

# UNDERSTANDING CENTRAL AMERICA

John A. Booth  
and Thomas W. Walker



Westview Press

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John A. Booth

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

Thomas W. Walker

OHIO UNIVERSITY

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The drawing on the paperback cover was created especially for this book by Leoncio Sáenz of Managua, Nicaragua. Sáenz, whose works hang in the outer office of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and have been featured in exhibitions in New York and throughout the world, is a frequent artistic contributor to *Nicarduac*, *Pensamiento Propio*, and other Nicaraguan publications.

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## About the Book and Authors

Since the 1960s political violence has taken 300,000 lives, displaced millions, and reversed decades of economic gains in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Despite the turmoil in these countries, however, neighboring Costa Rica and Honduras have remained relatively stable. And in a region long dominated by the United States, political events have increasingly eluded U.S. control. In this book, two of the most respected writers on politics in Latin America examine these paradoxes.

The authors trace the roots of underdevelopment and crisis in the region by examining the shared and individual histories of the Central American nations. They offer an original theory about rebellion and political stability to account for the region's peculiar mixture of violence and relative placidity. Drs. Booth and Walker look in particular at the forces driving popular mobilization—including economic change, liberation theology, and Marxism—and evaluate the origins, successes, and failures of U.S. efforts to affect the course of political events and to contain the perceived Soviet influences. Finally, they assess the prospects for peace in Central America and the future role of U.S. policy.

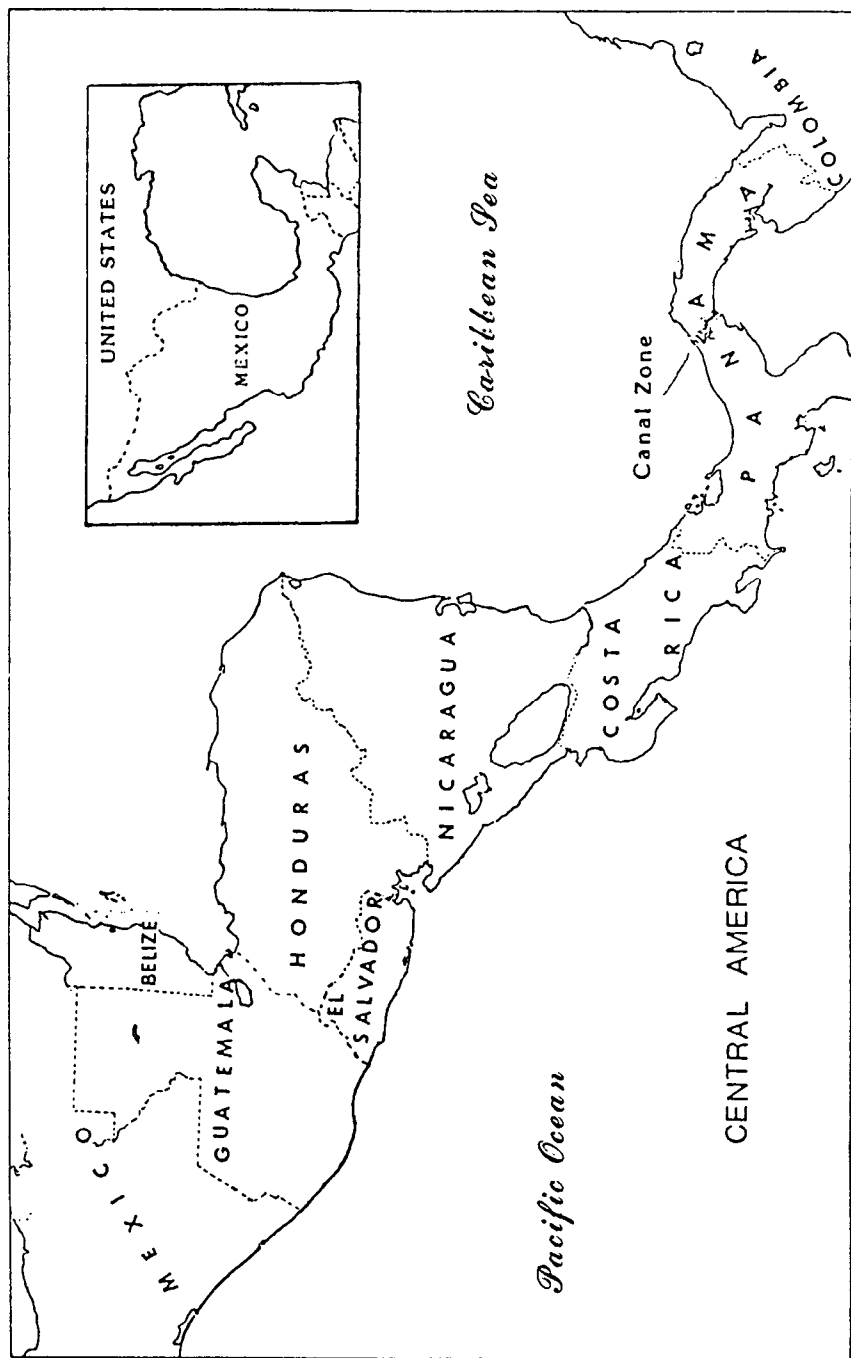
**John A. Booth** is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of North Texas. He is the author of *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Westview, revised edition, 1985) and has written widely on politics and democracy in Latin America. He chairs the Latin American Studies Association's Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Nicaragua and Central America and is a member of the editorial board of the *Latin American Research Review*. **Thomas W. Walker** is professor of political science and director of the Latin American Studies Program at Ohio University. He is the author of *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino* (Westview, second edition, 1986) and the editor/coauthor of *Reagan Versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua* (Westview, 1987) and *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua: The First Decade* (forthcoming from Westview Press). He has participated in the United Presbyterian Church's National Task Force on Central America and in 1983–1984 served as founding chair of the Latin American Studies Association's Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Nicaragua.

