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# Inside Central America

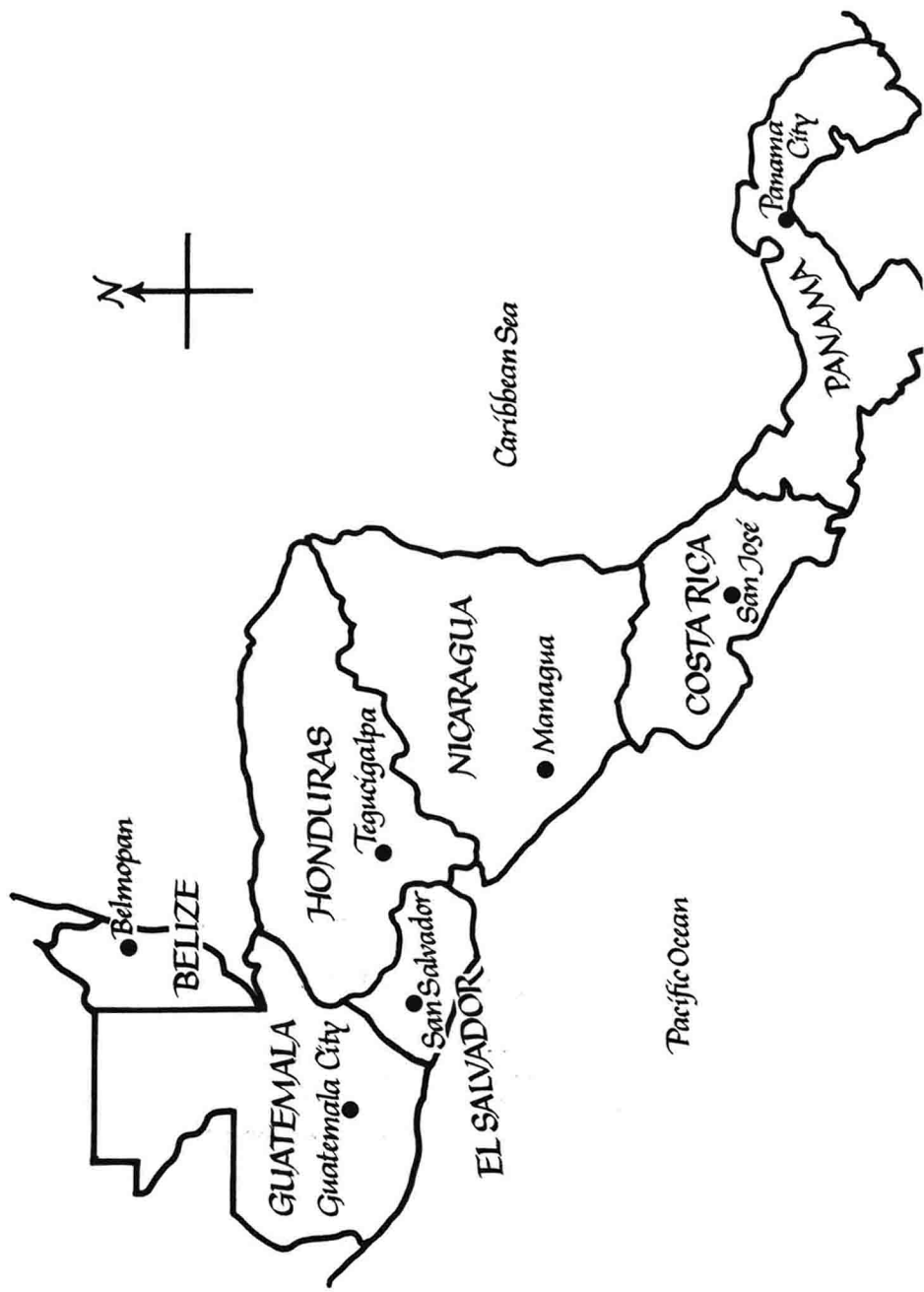
Its People,  
Politics, and History

A HIGHLY ACCLAIMED COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY  
OF THE SIX KEY NATIONS OF THE REGION



Clifford Krauss





# INSIDE CENTRAL AMERICA

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Politics, and History

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A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

Published by Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore



TOUCHSTONE  
Simon & Schuster Building  
Rockefeller Center  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, New York 10020

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First Touchstone Edition 1992

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Designed by Eve Metz

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 (pbk)

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Krauss, Clifford.

