

GUEST EDITORIAL

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THE KISSINGER REPORT AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The social problems of Central America can be traced back to three centuries of semi-feudal Spanish colonial control, when systems of monopoly of the earth by a few favorites of the realm dominated everything. Though the actors have changed, the same types of feudal remnants still control most of the area.

In El Salvador, prior to the recent land reform which has affected some 15 percent of the usable land of the country, there was much truth to the popular claim that 18 families owned the republic. The rest of the population of some 4.5 million could either come to terms with one of those families, or survive by begging, brigandage or emigration. The current land reform is much too little and far too late.

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

So, Marxist revolutionaries have taken power in Nicaragua and threaten to do so in El Salvador; and the Kissinger Commission urges that within the next five years, the U.S. spend \$8 billion to help feed, clothe, educate, employ and provide for the health of the impoverished people of Central America. The Commission recommends that there be a sort of Marshall Plan to alleviate distress, but offers no program to eliminate the causes of that distress.

Costa Rica is a partial exception to the Central American pattern of unrelieved misery. Her per capita income, \$2,200 per year, is low by our standards but more than double that of the rest of the region. Ninety percent of her people are reported to be literate, which compares with norms of 50 percent in the remainder of Central America. Her political system has been largely constitutional, democratic and stable since 1889, and entirely so since 1949.

For various historical reasons, the land of Costa Rica's central plateau is better distributed than elsewhere in Central America.

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Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, and in the lush subtropical highlands a farm of five hectares (eleven acres) is the minimum needed for the basic support of a family. Over 40,000 farms contain from five to 500 hectares each, constitute 51.6 percent of the total number of farms, and occupy 62 percent of the cultivated area of the country. Most of these are family-operated enterprises.

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.

It is unfortunate that the Kissinger Commission did not examine Costa Rica in greater depth. Had it done so, it could have pointed to measures that would have more enduring effects than to simply throw lots of money at Central America. In fact, the Commission could have started a social revolution to end all revolutions, Marxist or otherwise.

-- Dr. James L. Busey