Joseph Kraft

A Democratic Role . . .

What vital interest justifies a major American military effort in Central America?

Certainly not human rights or economic development—two themes that merely muddy the waters. A Soviet military presence, however, poses a genuine threat. But desatellization down south can be negotiated, and that is where the diplomatic effort should concentrate, and what the Democrats should require as a condition for support of President Reagan.

Human rights, to be sure, get raped every day in most of Central America. The Sandinista regime in Nicaragua is gradually strangling all opposition in the tried-and-true Leninist fashion. Right-wing elements in the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala subject parts of the civilian population to brutal repression as a matter of course.

But the United States lived easily in the past with gangster governments running Central America. This country's capacity to improve political conditions in banana republics is limited in the best of circumstances. During a civil war, democratization is spitting against the wind.

Economic development is equally beside the point. Western Europe retained, after being prostrated during World War II, abundant skills and resources, and a potential for political cohesion. So the Marshall Plan worked.

But Central America lacks skills, resources and political stability. Economic improvement can only come as a part of a genuine world recovery—particularly of commodity prices. Even that is threatened if American politics becomes the plaything of partisan controversy over Central America. Witness the great difficulty, in the present climate, of pushing through Congress the crucial measure authorizing additional resources for the International Monetary Fund.

A Soviet presence in Central America, of course, is something else again. It would tilt the balance of world power in ways readily comprehensible to most Americans. To avert, or if necessary erase, such a development, the country would be ready to support the use of force—even the intervention of American troops in a big way.

But cheaper and better means exist—at least for now. Using the threat of force to instill a measure of caution among Soviet sympathizers in Cuba and Nicaragua is one. In that respect, sending an armada to the area and dispatching troops on maneuvers make a certain amount of sense.

Still, it is hard to believe mere huffing and puffing will cause disciplined revolutionaries to give up. Especially since they know full well that the Reagan administration quailed before a confrontation with Havana when Secretary of State Alexander Haig pushed for it back in 1981. Now they have seen the president, at his news conference Tuesday night, cave in again under pressure from the press and Congress.

Negotiations offer another way to build barriers against the Soviet presence in Central America. The so-called Contadora group—Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama—has proposed a formal accord whereby all countries in the region forswear resort to foreign military assistance. The government of Nicaragua has given a positive response to that proposal.

A good-faith diplomatic effort along those lines would be well received in this country, especially since the president just before his news conference felt finally obliged to align the administration with the Contadora approach.

The Democrats, in particular, have a strong interest in rallying around Contadora. They have abundant reason to suspect the administration does not know what it is doing in Central America. Every day brings new evidence of supposedly clandestine operations seeing the full light of day, and of military plans so alarming to the professionals that American officers of all ranks come running to blow the whistle. Hence the observation by Speaker Tip O'Neill—unusually sharp in a foreign policy matter—that the military buildup was "absolutely awful."

At the same time, the Democrats cannot afford to take a purely negative stance. For one thing, they would be giving a blank check to subversives working all over Latin America. Moreover, they would deliver themselves bound and helpless to the divisive forces set in motion within the party by the Reagan administration.

A flat no would draw down thunder from the ideological Democrats, led by U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, who likes to beat the drum for Ronald Reagan on the theme of human rights. It would drive off the Florida Democrats, including Ambassador Richard Stone, who have to serve as tribunes for the Cuban refugees. It would embarrass many southern Democrats—including former party chairman Robert Strauss, now of the Kissinger commission on Central America—who like to be seen standing tall on defense.

Making support for the president conditional on diplomatic negotiations, on the other hand, fosters Democratic unity. It aligns Democrats with a position that commands majority support in the country and in the party. It puts the onus of performance on the back of the administration. It puts Democrats on high ground for dealing with a president whom no serious follower of events can take on trust.

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Cornish F. Hitchcock

Let's Really Deregulate Trucking

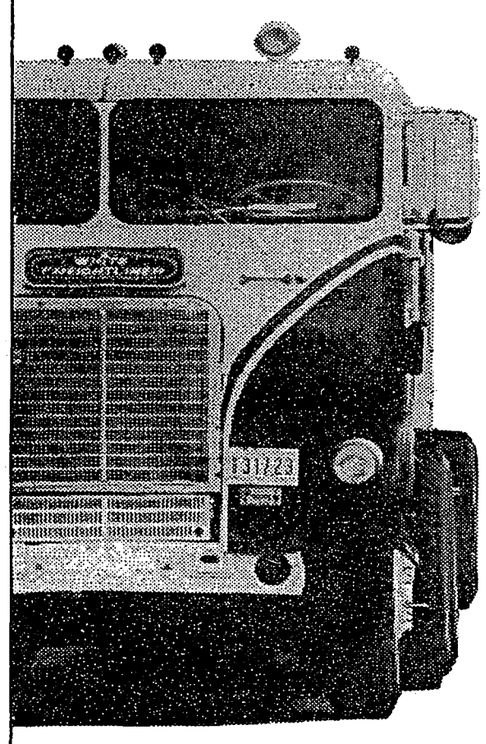
True or false: Congress deregulated the trucking industry in 1980.