Inside Central America : its people, politics, and history /  
Clifford Krauss  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Central America—Politics and government—1979—
2. Government, Resistance to—Central  
America—History—20th century. 3. Central  
America—Relations—United States. 4. United  
States—Relations—Central America. I. Title.

F1439.5.K74 1991

972.805'3—dc20 90-25462

CIP

ISBN 0-671-66400-X

ISBN: 0-671-76072-6 (pbk)

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**TO LINDA**



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book developed out of thirteen years of reporting and writing about Central America. During that time, I was fortunate to share ideas and companionship with many journalists, academics, and other researchers. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Paul Berman, Raymond Bonner, Dan Freedman, William Gentile, Robert Greenberger, Frederick Kempe, Charles Lane, James LeMoyne, Robert McCartney, Reid Miller, John Moody, Julia Preston, and Scott Wallace. I benefited from their advice, as well as that offered by Arthur Allen, Kenneth Anderson, Marc Edelman, Samuel Freedman, Lenny Glynn, Tim Golden, Al Kamen, John Lantigua, Tina Rosenberg, Philip Shepherd, and David Pitt, who were kind enough to read portions of my manuscript for style and content.

I was also graced with gifted and tolerant newspaper editors during the years I researched and wrote this book, including Eric Morgenthaler, Karen Elliott House, and Lee Lescaze of the *Wall Street Journal* and Joseph Lelyveld, Howell Raines, Philip Taubman, and Bernard Weinraub of the *New York Times*.

I would have never gotten started had it not been for the Council on Foreign Relations, which granted me the Edward R. Murrow fellowship and, with the award, the time to think and write. Three people helped me make the most of that time. James Silberman, the editor-in-chief at Summit Books, first conceptualized the book. Summit's Dominick Anfuso was the kind of editor every writer wishes for; his blue pencil was sharp and sure. Gloria Loomis, my agent and friend, provided constant good advice and encouragement.

Thanks also to the archivists and researchers at the National Security Archives, Columbia University, The National Archives, The Library of Congress, the North American Congress on Latin America, and numerous libraries in Central America. Special cheers to Bernice Krauss, who proved to be a valuable library researcher. And to Judy Burke and Richard Meislin, who helped when my computer ignorance got the best of me.

And finally, Linda Ricci, to whom I owe my greatest thanks. As my



constant companion, she never lost confidence in the book, even as she edited every draft. Her affection, encouragement, and good judgment were unflagging. Meeting her in El Salvador was one of the great gifts Central America gave to me.

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 25, 1984, President Ronald Reagan assembled his top foreign policy advisers in the White House Situation Room for an emergency meeting. As the president scanned a black leather briefing folder, he said he wanted to review all aspects of his Central America policy. There was a sense of expectancy in the windowless, wood-paneled chamber because a senior administration official was meeting with a Nicaraguan delegation in Mexico City that very day to present a draft of a secret State Department peace plan.

Before the White House session got under way, the normally unflappable Secretary of State fidgeted, played with his tie, and gazed at the low ceiling and clacking wire machines. George Shultz knew this was going to be an ambush. Conservative White House aide Constantine Menges had advised National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane to convene a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) after discovering that Shultz was working on a diplomatic solution to the administration's undeclared proxy war on Nicaragua without first consulting the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, or even the White House. Shultz had hoped to win the support of his colleagues once he had made progress at the bargaining table, but now his secret was out.

Shultz pleaded with Reagan and his fellow foreign policy advisers that a credible negotiation policy designed to demobilize much of the Sandinista army and expand political pluralism in Nicaragua could win congressional backing for the administration's ever-controversial Central America policy. "If Nicaragua is halfway reasonable, there could be a regional negotiated solution," he argued. But Shultz, who had angered many in the administration by flying to Managua for a brief visit only three weeks before, was totally outgunned.

