

THUNDER ON THE LEFT:  
Radical Critiques of U.S. Central American Policy

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- THE SOFT WAR: THE USES AND ABUSES OF U.S. ECONOMIC AID IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By Tom Barry and Deb Preusch. (New York: Grove Press, 1988. Pp. 304. \$18.95.)
- ROLLBACK! RIGHT-WING POWER IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY.* By Thomas Bodenheimer and Robert Gould. (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989. Pp. 272. \$12.00.)
- THE CULTURE OF TERRORISM.* By Noam Chomsky. (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1988. Pp. 269. \$12.00.)
- WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNIST THREAT IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By John Lamperti. (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1988. Pp. 110. \$25.00 cloth, \$8.00 paper.)
- DAVID AND GOLIATH: WASHINGTON WAR AGAINST NICARAGUA.* By William Robinson and Kent Norsworthy. (London: Zed Books, 1987. Pp. 400.)
- REAGAN, TRILATERALISM, AND THE NEOLIBERALS: CONTAINMENT AND INTERVENTION IN THE 1980s.* By Holly Sklar. (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1986. Pp. 76. \$4.75.)

During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, U.S. foreign policy was dominated by the Central American debate. Few foreign-policy issues have generated the public interest and commanded as much of the attention of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment as the Nicaraguan Revolution and the civil war in El Salvador. The U.S. Congress debated aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels (the Contras) every fiscal year between 1982 and 1988. President Reagan spoke more often on Central America than on any other foreign-policy subject except relations with the Soviet Union. The United States has also spent a great deal of money in Central America since the Sandinista revolution in 1979. Economic and military assistance to the region between 1979 and 1988 totaled well over seven billion dollars. Yet despite the intensity of the debate, the range of foreign-policy options that have been considered is very limited.

President Reagan and his followers as well as his opponents in the Democratic-controlled congress shared essentially the same goal in Cen-

tral America: to prevent the radical left from playing a significant role in Central American politics. Both groups began with the presumption that the United States had the right and the power to control events in Central America. The liberal critique of Reagan's policy labeled it as counterproductive in tending to encourage the forces of Third World radicalism rather than reduce them. Liberals complained that because of Reagan's hostility to the Sandinistas, his policies had forced Nicaragua into an economic-military dependency on the Soviet bloc. Moreover, mainstream opponents of the administration's policy feared that U.S. involvement with the Contras would eventually escalate into a Vietnam-type quagmire for U.S. military forces. Consequently, liberals called for negotiations with the Sandinistas to reduce tensions in Central America. They were essentially willing to accept the existence of a Marxist regime in Central America in return for Sandinista promises to reduce their armed forces and not to export revolutions to their neighbors. Thus the Central American debate was entirely tactical within a strategic consensus aimed at maintaining U.S. economic and political hegemony.

Not all opposition to Reagan's Central American policy conforms to this narrow elite consensus, however. The works under review here represent a radical alternative to mainstream arguments about U.S. Central American policy. These commentators hold that U.S. policy on Central America has been not only misguided but deeply villainous. The thesis of this school of thought is best expressed by Noam Chomsky at the outset of *The Culture of Terrorism*: "The central—and not surprising—conclusion that emerges from the documentary and historical record is that U.S. international and security policy, rooted in the structure of power in domestic society, has as its primary goal the preservation of what we might call 'the Fifth Freedom,' understood crudely but with a fair degree of accuracy as the freedom to rob, to exploit and to dominate, to undertake any course of action to ensure that existing privilege is protected and advanced" (p. 1).

Radicals view U.S. foreign policy as motivated by a desire to maintain U.S. global hegemony and defend world capitalism. Inevitably, nationalist and socialist revolutions in the Third World run counter to the expressed primary goal of all U.S. administrations since World War II: to open and keep open as much of the world economy as possible in the interest of foreign capital accumulation and expansion. According to radicals, the United States fears revolutions in the Third World out of the belief that a successful revolution might be contagious. John Lamperti poses the rhetorical question in *What Are We Afraid Of?*: "Might the Nicaraguan revolution, left free to develop, produce a dangerous example—an example, that is, of a successful transformation from an unjust, backward society into one with far greater benefits for the majority of its citizens? Such a possibility might prove alluring to oppressed people

elsewhere" (p. 78). It is the fear that social change would reduce U.S. influence in Central America that has made militarism and intervention symptomatic of U.S. policy.

