

Westview Press



# REVOLUTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

edited by

# Revolution in Central America

Edited by  
Stanford Central America Action Network

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## About the Book and Editors

### *Revolution in Central America*

edited by Stanford Central America Action Network

Central America, though affected for decades by profound socioeconomic transformations, has been more or less quiescent politically. The sudden eruption of revolutionary turmoil in the region, as seen in recent events in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, has shattered the political status quo and cast Central America into the U.S. foreign policy spotlight—a spotlight intensified by the Reagan administration's determination to make the isthmus a flashpoint in the precarious U.S.-Soviet relationship.

*Revolution in Central America* is the first book to explore these recent developments from a genuinely regional perspective. Topically comprehensive, it covers Central America's economic evolution, social conditions, and political changes, as well as the status of human rights and U.S. policy vis-à-vis the area. Special attention is given to the role of women and the Church and to the reconstruction problems of post-Somoza Nicaragua. The contributions in this critical anthology have been selected from a wide variety of sources to present an overview of the origins and nature of Central America's regional crisis that will be useful in the undergraduate classroom.

The Stanford Central America Action Network is a research and political education resource center based at Stanford University.

## Foreword

In the second half of the 20th century, crises are frequent but revolutions are rare. Central America is today a region in both crisis and revolution. Thus, what need to be explained are not only the multiple crises gripping the five republics, but also the roots and consequences of the revolutionary struggles now sweeping Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. As this is written, Honduras is also teetering on the brink of a revolutionary upheaval, and even Costa Rica is more severely stressed, politically and economically, than anytime in the past 35 years.

Although there can be no all-encompassing or final explanation for the crisis/revolution relationship, the recent history of Central America strongly supports the following assertion: Repeated and brutal denials of the most elementary social, economic, and political rights create the conditions under which mass revolutionary movements can (but not always do) flourish. Revolutionary movements are, in this sense, dramas of last resort. Their histories are crucial, for only when seen in the light of the past does their desperate yet hopeful character become understandable. In Nicaragua it took 45 years of Somocista dictatorship, murder, and pillage (as well as many years of organizational work by the Sandinists) to create the conditions that made possible the victorious popular insurgency of 1978-79. In El Salvador it took almost 50 years of military government, thousands of assassinations, fraudulent elections, and failed reformism to create the conditions for a broadly based mass struggle. In Guatemala it took U.S. intervention and a coup against a progressive government, widespread killing of moderate politicians, and the wholesale extermination of peasants and Indians to exhaust the possibilities for a peaceful transformation of the social and economic system.

To emphasize the political-historical aspect of the revolutionary process is not to underplay the depth of poverty, inequality, and social injustice in the region. On the contrary, the political and social factors are intimately related. For elites, both military and civilian, who have no desire to see social and economic conditions change in basic ways, a politics of exclusion, repression, and ultimately mass murder is a "logical" response. But the interplay of injustice and repression is explosive over the long run. Vast numbers of Central Americans have come to feel that revolutionary violence is the only possible response to the institutionalized, official violence to which they are subjected on a daily basis.

Despite the amount of violence in North American life, there is little

in our recent national experience which prepares us to understand what institutionalized repression and state terror in Central America really mean. The Nicaraguan revolution left almost two percent of the population dead, another four percent wounded, most of them victims of Somoza's air and land attacks on urban areas. Proportional figures in the United States would be approximately four million dead and another nine million wounded. But these are just the aggregate statistics, in essence the statistics of war. To grasp the flesh-and-blood meaning of state terrorism, the Amnesty International report, "Guatemala: A Government Program of Political Murder," included in Chapter Five of this book, should be required reading. On any given day the security forces of El Salvador and Guatemala kill or torture dozens of persons in the ways described in the Amnesty report. For them, murder is "politics as usual."

Of particular importance to North American readers is the deep level of complicity of United States administrations, past and present, in this state of affairs. As the readings make clear, this complicity is neither complete nor always immediately evident. But the historical record overwhelmingly suggests that the massive economic, political, and military power of the United States has almost always been used on the side of the conservative status quo in Central America. Of course this status quo varies from time to time and place to place. Today's murderous Guatemalan military establishment is not the same as the fragile civilian administration currently holding nominal power in Honduras. Nor is U.S. power always used in the same way. The Carter administration's policy of seeking a *modus vivendi*, however conflictual, with the Nicaraguan Revolution is not the same as the Reagan administration's policy of seeking to destabilize and (it hopes) overthrow the Sandinists. But in the sweep of historical time, the continuities of imperialist practice are much more in evidence than are meaningful policy shifts. When viewed from Washington, Central America has been and continues to be a region where U.S. interests come first and the lives and futures of the local majority come second—if at all.