As Central Intelligence Agency director William Casey and U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick nodded in agreement, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger belittled Shultz's suggestion to hold negotiations in Washington and Managua as an effort "to dignify Nicaragua." McFarlane claimed that the Sandinistas were only interested in talks

"as tactical exercises." Reagan agreed, according to Menges's notes from the meeting, saying it was "far-fetched to imagine that a Communist government like that would make any reasonable deal with us." Shultz was forced to dispatch an aide to telephone Mexico City and relay a coded message to special envoy Harry Schlaudeman to forget the peace plan. Negotiations with Managua were scotched before they got off the ground, and 15,000 more Nicaraguans died in a war that might well have been prevented by diplomacy.

What passed for Ronald Reagan's diplomacy in Central America was dominated by cold war anticommunism and grounded in the heavy-handed way Washington has dealt with Central America since President James Buchanan covertly aided a force of mercenaries to conquer Nicaragua in the 1850s. Obsessive, ideological fears clouded Reagan's vision, as was all too often reflected in his apocalyptic public speeches in support of his beloved "freedom fighters." A few weeks before the fateful June 1984 National Security Council meeting, Reagan told the American people: "If we do nothing or if we continue to provide too little help, our choice will be a Communist Central America with additional Communist military bases on the mainland of this hemisphere and Communist subversion spreading southward and northward. This Communist subversion poses the threat that 100 million people from Panama to the open border on our south could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes."

Less prominent but no less guilty for simplifying and distorting the truth about Central America in the 1980s was the American left, whose analysis dominated college courses and much of the magazine and book literature on the subject. While on the right there was a remarkable capacity to miss opportunities for peace in Nicaragua, support reputed mass murderers and torturers such as Roberto D'Aubuisson in El Salvador and Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt in Guatemala, and even undermine true democrats like Oscar Arias in Costa Rica, there was an equal capacity on the left to romanticize such murderous guerrilla leaders as El Salvador's Joaquín Villalobos, and blame every problem in Central America on "American imperialism." In this peculiar moral universe, the left and right suffered a reflective political myopia.

Liberal inclined Americans found a passion and the resources to monitor every human rights abuse by the Contras in Nicaragua, even posting volunteers in many Nicaraguan villages. But they never saw fit to do the same in the Salvadoran countryside where the Marxist guerrillas they supported mined civilian agricultural fields, assassinated

popularly elected officials, and forcibly recruited villagers, executing those who deserted. Profiles lionizing El Salvador's top guerrilla leader, Joaquín Villalobos, on public television and in liberal magazines never saw fit to acknowledge that it was Villalobos who was responsible for the death of El Salvador's leading poet, Roque Dalton, and reportedly authorized a campaign of car bombings that killed or injured dozens of people in front of a Pizza Hut, a teenage hamburger hangout, a shopping mall, and the parking lot of a movie theater.

"The [American] left looks at us as noble savages while the right looks at us as savage savages," complained Nicaraguan essayist Arturo Cruz, Jr., who defected from the Sandinista government to become a Contra. "The left thinks we are poor, violent, and corrupt because of the United States, as if we are incapable of making ourselves poor, violent, and corrupt. Meanwhile, the right thinks we have no capacity for redemption."

Having covered the region since 1977, I came to a different view from those who have dominated the United States discourse over Central America. This is a book that contains few heroes, liberators, or freedom fighters. Rather, this is a description of six distinct countries and their relationships with the United States, relationships that have almost always been mutually uneasy, exploitative, suspicious, reactive, violent, and driven by false assumptions. Even though the United States is responsible for a series of disastrous policies in Central America during the last hundred years, the United States is not responsible for everything bad that happens in Central America. Central America's chronic problems—poverty, social polarization, militarism, racism, and dependency on foreign powers—defy easy explanation or resolution. Their roots go back centuries, to the bloody Spanish conquest, the corrupt and autocratic colonial period, and a nineteenth-century agricultural revolution that tore the social fabric across the isthmus.