Opposition to revolutionary change has meant that the United States has allied itself with the status quo in Central America. Thus the United States supports the strong against the weak. According to Tom Barry and Deb Preusch's account in *The Soft War*, "[W]e were shocked to find the extent to which U.S. foreign aid to Central America worked against the interest of the poor" (p. x). These scholar-activists reject not only Reagan's Central American policy but also the liberal alternatives because both approaches are aimed at buttressing U.S. hegemony in the region.

The central thesis of Chomsky's *The Culture of Terrorism* is that supporting the status quo has made the United States the biggest terrorist state of all. He points out as an example that the United States has organized and directed terrorist forces in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Chomsky claims that these forces are used to put or maintain in power local elites that "rely on external power, unable to enter a political struggle since they have nothing to offer the population beyond a renewal of misery and subordination" (p. 93). Yet Reagan's Central American policy is only part of a long historical tradition of U.S. intervention that is deeply rooted in U.S. political culture.

Chomsky argues that the origins of this policy are to be found in the structure of power within the United States. In his view, U.S. policy in Central America is shaped by "elements within the narrow elite consensus adapting policies to the unchanging goals that are deeply rooted in our institutions, our historical practice, and our cultural climate" (p. 262). The U.S. elite is determined to preserve the global capitalist system and thus "the United States remains dedicated to the rule of force, . . . political elites agree and insist that it must remain so, and . . . furthermore, the commitment to violence and lawlessness frames their self-image as well" (p. 11).

Supporting the political culture of violence are the two major U.S. parties, the media, and the general intellectual community, according to Chomsky. Throughout *The Culture of Terrorism*, he argues passionately that the supposed critics of the Reagan administration have largely accepted and internalized the basic framework of the administration's premises. He asserts, for example, that mainstream critics of U.S. policy agree that the Sandinistas are Marxist-Leninist, that the 1984 Nicaraguan elections were a Soviet-style sham, and that U.S. allies in the region (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) are fledgling democracies. Chomsky holds that these "doctrinal truths" have been driven home by the usual techniques of selective focus and interpretation that hew to approved principles, or simply by outright falsification or suppression of unacceptable facts. He

also claims that “failure to observe doctrinal purity with regard to Nicaragua proves that one is ‘pro-Sandinista,’ therefore unreliable and unobjective; only those who are properly anti-Sandinista and thus conform to the demands of American power qualify as objective and may therefore enter the arena of public discourse” (p. 22).

Chomsky warns that if Reagan’s policy succeeded in destroying its enemies in Tripoli and Managua, then “the long-term effects on American political culture might be significant. There would be no place for ‘wimps’ in the political system, no room for those who toy with treaties and negotiations, political settlements, international law, or other such tommyrot; only violent thugs who relish the role of ‘enforcer,’ who delight in sending their military forces and goons to torture and kill people who are too weak to fight back, and hurt them severely enough so that they will submit to our terms—what is called ‘conservatism’ in modern political jargon” (p. 262). Yet Chomsky also offers a message of hope, a reminder that resistance is possible and that the “constraints that have been imposed on state violence are not insubstantial achievements on the part of those who have exercised the effort and personal initiative to engage in serious work for freedom, democracy, and justice in a society that offers limited means for such endeavors” (p. 7).

Barry and Preusch would agree with Chomsky that U.S. Central American policy has been villainous. The thesis of *The Soft War: The Uses and Abuses of U.S. Economic Aid in Central America* is that U.S. aid actually works to promote U.S. hegemony instead of serving the poor in the region. The authors claim that nonmilitary aid is part of a larger strategy to stabilize the region rather than to set it on the path to self-sustained development. Barry and Preusch insist that so-called humanitarian aid actually constitutes a second front that dovetails with the doctrine of low-intensity conflict in order to serve the political aims of pacification and counterrevolution: “The second front is the soft side of intervention. It relies on a wide array of tactics and nonmilitary instruments to secure its objective. AID is the quartermaster of this other war in Central America, although supplies and personnel also come from the Pentagon, the corporate community, and private organizations” (p. 17).

