AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER VIETNAM

by

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Ambassador Graham Martin's flight from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon in April 1975 symbolized the magnitude of the nation's long misadventure in Vietnam. Shortly thereafter, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained why the long Vietnam experience would sink into history without compensation even in the form of some public enlightenment. "I think this is not the occasion, when the last American has barely left Saigon," he told newsmen, "to make an assessment of a decade and a half of American foreign policy, because it could equally well be argued that if five Administrations that were staffed, after all, by serious people, dedicated to the welfare of their country, came to certain conclusions, that maybe there was something in their assessment, even if for a variety of reasons the effort did not succeed . . . . [S]pecial factors have operated in recent years. But I would think that what we need now in this country . . . is to heal the wounds and to put Viet-Nam behind us and to concentrate on the problems of the future."[1]

To this point, the United States has not yet come to grips with its failed Vietnam policies. As a consequence, our foreign policy since Vietnam has reflected some of the same failures and has, most importantly, failed to achieve the bipartisan consensus required if we are to be able to act with confidence and retain the confidence of our friends and allies.

No official admission of error is required to know where the war's lessons lay. The first, and most pervading, was the discovery that a democratic government cannot conduct a long, debilitating war in some distant land unless it can build and maintain a broad public consensus in support of that war. Americans who are asked to die in war must understand why their deaths contribute to the security and welfare of the United States. Officials anchored the war's necessity to the concept of falling dominoes—that the loss of South Vietnam would unleash a process of communist expansion from country to country until the Soviet Union, the center of international communism, would threaten the United States directly. Thus the United States entered Vietnam both to prevent the Kremlin from extending its power across Asia and to prevent World War III. When it became clear by 1966 that the United States would not achieve a clear military victory in Vietnam, the rationale for involvement shifted to one of protecting the *reputation* of the United States as a guarantor of world peace, thereby sustaining the country's effectiveness elsewhere. That year President Lyndon B. Johnson informed a Japanese visitor: "If I tear up the treaty with Vietnam I tear up the one I have with you and 42 others . . . . If I go bankrupt in one place, I go bankrupt all over."[2]

To carry the day against their domestic critics, American officials anchored their policies to words and emotions—to high promises of success and dire warnings of the consequences of failure—and not to a body of clearly recognizable circumstances, such as those created by Hitler, which carried their

own conviction and recommended their own responses. It was not strange that the country divided sharply between those who took the rhetoric and admonitions seriously and those who did not. To defend the Vietnam intervention with a half million men, Washington was compelled to exaggerate the importance of that region to the United States and the rest of the world until it had committed more in cost and destruction than the results could justify. In time the war in Vietnam produced far more divisions at home than victory in Asia. In the process it demonstrated that a democracy cannot make demands on the lives of its citizens except against dangers to national security obvious enough to require little explanation.

Having failed to create the desired pro-war consensus in the United States, both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations sought to override the opposition to the war with claims to Executive primacy unprecedented in the nation's history. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach reminded the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in August 1967 that "the expression of declaring war is one that has become outmoded in the international arena." Under modern conditions, he said, it was for the President alone to determine when and how the armed forces of the United States should be used.[3]

Actually Congress permitted both Administrations to conduct their Executive war. Congressional majorities simply abdicated to the foreign policy managers, seemingly powerless to contest the Executive's claims to superior knowledge, much of it kept secret. They no more than members of the Administration, moreover, cared to contemplate the price of failure. Even as the war in Southeast Asia escalated to a cost of $25 billion a year, its defenders still emerged triumphant in Congress. Time after time they won the struggle for additional appropriations hands down. A congressional majority underwrote the war in Vietnam from 1961 to 1973 through its power of the purse; that war always belonged to Congress as much as to the President. With its power of the purse Congress could have terminated the American war at any moment, but it succumbed both to its own convictions and to the threats that it would carry the burden of failure should it refuse Administration requests. When congressional majorities in the summer of 1973 voted to cut off all funds for the war in Southeast Asia, a reluctant Nixon Administration capitulated and brought the lingering American war to an immediate halt.[4] Until then congressional behavior was no measure of public support. Even among the millions who favored the war there were few who cared to send their sons to fight it. Carl von Clausewitz warned that war rests on the trinity of people, army, and government. "A theory that ignores any one of them" he wrote, "would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."[5] For Clausewitz the people ultimately determine success in war. Thus Vietnam demonstrated, as its second profound lesson, the futility, even the danger, in administrative efforts to push a questionable policy onto Congress and the public by relying on the special powers available to the Executive in fashioning and defending the country's external policies.

