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Latin America & U.S. Credibility, 1948-1984

We can't abdicate our responsibility to protect our interests to a committee of Latin American countries...The notion that if we have interests at stake, we should ask Latin Americans what do about it is wrong...they want to know what we are going to do. They want to know if we have the guts to protect our interests, and if we don't, then they are going to walk away, and that is the way it should be.

Elliot Abrams, Asst. Secretary of State,
Reagan Administration¹

Ronald Reagan's choice of Central America as the place to begin reasserting U.S. international credibility was hardly surprising. Since the earliest days of U.S. foreign policymaking, Washington has considered Latin America its exclusive sphere of influence. From Monroe to FDR to JFK, the United States always sought to maintain the region firmly in alignment. While the area's geographic proximity made it a potential base of external aggression, during the Cold War Latin America was more important to Washington for its symbolic significance than its strategic value.² To be sure, Washington's fears of communist infiltration there were driven by national security concerns. It was the global balance of power, however, rather than military fears, that U.S. officials focused on. From Washington's perspective, a dependable, unified bloc of hemispheric allies supportive of White House positions in the UN and OAS was regarded as a cornerstone of U.S. leadership of the Western coalition. Preservation of "hemispheric solidarity" was, throughout the Cold

¹Quoted in Robert A. Pastor, "Stalemate and Opportunity in Latin America," U.S. Foreign Policy in the 1990s, Greg Schermegel, ed., (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 233.

²Lars Schoultz, National Security and United States Policy Toward Latin America, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), *passim*.

War, a fundamental imperative of U.S. security policy. If the U.S. alliance system in the hemisphere unraveled—if an erstwhile Latin American ally “defected” from the Inter-American community—western unity would be weakened and the credibility of U.S. international leadership called into question.

Indeed, if the United States *could not* control the area which both superpowers instinctively considered America’s “backyard,” how could it hope to direct events elsewhere?³ As a result, any expression of political autonomy by Latin American allies was anathema to Cold War Washington. Indeed, U.S. leaders such as John Foster Dulles held the opinion that neutralism in the Cold War era was immoral: in the bi-polar world of the 1950s, any country that was not explicitly pro-U.S. was to be considered pro-Soviet. The apogee of Third World nationalism was still some decades away, yet by the 1950s, growing dissatisfaction with the economic status quo in Latin America presaged potential chinks in hemispheric solidarity.

By the time Eisenhower assumed office, Latin America was starting to look more and more like a Cold War trouble-spot. In Bolivia in 1952 Víctor Paz Estenssoro’s revolutionary MNR party had come to power with significant help from the left; 1953 saw Marxist Cheddie Jagan win 51 percent of the popular vote in British Guiana; that same year the government of Guatemala moved markedly to the left, and the small country emerged as a focal point of Cold War tensions.⁴

³Gaddis, *Know*, p. 177, footnote 143.

⁴Samuel L. Baily, *The United States and the Development of South America, 1945-1975*, (NY: New Viewpoints/Franklin Watts, 1976), pp. 70-71.

Whatever the true ideological underpinnings of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz government, the Eisenhower administration's analysis of his actions forewarned a shift to the eastern side of the global playing field.⁵ The State Department was convinced that Arbenz was under the "ascending curve of Communist influence" and drifting toward an alliance with the Soviets.⁶ The signs were all there: Guatemala declined to sign on to the grand symbol of inter-American solidarity, the Rio Pact; its Congress had observed a minute of silence to commemorate Stalin's death; Arbenz refused to send troops to the Korean War; he accelerated agrarian reforms; and—worst of all—legalized the communist party.⁷ John Foster Dulles—at the Tenth Inter-American Conference in Venezuela (March 1954) to drum up support for Eisenhower's anti-Arbenz policy—concluded that Guatemala's tilt away from a pro-U.S. stance "disclosed [a] breach within our ranks."⁸

On June 17, 1954 a CIA-supported destabilization campaign toppled Arbenz. A pro-U.S. regime took power, neutralizing the threat to hemispheric unity. Without acknowledging the CIA's pivotal role in the affair, Dulles informed the nation that "a direct challenge to the Monroe Doctrine" had been removed.⁹

⁵Richard H. Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," *Political Science Quarterly* 95, (Winter, 1980-1981), p. 633.

