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Honduras Is Well Worth Saving

It Is a Liberal Democracy Surrounded by the Region's Turmoil

By JOHN NEGROPONTE

There is a vague conventional wisdom about the nations of Central America. Their regimes are supposedly repressive and militaristic. Political violence is alleged to be the culmination of years of social and economic inequities, including mistreatment by U.S.-based economic interests. And the foreign policies of these countries are presumed to be servile to our dictate.

Taken as a whole, this stereotype—passively accepted by some, actively promoted by others—is designed to guide us to the conclusion that this crucial region is not worth saving. But let's stop a moment to examine the facts. I will use Honduras as an example because I have been stationed there for the past 22 months. Also, Honduras makes a good case study, located as it is in the vortex of Central America and bordered by the troubled countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

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Contrary to perceptions prevailing in some quarters, the military in Honduras supports the constitutional process. Given the recent history of direct military involvement in internal politics, it is too early to say that this fortunate development represents an irrevocable commitment, but the signs are encouraging. First, the Honduran military "guaranteed" both elections. The validity of this pledge was borne out by the results of the presidential elections, in which the party traditionally aligned with the military was defeated.

Other positive developments include the facts that 13 out of Honduras' 14 cabinet-level positions are occupied by civilians and that Suazo has managed to keep military spending at less than 10% of the national budget. Finally, the Honduran military sees its own interests in promoting the country's democratic image by concentrating its efforts on the improvement of professional capabilities in the wake of regional tensions.

If there is a soft spot in Honduras' otherwise positive political record, it is in human rights. There have been arbitrary arrests and credible allegations of some disappearances. The Honduran press has been free to publish what it wishes about such cases, no doubt contributing to the satisfactory resolution of some of these cases. Moreover, there is no indication that the infrequent human-rights violations that do occur are part of deliberate government policy. Indeed, disciplinary action has been taken against members of the police and military (including officers) who have abused their authority.

Perhaps most important, in the prevention of future human-rights abuses, has been the recent passage of a new criminal code by the Honduran congress. This should lead to a more expeditious handling of criminal justice and a substantial reduction in arbitrary police behavior.

The social picture in Honduras also contains promising elements. Population pressures are slight, though the 3.7% annual population growth rate is cause for concern. There are no racial troubles in the country's relatively homogeneous society. And one does not find discrepancies of wealth on a scale reputed to occur elsewhere in Central America. Land reform has been a reality in Honduras for more than 20 years, and has been fully accepted (though not necessarily welcomed) by the country's onetime large landholders. If there is a serious blemish on the Honduran social scene, it is the high rate of illiteracy (approximately 45%), which the government is attempting to

reduce through a crash literacy campaign.

On the other hand, the Honduran economic situation has been adversely affected by political instability in neighboring countries, the worldwide recession and the general reluctance of commercial banks to lend to Latin America. During the 1970s Honduras experienced impressive annual economic growth rates of 7% or 8%. I have been told that in 1978 employment was so high and business so good that building contractors went out to the countryside to implore farmers to come to the cities as construction workers.

Today the picture is considerably bleaker. Growth was estimated at -1% in 1982—under the circumstances, viewed as something of an economic triumph. Unemployment stands at 25%-30% of the work force, and there has been no significant new foreign investment in the last five years. Honduran businessmen lament the fact that—despite a stable political situation, willing labor force, adequate commercial infrastructure and ready access to U.S. markets—private foreign capital is unlikely to be drawn to Honduras in significant quantities so long as there is apprehension about political stability in the region. Nonetheless, both public and private sectors are engaged in a determined effort to point out that the situation in Honduras is distinct, and that sweeping generalizations about Central America, in addition to being dangerous, can also be very unfair.

While on the subject of sweeping generalizations, there is probably none more irritating than the notion that every Honduran walks around with a chip on his shoulder about mistreatment at the hands of American fruit companies. It is important to distinguish between what the past may have been and present conditions. Two U.S.-based multinational food companies have fruit-growing, packing and export facilities in Honduras, and they are excellent corporate citizens. Together they employ close to 20,000 workers—the best paid earning several times the per-capita average. Both companies have been pioneers in the diversification of Honduran agriculture, introducing the cultivation of pineapples, African palm and cantaloupe melons. Thus, in addition to together being the country's single largest and best-paying employer, the fruit companies are a key factor in the modernization of the agricultural sector.