President Jimmy Carter responded to the post-Vietnam challenge by acknowledging America's declining world role and, with that recognition, a diminution of the strategic

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importance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His assumption that Third World countries had interests of their own and the will to pursue them reinforced his determination to avoid simple anti-Soviet postures to perpetuate the status quo. In his Notre Dame University speech of May 1977 he rejected the traditional Cold War assumption that American interests were global. "Being confident of our own future," he said, "we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear."[6] For Carter the political, economic, and ideological potential of the Third World was sufficient to eliminate any serious Soviet threat. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance spelled out the Carter approach in a statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. "To view U.S.-Soviet relations from the perspective of a single dimension," he said, "is to run the risk of failing to identify our interests carefully and to act accordingly."[7] In deserting the old commitment to global containment, the Carter Administration accepted the growing Soviet presence in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia with general unconcern—if often to the dismay of those who accused it of assigning world primacy to the Soviet Union. National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski explained the Administration's inaction by pointing to the country's Vietnam hangover.

Responding to the apparent need for more determined, successful policies in the Third World, numerous writers, officials, politicians, and academicians now assaulted the Vietnam Syndrome as the necessary first step in freeing the country of the restraints imposed by the recent experience of war. New writings argued that there had been nothing wrong with the war's design or the assumptions that motivated it. The tide of human misery that swept across Southeast Asia after the fall of Saigon demonstrated the justice of the American cause. If the war was neither ignoble nor immoral and successive Presidents had acted solely to protect the interests of the United States, the accusations that one or more had behaved unwisely were without foundation. As one former Foreign Service officer phrased it: "Our decision to intervene militarily in Vietnam was—in hindsight—bad judgment, but, given the political assumptions which we all shared a generation ago, it was both sound and honorable. Besides acting to protect our interests as we saw them, we did our best to protect an unwarlike people, however corrupt and undeserving, from the fate which inevitably overtook them a couple of years after the withdrawal of our troops."[8] If that oppression was predictable, its prevention had required an American victory. Now that victory seemed possible. The United States had failed, not because of the ends that it pursued, but because of the insufficient and ineffective use of power. The lessons of the war were strategic; another war, fought with a different strategy, would end with success and honor. For some writers the United States lost the war not on the battlefield, but on the home front. Writing in *Encounter*, Robert Elegant argued that the United States and its allies won the war on the ground in Vietnam but that the misreporting of the war by a hostile press turned it into a defeat on the home front.[9] Ultimately it was an antiwar movement in the United States that had prevented an American victory.[10]

That the loss of Vietnam had damaged the nation's security seemed clear from the continuing evidence of falling dominoes in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. State Department officer Lawrence S. Eagleburger declared in a *New York Times* interview: "I don't care what anybody says about the domino theory having been discredited in Southeast Asia . . . . [I]f you were a Cambodian or a Laotian you might argue that there was something in the theory."[11] Actually, the communist-led turmoil in Laos and Cambodia erupted during the war itself; the American failure to control Vietnam permitted no occasion for resolving the other conflicts within the borders of the former Indochina. Beyond Indochina the countries of Southeast Asia, the real dominoes of the Vietnam War because of their contiguity to Indochina and to each other, thrived in the war's aftermath as never before. Prosperous and confident of their future, they enjoyed an economic growth twice the global average.

During the war Singapore above all others implored Washington to keep it out of communist hands; after the fall of Saigon, Singapore emerged as one of Asia's major success stories. Indeed, all the countries of Southeast Asia fared far better than victorious Vietnam. The only unstable non-communist government of the region was the American-backed Marcos regime of the Philippines.[12] Looking beyond Southeast Asia, those who questioned the suppositions of falling dominoes never argued that the Vietnamese conflict comprised the final assault on international stability. They argued only that instability elsewhere would result from indigenous forces that had no relationship to the Vietnam experience. Certainly the sources of the scattered upheavals in Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador did not lie in Vietnam.

Finally, the concept of falling dominoes assumed the existence of a communist monolith, coordinated and directed by the Kremlin. Vietnam demonstrated that there was no monolith after all. Russia and China had long been at odds everywhere in Asia. Following the fall of Saigon, China invaded communist-led Vietnam, not the countries of Southeast Asia; the Vietnamese occupied portions of Cambodia not to expand communism, but to challenge the Chinese presence. The Vietnamese government assigned Cam Ranh Bay to the Soviet Union as a military base, but even its ties to Russia were no guarantee of security against China. At the same time the Kremlin had very little influence in the renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Torn by strife among its communist factions, Southeast Asia emerged from the Vietnam War as one of the world's least troublesome regions.