My interest in Central America began in a most unlikely setting: a gothic study in the Vassar College library, in the dead of a damp and chilly Hudson Valley winter in 1974. Bundled up in a wool sweater, I read Neill MacCaulay's biography of the Nicaraguan rebel Augusto César Sandino, an assignment for a modern Latin American history course I took as an afterthought during my junior year. I had never heard of Sandino. I was not even aware of the fact that U.S. Marines

had occupied Nicaragua in the 1920s and 1930s. The discovery of lost history is what first engaged me. MacCaulay's *The Sandino Affair* would change my life in the most unexpected ways.

I immediately admired Sandino for his guts, his nationalism and anarchism, and his passion for the peasants and miners. To me, Sandino represented the values of dignity and social justice. My attraction to him was the kind of response that the Vietnam era produced in such abundance among my generation—a feeling that not only Vietnam but the entire history of American foreign policy was tainted. I wrote my senior thesis the next year on the Taft administration's military occupation of Nicaragua in 1909, thinking I had found a most relevant topic of study.

My intellectual dissidence then led me to graduate school, where I studied Latin American history, and finally to journalism school, where I dreamed of becoming a foreign correspondent. I was lucky that just as I graduated from Columbia Journalism School, the modern-day Sandinistas (who named their movement after Sandino) were organizing an insurrection. Central America was a backwater that more experienced reporters often snubbed, and UPI hired me in August 1977 to report on the region. Within three months I was on a flight from Mexico City to Managua to cover the first major Sandinista offensive leading to the overthrow of the Anastasio Somoza regime. I went to Nicaragua for the first time with Sandino on my mind. Not as yet an objective reporter, my intention was to cheer on the new Sandinistas and to help stop the next Vietnam—and if I couldn't do that, then to see the war, and feel it.

The next thirteen years encompassed the most violent period in the region's history since the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. I lived through this compelling era, seeing friends, colleagues, and sources die; hiking for weeks at a time with guerrillas and soldiers; even suffering a minor bullet wound myself in El Salvador. Through the personal and professional rigors, I moved from the worn ideas of the left to a deeper and more critical understanding of the region's political and cultural complexities. It was the people of Central America, and how they responded to the last decade's events—what the Marxists would view as the froth on the waves of history—that changed my perceptions of politics and the human condition. All too often I found that the leaders of the Central American radical left were out of touch with the workers and peasants they claimed to represent. Poor people wanted the schools and health clinics the left offered, but they fre-

quently bristled when revolutionaries told them their traditional religious beliefs or desires to own their own plot of land were backward vestiges of capitalism and imperialism. But while I concluded that the Central American revolutionaries were flawed by their hard-line political philosophy and affinity to Cuba and the Soviet Union, I never stopped listening to their complaints and aspirations. Their cries against the way the United States treated their countries remain uncomfortably true.

In 1985, I spent an evening on the back patio of a Managua ranch house with Sofia Montenegro, an editorial writer for the Sandinista party newspaper *Barricada*. Sofía is in many ways a typical young middle-class Nicaraguan woman. She has a taste for New York fashions and socializing with Americans, but she also has a taste for radical politics. She spoke incessantly about the need to establish “a new relationship with the United States.”

Sipping rum in our rocking chairs under palm trees that swayed in a damp breeze, we talked about President Reagan's efforts to push Congress into backing his Contra war. “We know everything about you and you know nothing about us. We play your baseball, we know your movie stars, your fashions. Our history is full of your people: Vanderbilt, Taft, Coolidge, now Reagan—they fill the pages of our history books. Yet our Sandino defeated your marines and you have the nerve not to include him in your history books. How can you kill us when you don't know who we are?”

Sofía was right. Despite the fact that the United States invaded Panama and played a vital role in civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador that took the lives of more than 90,000 Central Americans between 1977 and 1990, few Americans know who the Central Americans are. Numerous public opinion polls taken throughout the 1980s showed that the majority of the American people never grasped whether Washington backs the government or the rebels in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Fewer still know what the warfare in Guatemala is all about. It is especially difficult to explain this ignorance given that more than 2 million Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans have streamed into our country during the last decade. It is time to begin to pay better attention, and reevaluate the United States' unfortunate role in this forlorn region with more objectivity, and more feeling.