Thomas Bodenheimer and Robert Gould also share the conviction that the foreign-policy debate within the United States is extremely narrow. They attempt to demonstrate in *Rollback! Right-Wing Power in U.S. Foreign Policy* how a reactionary foreign policy has dominated Democratic as well as Republican administrations. In their view, capitalist expansion has been the guiding mechanism of all U.S. administrations since World War II. Bodenheimer and Gould argue that because revolutions in the Third World present the main challenge to capitalist control, Democratic as well as Republican presidents have attempted to roll back nationalist revolution. These authors define “rollback” as “the overthrow of govern-

ments that seek full independence from the economic, political, or military influence of the United States" (p. 3).

This pattern of aggression has translated into massive human suffering for many non-Western societies. Bodenheimer and Gould trace the U.S. crusade to wipe communism off the face of the globe to thirteen rollback operations since 1945, operations that were associated equally with Republicans and Democrats. The authors claim that "U.S. postwar policy, generally called containment, on closer inspection is actually a hidden policy of selective, deliberate overthrow of governments in the Third World, with the ultimate long-term goal of disintegration or 'melting' of socialism in the Soviet Union" (p. 35).

According to Bodenheimer and Gould, Reagan's foreign policy was no rightist aberration but fit squarely into the tradition of imperial self-delusion that has characterized U.S. policy since 1945. But Reagan did refine this policy of rollback by endowing it with a new intellectual rationale that went beyond the negative goal of defeating communism and took the moral high ground by espousing worldwide democracy. Bodenheimer and Gould explain, "Under the guise of supporting a genuine Third World movement for democracy, the Reagan administration tried to make the policy of global rollback respectable. The U.S. government can no longer get away with the crushing of democracy around the world directly; to justify its action it now works with authentic democratic movements or graces its rollback action with the terminology of democracy" (pp. 85–86).

Analysts who disagree with the assessment that Reagan's foreign policy is simply an outgrowth of the old anticommunist doctrine of containment are William Robinson and Kent Norsworthy, the authors of *David and Goliath: Washington War against Nicaragua*. They argue instead that Reagan's mounting pressure on Nicaragua illustrated a significant shift in U.S. global strategy: "Stated simply, this doctrine, known as the Reagan Doctrine, signifies global counterrevolution. It is a radical response to the long-term decline of U.S. imperialism in the face of successful war of national liberation. The Reagan Doctrine represents a qualitative break with the doctrines of the previous administration in that it seeks not to maintain but to alter the world correlation of forces in its favor" (p. 17).

According to Robinson and Norsworthy, the Reagan administration aimed at nothing less than reestablishing the kind of U.S. worldwide hegemony that the country enjoyed in the 1950s, before its defeat in Vietnam. To reshape the global balance of power, according to this view, Reagan launched low-intensity warfare to destroy revolutions in the Third World. Angola or Afghanistan might have been chosen as examples, but Nicaragua was targeted as the principal victim on which the success of this policy hinged: "[A]t the core of the Central American challenge to

U.S. hegemony is the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. On July 19, 1979, Nicaragua ceased being just another of Uncle Sam's banana republics. The Sandinista victory shattered U.S. pretensions to regional supremacy and, in the eyes of some, signified the beginning of the end of U.S. domination in the region" (pp. 25–26).

The radical perspective calls for a new foreign policy that would actually support radical transformation instead of opposing it. Barry and Preusch call for a basic redefinition of U.S. national interest to reshape U.S. policy to "support empowerment not pacification, self-determination not dependency, and development for the many not just the few" (p. 269). In contrast to both liberals and conservatives, radicals hold that "popular revolutions in other countries don't threaten the United States. They threaten the same structure of oppression which exploit working people here. The initiatives they undertake in literacy, cooperatives, and grassroots democracy can serve as examples abroad" (Sklar, *Reagan, Trilateralism, and the Neoliberals*, p. 69). Radicals also claim that "a more courageous and compassionate approach is not hard to find once the East/West paradigm and the fear of social change are put aside" (Lamperti, *What Are We Afraid Of?*, p. 78).