**To Julie  
and  
to Anne**

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*John A. Booth  
Thomas W. Walker*



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## THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CRISIS

In its 1984 report, President Reagan's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (the Kissinger Commission) explained the turmoil in Central America and dramatized its gravity:

Central America is gripped by a profound crisis. That crisis has deep roots in the region's history. . . . The crisis is the product of *both* indigenous and foreign factors. Poverty, repression, inequity all were there breeding fear and hate; stirring in a world recession created a potent witch's brew, while outside forces have intervened to exacerbate the area's troubles and to exploit its anguish.<sup>1</sup>

No one familiar with Central America and its problems could disagree that both internal and external factors have shaped the region. However, there is indeed much to question about the commission's conclusions as to the nature and relative importance of such factors.

The commission looked at Central American reality in a very particular way. It sought written advice from only about one-fourth of the fifty most active U.S. scholars specializing on Central America at the time and heard oral testimony from still fewer. The commission consulted almost no scholars from Central America itself. The groups the commission visited during its one-week Central American visit were predominantly from the political center and right and generally represented dominant elites and powerful vested interests. Commission staff and expert advice were drawn from conservative think tanks, large U.S. business firms and pressure groups with Central American interests, and from the U.S. military and foreign service. At least eight of the commission's twelve members were conservatives.<sup>2</sup>

Given its composition and operation, it is no great surprise that the Kissinger Commission's report was a highly ideological, partisan, and analytically biased document that presented an unclear picture of Central America and stimulated a barrage of criticism.<sup>3</sup> The commission apparently was not intended to conduct

an impartial and open enquiry about Central America and its problems. Rather, its purpose seems to have been to give the imprimatur of bipartisanship and its members' collective stature—and thus to ratify and legitimate—the Reagan administration's policy preferences for Central America. We do not pretend to rebut or correct the Kissinger Commission's report. We do, however, seek to supply the reader with keys to understanding Central America by briefly and systematically describing the region and its major problems, its historical evolution, and the major social and political forces that have taken at least 200,000 Central American lives and displaced nearly 2 million refugees since 1978.

The dramatic passage cited above suggests that mysterious forces have conspired to disturb Central America. We disagree that the causes of this turmoil are mysterious or obscure—even though solutions to the problems will likely prove elusive. In fact, much of what is wrong in Central America today stems from fairly simple, direct, and man-made causes. We believe that regional traditions of economic and political exploitation and the external reinforcement of those patterns of repression of the many by the few laid the groundwork for turmoil. Rapid but unbalanced economic growth, the product of deliberate public policy decisions by Central American elites, backed financially and militarily by the United States, created the conditions for popular rebellion and turmoil in the late 1970s.