⁶"Notes of the Undersecretary's Meeting, June 15 1951," *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter referred to as FRUS], (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State), 1951, Vol. II, pp. 1440-1443; "Memorandum of Conversation by Robert Cutler, Special Assistant to the President, May 22, 1954," FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol. IV, p. 1123; "Telegram, the Ambassador In Guatemala to Department of State, December 17, 1953," FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol. IV, p. 1093.

⁷Martha L. Cottam, *Images and Intervention: U.S. Policies in Latin America*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), p. 40; Cole Blasier, *The Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976) p. 154.

⁸Quoted in Gordon Connell-Smith, *The United States and Latin America: An Historical Analysis of Inter-American Relations*, (London: Heinemann Books, 1974), p. 215.

⁹Dulles' address to the nation can be found in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1954 p. A2; "Dulles on 'International Communism' in Guatemala, 1954," *The Makings of America: The United States and the World*, (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), p. 361.

But the most serious Cold War challenge to U.S. credibility as regional hegemon in Latin America came five years after Arbenz's fall, in Cuba. The 1960 defection of Fidel Castro's government from the U.S. sphere of influence to the Soviet bloc was a major blow to the United States' carefully maintained image as an international power.

The Cuban revolution was indicative of a growing trend in many Third World areas toward a rejection of Western leadership. By the time it took place, the international context was not what it had been during the Guatemalan episode. In the Kremlin, Nikita Khrushchev was openly supporting Third World wars of "national liberation," the Suez Canal crisis and the French failure to eradicate communism in Indochina had shaken the West's confidence, and in Asia and the Middle East, neutralism, anti-Western radicalism, and economic nationalism were on the rise.¹⁰ Latin America was not immune to these trends, and this reality, so close to home, troubled Washington.¹¹ CIA Director Allen Dulles darkly noted that the United States was confronted by "a revolution of the have-nots, particularly in Latin America, Asia, and in Africa."¹² Worse yet: the Soviets had noticed. "Latin America," Khrushchev observed in 1960, "reminds one of an active volcano."¹³

Vice president Richard Nixon's disastrous 1958 trip to Latin America first revealed the extent to which U.S. influence had deteriorated in the region. In several countries Nixon

¹⁰Ambrose, *Globalism*, pp. 139-141; Cottam, p. 44; Macdonald, p. 36; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (London: Mayflower-Dell, 1967) p. 256, quoted in John L. S. Girling, *America and the Third World: Revolution and Intervention*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 156.

¹¹McCormick, p. 141.

¹²Quoted in Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 139.

¹³Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 145.

was met by angry protesters; in Venezuela an irate mob stoned his cavalcade and tried to pull him from his car.¹⁴ If these events didn't place a deteriorating U.S.-Latin American relationship in the international limelight, developments in Cuba did. Long before it ever occurred to the Soviets to pay attention to the Caribbean, twelve rag-tag revolutionaries managed to topple one of the United States' staunchest Latin American allies, Fulgencio Batista. The puissance of *el foco* in Cuba did not bode well for U.S. efforts to maintain the Southern Hemisphere in close alignment.

By 1961, Castro had spiraled into a satellite relationship with the USSR, and concern spread in the United States over the message that Cuba's "loss" would send to the rest of the world. Khrushchev rubbed salt in the wound when—ever appreciative of drama's role in international relations—he avowed that "Soviet artillerymen, in the event of necessity, can with their rocket firepower support the Cuban people if the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare begin intervention against Cuba."¹⁵ If that weren't bad enough, the Soviet premier also pronounced that the Monroe Doctrine was dead and should be buried "so as not to foul the air with its putrefaction."¹⁶

The failure of a CIA-organized invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 made the United States seem even more inept in the face of Castro's defiance. Despite reservations, JFK had approved the covert operation because he felt that a failure to act "would be a show of weakness."¹⁷ The overthrow of Castro had been intended to serve as a

¹⁴Connell-Smith, p. 223.

¹⁵Quoted in Connell-Smith, p. 228.

¹⁶LaFeber, *Inevitable*, p. 137; Khrushchev is quoted in Gaddis, *Know*, p. 182.

¹⁷Quoted in Ambrose, *Globalism*, p. 185.

