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THE STAKES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Hardly anybody wants to come right out and say what is the real issue in Central America. Contrary to the thrust of the questions at President Reagan's press conference, the real issue is not human rights, democracy or elections; it's not a phony comparison with Vietnam; it's not what the public opinion polls say; it's not even the personality of Henry Kissinger.

The crucial issue in Latin America is: will we allow the Communists to take over another country and let the dominoes fall all the way to the Rio Grande? Is the Monroe Doctrine really as dead as Khrushchev once boasted?

Why do we care if a few more "people's republics" like Castro's Cuba emerge in Latin America? Is the defense of Central America from Communism in the self-interest of the United States?

If there were no other reason to care, the refugee problems would be reason enough. Every country where a Communist regime has taken over has witnessed a mass exodus of refugees. Thousands of them have reached the United States from faraway countries.

If the Communists take over Central America, their refugees would not have to show the uncommon courage of the "boat people"; they would be able literally to walk across our borders. Our problems and our costs would be massive.

Central America is clearly the most important to American security of the more than a dozen wars of "national liberation" which the Soviets are waging around the world. If the Soviet-Cuban backed forces take El Salvador, then Honduras and Costa Rica will fall soon after. Mexico would become a problem we could not escape; and it would be a real problem with its corrupt, openly pro-Communist government, its 100% inflation, and its impoverished peasantry so eager to come to the United States.

The Communist arms build-up is going on all the time. The Soviet Union has poured at least $2 billion into Cuba and Central America in the past two years and built Cuba into a world-class military power. In April, Brazil even intercepted four Libyan transport planes loaded with arms bound for El Salvador.

Yet when the press got a chance to question President Reagan at his news conference, they asked him to explain AMERICAN naval vessels in the Caribbean; they didn't ask him about arms-carrying Russian ships!

The press asked President Reagan to justify giving American servicemen the right to defend themselves if they were attacked, but failed to ask him about the presence of Russian troops and advisers in the Western Hemisphere, or the fact that Soviet military advisers in Cuba outnumber U.S. military advisors in all Latin America by a ratio of 25 to 1. Reagan properly responded by saying "what's new?" about allowing American GIs to defend themselves against attack.

The liberals complain incessantly about the miniscule amount of aid President Reagan has requested to prevent the Communists from capturing another country. Incidentally, it's only one one-hundredth (1/100th) the sum we are asked to give to the International Monetary Fund to bail the big banks out of their bad loans to Communist and Third World countries. The liberals just don't talk about the immense Soviet military aid.

Few things show the liberals' bias so much as their phony demand for "human rights" in El Salvador. That beleaguered nation did have an election in March 1982; more than 80 percent of the eligible voters participated and voted anti-Communist even though they were under the terrorist threat of "vote in the morning and die at night."

The liberals crying about "human rights" in El Salvador are the same people who told us that Chiang Kai-shek was corrupt and reactionary while Mao Tse-tung was an agrarian reformer; and now we have Communist China. The liberals told us that Batista was corrupt and reactionary while Castro was an agrarian reformer; and now we have Communist Cuba.

The liberals told us the Shah of Iran was corrupt and reactionary while Khomeini was merely a religious leader; so now Iran has the most reactionary regime of the 20th century. The liberals told us Somoza was corrupt and reactionary and the Sandinistas were idealistic reformers; so now we have Communist Nicaragua, and it is also a base for exporting Communism to its neighbors.

This year is the 160th anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine -- our pledge not to allow any new European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Our credibility is at stake in El Salvador and Nicaragua. If we can't defend our interests there, no one will believe we can or will defend ourselves anywhere.