only to the

extent that the U.S. represents a threat to that sovereignty.

5) Revolutions are socialist. They are concerned with accelerating production and distributing its benefits equitably. Each will devise its own means for attempting to do this (those devised in Nicaragua are, for example, startlingly different from those devised in the Soviet Union or China or Cuba); all will be interested in the lessons that can be learned from the experience of socialist revolutionary movements in other countries.

This process should nevertheless be welcomed by the U.S. rather than opposed, because as has been shown in China, it improves the general standard of living, diminishes the danger of war and is conducive to the development of increased trade with the U.S.

6) Revolutions are democratic in principle and purpose. That is, they abolish the control of the political process by a wealthy elite and encourage wide participation. They also reveal a countervailing defensive tendency to reconcentrate authority in a "vanguard" party or a small new group of leaders. The best guarantee that they will be more democratic than authoritarian is that they be free to find their own road in the struggle between leaders and followers, and that they not be embattled by an anticommunist U.S.

7) Revolutions are constructive rather than destructive. Their purpose is to create institutions which will meet the needs of their people; and any destruction they work is reluctantly undertaken by revolutionaries as a necessary concomitant of that process.

8) Revolutions are pragmatic. They are more concerned with practical problem-solving, with defending their achievements and improving the standard of living of the people they serve, than with nursing grudges over past offenses, or with promoting hostility towards foreigners. If the U.S. were friendly or at least correct in our behavior toward them, we would have nothing to fear from them.

9) Revolutions are needy. They take place in poor countries lacking the personnel and infrastructure necessary for rapid economic development. Often they lose some of the few qualified people they do have by depriving them of privilege and thereby driving them into exile. This feature of revolutions is what has made of them an opportunity for the expansion of Soviet influence; but it is an opportunity for the expansion of U.S. influence as well. Revolutions provide us with an occasion for wielding influence in the way that it works best -- by being genuinely helpful, as the Cubans have been in Nicaragua and Angola and as the several hundred Americans now working in Nicaragua have demonstrated that it is possible for Americans to be as well.

10) Revolutions are no threat to the national security of the United States. What threatens our security is our determination to prevent them at all costs (in the name of anticommunism), among peoples for whom they represent the only viable alternative to ignorance, starvation, humiliation and premature death.

Revolution, then, is conceivably and potentially a good thing rather than a bad thing from the point of view of the United States.

But in order to turn that recognition into a new foreign policy, we are going to have to turn away from sterile and self-defeating anticommunism and embrace a positive commitment, a commitment to promoting and nurturing and improving the general well-being of human kind. As the liberation theologians of Latin America tell us, we are going to have to turn away from our idolatry of death (that is, of wealth and power) to embrace the loving God that is life. Once that possibility is envisioned, once we have committed ourselves as a nation and as individuals to a practice that is based on love rather than on hatred, the Soviet threat to the United States through Central America,

once perceived as the central determining factor in the formulation of foreign policy towards that part of the world, will be a hard thing even to remember.

Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

What is called for, I believe, is a 180o change in direction, a change from a policy that has proven to be an unmitigated disaster for ourselves as well as for our neighbors, to a policy that actually works. But in order to have the opportunity to conduct such a policy, and to learn by doing how a great nation can relate to our neighbors in a manner of which we can be proud, we must first find our way to reconciliation with these neighbors. Reconciliation is alien to the thinking of statesmen and others committed to the pursuit of power, but is a familiar and easily understood phenomenon and goal for ordinary people. This is perhaps especially true for Christians, who have an explicit ideological commitment to it stemming from the teaching of Jesus. It should therefore be possible for the powerful men of this country to be taught it, or called to it, by the millions of ordinary women and men in this country who understand very well the way to achieve it. In order that reconciliation may take place between those who have fallen out, and sinned against one another in word and deed, the principal offender must, having reflected upon his offending behavior, acknowledge it openly with signs of an honest repentance so that he may be forgiven by those whom he has offended. The miracle of reconciliation is that no vengeful hatred in human beings is too great to notice sincere repentance in an offending other, nor to give way to forgiveness as a natural response to it.