Answer: False.

Unlike airline deregulation, where Congress simply abolished federal reuglation of air fares and routes, the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 focused on liberalizing the ground rules under which the Interstate Commerce Commission regulates how truckers set their rates and enter new markets.

While that act has brought about significant new competition and public benefits, the ICC still wields a lot of clout, and the industry is still far from being "degregulated." Consider:

• Despite the 1980 act, a number of bizarre regulations are still on the books. A



trucker, for example, still needs an ICC license to haul butter, but not buttermilk; frozen beef dinners, but not frozen chicken dinners; chocolate-coated raisins, but not honey-covered raisins; and racehorses, but not horses used for recreational riding.

• Since 1948, truckers have enjoyed a special immunity from the antitrust laws that lets them sit down with their competitors and vote on what rates to charge their customers. Such blatant price-fixing would be a felony for other U.S. industries, and it raises prices paid by shippers and consumers.

The 1980 act forbids truckers from collective price-fixing along specific routes, starting July 1, 1984, but truckers will still be able to vote on across-the-board rate increases.

• Entering new markets can still be a problem for new firms and small truckers. President Reagan's ICC chairman, Reese H. Taylor Jr., is perceived as favoring a more restrictive approach to entry than the Carter ICC. As a result, some truckers are hedging against ICC denial of broad entry requests by seeking narrower licenses.

How narrow is narrow? Well, one company has applied to haul one commodity—coal cinders—between two points—Charles County, Md., and Fredericksburg, Va., while another firm wants permission to haul only fertilizer between Woodward County, Okla., and Chase County, Neb.

All applications must be supported by affidavits showing public support for the new service, and ICC staff must pore over this paper work, along with any protests filed by established carriers, and prepare a decision that will stand up in court if a disgruntled competitor decides to sue. The net effect of this licensing system is to deny—or at least delay—new service to the public and to run up the bill for lawyers' fees.

In short, the 1980 act made important reforms, but there is still a way to go. Do we really need a federal agency fretting about who should haul coal cinders or frozen beef dinners? And why should truckers have any immunity from the antitrust laws when they set their rates?

The trucking industry was in its infancy when it was first regulated in 1935, but times have changed, and the only types of regulations now needed to protect the public are federal safety and insurance standards and some consumer protection rules when people ship their household goods. Beyond that, ICC regulation of the industry should end.

Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Dole announced plans to introduce such a "Phase II" deregulation bill in May, but top White House officials have reportedly put a hold on the proposal for fear of offending the Teamsters' Union, President Reagan's major labor supporter in 1980. The new Teamsters president, Jackie Presser, made opposition to truck deregulation bill his first priority after taking office this spring, and White House aides are apparently concerned that a truck deregulation bill could torpedo Teamster support for Reagan's reelection bid.

It is not unusual for the beneficiaries of special-interest regulation to oppose reform. What is surprising is the adminstration's sudden skittishness on this issue, considering its desire to deregulate just about everything else in sight.

Only the Teamsters and some elements of the trucking industry support continued regulation. By contrast, a broad coalition of business groups, farm groups, consumer organizations and some trucking concerns lobbied for the 1980 act and favor total deregulation, as proposed by Dole.

A truck deregulation bill would further some important national policies, such as increasing competition, thus restraining inflationary pressures, as well as boosting truckers' productivity and conserving oil.

Will the president's advisers "let Reagan be Reagan" and support the Dole bill? Or will they scuttle this proposal in return for a Teamster endorsement? The answer to those questions will show whether the president is genuinely committed to rooting out wasteful, special-interest regulation or supports deregulation only when it is convenient—and not when the rules favor the powerful few at the expense of the many.

The writer is a director of the Transportation Consumer Action Project, a consumer group.

George F. Will

Taft's Torch

Postwar politics has been enriched by two careers which fell short of winning the final prize. One was Hubert Humphrey's. The other was Robert A. Taft's. Both men died of cancer soon after their last quest for the presidency. Taft died 30 years ago this week. It is arguable that if Taft had never run, Ronald Reagan would never have won.

