



Will El Salvador be Reagan's Vietnam?

US Policy Toward Latin America

Interview with Saul Landau

Reagan has just restored trade relations with Chile. What do you anticipate his attitude towards Chile over the period of his administration is going to be?

Well, in our terms we would call it gross. I think Reagan's going to soul-kiss Pinochet. I think that Chile after the coup became the absolute darling of the world's right wing. It was the prized bastard child, the one they loved more than any other, more than the South Koreans, the Indonesians, the Taiwanese or the Brazilians. Chile was the doll. Reagan is one of the members of the worldwide ultra-right wing. Clearly human rights is not an issue in his policy. I think that he will spare nothing to prop up, shore up, support in every way, and legitimise the bastard regime.

I don't think he's going to get away with all this. I think there's going to be a lot of flak and protest. I think it's going to come from religious groups as well as from the more traditional sources of

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political disagreement. I think he's going to run into trouble even with his own bureaucracy.

Looking back, how would you evaluate Carter's foreign policy?

What Carter did in his foreign policy probably marked the greatest successes that American governments have had in foreign policy in many years. Unfortunately for him, because of his bungling and incompetence in political management, and his apparent incoherence and inability to hang two thoughts logically to each other, he went out in a blaze of obscurity. Let me just list partially the successes he did have.

The first and most important one is the Panama Canal Treaty. The

Interview conducted by Mike Gatehouse

second, more important perhaps, but unfortunately not fully realised, was the SALT II treaty. He didn't get it past the Senate, but he did get it past the Russians, and that was a formidable agreement, taking a long time, much tact and diplomacy to work out.

Where he screwed up was always at home. He had a Cyrus Vance and in Paul Warnke at arms control really an able team. In Africa I think he utilised Andrew Young and made possible the Zimbabwean solution by refusing to lift sanctions, despite the tremendous pressure from the Right, and indeed the Centre in the United States, to do so. The pay-off for that is that IBM is now selling hundreds of millions of dollars of machinery to Nigeria; where previously Americans only sold arms and food to Africa, now they are designing hotels and all kinds of things.

If you look behind the idealism of Andy Young, Jimmy Carter, Cyrus Vance, you see this very concrete national interest in terms of the multinational corporations. At least holding the line on Angola — this was a move supported by Gulf Oil and Citibank. And the Namibia solution is not a solution wanted only by the groups like SWAPO. It's certain US banking and industrial concerns that would also like to see the Namibia solution apply.

Also important was one of the premises that Carter enunciated for his foreign policy — human rights. He figured out he could sell this to the Right in his own administration, namely Brezinski, by saying that it could be utilised against the Soviets. He nevertheless wielded it very ably in certain respects against right wing dictators, in Korea and in Latin America especially. It also meant that individuals were freed, or were stopped from being arrested, tortured, or disappearing. The human rights policy really cut the floor from under the ring wing dictators in Latin America, not in the sense of punishing them with very heavy sanctions, but rather punishing them by withdrawing the legitimisation of the only power in the world that gives them any legitimacy. The human rights policy also opened up a door for more liberal and left wing elements to attack, to criticise and to organise.

How do you see Reagan's attitude towards Latin America differing from that of the previous Carter administration?

I think Reagan and the gang that supported him saw Latin America as very crucial long before the election. There's a group in Washington called the American Security Council, which brings together a variety of right wing fronts and groups who began organising years ago and got their big push when Carter promoted the Panama Canal Treaty. They lined up against the Canal, and called Carter a traitor for giving the Panama Canal away.

The real objective, however, of all of the right wing policy on Latin America is Cuba. To them, Cuba is the sin of sins — the occurrence of a communist regime, not just in our hemisphere, in our Munroe doctrine area, but 90 miles from America's shore; a regime that has withstood all the attempts by successive American governments to overthrow it. And if anything it is strengthened and has won almost every diplomatic battle or encounter with the United States.

The right wing hates Cuba with a passion probably unequalled except for the hate they have for the Soviet Union. So when you look at US policy towards Central American, or towards the Caribbean or even towards the Southern Cone dictatorships, you have to see Cuba as the special obsession. I think that for the first time there's going to be a serious attempt now to roll back the carpet. Not just to achieve a freeze in the present state of relations of the United States with the rest of the hemisphere, but seriously to roll it back. And this of course brings up El Salvador, because that's where the roll-back starts.

When Reagan says that El Salvador is a test case, or Haig says it, what he's talking about is American *will*. And what he thinks of as American will is the will to withstand another communist takeover. He sees El Salvador as an East/West conflict, which it is not, and he has forced the definition of the Salvadorean situation into East/West terms.