Upon assuming the Presidency in January 1981, Ronald Reagan determined from the outset to exorcise the restraints which Vietnam might impose on his Third World policies. He accepted the verdict that the Vietnam Syndrome was responsible for the alleged decline of the United States in world affairs. During the presidential campaign he termed Vietnam "a noble war," an unselfish American effort to help a new Asian country defend itself against a "totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest." Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr., agreed. Vietnam had been necessary, he said, to counter Soviet expansionism and sustain the global position of the United States. The Reagan team accepted the notion that the United States could have and should have won its war in Vietnam. The President himself asserted that the United States was not defeated but failed because the country would not permit the military to win. Haig declared that the United States could have emerged triumphant if only it had used its full military power against the North Vietnamese enemy. "America," he concluded, "is no longer the America it was, . . . [and] this is largely attributable to the mistakes of Vietnam."[13] This official view transformed the Vietnam War from a disaster to a necessary, laudable, and winnable encounter. The challenge to America's post-Vietnam policy, therefore, lay not in analyzing anew the ends of American policy in a revolutionary world but in recognizing Soviet expansionism in Third World upheavals and meeting the danger with greater determination. Reagan reminded the nation that the Soviets "have told us that their goal is the Marxian philosophy of world revolution and a single one world Communist state, and that they're dedicated to that."[14] By augmenting the country's military structure and reinstituting the policies of global containment, the United States would regain both the capability and the will to check Soviet expansionism and again become the defender of the free world. In so doing, the Reagan Administration appeared to lose sight of the paramount lessons of the Vietnam experience. It has, in fact, consistently failed to take cognizance, in policy, of the two prime lessons cited above. This failure may be seen most clearly in regard to its actions in Central America.

Reagan decided early to convert tiny El Salvador into a major arena of Soviet-American confrontation. The stage was well set. The final triumph of the revolutionary Sandinistas in Nicaragua in mid-1979 had

forced the Carter Administration to focus on El Salvador with the hope that more moderate elements there would gain power and stop the burgeoning guerrilla movement in that country. A reform effort inaugurated in October 1979 ended almost before it began as the hardliners within the military regrouped and placed Colonel Jose Guillermo Garcia in the office of Minister of Defense. Thereafter demands for reform met bloody repression. The moderate Jose Napoleon Duarte acted as head of state while the military ran the country and proceeded to organize "death squads" which eliminated enemies of the regime by the thousands. Reagan rejected the notion that the struggle within El Salvador had its roots and being in indigenous conditions. His team knew long before inauguration day that Cuba and other Soviet-bloc countries had shipped arms to the Salvadoran guerrillas through Nicaragua. By launching a counteroffensive in El Salvador, the Administration would not only reassert American responsibility for hemispheric defense but also do so under conditions that would eliminate the danger of a direct American involvement. Reagan quickly resurrected the domino theory to explain his decision to take a stand in El Salvador. "What we're doing," he told newsmen, "is [trying] to halt the infiltration into the Americas, by terrorists and by outside interference, and those who aren't just aiming at El Salvador but, I think, are aiming at the whole of Central and possibly later South America and, I'm sure, eventually North America."[15]

Others in Reagan's Washington took up the Salvadoran cause. A State Department report of February 1981 declared that an external conspiracy was endangering the whole of Central America. Already one government had been the victim of "a well-coordinated, covert effort to bring about the overthrow of [its] established government and to impose in its place a . . . regime with no popular support." Another Central American state had been transformed "into a base for indirect armed aggression" against its neighbors. "In short," the report concluded, Central America had become "a textbook case of indirect aggression" which could destabilize the entire hemisphere.[16] Lawrence Eagleburger, Reagan's Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, again applied the domino theory to Central America. "If the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran guerrillas are successful in overthrowing the Government in El Salvador," he warned, "that's the beginning, not the end, of the problem. The Costa Ricans, the Hondurans and the Guatemalans are certainly going to face the same sort of threat. I can't even say that the Mexicans wouldn't have a problem."[17]

Secretary of State Haig met the challenge of El Salvador by quickly elevating that country into a symbol of world crisis. To Haig, Cuba and Nicaragua, as the Salvadoran rebels, were tools of the Soviet Union; he expected, he said, the Kremlin to control its clients or take responsibility for their behavior. Testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in mid-March 1981, the Secretary declared that El Salvador was one entry on "a priority target list—a hit list, if you will, for the ultimate takeover of Central America." Unless the United States stopped the spread of Soviet-sponsored terrorism, he warned, "we will find it within our own borders tomorrow . . . . When you get to the bottom of this question, it is the Soviet Union which bears responsibility today for the proliferation and hemorrhaging of international terrorism as we have come to know it."[18] Nicaragua had already fallen under Soviet domination; El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were destined to follow. Thereafter Haig pressed the Administration to step up the American involvement in Central America while White House advisers urged caution to keep the issue quiet.