When Taft died on July 31, 1953, his body was placed in the Capitol rotunda, where his father's body had rested 23 years earlier. The father (president and chief justice) had embodied the Republican Party in 1912. The son helped keep conservatism intellectually reputable during its wilderness years, 1932-1952. And he advanced the process of getting conservatives to come to terms with the modern state.

Taft won his Senate seat in 1938, the year FDR's court-packing plan was an issue, the year Congress acquired a moderately conservative majority (Republicans and southern Democrats). That majority lasted until the 1964 landslide, when the Republican right at last got the nominee of its choice.

Although Taft was nearly 50 when drawn into national politics, and although he was drawn by disapproval of the New Deal, he helped conservatism outgrow the recriminatory tone of voice it acquired when defining itself in reaction against Roosevelt. He could be mistaken (as in opposing TVA), but was selective in opposing governmental activism. He favored the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, subsidized loans for farmers and homeowners and accelerated public works spending.

In three areas—education, health and housing—Taft was, some conservatives thought, unsound, because he favored federal programs. The programs were modest by today's standards, but his principle was, for his party, momentous. It was that the severe individualism of pure laissez-faire is an insupportable public philosophy because it is contrary to humane instincts and prevents the national government from dealing with matters important to the national welfare.

A negative tone has served Republicans (and Democrats) well when out of office. In 1946 the Republican slogan "Had Enough?" helped produce gains of 56 House and 13 Senate seats. Twenty years later, a Republican rookie won California's governorship using the slogan in Spanish—"Ya Basta!" (literally, "Enough already"). But Taft was a bridging figure, reaching out from negativism to a conservatism compatible with the government Roosevelt built.

In "Profiles in Courage," John F. Kennedy recalled the bitter criticism Taft received for opposing the Nuremberg trials. Taft thought the trials imposed ex post facto laws, punishing crimes not defined at the time they were committed. He was right that the trials used judicial forms for political ends, and were acts of vengeance. His complaint was brave, but too coldly lawyer-like. He was blind to the need to civilize vengeance and build a record of the crimes that called for vengeance.

Like Humphrey, Taft suffered from some of life's close calls. Had he been nominated either in 1948 or 1952, he might well have won. But what made him admirable—a willingness to lean into the wind—limited his appeal. And just as Humphrey at times seemed to be a caricature of liberalism—too bubbly to be serious—Taft sometimes seemed to be a cartoon of conservatism, earnest to a fault and an enemy of fun. No one was less suited than Taft to run against Dwight Eisenhower's smile.

It is now clear that Eisenhower was underestimated as a politician and president. But as a party leader he was at best indifferent. After the 1958 elections there were fewer Republican senators and congressmen than after the 1948 elections. Taft knew something Ike did not know or at least care about: party vigor depends on a sense of distinctive purpose, and hence on some clear doctrine. In that sense, Taft's torch has come through many hands to Reagan's hands.

In 1957 the Senate (acting, perhaps, on the dubious principle that is is as important as baseball) elected five former members to a "hall of fame"; Calhoun, Webster, Clay, La Follette and Taft. As Joseph Alsop wrote when Taft died, not since the era of Clay and Webster had politics been so influenced by someone who did not have the White House at his disposal.

Among Washington monuments, the memorial to Taft—a carillon on the slope of Capitol Hill—is modest. But his other monument is at the top of the Hill. It is a Republican Party more adapted to the age than it would have been if he had never left Cincinnati.

Philip Geyelin

. . . In a GOP Fiasco

Just in case you slept through it, the Reagan administration had a bipartisan policy for Central America the other day. It was beautiful: Henry Kissinger himself would guide a "blue ribbon" commission's search for a national consensus on how to handle communist encroachment in our hemisphere. And then, like a shooting star, it was gone.

The Kissinger commission will live on. But the bright flash of bipartisanship lasted only as long as it took Sen. Jesse Helms to write a confidential memo to his colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, demanding urgent hearings.

Helms' witness list, in its entirety: Henry Kissinger; Seymour Hersh, author of a 640-page indictment of Kissinger's public service; and a professor Henry Paolucci, whose much slimmerr "Kissinger's War" makes Hersh look evenhanded.

"Jesse has a great sense of humor," said a Senate committee aide, who was not laughing. Helms is chairman of the Senate's Latin America subcommittee. He is also an ideological kissing cousin to a conservative coalition that is organizing its own watchdog commission to yap at Kissinger's. The membership constitutes a fair sample of Reagan's hard-core constituency.

If arousing the wrath of your own true believers is a dumb way to set out in search of consensus, even dumber is the way the administration went about building bridges to the opposition party (which is what bipartisanship means, if it means anything).