When he defines international terrorism now, he defines it exclusively in Salvadorean terms. Terrorism has nothing to do with Pinochet and his gang murdering Letelier and Moffitt in Washington — that's not international terrorism. That may in fact be defined before long as just retribution. What terrorism is is the aiding and abetting of 'left-wing guerrillas' in El Salvador by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua, the three targets, the three obsessions in American policy. So the roll-back starts in this test case.

American *will*. Will to what? Well, will to threaten and scream and shout, at least in the initial stages. There was no threat to send in troops to El Salvador. There was a threat however to take action against Cuba. There was also an implied threat to take action against Nicaragua.

I think we need to say something here more generally about the Reagan administration. What we're facing is the first *ideological* administration that we Americans have known. I have not in my lifetime ever seen an administration use ideology like this one does, and mean what it says. This regime is ideological, and we have in a sense to restudy American politics because we've never had to deal with that before.

Every other administration has sought consensus: a right wing Republican appoints liberal Democrats in at least one or two places: or liberal Democrats will appoint middle-of-the-road or rightish Republicans in high places, just to show that there's really no hard feelings, the establishment is one unit. Not this group. Other than Casper Weinberger, the Secretary of Defence, this is a right wing gang. We have a Secretary of Labour who is anti-labour to the core; a Secretary in charge of the Environment who plans to destroy the environment; Secretaries of Education, Welfare, who oppose education and welfare. All down the line you have an amazing collection of right wingers who, all of them, are mouthing an ideology that comes very close to repression or threats of repression, and which has a big racist insinuation, albeit the words are never actually spoken.



El Salvador, February '81. Young civilians are beaten by soldiers and police in the back of an army truck.

This has been its appeal. And I think it plans to work on this appeal to win victories in places like El Salvador. To be sure, it inherited some of its Salvador policy from Carter. Carter created a mythical Centre in El Salvador, and helped engineer a coup against the right wing General Romero (not to be confused with the Bishop), placing in power a so-called Centre government. The irony of course is that almost all of the key people that Carter placed in have by now resigned and joined the opposition, or been booted out, including his chief military man, Colonel Majano. The myth of the Centre, however, is still maintained. Only now the Reagan group doesn't give a damn whether you call it the Right or the Centre — it's the government now.

Do you think the situation is likely to develop in El Salvador where the US administration will have to take a decision either to invade or to step back, and if so, how do you think it would respond?

I don't know. I don't think in the near future, that is before the election in 1982, that this administration is going to send troops anywhere, without there being some terrible emergency. I think the dispatching of US troops to any foreign land would defeat the political plan to capture the Lower House in 1982. So I don't think he's going to do it.

I do think he's going to revitalise the Nixon/Kissinger Vietnamisation Plan. That's what we're seeing right now in El Salvador. Get these little 'grease-ball spicks' into shape, right. That's the order to the American military. Advisors, equipment, heavy training, bring them up to Fort Bragg, bring them up to Texas, get them into shape to fight a war. So that will be the plan: all the aircraft you need, all the mobile support, all the artillery that'll flow in. Then

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you'll have AID teams going in there to shore up the economy to make the Government look attractive, even to print a newspaper which occasionally disagrees with the government — just as a showpiece. This is the kind of politics I would look for in El Salvador, with at the same time the maintenance of heavy threats against Nicaragua and Cuba.

On Cuba, you said that this was a particular bete noir of the American Right. But in practice how will Reagan's attitude differ from previous American administrations?

The Carter administration had by far and away the best relations with Cuba since the revolution. A whole series of positive steps were taken short of re-establishing full relations. I don't think any new positive

steps will be taken under Reagan. I do think there will be some rolling back of the old steps.

For example, about two weeks ago the Cuban Interest Section in Washington¹ was declared *persona non grata* on the grounds that it was 'attempting to promote commercial and trade relations between Cuba and the United States' — a clear signal. The Cubans have been told, in the recent period, in no uncertain terms, that if they don't stop shipping arms to El Salvador, they're going to get it. What 'it' is has not been defined. However the old trial balloons have gone out, the naval blockade, the mining of Cuban harbours, the selected air strikes, and so on. All of these have been thrown out to the press as possibilities. So it's a politics of threat, blackmail.

In the past Fidel Castro has won literally every political battle against American Presidents. As somebody once remarked, for an American President to go against Fidel in any kind of one-to-one encounter, Fidel would have to check his brains at the door to decide if they could even start.

What about the attitude of other Latin American countries? Particular countries like Mexico and Venezuela not only have different attitudes now to those they held in the 60s, but they're also to some extent economically more independent of the US than they were then.

I think that's very important, especially with regard to Mexico. I wouldn't count on Venezuela. That's a separate case. Europeans should view with great caution, and have very low expectations of Venezuela under the Christian Democrat government. Just as a footnote, Venezuela's intelligence service is and has for a long time been controlled by right wing Cuban exiles, all of whom are closely linked to the CIA.