¹⁸McCormick, p. 144.

signal of U.S. strength to enemies and erstwhile allies both. Instead, as one scholar puts it, the United States came off looking like “a global policeman without real clout on its own neighborhood beat.”¹⁸ Indeed, afterward Kennedy dourly reflected that another display of impotence like the Bay of Pigs would mean that “the world would lose confidence in the U.S. and...not regard it as a serious country.” He clarified the point: “It is an important strategic matter that the world believe the U.S. is a serious country.”¹⁹

Ironically, the Russians, too, quickly assigned immense symbolic importance to Cuba’s status. They had never dreamed of having an ally so deep in the U.S. sphere of influence, and now, according to Khrushchev’s memoirs, the question of Cuba “was constantly on my mind...one thought kept hammering away at my brain: what would happen if we lost Cuba?”²⁰ Both superpowers came to believe that their reputations were attached to the island’s fate. A failure to defend the USSR’s new ally, Khrushchev perceived,

would have been a terrible blow to Marxism-Leninism. It would gravely diminish our stature throughout the world, but especially in Latin America. If Cuba fell, other Latin American countries would reject us, claiming that for all our might the Soviet Union hadn’t been able to do anything for Cuba but make empty protests to the United Nations.²¹

The symmetry of thinking on both sides was remarkable. “We had to think of some way of confronting America with more than words,” mused the Soviet premier. “We had to establish a tangible and effective deterrent to American interference in the Caribbean. But what, exactly?”²²

¹⁹Quoted in Gaddis, *Know*, p. 145.

²⁰Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

In 1962 this contest of superpower credibility came to a boil when the U.S. government acquired intelligence that Soviet nuclear missiles had been placed in Cuba. Rather than altering the military balance of power, Kennedy was concerned that Soviet rockets on the island “would have appeared to [have] politically changed the balance of power,” and, he added, “appearances contribute to reality.”²³ As Kennedy informed the nation, the international credibility of the United States was at stake. The “secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles,” he said,

in an area well known to have a special and historical relationship to the United States and the nations of the Western Hemisphere...is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country, if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe.²⁴

Kennedy resolved the crisis with a convincing show of strength, but Cuba’s defection remained a matter of fact, irredeemably altering the dynamics of inter-American relations on a significant scale. In the same way that the “loss” of China inspired a zealous militancy among Washington policymakers in the early 1950s, the loss of Cuba engendered the enduring attitude that the defection of another Latin American state to the Soviet camp must be prevented at all costs.

The years 1959-1973 saw a series of overt and covert U.S. interventions in the region designed to stem communist infection, counter expressions of radical nationalism, and demonstrate U.S. power to Cold War allies and enemies. Multiple attempts were made to subvert Castro’s rule in Cuba. In the early 1960s, the U.S. intelligence community

²³John Fitzgerald Kennedy, “Television and Radio Interview, December 17, 1962,” PPP-CD, John F. Kennedy, 1962, Item 551, p. 898.

undermined the leftist Jagan government in British Guiana. In 1965, in turn, when chronic instability in the Dominican Republic threatened to produce “another Castro,” President Johnson ordered 23,000 U.S. troops onto the island republic. As American forces in Indochina faltered in their attempt to halt the spread of communism, a failure close to home would have global ramifications. “What can we do in Vietnam if we can’t clean up the Dominican Republic?” the president worried.²⁵ “What is important...in this hemisphere [is] that everybody knows what we don’t propose is to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded and let the Communists set up any government in the Western Hemisphere.”²⁶

Five years later, similar thinking was evident when the Nixon administration orchestrated a covert intervention against socialist Salvador Allende in Chile. Allende was regarded in Washington as a major threat to U.S. hemispheric leadership. As an internal CIA study concluded, “[a]n Allende victory [would create] considerable political and psychological costs,” including “a threat to hemispheric cohesion [and] a definite psychological advance for the Marxist idea.”²⁷ Washington’s ambassador in Chile, Edward Korry, agreed: “[i]t will have the most profound effect on Latin America and beyond,” he counseled. “[W]e will have suffered a grievous defeat.”²⁸ The fact that Allende rose to power via democratic elections was especially ominous. The anxiety that his electoral victory produced in Henry Kissinger was, according to NSC staffer Roger Morris,

²⁴John Fitzgerald Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, October 23, 1962,” PPP-CD, John F. Kennedy, 1962, Item 485, p. 572.

²⁵Quoted in Slater, p. 307.