The "Central America" upon which we focus in this report consists of five countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> Belize and Panama will not receive individual attention. Though Belize is technically Central American, that English-speaking microstate has a history that is fairly distinct from that of the other states in the region. At present this tiny republic, which only became formally independent from Great Britain in 1981, does not figure significantly in the "Central American" problem. Panama, though often lumped with the other countries of the region, is not technically Central American. Its pre-Columbian indigenous cultures were South American, and from the beginning of the national period until 1903, Panama was an integral (though poor) part of the South American republic of Colombia. "The five," however, share a common political heritage from the colonial period—in which they were administered as a unit by Spain—to the early national period, when for fifteen years (1823–1838) they formed a single state called the United Provinces of Central America. In the late nineteenth century, several ill-fated attempts at reunification once again took place, and in the 1960s the five joined to form a common market. Out of this history comes a sense of Central American national identity and, among a surprisingly large segment of the region's educated elite, an almost utopian belief that someday the larger homeland will once again be united.

Central America, as defined above, is not a big region. Indeed, its combined land mass of 431,812 square kilometers is barely larger than that of the state of California (404,975 square kilometers). Moreover, its total 1988 population of around 25.9 million is just slightly more than California's (25 million). The country with the smallest surface area, El Salvador, is smaller even than the state of

Maryland, whereas the largest, Nicaragua, is only slightly larger than Iowa. In population, the five vary between a low of 2.82 million in Costa Rica (Arkansas, in comparison, has 2.28 million) and a high of 8.61 million in Guatemala (New Jersey has 7.36 million).<sup>5</sup>

Central America's natural resources are not particularly remarkable. However, under a different sort of political system than currently rules most of Central America, there would certainly be enough arable land to provide adequate sustenance for the present population, while at the same time producing some primary products for export. Yet the unregulated response to international market demands by the region's agrarian elite has led to land concentration, an overemphasis on export, and inadequate production of consumer food staples. Instead of growing beans, corn, rice, plantain, and cassava for local consumption, big landholders normally concentrate on lucrative exports such as coffee, cotton, sugar, and beef. Central America also has a variety of mineral resources, though apparently not in remarkable abundance. One possible exception is Guatemala, with its nickel and its newly discovered oil reserves. Historically, Central America, or more precisely, Nicaragua, was (for a while) viewed as the logical site for a future transisthmian waterway. However, the building of the Panama Canal and the development of modern air and surface communication have made it unlikely that this potential will ever be developed.

Central America's main resource is clearly its people. Contrary to the ethnocentric stereotype often held by North Americans, Central Americans are as hardworking as most other humans on this planet. To verify that statement, one need only observe the hustle and bustle of most Central American cities at daybreak, or follow the activity of a typical Central American through the long hours of his or her daily routine. Central Americans are also remarkably resilient. The strength with which they have faced more than their share of hardship—including endemic repression, occasional civil war, foreign occupation, and frequent natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods—is impressive to outside observers, especially those used to fairly safe natural and human environments.

This is not to say that there are not characteristics of the population of some Central American countries that pose problems. Guatemala, for instance, no matter which type of political system it adopts, will long have to struggle with the question of how to integrate the approximately half of the population that is Indian, and that, by and large, does not speak Spanish. Similarly, any government in El Salvador is going to face an enormous social headache posed by the country's high density of population. Moreover, all of the countries face severe problems of poverty that affect the vast majority of their people. But such poverty is not inevitable, and, overall, the human resources of the region are a very positive factor. The dignity, determination, and remarkable humor of the Central American people must be taken as a cause for hope.

In sum, Central America is small in size and population, poor in resources, and holds a wealth of problems and troubles—for its own people as well for its neighbors and for the United States. Its small nation-states are riven by severe internal strains. They are pushed and pulled by international pressures, both economic and political, pressures that often intensify domestic strains rather than reduce them. The deepening U.S. involvement there and the efforts that numerous Latin American and European nations have made to promote negotiated settlements to the various open and latent conflicts in the region have made these strains and conflicts worthy of serious study.

U.S. interests and involvement in Central America have fluctuated widely over the past century and a half. A period of protracted U.S. inattention to Central America after the mid-1950s changed suddenly into intense U.S. concern in the late 1970s when Nicaraguans rebelled against the Somoza regime. Though they lavished attention on Central America, the Carter and Reagan administrations treated and described the region so differently as to bewilder many observers—including academic and policy experts, and especially Central Americans themselves.

There is also evidence that Soviet and Eastern bloc interest and involvement in Central America have changed. The presidential commission on Central America expressed grave reservations about the Soviet role in the region.<sup>6</sup> Although there is ample reason to question the validity of what might well be described as the commission's "devil theory" of Cuban/Nicaraguan influence in Central America, the issue of external involvement must be examined. There are also crises of poverty, development, and political order. In our effort to help the reader understand Central America, we will examine these crises and consider the relative importance of domestic and foreign influence over the region.





CENTRAL AMERICANS (photo of baby in hammock by John Booth; other photos by Steve Cagan).