

Equal Rights

To The Earth's Resources

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE STRUGGLE FOR NATURAL RIGHTS

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THE GLOBAL "CONCERN" OVER HUMAN RIGHTS

Edward J. Dodson

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James L. Busey

SOVIET EXPANSION: FACT OR FICTION

Donald Hurford

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS "SPECIAL ISSUE" OF EQUAL RIGHTS ARE JAMES L. BUSEY, PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO; DONALD HURFORD, ED.D., ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF CONTINUING EDUCATION, LINCOLN UNIVERSITY; AND EDWARD J. DODSON, CO-EDITOR, EQUAL RIGHTS...

By now, many people have probably forgotten that last January, a National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, headed by Henry Kissinger, made its report to the President. Then in early February, President Reagan sent a bill to Congress which would appropriate \$8.4 billion to implement the recommendations of the Commission.

The concern of the administration was that unless drastic action were taken to stabilize socio-economic conditions in Central America, it would become a Marxist base for Soviet advance in northern Latin America beside which the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 would seem like harmless child play.

Amidst a myriad of projects proposed by the report and legislative bill, strong emphasis was placed on the objectives of strengthening human rights and democratic institutions in Central America. The devices would include correction of economic instability, economic and social inequity, and inadequate political systems, to be achieved by numerous specific proposals for stabilization of trade and production, creation of an improved economic infrastructure, betterment of health, nutrition, family planning and shelter; as well as aid to refugees, promotion of general education, and specific training in public

administration, the democratic process, and management of elections. There were many other proposals, far too numerous to describe here.

Members of the Commission worked very hard on their report. They said some sensible things about our legitimate strategic concerns lest the region descend into the Soviet-controlled abyss, as well as about the illiteracy and general misery that might easily deliver these republics into the arms of the Cuban-Soviet sphere.

However, though the Kissinger report and the legislation do mention "access to land" as one among almost innumerable other objectives, the subject is almost buried in a sea of verbosity about other matters.

In Central America, as in most of Latin America, land monopoly is absolutely notorious as a central cause of popular misery. Until recently in El Salvador, and to a lesser extent to this day, there was much truth in the popular conception that "eighteen families" owned the country. The rest of the population of four and a half million people could either come to terms with one of those families, or survive by begging, brigandage or emigration.

In Nicaragua from 1933 to 1979, the Somoza family ran the government and came to own at least a fourth of the

cultivable land, to dominate a very large portion of the commercial, banking and industrial institutions of the country, to monopolize the only national airline and steamship companies, and of course to become enormously rich and powerful.

Illiteracy, ancient prejudices, economic suffering and practices arising from colonial tradition all contribute to the Central American scorn for human or civil rights; but the central factor which has historically prevented evolution from thralldom has been land monopoly.

Costa Rica is a partial exception to these generalizations. Her per capita income, \$2,200 per year, is low by our standards, but more than double that of the rest of the region. Schools are everywhere and 90 per cent of her people are reported to be literate, which compares with norms of 50 per cent or less in most of the rest of Central America. From the beginning in 1838, her political system has with but few exceptions been led by civilians, and characterized by moderation and egalitarianism. Her government has been largely constitutional, democratic and stable since 1889, and entirely so since 1949, when a new constitution even abolished her army!

For various historical reasons, but

largely because the Indians of the area were too ferocious to be enslaved, early settlers on the central plateau had to do their own work, and the land became better distributed than elsewhere in Central America. Agriculture is still the most important economic activity, and in the lush subtropical highlands a farm of five hectares (eleven acres) is the minimum needed for basic support of a family. Over 40,000 farms contain from five to five hundred hectares (1,100 acres) each, constitute 51.6 per cent of the total number of farms, and occupy 62 per cent of the cultivated area of the country.

At the other end of the scale, farms of over 2,500 hectares (5,500 acres) occupy only 15 per cent of the agricultural area. This is in sharp contrast to the norm in most countries of Latin America. According to studies by the United Nations and others, it is common in most of the region for half or more of the agrarian area to be occupied by a few huge properties averaging over 15,000 acres each.

Most of the Costa Rican small to medium-sized farms are family-owned affairs. From the statistics, we can assume an average of six persons per family, so that something like 240,000 people are dependent on family-operated land. Those 240,000 persons constitute

about one-third of the some 700,000 to 800,000 Costa Ricans who are dependent upon agriculture for their livelihoods.

This says nothing about some 36,000 small plots of less than 11 acres each, which provide partial sustenance for some 216,000 additional persons (35,000 x 6) who are also dependent on other sources of income.

Similar patterns of ownership may be found in other sectors of the economy, where over a fifth of the population are patrones (owners or bosses) or working for themselves. Over half of Costa Ricans own their own homes. For Latin America, this is a phenomenon. At its base lies a distribution of land ownership unknown in most of the rest of Latin America.

It is quite likely that taxation of both rural and urban land values in lieu of taxes on production would greatly improve Costa Rican access to land; but the present situation guarantees that at least a large minority of the population is influential in socio-economic and political affairs, that civic and human rights cannot be suppressed with impunity, and that nothing like "eighteen families" control the republic.

There has to be a causal connection between this unusual pattern of land distribution and the exceptional

features of the Costa Rican socio-political system. Historically, these unusual economic characteristics, as well as the notable political features of the country, have long been a source of lively comment and debate.

It is astonishing that the Kissinger Commission did not take special note of the Costa Rican phenomenon. Had it done so, it could have pointed to measures of land reform that could conceivably turn Central America away from its unfortunate but understandable revolutionary march into the Soviet trap.

As it is, the administration wants to throw money at Central America to alleviate distress, but offers very little to eliminate the root causes of that distress. In the unlikely event that the whole set of Commission recommendations are approved by the Congress, they may prove helpful for the improvement of education, human rights, and provision of more income for some Central American people. Like the Alliance for Progress which they much resemble, such measures may give some fleeting relief from certain problems. Also, they are likely to enrich corrupt political elements; and by increasing land values, may serve to further line the pockets of land monopolists.

Indeed, one may be forgiven some

skepticism about this whole business. The administration said it hoped to pass its bill through the House by mid-March, and get it through the Senata by early May. A sense of political realism about the self-serving factionalism of much of the Congress raises questions about the sincerity of those who predicted such an outcome.

Skepticism deepens when one reflects that though two Commission members have Hispanic names, and though one or two members have had some contact with Latin America, not one of the twelve is a specialist with known expertise on the region.

Then there is the matter of the land. Even a body of investigators so ill prepared for its mission must have known that in most of Central America, especially in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the monopoly of the earth has been absolutely central to almost all the problems cited by the Commission.

Finally, there is the inattention to lessons one might draw from Costa Rica. Thus, one can at least wonder whether the whole Kissinger effort and the corresponding proposed legislation were not designed more as a propaganda ploy during an election year than as serious attempts to solve the problems of Central America.

Whether or not there is justification

for such skepticism, it seems unlikely that anything much will occur in the near future to turn Central America around. To expect more would be to misunderstand the terrible history of the region, the basic causes of its distress, and the political pitfalls that confront serious solution of social problems anywhere.

JAMES L. BUSEY