²⁶“Remarks to the 10th National Legislative Conference, Building and Trades Department AFL-CIO, May 3, 1965,” PPP-CD, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, Item 223, p. 480.

²⁷Quoted in Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 175.

²⁸Quoted in Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 653.

particularly profound. "I don't think anybody ever fully grasped that Henry saw Allende as being far more serious a threat than Castro," he later reminisced. "If Latin America ever became unraveled, it would never happen with Castro. Allende was a living example of democratic social reform in Latin America. All kinds of cataclysmic events rolled around, but Chile scared him."²⁹ The Allende example, if it had been permitted to succeed, would have called into serious question the credibility of the U.S. system as the political model for the region.

Toward the end of the decade, the focus of U.S. concern shifted back to the Caribbean. By 1979 revolutionary insurrections were underway in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and U.S. influence in the region looked to be at an all time low. One Carter administration official cautioned that

[i]f we fail to make clear that the external encouragement of violence and instability in El Salvador will have serious costs, we ensure that other countries seeking domestic solutions to domestic problems will find their efforts thwarted by guerrilla groups advised and armed from abroad. In turn, our failure to respond adequately to externally supported attempts to overthrow governments committed to reform and to electoral solutions would cause other friendly countries to doubt our ability to help them resist assaults on their sovereignty.³⁰

Nicaragua, in particular, was a major concern. As the power of traditional U.S. ally Anastasio Somoza ebbed, the White House scrambled to intercede diplomatically in the hope that a moderate coalition might succeed him and prevent the establishment of "another Cuba." Brzezinski warned that if Carter permitted "a Castroite take-over in Nicaragua" he and the U.S. "would be considered as being incapable of dealing with problems in our

²⁹Quoted in Smith, *Talons*, p. 174.

³⁰"The Situation in El Salvador," Hearings before the U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 97th Congress, 1st Session, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1981), pp. 4-5.

backyard and impotent in the face of Cuban intervention.”³¹ Viron Vaky, Carter’s assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, was likewise convinced that Nicaragua offered the potential for a “replay” of the 1959 Cuban Revolution.³²

As previously noted, Ronald Reagan entered office determined to restore America’s international credibility. His foreign policy team planned to “return to containment in its most militant form” on a global scale, a blanket approach grounded in support for anti-communist regimes overseas, harsh rhetoric, and aggressive posturing on foreign policy issues that became known as the Reagan Doctrine.³³ For the first three years of the administration, however, these attempts to rebuild U.S. credibility lacked one crucial element: a successful demonstration of the Washington’s capability to project its power overseas. All the rhetoric in the world could not change the fact that the U.S. influence in the Middle East was at its nadir, anti-American terrorism was on the rise, the Soviets remained involved in Afghanistan, and Marxist insurrections were ascendant across the Caribbean basin. In Secretary of State Alexander Haig’s view, if the U.S. did not successfully demonstrate its ability to exert its influence overseas, America would eventually be “nibbled to death.”³⁴ Matters only worsened, however, with the disastrous 1982-1983 intervention in Lebanon that culminated in the bombing deaths of 241 marines. As the images of the

³¹Quoted in Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 148.

³²Pastor, *Repetition*, p. 79.

³³Gaddis, *Unexpected*, p. 120.

³⁴“Reagan’s Goal: Cutting Castro Down to Size,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 6, 1981, p. 20, cited in Johnson, *Dangers*, p. 173.

decimated marine barracks flashed across TV screens worldwide, White House advisers determined that it “was time to win one somewhere.”³⁵

Nearby Central America, as one scholar notes, “was the best site” to stage an American comeback: “there Washington could minimize the risk of escalation and maximize the power of the United States.”³⁶ Moreover, many Reagan supporters believed that failures in the region under Carter had contributed to the collapse of U.S. influence world-wide. Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan’s UN ambassador, had written an influential article in 1979 which declared that it was Carter’s “lack of realism” which drove allies like the Shah of Iran and Anastasio Somoza from power.³⁷ If the United States should fail to back up its Cold War commitments, she argued, “[o]ur enemies will have observed that American support provides no security against the forward march of history.”³⁸ Another Reagan adviser, Constantine Menges, insisted that “[t]he inability of the United States to prevent a political war on its doorstep would reduce the confidence of allies and others, such as Persian Gulf regimes, looking to the United States for protection.”³⁹ According to Secretary of State Haig, a strong U.S. showing in Central America would prove that “we mean what we mean and that we are going to succeed and not flounder as we did in Vietnam.”⁴⁰ “Mr. President,” he counseled Reagan, “this is one you can win.”⁴¹

³⁵Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home*, (NY: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 346-356.