Radical activists hope that U. S. foreign policy can be redirected by a popular protest movement like that opposing the war in Vietnam. The works under review encourage activists to continue their efforts to change U.S. policy through education, electoral politics, grass-roots organizing, and civil disobedience. As Chomsky comments, "domestic dissidence was the essential factor that forced state terror underground in the 1980s." The antiwar movement proved that "even in a largely depoliticized society such as the United States, with no political parties or opposition press beyond the narrow spectrum of the business-dominated consensus, it is possible for popular action to have a significant impact on policy, though indirectly" (p. 7). Radicals claim that popular opposition was the key factor that prevented Reagan from invading Nicaragua. As Holly Sklar expresses this opinion, "We have made a difference. But a difference is not enough. As Congressman Ronald Dellums said, 'The United States can no longer control the world, but we can destroy it'—piecemeal or wholesale. Now we must make a new policy" (Sklar, p. 79).

Sklar's *Reagan, Trilateralism, and the Neoliberals* and Lamperti's *What Are We Afraid Of?* were written specifically for activists seeking to organize popular protest against U.S. policy. The purpose of both books is to offer radical alternatives to mainstream arguments made by liberals and conservatives. Lamperti outlines a six-point proposal on how to redirect U.S. policy in the region. First, he calls for keeping Central America free of nuclear weapons and reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. The United States should also acknowledge that "Cuba has compelling historic grounds for fearing U.S. threats to its security and should seek ways

to assure Cuba that it will not be so threatened in the future" (p. 79). A third goal is making peace a U.S. priority. As a step toward peace, the United States should halt its own warlike activity in the region, ending all U.S. support for the Contras, military maneuvers and construction in Honduras, and U.S. participation in El Salvador's civil war. Fourth, the United States should respect international law, accept the judgment of the World Court that its attack on Nicaragua is illegal, and carry out its obligations accordingly. Finally, the security of the region should be assured through regional agreements, and the United States should seek international arrangements to alleviate the economic crisis facing Central America (pp. 79–83).

Sklar argues in *Reagan, Trilateralism, and the Neoliberals* that it would be impossible to redirect U.S. Central American policy along the lines Lamperti suggests without a basic change in domestic politics. In her view, "There will be no new relevant spectrum for foreign policy without a new spectrum for domestic policy. So long as the country is dominated by competing elites, they will define the national interest as their own and defend it with intervention" (p. 69). Sklar therefore calls for massive civil disobedience and a unified progressive movement to reshape U.S. politics. She advocates

individual and collective steps to act upon an alternative policy by breaking the economic embargo, providing aid to the Nicaraguan people and standing with Nicaraguans on the Honduran border; by boycotting the products of U.S.-backed oppressor regimes such as South Africa and Chile; by providing sanctuary to refugees from Haiti, El Salvador, and Guatemala; by pledging to resist U.S. intervention in Central America and acting on that pledge in the face of so-called low-intensity warfare; by withdrawing savings from banks which invest in South Africa; and by supporting the few incumbent politicians and the many more new candidates with principled opposition to intervention. (P. 70)

The main scholarly contribution made by these radical analysts is their assertion that the relevant policy spectrum is extremely narrow. Imperialism is symptomatic of U.S. policy, not something that began or ended with Ronald Reagan. They point out the continuity of U.S. foreign policy throughout liberal and conservative administrations, with containment of communism as the guiding principle. As Chomsky argues, "There are differences, but they are within a general tendency that has won wide agreement. The Democratic opposition has broadly supported these policies, even the attack against Nicaragua, the most controversial element of the Reagan program, because of concern that it might prove costly to the United States" (pp. 29–30).