Through much of 1982 El Salvador remained low on the foreign policy horizon even as the guerrillas steadily widened the territory under their control. The Salvadoran army, prodded by threats of losing US assistance, purged itself of its most blatant human rights abuses. Yet in the field the army, as in the past, continued to dig in rather than advance and often gave up its

weapons in the face of vigorous guerrilla attacks. The Reagan Administration responded with an augmented combat training program and added shipments of arms and equipment. This expanding American involvement in El Salvador confirmed the Sandinistas' worst fears. Even before coming to power, the Reagan team stated clearly that it intended to reverse the Nicaraguan revolution. The Republican platform of 1980 abhorred the "Marxist-Sandinist takeover" in that country and called for the termination of aid. Members of the administration acknowledged the need to use the tactics of destabilization and, if that failed, to resort to sabotage or a surrogate invasion. At the same time the Reagan Administration curtailed its diplomatic contacts with the Sandinista government.[19]

As the strife in Central America continued into 1983 with no resolution of the alleged Soviet challenge in sight, the Reagan Administration reminded Americans of the consequences of Russian success in building a bridgehead in the center of the hemisphere. "Our credibility," the President warned, "would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be in jeopardy." On 10 March 1983, Reagan addressed a business group in Washington: "It isn't nutmeg that's at stake in the Caribbean and Central America. It is the United States' national security." Yet the President promised his audience that the American role would remain strictly limited. "We will not Americanize this conflict," he said. "American combat troops are not going to El Salvador."[20] That spring Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger declared that the Administration was determined to confront the Soviets in any part of the world it considered important. Failure to stop the insurgency in Central America, he said, would compel the United States to withdraw its forces from Europe, Japan, and Korea, leaving the entire Eastern Hemisphere to Soviet purposes.[21] The Administration's persistent application of the domino theory to Central America set off the expected debate in Congress. California Democrat Don Edwards declared: "The similarities between El Salvador and Vietnam are terrifying." Senator John Glenn of Ohio denounced the President's request for aid funds for El Salvador as "vastly out of proportion with our interests and objectives in that country." Senator Paul Tsongas, Massachusetts Democrat, termed as "blackmail" the President's threat to send more US advisers to El Salvador if Congress failed to approve money to train foreign troops in the United States.[22] Most critics argued that the increased expenditures in El Salvador would achieve nothing as long as the Salvadoran army refused to fight.

To counter the growing congressional and public concern over his Central American policies, President Reagan, in July 1983, appointed a special commission, led by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to study the region and make policy recommendations. Although the commission was bipartisan, observers suspected from the outset that it would adopt rationales and objectives that had guided the Reagan policies toward Central America since 1981. Kissinger obtained what he wanted—the commission's endorsement of a geopolitical view that the struggles for power in Central America were essentially extensions of the East-West conflict, demanding military resolutions. Others on the commission, especially Robert S. Strauss, insisted that military aid to El Salvador be dependent on progress in human rights. Reagan had long feared that an accent on human rights could undermine the war against the guerrillas; in November 1983 he pocket-vetoed the congressional requirement which demanded the periodic certification of human rights gains. When Lane Kirkland and other Democrats on the commission announced that they would resign unless military aid were made conditional, Kissinger agreed to include their demands although he knew it would be a repudiation of Administration policy.[23]

The commission's final report, announced in January 1984, proposed a program of economic and military aid designed to build a consensus for US policy in Central America. The commission admitted

that the revolutions and pressures for change in Central America had been indigenous and therefore no real danger to hemispheric security. What had made possible the global balance of power at nominal cost to the United States, in essence, was the inherent security of the North American continent. Now the advance of the USSR into the vulnerable areas of the hemisphere threatened this balance. "From the standpoint of the Soviet Union," warned the commission, "it would be a strategic coup of major proportions to impose on the United States the burden of landward defenses. If they succeeded in doing so they would have outmaneuvered us on a global scale." Nicaragua loomed as a special danger. It was, ran the report, "an indispensable stepping stone for the Cuban and Soviet effort to promote armed insurgency in Central America. With both an Atlantic and a Pacific coast, Nicaragua is uniquely well-placed" to become the base for Russian activity in Central America, giving Russia and Cuba the presence to subvert the entire region, including Panama. Then in a warning reminiscent of Vietnam, the report continued: "The triumph of hostile forces in what the Soviets call the 'strategic rear' of the United States would be read as a sign of U.S. impotence. It would signify our inability to manage our policy or exercise our power." What was being tested in Central America was "not so much the ability of the United States to provide large resources but rather the realism of our political attitudes."[24]