But Mexico is in a different situation. Mexico is really developing into a regional power; thanks not only to its oil and gas resources but also to the significant industrial progress it has made over the last 20 years.

The Mexican President, Lopez Portillo, has declared that an attack on Cuba is an attack on Mexico. Does he mean it? I don't know, but he did say it, and the words were not lost in Washington. The United States shares certain common problems with Mexico. I'm not going to talk about availability of oil and gas because I don't think they're going to be in the ball-game right now. There are some very serious issues involving the border. Serious issues involving the dope trade.

The United States would like Mexico, or it says it would, to stop growing poppies and pouring heroin and marijuana into the United States. Well, Mexico says it's very anxious and enthusiastic to cooperate in this. To do so would mean considerable loss of revenue for many Mexican farmers, to say nothing of Mexican gangsters and businessmen, and the cuts taken by the variety of Mexican officials. Perhaps more important is the border dispute, in terms of how many *brazeros* — migrant labourers — can come into the United States each year. If the United States were to offer to Mexico what it offered to the Cubans, that is open the border and say free migration in, it would probably mean between 25 and 30 million Mexicans coming into the US in the course of the first month. Now that's a serious issue between the two countries.

I think Mexico is deeply committed to non intervention, and when they say non intervention they're not worried about Cuban arms, or Nicaraguan arms to the Frente Democratico in El Salvador. What they worry about is US intervention. Even Argentina, Chile and Brazil are worried about US intervention. They just don't like it, having tasted it so many times before.

So we may have to look to Mexico to take the leadership in settling the Salvadorean issue, and it may be for the powers of Europe, both East and West, to reinforce Mexico's position as the logical, natural

and most able power in that area to solve the Salvadorean predicament.

Guillermo Ungo of the Frente has declared a willingness to negotiate, to talk, and I'm sure if the United States would agree to non intervention, that is to halt the shipment of arms and advisors, I have a feeling that Cuba and Nicaragua would also agree to the same. What you have is the setting up of a Zimbabwean solution, if you like, with Central American modifications. And if one can just move the metaphor over, at this point I would say: 'let's strengthen the front-line states'.

You've described the new American administration as being rightist in a new fashion, both in foreign policy and domestically. That Latin America has a special place in its foreign policy. That it's very anxious to roll back the advances that have taken place there over the past couple of decades. But in trying to do that it's confronted with very severe domestic as well as regional constraints. Would you like to comment further on that?

What's the ace in the hole domestically? You know, sometimes a war is the best cover-up for unpopular domestic policies. The first thing Reagan's done is get the United States off on the wrong foot in El Salvador. He has defined politics in a very peculiar way, telling a rather sophisticated press and public what terrorism is. General Haig resorted to a Lewis Carroll caricature and told them in no uncertain terms that terrorism is what he says it is.

Domestically, the poor, already suffering in the United States as they have for a long time, are going to suffer more, especially the aged poor. Those who are really dependent upon food stamps and full Medicare and Medicaid payments, the black poor, I'm certain that the Reagan administration will think of something to make their problems more acute.

I think this administration is looking for confrontation. I think they are looking for a face-off in Central America and I think they are looking for a face-off at home. They're looking for blacks to riot, and they're looking for students to demonstrate. And I think each one will be treated with swat teams and similar types of affairs. This may be the way they will go for 1982. They're not going to send troops abroad, but they are going to show a strong hand, the old father figure, the old moral majority, not afraid to stand up to those people. They won't be called niggers, commies, hippies or anything like that, but everybody will know that's what he means when he says 'those people' or some such euphemism. I think it is a real possibility. So, yes, there will be domestic strife. But Reagan is not looking for consensus, and he has not offered any compromise.

But one reason I don't think it can last is the American press. The American press, if you want to describe it in one word, is destructive. I don't think that the Reagan people yet see what is going to happen to them. People are going to start to laugh at them, and I don't think they can take ridicule. I think they are really going to crack up under it. And that may be the achilles heel before 1982. They're going to start to look stupid, and the more stupid they look, the more they are going to appeal to this moral majority, and that gives the chance for the opposition to organise.

How will it organise? Well, the blacks, the poor, the workers, the chicanos, the women, the gays, the vast coalition of those who have won rights for themselves in the past, with blood, with sweat, are they going to be able to get together an umbrella organisation? Some kind of coalition? And stand up and start to fight? This is the unknown. I have faith in my own people. But we're going to have to wait and see.

¹ Because Cuba and the US do not have diplomatic relations, they had established 'Interest Sections' in each others country — *Ed.*
Transcript typed by Eda Ciccone.