Reconciliation is therefore possible even between great life-destroying sinners such as the United States, the Soviet Union and the other world powers of the twentieth century have been, and the bleeding peoples against whom we have sinned. It is possible between the Germans and the Jews, between the Israelis and the Palestinians, between the British and the Irish, the French and the Algerians, the Afrikaners and the South African Blacks. It is possible between the Russians and the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians or the Afghans; and it is possible too between the North Americans and the Vietnamese, the Indonesians, the Angolans, the Cubans, the Salvadorans, the Guatemalans, the Chileans, the Granadans, and the Nicaraguans.

Open and sincere self-criticism and repentance are perhaps too much to expect from President Reagan and his friends. But surely it is within our power to demand open repentance of the sins of a nation led by past administrations, a change of direction in foreign policy and a commitment to reconciliation and peace with our neighbors, from the next President of the United States. We can demand a public acknowledgement of past errors, and an expression of our determination to make amends -- not with cash reparations to those against whom we have transgressed, but with genuinely neighborly conduct during the decades to come. Those are the decades during which Central America's peoples will be rebuilding their societies amidst the ruins to which we have reduced them, as the Vietnamese are doing still today. They will be very much in need of our help then, as they will be of that of the Soviet Union and Cuba and anybody else who is willing to lend a hand. In such circumstances forgiveness and reconciliation are gifts which a United States with a changed heart and a changed conduct could certainly look forward to receiving from the peoples against whom we have transgressed.

A policy to be proud of.

What might a reasonable United States policy for relations with Central America look like? It doesn't take experts to imagine it. Any group of neighbors or friends could come up with a policy which would work just fine. No more troops, no more threats, no more shipments of weapons to anybody. An honest willingness to negotiate all differences with any country openly, and to rely on the United Nations and the World Court in the resolution of conflicts. Warm support for the efforts of all countries to broaden the base of participation in their political decision-making processes. Retraining and guaranteed employment for the American workers who lose their jobs in war industries as we move to disarmament. Generous terms for the resettlement in the U.S. of the generals, oligarchs and ordinary middle-class Central American people whom we have encouraged over the last four decades to think that they can maintain a non-viable position of privilege in impoverished countries indefinitely. Guaranteed prices in the U.S. market for the commodities the Central Americans produce for export, so that they can count on foreign exchange with which to finance their development projects. Renegotiation of each country's debt to interest-free or low-interest loans from the U.S. and other governments and from the international lending agencies. Modest bilateral and multilateral programs of material and technical assistance to improve economic infrastructure and social services, and provide the basis for equitable and environmentally sound economic growth. Support for poor countries' efforts to carry out land reforms and other redistributive programs aimed at establishing the basis for a stable social and political order. All assistance programs conditioned on the observance of international standards of human, political and labor rights, and respect for the ethnic autonomy of indigenous peoples. Reasonable prices for the manufactured goods, food staples and technology that the Central American countries are obliged to import from the U.S. Open admissions and fellowship support for Central American students who wish to pursue their studies in the U.S., on the condition that they will return home after they have finished their studies, and that their home governments will guarantee them employment. Encourage all forms of cultural and educational exchange.

The details of the new and radically different foreign policy that we must devise in the years before us are easy enough to imagine. They will follow freely upon fresh thinking in a friendly and constructive vein, unimpeded by the virus of anticommunism -- thinking focussed on who our neighbors are, on what they need from us, and on what we need from them. Sweden can serve as an example to us in this. If we can find in ourselves the principled boldness with which to face the consequences of our present life-destroying course of action, then we can turn sharply away from it to a view of the world that works. If that can be done during the final decade of this nightmarish twentieth century, we may live to see in our own lifetimes a United States of America that once more lives, in Isaiah's words, "like a watered garden," and whose people enjoy a reputation in the world as "rebuilders of broken walls, restorers of houses in ruins."

See the article by Wayne Smith in *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1987).

See the general works suggested in the section "On Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Nicaragua" in the bibliography below.

These observations and those that follow are based on wide reading and on the author's five visits and some ten months of residence in Nicaragua between July 1983 and

September 1986.

It is a common complaint of the organizers of public discussions on this subject -- such as the conference from which the present volume derives -- that the State Department is reluctant to send a representative who will participate.

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