At the end the commission recommended a close link between continued US aid and progress on human rights, knowing that the President opposed such linkage and believed that the primary purpose of the program was the destruction of the Salvadoran insurgency. In agreement with established policy the commission never questioned the right of the United States to intervene in the civil wars of Nicaragua and El Salvador. It recommended $8 billion in economic aid over five years, more than either Congress or the Administration was willing to endorse. In addition, the Kissinger plan called for a Peace Corps approach to Central America with technicians, teachers, doctors, and other experts. It advocated increased military aid to El Salvador of some $400 million to counter what it depicted as a "direct threat to U.S. security interests." It asked for the necessary military aid for Honduras "to build a credible deterrent," as well as the resumption of military aid to Guatemala which the Carter Administration had cut off in response to human rights violations.[25] The commission's language of fear rendered the military requests essential simply because it raised the stakes so high that the United States dared accept nothing less than a military victory over the communist enemy in Central America.[26]

Critics in Congress and the press balked at the Kissinger commission's emphasis on the nonregional challenges to Central American stability and its concomitant reliance on power. The large request for military aid, responded Congressman Michael Barnes of Maryland, "will only buy more death, destruction and suffering." To Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut the commission failed "to address the fundamental economic, social and political reform necessary to make any aid program effective within the region . . . . There is rhetoric to satisfy every imaginable constituency, but there is no policy." Even the sometimes hawkish Senator Daniel P. Moynihan of New York insisted that the commission had offered no evidence for its assumptions of Soviet-Cuban threats to US security interests in the hemisphere.[27] *The New York Times* editorialized: "The same fears about impotence and credibility were the stuff of a thousand speeches justifying American involvement for a generation in the lost war in Indochina . . . . What matters most is that the bipartisan commission endorses pouring more arms and advisers into another regional civil war."[28]

Such broad disagreement on the Kissinger report in no way altered Washington's official assumption of the threat of falling dominoes in Central America. In mid-April the President accused Nicaragua of joining the Soviet Union and Cuba in trying "to

install Communism by force throughout this hemisphere . . . . We cannot turn our backs on this crisis at our doorstep." Later that month the President warned a group of Hispanic Americans at the White House: "If Central America is lost, then our borders will be threatened . . . . A faraway totalitarian power is committing enormous resources to change the strategic balance of the world by turning Central America into a string of anti-American, Soviet-styled dictatorships."[29] That Russia was committing "enormous resources" to either the government of Nicaragua or the rebels of El Salvador was doubtful. During May, Mexico's President Miguel de la Madrid publicly disputed President Reagan's views before a joint meeting of Congress. "We are convinced," he said, "that the Central American conflict is a result of the economic deficiencies, political backwardness and social injustice that have afflicted the countries of this area. We therefore cannot accept its becoming part of the East-West confrontation." Reagan disagreed, lecturing Madrid on the importance of taking military action against the external communist threat to the hemisphere.[30]

What mattered even more than El Salvador in the spring of 1984 was the country's burgeoning involvement in Nicaragua. The Pentagon continued to build a military infrastructure, based largely in Honduras, to undergird the forces fighting leftists in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Pentagon officials regarded this unfolding military activity in Central America as the only alternative to sending American forces. One officer explained: "If Salvador falls, that's the time the United States would have to decide whether to send troops or withdraw completely and fortify the Rio Grande." What characterized the entire American military program in Honduras was the absence of public announcements and congressional authorizations that normally accompany such foreign commitments. The Pentagon, without any formal expression of public or congressional support, conducted military exercises that permitted it to rotate hundreds if not thousands of troops through Honduras while it maintained its self-imposed limit of 55 advisers in El Salvador. Air reconnaissance units based in Honduras flew over El Salvador to aid that country in targeting enemy positions. Initially, US aid to the Nicaraguan rebels had been limited, supporting only tiny bands operating along the border; by 1984 some 18,000 *contras*, with American encouragement, were conducting full-scale operations in the field. CIA operatives aided the growing army of US-financed counterrevolutionaries in the guerrilla war against the Sandinista government in Managua. Private American groups sent soldiers of fortune into Central America to support the war. Congress contemplated none of this. Congressman Barnes, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Latin American Affairs, complained: "The U.S. role has just seemed to increase by leaps and bounds while we are constantly being assured that nothing new is happening . . . . The U.S. role has expanded in ways that no one would have thought possible a year ago."[31]

Public and congressional doubts regarding US intentions increased when the Administration, in early April, became implicated in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. CIA officials had supervised the mining from a ship off Nicaragua's Pacific coast. Washington admitted that the decision to mine the harbors was a scaled-down CIA plan to cripple the Nicaraguan economy, a plan aimed at power plants, bridges, and other key targets. Previously, American officers in Honduras had monitored the rebel ground operations in Nicaragua, but had not controlled them; the mining of Nicaraguan waters involved the United States directly in the war against the Sandinistas for the first time. The Sandinistas took their case to the International Court of Justice at The Hague with the charge that the United States was "directing military and paramilitary actions" against Nicaragua in an attempt to destabilize and overthrow its government. Members of Congress condemned the secret war in Nicaragua. The Senate rebuked the Administration for mining the harbors by a vote of 84 to 12. Republican Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona complained to CIA