The Reagan way was instantly to make it known that his mind had already been made up and his means and methods selected, before he reached out to touch everyone. Accommodation with Nicaragua's Marxist junta is out. Gunboat diplomacy, with perhaps even a naval "quarantine," is in. So is a fight to the finish in El Salvador and an expanded military presence in the region.

The official leaks were torrential in their details. Five months of Central American war games on land and sea are only part of a "newly devised, long-range Reagan administration plan . . . hammered out during the last four weeks in inter-agency discussion," said an account in The Washington Post; military and economic aid in Central America would be increased by $400 million.

The president denied such firm plans; he would take away the White House passes of the leakers if he could find them. Apparently he couldn't find the "senior national security official" who turned up the next day in The New York Times hailing a "program for significant and long-lasting increases" in the U. S. military presence in Central America. More leaks told of plans for vast expansion of covert activities and even a license for U.S. military advisers to go on combat missions with the Salvadoran army.

If this is a bluff, it's a dangerous game. The gang that fought its way into power in Managua and then muscled out its moderate element will not be easily bluffed, and still less will its Soviet/Cuban patrons if their investment is anywhere near as large and their commitment anywhere near as absolute as the administration would have us believe.

If it's not a bluff, it's both dangerous and duplicitous. Sen. Robert Byrd, whose position as minority leader makes him someone you would want with you in any serious bipartisan effort, was not the only Democrat to sense "a smoke screen for the administration to get its way."

People with a post-Vietnam mindset would suspect duplicity. Generosity argues that some allowance be made for blinkered zeal and ignorance. When administration officials hold up the Marshall Plan as their model, they are either kidding us or themselves. The Marshall Plan was not a hard-and-fast proposal, but an invitation to the Europeans to take the initiative for their own salvation. Its "commissions," headed by men like Henry Stimson, Averell Harriman and Christian Herter, were charged with rallying support by talking to—and hearing—all sides.

Contrast that with an administration that spots Congress in the act of setting up a bipartisan commission, sends high-level scouts to Capitol Hill to find out what's going on, then co-opts the idea with a commission of its own—while rushing to put into practice its own policy. At some point, if the effect is what counts, it ceases to matter how much of this you credit to bad faith, and how much to incompetence.

Hobart Rowen

Uncle Scrooge

While the Reagan administration may ultimately squander billions in seeking an elusive military solution in Central America, it is trying to save chicken feed by paring back subsidized loans to Africa, Asia and other poverty-stricken areas around the globe.

When writing out checks for the military, Uncle Sam willingly plays the role of Santa Claus. When it comes to showing compassion for the less fortunate—even when our own self-interest is tied up in their welfare—we turn into Uncle Scrooge.

The latest evidence of this penny-wise pound-foolishness is a rigid ceiling of $750 million a year that the Reagan administration is placing on its commitments to IDA, the soft-loan affiliate of the World Bank. Because more attention has been focused on the debate over an extra $8.4 billion for the IMF, the shortchanging of IDA (although just as important to Third World survival) has been obscured.

IDA, which stands for the International Development Association, makes long-term, no-interest loans with just a small service fee to the money pool, three-fourths of which is contributed by other rich nations, is the main source of subsidized official aid to these countries.

Now the Reagan administration wants to cut 25 to 30 percent from the $1.1 billion annual level the Carter administration agreed to for the last IDA program. And under the burden-sharing agreement with other donors—roughly 25 percent for the United States, 75 percent for all others—every $1 slashed by the United States means a $4 total reduction in the lending pool.

World Bank President Tom Clausen correctly says that to ignore the massive economic problems of the Third World by cutting IDA funds is to invite global political instability. "Almost every flashpoint of East-West confrontation in the last 20 years has been in the Third World," Clausen argues.

Yet, in Tokyo last week for a meeting of IDA donor nations, such instability and confrontation are exactly what Treasury Assistant Secretary Marc Leland risked, pleading that Congress would never appropriate more than $750 million a year for IDA.

This ceiling would effectively limit the total IDA program beginning in mid-1984 to $3 billion a year, or $9 billion for a three-year term. Leland's arrogant take-it-or-leave-it attitude (he didn't even stay for the full meeting) was bitterly resented by the others, who had come prepared for a real negotiation.

Leland's message was that the Reagan administration's mind was made up: if the other donors wanted to put in more than their usual shares, that was up to them. But that, of course, would undercut the concept of fair burden-sharing, which underlies all multilateral lending programs.

Snapped the French delegate—who noted that France's economic problems were at least as bad as the United States': "This is a disastrous message for developing countries."