In this context of violence, revolutionary upheaval, and imperialist practice, one has to take sides. Certainly the Reagan administration has taken sides, vigorously promulgating its version of reality, vigorously supporting militarized regimes and solutions in El Salvador and Guatemala—to the extent that public opinion and congressional opposition permit. It is to the credit of the editors of this volume that they too have made choices and make no attempt to hide their sympathies. They are *for* the Nicaraguan Revolution, *for* the popular movements in the rest of Central America, and *against* U.S. imperialism. This does not mean, nor should it, that they always agree with each other, with the tactics adopted by various revolutionary movements, or with every criticism of U.S. policy. But it does mean that their choice of materials has been guided by quite explicit ethical and political criteria.

Some—perhaps many—will say that this is not a "balanced" selection. If by that they mean that the propagandists of the Reagan administration have not been given equal time, or the apologists for the Guatemalan



military have not been invited to refute the Amnesty charges, they are obviously correct. But it is important to remember that the classic liberal definition of "balance" never included the notion of pleading your opponent's case. And certainly in this instance, given the financial and news-making resources at the disposal of the administration's propagandists, no one can claim that official U.S. explanations of the Central American crisis have not been widely disseminated. If such explanations fail to sway large segments of the American public it is because they are unconvincing and at times downright false.

So, in John Milton's famous phrase, "let truth and falsehood grapple." If readers of this book emerge with a clearer understanding of the nature of the Central American crisis and the reasons why revolutionary struggles are sweeping the region, then truth will have been served. And if, additionally, they emerge with a clearer understanding of why the United States government falsifies much of what is happening, blaming revolutionary upheavals on the Cubans and the Soviets, this too serves the cause of truth. Above all, if readers leave this volume convinced that they too must do their part to lift the burdens of state terror and imperialism from the backs of millions of their fellow Americans, then justice will have been served as well. In Central America today, the truth cries out for action.

*Richard R. Fagen*  
*Palo Alto, California*

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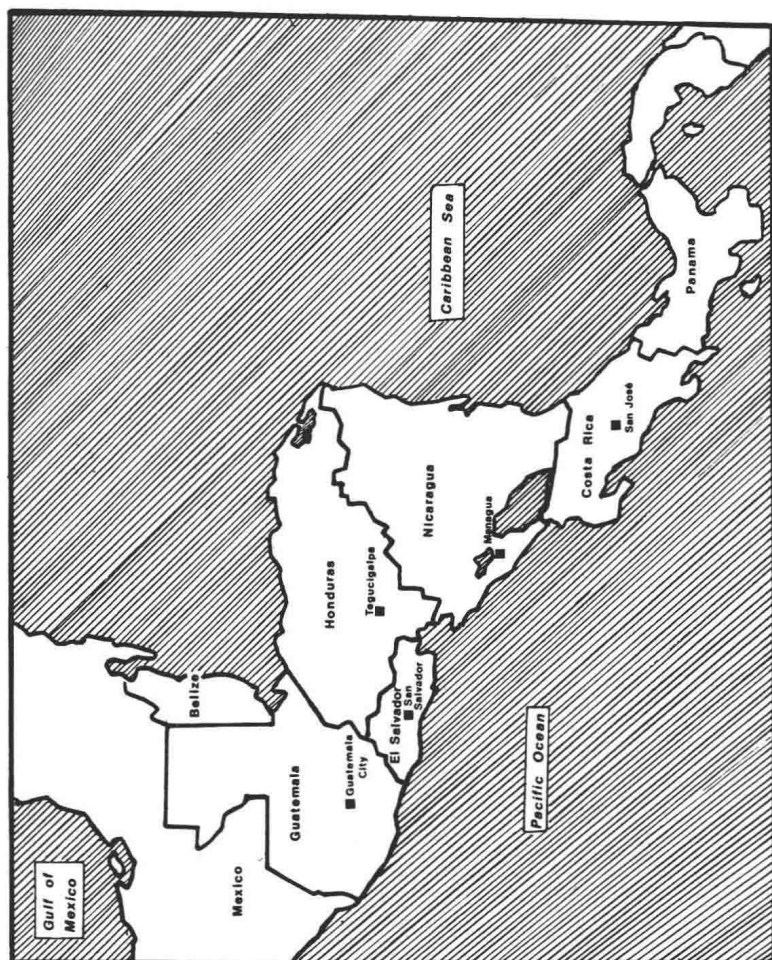
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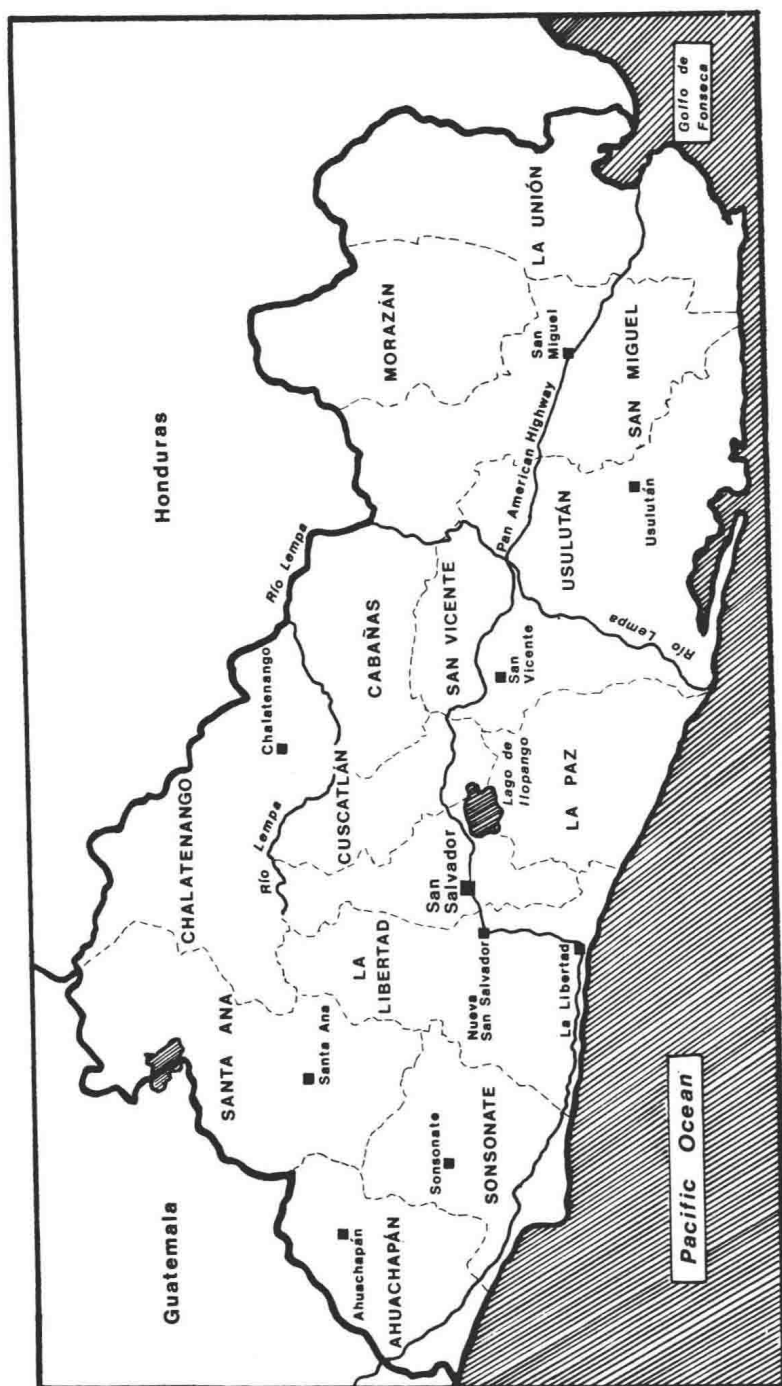
Central America