Director William J. Casey that the mining was a violation of international law. "It is an act of war," he concluded. "For the life of me, I don't see how we are going to explain it." Speaker O'Neill added: "I have contended that the Reagan Administration's secret war against Nicaragua was morally indefensible. Today it is clear that it is legally indefensible as well." What added to the bitterness was the announcement that Washington had informed the World Court that for the next two years it would not recognize the panel's jurisdiction over Central American disputes. For the British and French governments, no less than for members of Congress, this was an admission of guilt.[32] The President answered his detractors: "[Critics] ignore the most relevant fact: Central America has become the stage for a bold attempt . . . to install communism by force." Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that "to portray Nicaragua as a victim in the current situation is a complete, Orwellian inversion of what is actually happening in Central America." It was Nicaragua, she said, that was violating international law by attacking its neighbors.

In the absence of any costly involvements that might compel a clearer definition of American interests in Central America, President Reagan faced little trouble in extricating his policies from the web of restraints that some members of Congress sought to spin around them. Whatever the disillusionment which flowed from those policies among critics in Central America, Europe, and the United States, as long as the price entailed little but appropriations, congressional majorities had been willing to approve Administration requests and play safe. Undoubtedly Reagan's approach to Central America—to say nothing of his policies toward Lebanon and Grenada—enjoyed the support of Republican hardliners, both inside and outside Congress, as well as those whose faith in the validity of the Vietnam War was never shaken by events. Those who did not share that faith confronted a popular President, and many of them understood that the perennial executive-legislative conflict tended to erode the consistency and effectiveness of national policy. Democratic leaders in the House acknowledged that the President could control almost any foreign policy issue; Congress could only compel the Administration to slow down and hone its arguments more carefully. But the limited restraints which Congress usually cared to impose on the President were no measure of either congressional or public opinion. The divisions within the country were no more favorable to the Reagan policies, and the rationales employed to defend them, than they were to American policy in Vietnam at the moment of its ultimate failure. Vietnam had destroyed the guideposts to which all administrations from Truman to Ford had attached their containment policies; despite his efforts Reagan could not rebuild them.

No critic expressed the opposition view more forcefully than the former Idaho Senator Frank Church. For years, he complained shortly before his death in early 1984, the United States had ventured into Vietnam to contain Russia and China only to discover that these two communist countries were not the problem in Southeast Asia. "Yet we seem unable to learn from the failure of our Vietnam policy," he continued. "It is this idea that the communist threat is everywhere that has made our government its captive and its victim . . . . This country has become so conservative—so fearful—that we have come to see revolution anywhere in the world as a threat to the United States. It's nonsense. And yet that policy we have followed has cost us so many lives, so much treasure, such setbacks to our vital interests, as a great power ought not to endure. Until we learn to live with revolution, we will continue to blunder, and it will work to the Soviets' advantage. It will put them on the winning side, while we put ourselves on the side of rotten, corrupt regimes that end up losing. And each time one of those regimes is overthrown, it feeds the paranoia in this country about the spread of communism."[33] Congressional Democrats, led by Senator Dodd, took up the cause. They argued that Reagan and his advisers simply did not understand the sources of instability in

Central America or the mindset of the area. Critics in Congress and elsewhere feared that the longer the Administration insisted on the need of victory in Central America to protect hemispheric security, the more difficult it would become, as in Vietnam, to accept less than victory.

Five years of intense effort to destroy the Vietnam Syndrome failed. That failure left the country as divided on matters of external policy as it was at the height of the Vietnam War. Only the absence of fighting clouded the existing disagreements. Opinion surveys indicated that the vast majority of Americans had consistently opposed the Reagan policies in Central America. In a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll in 1982 and 1983, 70 percent or more of the public opposed increased military aid for El Salvador. A Gallup survey of April 1984 indicated that only 29 percent of the people interviewed approved of the President's Central American policies. That same month a *New York Times*-CBS News poll revealed that only one in three persons in the United States supported the President's policies, and that half the people feared that they might lead the country into war. By a margin of 67 to 13 the respondents disapproved of the decision to mine the Nicaraguan harbors; only a quarter favored the overthrow of the government in Managua.[34] In May a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll agreed with these findings. What this poll discovered, additionally, was the high level of public ignorance regarding US policies in Central America. Almost half of those interviewed did not know which side the United States government was backing in El Salvador; a large percentage believed that the United States was on the side of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Only one-fifth of the people interviewed could answer both the Nicaragua and El Salvador questions correctly; 43 percent could not get either correct. Of those who understood which side the Administration was backing in the two countries, well over half admitted their disagreement with the policy.[35] The approval rate for Reagan's Central American policies was almost as low as any ever registered for the handling of specific foreign policy issues.