Yet while such radical perspectives contribute to a broader understanding of the narrow political debate within the U.S. foreign-policy establishment, their approach is too flawed to be incorporated into the decision-making process on foreign policy. For example, although liberals

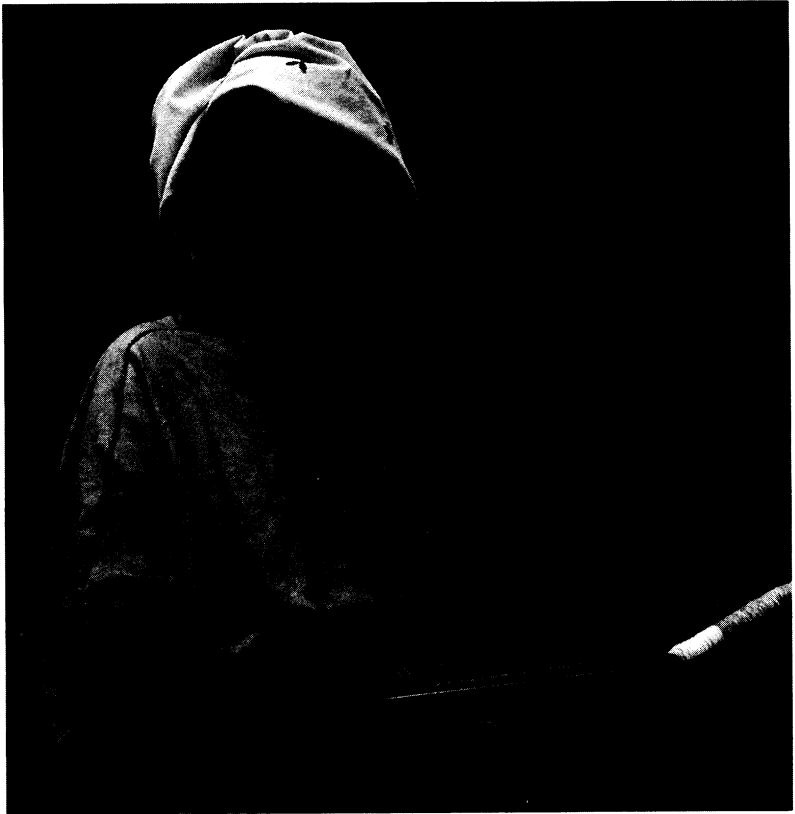
and conservatives may share similar objectives (such as maintaining the global political and economic status quo), their strategies for achieving this stability are so different as to require careful consideration (as demonstrated in the debate over Contra aid). Another central problem with the radical literature is its strident tone. The scholarship of all who do not share their worldview is called into question by open attacks. These books resort at times to a leftist brand of McCarthyism: Sklar describes the Republican party as welcoming “loyal neo-Nazis, klansmen and average armageddonists” (p. 13); Chomsky calls Reagan the “great prevaricator” and refers to “the familiar sleazy style of the Reagan administration” (pp. 220, 86); and Robinson and Norsworthy accuse Nicaraguan Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo of being part of the internal front opposing the Sandinistas who are trying to create a counterrevolution (pp. 284–85). These kinds of childish accusations detract from the credibility of each of the books.

Their effectiveness is also damaged by their utopianism. All the works reviewed here demand a redefinition of U.S. national interest to include an economic reordering of the world along more egalitarian lines. But at the same time, they argue that U.S. politics is dominated by a business elite intent on maintaining the current system of capitalist expansion. The inference seems to be that short of basic structural change, U.S. foreign policy cannot change.

These works are also flawed by their one-sidedness. There are no enemies on the left. Human rights abuses occur only in the United States or among its allies, such as Israel, El Salvador, and South Africa. Yet according to the radical perspective, Cuba and Nicaragua are exemplary practitioners of human rights, especially in economic and social spheres. Revolution and radical change are obviously in the interest of the poor, given the unfairness of the current system. Thus socialist revolution represents the aspirations of the people of the Third World—a dangerous assumption, given popular rejection of socialist regimes in Nicaragua and Eastern Europe.

In sum, the radical critique of Reagan’s Central American policy offers a kind of fervent insight into the U.S. foreign-policy process. Unfortunately, however, the intellectual rigor of these arguments suffers from the same kind of ideological myopia that afflicted the Reagan administration.





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