Guatemala



Honduras

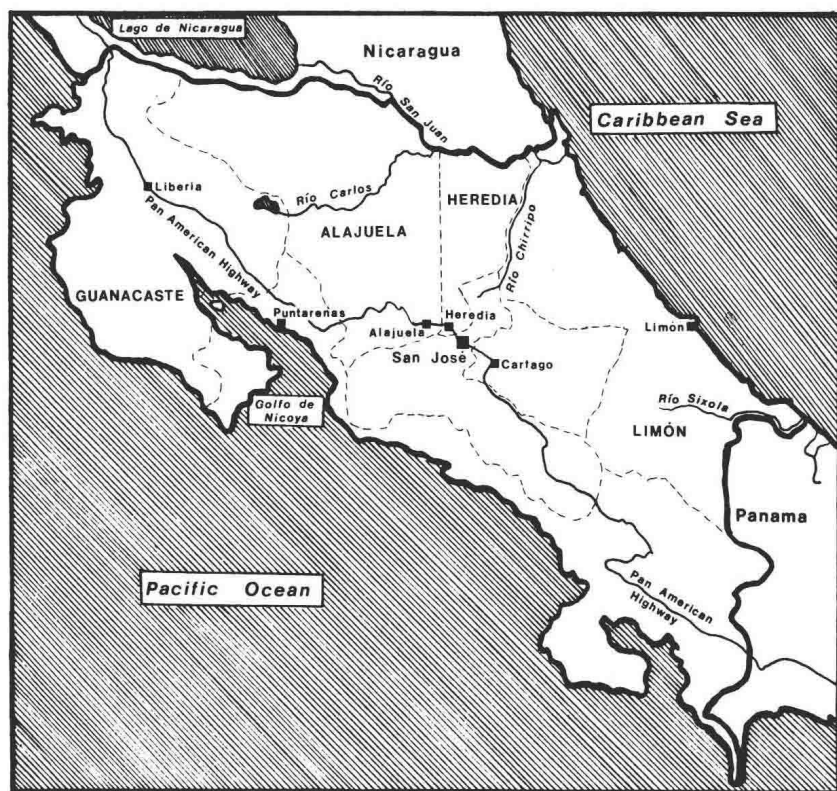


El Salvador



Nicaragua





Costa Rica