To carry on its Central American policies in the face of such high levels of opposition the Administration sent weapons abroad that Congress sought to block and made military dispositions that Congress tried to foreclose. At the same time the President complained that Congress had imposed limitations on his foreign policies and rendered them less effective than they otherwise would have been. Yet that congressional obstructionism resulted not from any defense of prerogatives but from serious disagreements over the direction of US foreign policies, especially in the Third World. House Foreign Affairs Chairman Dante B. Fascell of Florida responded to the President's charges: "I think we put too many barnacles on the president." But the Administration, he added, must recognize that congressional behavior reflected the persistent public concern over the Administration's "full-court-press confrontation" with the Soviet Union and its "dragging the United States into every corner of the world." Other Democrats reacted bitterly to Reagan's partisan efforts to undermine his congressional opposition. House majority leader James C. Wright, Jr., of Texas explained why it was not easy for many Democrats to support the President on foreign policy issues: "He is clearly the most partisan of all [the past seven Presidents], the most polarizing in his approach, in his rhetoric and in the alacrity with which he blames Congress. He treats Congress almost as he treats the Soviet Union—one day calling it 'an evil empire,' and the next day saying, 'Come and let us reason together.' " Senator Robert Byrd added ruefully: "You have top people in the administration denigrating the role of Congress, questioning the patriotism of those in Congress who would differ . . . . I've never seen an administration so partisan, so political and so arrogant."[36]

Clearly the burden of leadership, both political and intellectual, is that of narrowing the breaches of disagreement in the country. A seriously divided nation cannot sustain an adequate foreign policy over time. Leaders must demonstrate the understanding, wisdom, and moderation necessary to create widespread trust in their judgments or they

will only with difficulty extract the physical and human sacrifices that costly policy demands. There are few circumstances and few issues around the world that could lead the country to war with the full support of the American people. For that reason the disagreements that now characterize the American outlook on world affairs, perhaps as pervading as at any time throughout the postwar era, are dangerous to the country's welfare and security. What conceivable crisis would unify rather than further divide the country is not apparent. Experience should teach some basic truths about proper and promising approaches to external affairs; the United States has had its share of successes, all of them replete with evidence as to why the successes occurred. Somehow that record of success, like the record of failure, is either unknown or has been twisted beyond recognition. The Vietnam War itself, so divisive and so damaging to the nation's interests both at home and abroad, should have furnished lessons upon which Americans could agree. Tragically, it has not done so. In the final analysis, except for some immediate advantage that victory might bring, what a nation gains from any costly external involvement is the lessons that it teaches. And the public can learn from experience only to the extent that government leaders evaluate past decisions openly and offer the nation that education which alone can compensate it for the costs of mistaken policy. New challenges create new problems and the possibilities for new mistakes, but no nation with the capacity to learn should repeat past errors. Such luxuries no people can afford.

NOTES

1. During the Vietnam crisis of April 1975, Kissinger on numerous occasions argued that reviews of the country's original involvement in Vietnam would serve no useful purpose. See, for example, his remarks before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, 15 April 1975, in The Secretary of State, *Statement*, 15 April 1975, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Media Services, p. 3; also see his address before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 17 April 1975, The Department of State *Bulletin*, 72 (5 May 1975), 558. President Gerald Ford repeated this admonition in a press conference on 6 May: "I think the lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned, learned by Presidents, learned by Congress, learned by the American people, and we should have our focus on the future." See Bernard Gwertzman in *The New York Times*, 25 May 1975. Walt W. Rostow, a leading proponent of the war during the Johnson Administration, joined the chorus: "The overriding problem we face is to put the debates and the positions of the past behind us and . . . for Congress and the President to quickly come together on a program that will re-establish the credibility of our strength and our commitment. There has been no moment in my experience in which we more needed unity as a national family." Quoted by Austin Scott in *The Washington Post*, 13 April 1975, p. K1.

2. Johnson quoted in *Life*, 3 June 1966, p. 36B. Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton developed the theme that the United States should seek only to preserve its reputation in his noted memorandum of 17 January 1966, in Neil S. Sheehan, ed., *The Pentagon Papers as Published by The New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 502.

3. Katzenbach's statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 17 August 1967, The Department of State *Bulletin*, 57 (11 September 1967), 333-36.

4. For a detailed study of this episode see Norman A. Graebner, "Presidential Power and Foreign Affairs," in Charles W. Dunn, ed., *The Future of the American Presidency* (Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1975), pp. 196-98.