³⁶Schoultz, pp. 272-273.

³⁷Quoted in Michael Schaller, *Reckoning With Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 120.

³⁸The passage from Kirkpatrick’s “Dictatorships and Double Standards” is quoted in Eldon Kenworthy, “Central America: Beyond the Credibility Trap,” *World Policy Journal*, (Fall, 1983), p. 196.

³⁹Schoultz, p. 277, citing Constantine C. Menges, “Central America and the United States,” *SAIS Review*, (Summer 1981), p. 14.

⁴⁰“Excerpts From Testimony by Haig,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1982, p. A12.

⁴¹Quoted in Kenworthy, *Central America*, p. 182.

The year 1983 was a major turning point in the Reagan administration's drive to display U.S. power overseas. In Central America, U.S. money and advisers had flowed to the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, while in Nicaragua the U.S.-backed *Contra* rebels were harassing the Sandinista government; nonetheless, no U.S. victories had materialized and the Reagan Doctrine seemed dangerously hollow, especially after Lebanon. Coming on the heels of the disaster in Beirut, the October 1983 invasion of the tiny Caribbean island-state of Grenada was the first demonstration that under Reagan, "America is back."⁴² Since 1979, Grenada had been governed by a group of nationalist, left-leaning radicals whose relationship with Cuba raised eyebrows in Washington; under Reagan, agitation at the association grew more intense. Trepidation mounted when on October 19, 1983, a dispute within Grenada's ruling junta brought a hard-line faction to power; the presence of U.S. medical students on the island could permit the development of a new hostage crisis, with troubling ramifications for U.S. credibility.⁴³ On October 25 nearly 2,000 U.S. troops initiated an armed occupation of the country to "protect American lives"

⁴²A. Payne, P. Sutton and T. Thorndike, Grenada: Revolution and Invasion, (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 80.

⁴³Robert Beck qualifies that "when considering *only* the rather pathetic way in which they were rescued, the safety of American students on Grenada would seem to have been a lesser priority," noting that at the first State Department discussion of the issue, danger to U.S. citizens was a key topic of discussion; that the initial plan for intervention was conceived of as an "evacuation;" that intelligence provided by British and U.S. diplomatic personnel focused on potential threats to U.S. citizens; and that at the first cabinet level discussion of Grenada on October 20, Lawrence Eagleburger "specifically raised the specter of the Tehran hostages. The Undersecretary of State argued that if the United States did nothing to rescue its citizens, the administration would lose face—this at the very time when toughness against the left-wing challenge in Nicaragua and El Salvador was essential." Robert Beck, The Grenada Invasion: Politics, Law, and Foreign Policy Decisionmaking, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 33; pp. 93-97; pp. 102-103; Eagleburger quoted on p. 106.

and stop the creation of “a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy.”⁴⁴

Of particular significance is the global context surrounding “Operation Urgent Fury.” Not only had President Reagan failed to “win one” overseas during his first three years in office, only *two days* before U.S. forces swarmed over Grenada, Washington had suffered one of the worst humiliations in its foreign policy history when the marine barracks in Lebanon came crumbling down.⁴⁵ Clearly, credibility concerns played a key role in the administration’s decision. As one account notes,

in several crucial respects, Grenada in 1983 was a replay of Santo Domingo in 1965, another intervention widely remembered in Washington as a success. In both invasions U.S. troops were introduced onto a Caribbean island, purportedly to protect U.S. citizens. In both, the real purpose seemed to be to prevent leftists from establishing rule and to repair U.S. “credibility”—damaged, in both cases, by a previous failed intervention.⁴⁶

Afterwards, the administration held up Urgent Fury as proof that Beirut had been the exception, not the rule: “[n]ow the world knows,” the president asserted, “that when it comes to our national security, the United States will do whatever it takes to protect the safety and

⁴⁴Ronald Reagan, “Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica Announcing the Deployment of United States Forces in Grenada,” PPP-CD, Ronald Reagan, 1983, pp. 1505-1506.

