

Central America's strategic triggers

by Gretchen Small

If Mexico has suddenly been declared a "battlefield" between the Soviets and the "West," Central America is already considered a full-scale war theater.

One recent press commentary on Central America in fact called that area a "curtain-raiser" for a new world war. "There are growing parallels between the current conflicts in Central America and the Spanish Civil War of the mid-1930s," asserted an article appearing in the Sept. 1 issue of *Business Week*. "Just as the Axis powers and the Soviets tried out weaponry and propaganda in Spain," the article continued, "today various international powers are experimenting with the latest in infiltration, propaganda, and guerrilla warfare in microcosm in the isthmus."

"Well-meaning Western diplomats" are as oblivious now to the activities of communists in Central America as they were to the "long arm of Stalin 40 years ago in Spain," author Sol Saunders added.

In London's *Daily Telegraph* Aug. 24, Robert Conquest, a frequent *Telegraph* commentator, argued that the old ideas of "national independence and sovereignty" must be put aside today just as they were "in the last war," citing the occupation of Iceland and the overthrow of the Rashid Ali regime in Iraq as exemplary. "One can envisage extreme circumstances in which the interests of our country, of the West . . . might strongly suggest direct intervention without adequate political preparation," as in the case of a Soviet or Cuba-allied takeover.

Conquest counseled, perhaps a joint military force, "with British participation, might be established by treaty" among various states in the Caribbean.

On Aug. 9, a potential new front was opened. Belize, formerly British Honduras, has been slated for independence for decades. But on Aug. 9, British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington announced in Mexico City that Belize would be independent by early next year—if all goes as planned.

Independence for Belize had always been snagged before because of Guatemala's historic claims that Belize is a part of Guatemala. No discussion of the issue has taken place since the last round of negotiations collapsed in fall 1978. British troops have remained in Belize to prevent Guatemala's threat to militarily take over. Belize and Guatemala together make up the southern border of Mexico, and any Guatemalan military incursion into Belize would immediately involve Mexico in the conflict.

Mexico has maintained its own historical counterclaims on part of Belize as a check on Guatemalan pretensions.

Guatemala has traditionally claimed that the entirety of Belize was a part of its territory, a claim even included in the country's constitution. In recent years, however, the Guatemalan military and its political allies began charging that Belize would serve as a training ground for Cuban-sponsored guerrillas from across the region. *El Imparcial*, a leading Guatemalan daily, went so far as to recently editorialize that the July visit to Cuba of Mexican President López Portillo represented an intervention into Guatemala's "internal affairs," because both Mexico and Cuba support Belize's right to independence.

According to some sources, the Guatemalan government has come close to agreeing to a settlement of the issue: taking a strip of "swampy land" and a corridor to the Caribbean coast, as a replacement for all of Belize—particularly if Britain throws in economic aid as a sweetener. But it is not at all clear the Belizean government would agree to turn over even a small piece of territory, and even less clear that sections of the Guatemalan military would go along with *any* partial concessions. ■

'Incoherent policy'

Former U.S. ambassador to Mexico Patrick Lucey, now the running mate of independent presidential candidate John Anderson, has started to tell stories about his 1977-79 stint in Mexico—what it was like being an ambassador during an administration that is universally acclaimed to have achieved the worst possible relations with its southern neighbor Mexico in a mere four years. In the editorial pages of the *Washington Post* on Aug. 26, columnist Mary McGrory provided the following insight into what Lucey has since told his friends about that period:

"His tenure in Mexico was an education in the incoherence of the Carter presidency. His cables and recommendations were ignored. The reports of the CIA station chief had greater weight. The White House sent hare-brained initiatives and super-envoys to work behind his back."

"He felt that the U.S. could have worked out a highly satisfactory deal on urgently needed Mexican oil through careful and conventional diplomatic approaches, instead of the systematic insults of then-secretary of energy, James R. Schlesinger."