The U.S. contribution to the current three-year IDA program (known as IDA-6) was originally budgeted at $3.124 billion, or 27 percent of a $12 billion total. But so far, Congress is short $1.1 billion on its $3.124 billion promise.

In Tokyo, the World Bank proposed $16 billion for a three-year IDA-7 program, barely enough, considering inflation over the past three years and the need to help a new client, China, with its more than 1 billion people.

As against the rigid $9 billion proposal by the United States, all of the other donors said they were willing to discuss a replenishment ranging from $12 billion to $16 billion over three years—assuming that the United States carried its proper load.

In the real world, the Reagan administration can force the total down to $9 billion if it adamantly clings to its $750 million annual ceiling. Congress may not approve such a low figure for five years, as Leland suggested the administration would like. But historically, Congress doesn't top an administration's money recommendations.

The result would be to create extreme hardship in Bangladesh and sub-Saharan Africa. It would slow down the ability of India and China to attack poverty. All over the Third World, it would harden and confirm existing harsh views about the United States.

But Democrats in Congress think that the Reagan crowd is prejudging the issue. What Congress may understand better than the troglodytes in the Reagan administration is that larger appropriations for IDA are in the self-interest of the United States.

In 1981, nearly 40 percent of U.S. exports went to developing countries. Since then, sales to the Third World countries have been shrinking. Thus, cutbacks in aid affect our own economic well-being, in addition to ensuring a continuation of human misery that could be alleviated.

Why is that so hard for the Reagan administration to understand?

James J. Kilpatrick

Political Dead-Enders

The National Women's Political Caucus that met recently in San Antonio, Texas, was "national" in name only, and unless I am badly mistaken, the importance of this "caucus" has been vastly overblown. President Reagan has reason to be concerned about the women's vote, but this is not the women's vote he needs to be concerned about.

Except for a few token Republicans— and these were very token indeed—the women who met at San Antonio were mostly Democrats on the far left fringe of their party. They were no more representative of the women of this nation than a convention of flat earth fundamentalists would be representative of American Christians. They are interesting curiosities, but after hearing them half a dozen times on tax-paid abortions and lesbian rights, we tend to move along. Sic transit Gloria Steinem.

I venture this proposition: extremism attracts followers only for the short run; over the long haul, extremism will always repel. That proposition is as old as the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, in which George Mason called for a firm adherence to certain fundamental principles of public life. Among these were "moderation" and "temperance."

We ought to learn from recent political history. The Prohibition movement that culminated in the 18th Amendment was an extremist movement. It called itself the "temperance" movement, but this was a sham. Its goal was to prohibit absolutely the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors. For awhile, that prospect seemed attractive: the resolution of amendment handily cleared the House and Senate in December 1917; within 13 months 45 of the 48 states had ratified. Then reaction set in. Prohibition lost its supposed charms, and in 1933 the amendment was repealed.

Strom Thurmond, running for president in 1948, was perceived as an extremist; he carried four states. Barry Goldwater in 1964 was perceived as an extremist; he carried six states. George Wallace in 1968 was perceived as an extremist; he carried five states. So, too, with George McGovern in 1972; he carried only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.

Remember the John Birch Society? It once was a force in American politics; it is moribund now, a victim of the extremism it was thought to espouse. Ralph Nader's consumerism has suffered the same fate; no one in public life any longer trembles at the name of Nader. Extremists on the environment are headed in the same direction. A few organizations on the far-out wacko right still finance their operations by scaring little old ladies with tales of the terrible Trilateral Commission. These outfits have no political clout. One of these days some courageous national figure will take on the National Rifle Association, and the NRA will be exposed as all bark and no bite.

It is against this background that the National Women's Political Caucus should be seen. I have a notion that the five Democratic presidential candidates who went to San Antonio did themselves more harm than good. Only Reubin Askew had the sense to stay away. John Glenn and Walter Mondale toadied to the ladies. Ernest F. Hollings wooed them with southern charm. Gary Hart and Alan Cranston made commitments that will haunt them in coming months: they promised explicitly that if elected they would withhold money for federal programs in states whose legislatures failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

Those of us in the media are at fault in this process of political inflation. Organized labor represents less than 19 percent of the labor force, and union leaders cannot deliver even half of the union vote. The notion that Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug can deliver "the women's vote" is hokum. The Moral Majority controls no demonstrable "majority" anywhere. Yet we puff hot air into these balloons, and the balloons impressively go up.

Temperance and moderation! Old George Mason had it just about right. Extremists make news because they are extremists; they are different; they are out of the mainstream. The press has to cover their activities—we cover baby pandas, don't we?—but we don't have to give them more importance than they truly deserve.

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