⁴⁵United States-Grenada relations were tense throughout Reagan’s first two years as president and had reached nadir by 1983. Contingency planning for a possible invasion of Grenada was underway prior to the Beirut bombing; on October 20, for instance, the cabinet-level Special Situations Group chaired by Vice President Bush recommended to the president that naval vessels en route to Lebanon and other areas be redirected toward Grenada. However, in the wake of the bombing, top-level planning meetings focused on just two items: Grenada and Lebanon. Discussions regarding these hotspots occurred nearly simultaneously. Indeed, Reagan determined that the decision to invade, taken tentatively on October 22, was even more correct following Beirut. “We shouldn’t let the act of a couple of terrorists dissuade us from going ahead,” he said. Indeed, in an interview with Robert Beck, Lawrence Eagleburger later explained that the tragedy in Beirut amplified the necessity to “demonstrate American resolve.” Beck, p. 107; pp. 146-156; Reagan quoted on p. 148. Eagleburger quoted on p. 225.

⁴⁶Eldon Kenworthy, “Grenada as Theater,” *World Policy Journal*, (Spring 1984), p. 635.

freedom of the American people.”⁴⁷ He added that “we weren’t about to wait for the Iran crisis to repeat itself...in our own neighborhood—the Caribbean.”⁴⁸ America’s “days of weakness are over,” Reagan concluded. “Our military forces are back on their feet and standing tall.”⁴⁹

Following the success of Urgent Fury, Reagan charged Henry Kissinger to head a bipartisan Commission to review the situation in Central America. The understanding that U.S. action in that area held crucial implications for its relationship with the world at large was explicit: “A lot will depend on how Central America comes out,” Kissinger wrote in 1983. “If we cannot manage Central America, it will be impossible to convince threatened nations in the Persian Gulf and in other places that we know how to manage the global equilibrium.”⁵⁰ A year later the Commission concurred for the record, stating that “[b]eyond the issue of U.S. security interests in the Central American-Caribbean region, our credibility world wide is engaged. 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.”⁵¹

Ultimately, the Reagan administration’s aggressive policies in Central America and the Caribbean were guided by the familiar logic that the outcome of the struggle against communism in the region would play a decisive role in the Cold War. “Soviet diplomacy is based on tests of will,” argued Haig. “Like the assiduous students of tactics and Western

⁴⁷Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to Congressional Medal of Honor Society, December 12 1983,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* [hereafter referred to as WCPD], (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration), p. 1682.

⁴⁸Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to Military in Cherry Point, NC, November 4, 1983,” WCPD, p. 1522.

⁴⁹Quoted in Eldon Kenworthy, “Grenada as Theater,” *World Policy Journal*, (Spring 1984), p. 635.

⁵⁰Schultz, p. 276, citing Henry Kissinger, *Public Opinion* 6, (April-May 1983), p. 54.

vulnerabilities that they are, the Russians would send out a probe—now in Angola, again in Ethiopia, finally in El Salvador—to test the strength of Western determination.”⁵² As Reagan told Congress in 1983,

[i]f Central America were to fall, what would the consequences be for our position in Asia, Europe, and for alliances such as NATO? If the United States cannot respond to a threat near our own borders, why should Europeans or Asians believe that we are seriously concerned about threats to them? If the Soviets can assume that nothing short of an actual attack on the United States will provoke an American response, which ally, which friend will trust us then?...The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble and the safety of our homeland would be put at jeopardy.⁵³

The credible assertion of American power in Latin America had become a crusade for Reagan. “Communist subversion is not an irreversible tide,” he argued. “We have seen it rolled back...in Grenada...All it takes is the will and the resources to get the job done.”⁵⁴

As Reagan was preparing to leave office, however, it was not at all clear whether he had succeeded in his crusade to restore U.S. credibility. Ultimately, his greatest frustrations had come not in the jungles of Central America, but at home. Demonstrations of U.S. resolve, he learned, required more than a determined White House—they also needed Congressional and public support. Reagan may have made progress in persuading the nation’s enemies and allies that the U.S. had overcome its “Vietnam Syndrome.”

Domestically, however, doubt and resistance had seriously hamstrung his ability to prove it.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 276, citing U.S. National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, (Kissinger Commission), “Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs), p. 93.

⁵²Haig, p. 95.

⁵³“President Reagan’s Address on Central America to Joint Session of Congress,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1983, p. A12.

⁵⁴“Reagan’s Television Address to the Nation,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 1984, p. A16.