If more than 25% of Honduras' labor force is idle, if there is 45% illiteracy and if per-capita income is less than \$600 a year, it might be asked if the conditions in Honduras are not ripe for violent revolution. Few Hondurans seem to be tempted by violent solutions. As a matter of common sense, the large majority see political stability and export-led economic growth as the long-term answers to their problems. They

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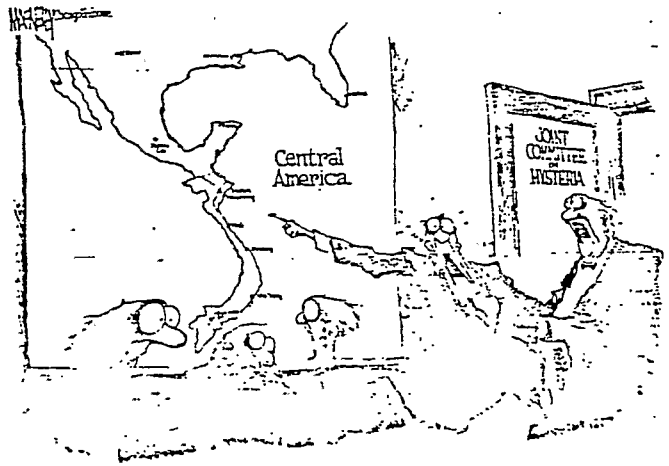
Nor does the heavily Cuban-influenced Marxist model of Nicaragua hold any attraction. To be sure, under growing Cuban influence and direction the Honduran Communist Party has been radicalized, and preparations are being made for the systematic promotion of revolutionary violence. But, thus far, not many Hondurans have signed up for the revolutionary cause. Perhaps most telling is the fact that the few acts of political violence within Honduras during the last three years have almost invariably been traced to foreign instigation—usually the extreme Salvadoran left. Without external support, advice and encouragement, the emergence of a significant Honduran terrorist or guerrilla movement appears most unlikely.

This brings me to the idea that Honduras somehow serves as an instrument of U.S. policy in Central America. This erroneous impression confuses servility with mutuality of interest. Honduras is a small country surrounded by trouble. Our two governments share a common view of developments in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Honduras fears Nicaragua's massive military buildup, the presence of thousands of Cuban military advisers and Nicaragua's policy of "revolution without frontiers." Most Hondurans are convinced that if El Salvador falls into communist hands Honduras will be the next target. It does not take much imagination to conceive the difficulties that Honduras would have in defending its democratic, free-market and liberally oriented way of life if two of the three countries along its porous borders were in hostile communist hands.

Under these circumstances it should come as no surprise that Honduras and the United States have drawn closer during the last four years and that there is a strong identity of views between us on regional issues. Hondurans look to the United States, as the strongest democracy in the world and as a neighbor, to assist in the defense of freedom in Central America.

Under foreseeable circumstances they do not seek or expect direct U.S. military involvement in the Central American conflict. Rather, they look to us for the economic and military assistance necessary to carry them through this period of regional crisis, and to defend their way of life. The Hondurans' nightmare is that our people and Congress might someday get the wrong idea that Honduras' way of life is not worth helping to save. That would be a sad day indeed—for both our countries.

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The social picture in Honduras also contains promising elements. Population pressures are slight, though the 3.7% annual population growth rate is cause for concern. There are no racial troubles in the country's relatively homogeneous society. And one does not find discrepancies of wealth on a scale reputed to occur elsewhere in Central America. Land reform has been a reality in Honduras for more than 20 years, and has been fully accepted (though not necessarily welcomed) by the country's longtime large landholders. If there is a serious blemish on the Honduran social scene, it is the high rate of illiteracy (approximately 45%), which the government is attempting to

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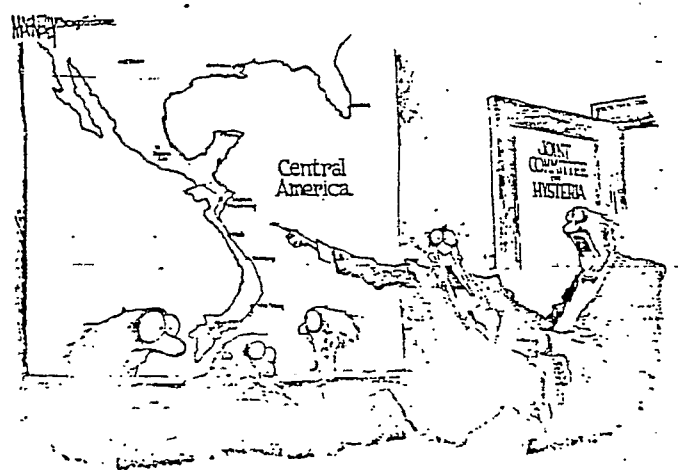
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