5. On Clausewitz's view of the importance of popular will in war, see Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., "What is War?" *Harper's*, 268 (May 1984), 75-78.

6. "A Foreign Policy Based on America's Essential Character," The Department of State *Bulletin*, 76 (13 June 1977), 622.

7. Vance's statement before the House Committee on International Relations, 19 June 1978, The Department of State *Bulletin*, 78 (August 1978), 14.

8. See Emmett B. Ford, Jr., in *The Daily Progress* (Charlottesville, Va.), 17 July 1977. Norman Podhoretz argued the same view in his book, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

9. For Robert Elegant's long critique of press coverage of the war, see "How to Lose a War: Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent," *Encounter*, 57 (August 1981), 73-90. In his last three pages Elegant attacks the Vietnam Syndrome directly.

10. This is the final conclusion of Guenter Lewy's major study of the Vietnam War, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978). For a valuable survey of recent literature on the Vietnam War, see Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 1983, pp. 26-35, 45-61. Stanley Hoffman of Harvard, in a letter to the editor which appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 March 1983, p. 110, observed that much of the new writing attacked positions and suppositions which the war's critics never held.

11. Interview with David Binder and Bernard Gwertzman in "The Week in Review," *The New York Times*, 22 April 1984.

12. Don Oberdorfer, "Rather Than Fall After Vietnam, The 'Dominoes' Have Prospered," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 13 August 1984, p. 16.

13. For a superb discussion of the Reagan team's early efforts to exorcise the Vietnam Syndrome, see George C. Herring, "The 'Vietnam Syndrome' and American Foreign Policy," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 57 (Autumn 1981), 594-96.

14. See Reagan's interview with Walter Cronkite, 3 March 1981, The Department of State *Bulletin*, 81 (April 1981), 9.

15. Reagan quoted in Alexander Cockburn, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 1981.

16. Quoted in T. D. Allman, "Reagan's Manifest Destiny," *Harper's*, 267 (September 1983), 30.

17. "The Week in Review," *The New York Times*, 22 April 1984.

18. Karen De Young in *The Washington Post*, 8 March 1981. *Newsweek*, 16 March 1981, pp. 34-38; 30 March 1981, pp. 20-21. *The Daily Progress*, 19 and 20 March 1981.

19. For the Republican platform on Central America, see Donald Bruce Johnson, compiler, *National Party Platforms of 1980* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1982), pp. 205, 215.

20. Reagan quoted in *U.S. News and World Report*, 21 March 1983, p. 20. For a major statement of Reagan's views on Central America, see his address before the International Longshoreman's Association 18 July 1983, The Department of State *Bulletin*, 83 (August 1983), 1-4. Reagan recognized the problems of Central America as being indigenous and historic; now, he said, they were being exploited by the "enemies of freedom." Thereafter he dwelled on the Soviet and Cuban threats to hemispheric security.

21. Weinberger quoted in *U.S. News and World Report*, 28 March 1983, p. 22.

22. For the debate on El Salvador see *U.S. News and World Report*, 21 March 1983, pp. 21-22.

23. Mary McGrory, "Struggles Over a Kissinger Report That Will Change Nothing," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 23 January 1984, p. 23.

24. Seymour M. Hersh in *The New York Times*, 8 January 1984, pp. 1, 16.

25. *The Daily Progress*, 4 February 1984.

26. Jeanne Omang, "The Play of Light and Shadow Hides the Truth in El Salvador," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 16 April 1984, p. 16; also see *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 30 January 1984, p. 27.

27. *The Daily Progress*, 11 and 12 January 1984. *Newsweek*, 23 January 1984, p. 28.

28. Editorial, *The New York Times*, 15 January 1984, p. E22.

29. Bernard Gwertzman, *The New York Times*, 15 April 1984, pp. 1, 12; Tom Wicker in *The Daily Progress*, 23 April 1984, p. 16.

30. See James Reston in *The New York Times*, 20 May 1984, p. B23.

31. Fred Hiatt, "The U.S. Military Buildup Continues," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 30 April 1984, p. 16.

32. Philip Taubman in *The New York Times*, 8 April 1984, pp. 1, 12; *The Daily Progress*, 11 and 12 April 1984; Taubman in "The Week in Review," *The New York Times*, 15 April 1984, p. E1; "The Furor Over the Secret War," *Newsweek*, 23 April 1984, pp. 22-26.

33. David S. Broder, "Frank Church's Challenge," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 6 February 1984, p. 4.

34. David Shribman in *The New York Times*, 29 April 1984.

35. Barry Sussman, "As the Central America Issue Grows, So Grows Public Ignorance," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 18 June 1984, p. 37.

36. Murrey Marder in *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 17 September 1984, pp. 12-13.