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Oscar Arias and the Treaty of Esquipulas

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Summary and Keywords

Throughout the 1980s, Central America was wracked by conflict. El Salvador faced a guerrilla insurgency, Guatemala's long conflict festered, and Nicaragua faced a continually escalating U.S.-led proxy war that used fighters, loosely referred to as the Contras, to wage war on the Nicaraguan government through cross-border raids that implicated Costa Rica and Honduras in persistent violations of sovereignty. The Treaty of Esquipulas, spearheaded by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez, ended these conflicts and brought stability to the region.

The Treaty of Esquipulas stands as one of the most significant and understudied peace agreements of the late Cold War. These accords ran counter to the will of the more powerful United States, which throughout the 1980s had sought to use military force as the key to achieving regime change in Nicaragua. The United States policy of supporting guerrillas that waged a war of regime change in Nicaragua fanned the flames of conflict and destabilized the region. Esquipulas undermined this destructive policy. For the first time, the small nations of Central America, so long considered the imperial servants of the United States, thwarted an aggressive U.S. military policy. Through intense diplomatic meetings, and in the wake of the controversy that developed from the Iran-Contra scandal, President Arias of Costa Rica succeeded in creating a peace agreement for Central Americans and authored by Central Americans. The Esquipulas accords were a blanket repudiation of the near decade-long Contra war policy of the United States. Central America created diplomatic unity and facilitated a successful opposition to the military policy of its more powerful neighbor. This agreement was a great triumph of peace and diplomacy created in the face of what seemed like overwhelming odds.

Keywords: Treaty of Esquipulas, Oscar Arias, the Contras, Daniel Ortega, Ronald Reagan, Contadora, Philip Habib

Introduction

On August 6, 1987, President Óscar Arias Sánchez of Costa Rica boarded a plane bound for Guatemala City. The president was possessed by a sense of urgency. He believed that a perfect window of opportunity existed to formalize a peace treaty, his treaty, with El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala and bring an end to guerrilla conflicts that had ravaged Central America for nearly a decade. After Arias landed in Guatemala City, he met his colleagues, the other four presidents, in a hotel suite. Along with Arias was President Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador, Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala, José Azcona del Hoyo of Honduras, and, of course, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua.¹ The situation was urgent. The group's first meeting, Esquipulas I, in May of 1986 fell apart amid disagreements over arms reductions; if Esquipulas II were to fail as well, hostilities would surely escalate. Influenced by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Arias told his colleagues his plan. He explained that when Roosevelt could not get ministers to agree, he would lock them in a room until an agreement was reached. Arias took the key, locked the door, and the leaders embarked on one of the greatest peace agreements of the Cold War era, the Treaty of Esquipulas.²

The five Central American leaders worked through the night, and by 5 AM on August 7, 1987, they agreed on an accord that promised an end to the wars that plagued the region. Arias felt a sense of triumph. Like David facing Goliath, he stood up to the overwhelming strength of the United States, which had privately resisted his efforts, and won.³ On that August day, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras all signed the Treaty of Esquipulas in Guatemala City (see Figure 1). The agreement was a repudiation of the entire U.S.-Contra war and acknowledged it as illegal and a violation of the sovereignty of the Central American states.



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Figure 1: Esquipulas, August 7, 1987. Seated left to right: Nicaraguan President Ortega, El Salvadoran President Duarte, Guatemalan President Cerezo, Honduran President Azcona, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.

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Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Costa Rica. Image Number 26253.

The treaty established a cease-fire; mandated arms reductions, democratic

elections, and an end of assistance to guerrilla forces; and established channels for international verification. In the following year, the Sandinistas and the U.S.-supported guerrillas, the Contras, agreed to schedule free and fair elections to be held in 1990 in accordance with the Nicaraguan Constitution. While Nicaragua and the U.S.-Contra war were the primary focus, the treaty began a process that also ended the conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala.⁴ Likewise, while the Sandinistas and the Contras continued to skirmish over the next year in Nicaragua, the two ultimately accepted a cease-fire and joined political negotiations.

Although the final agreement was made over one all-night diplomatic session, what those five Central American leaders achieved was a monumental and hard-fought peace, the success of which was never a foregone conclusion. The Esquipulas group created a lasting peace across a region divided by several nearly decade-long conflicts that were exasperated, in part, by the involvement of the United States, which in the 1980s trained proxy fighters, the Contras, to wage war on the internationally recognized government of Nicaragua and in pursuit of its larger Cold War aims. The idea that the leader of a small Central American country with no military could achieve a peace agreement in blatant opposition to the desire of U.S. policymakers during the Cold War seems almost impossible. However, Oscar Arias Sanchez used his diplomatic and political savvy and capitalized on fortunate circumstances, particularly the weakening of the United States position due to the Iran-Contra Affair, and created a landmark Cold War agreement that ultimately ended decades of brutal war.

In the late 1970s, revolution had swept across Central America. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas led a popular uprising that toppled the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose family had ruled Nicaragua since the early 1930s and often at the behest of the United States. At the end of the decade, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), too, took up a struggle against the United States-supported dictatorship in El Salvador. In Guatemala, an even longer-running civil war continued to fester. During the 1980s, the United States factored significantly into these conflicts, which intensified and bled over into the sovereign territory of Honduras and Costa Rica. The Reagan administration, through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC), trained and supplied a clandestine proxy army made up largely of the deposed Nicaraguan dictator's military that made war on the new government of Nicaragua. The United States also sent advisers and military aid to the government of El Salvador in a brutal and bloody civil war that witnessed widespread acts of terrorism conducted by both sides. In Honduras, it conducted a military buildup that aided both the Contra guerrillas fighting Sandinista-led Nicaragua and Honduran military capabilities as well. The Reagan administration, further, operated covertly alongside Contra fighters in Costa Rica and Honduras.⁵ In a 2016 interview of Costa Rican President Óscar Arias

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Sánchez at his residence in San Jose, the former president bemoaned the memory of the airfield that Reagan adviser Oliver North had operated illegally in Costa Rica.⁶

The Central American leaders at Esquipulas were tasked with finding a solution to brutal conflicts and a regional militarization caused, significantly, by the policy of the United States. They sought not only to create a complex and difficult peace; if it succeeded, it would also thwart the will of the longtime imperial power to the north, the United States.

When the Central American leaders met in Guatemala City in August of 1987, Daniel Ortega and Nicaragua were the most critical component. Nicaragua was aided by Cuba and the Soviet Union, and because of the Cold War ramifications of this relationship was directly targeted by the Reagan administration, which considered such a development as paramount to another Cuba in this hemisphere.⁷ In response to the U.S. war effort, which began in 1981, Ortega oversaw a robust military buildup and eliminated many aspects of free and democratic societies. In part because of a U.S. war, he moved toward militarized dictatorship.

In the July 28, 2016 interview, Arias was asked about leftism in the region and Ortega. The president smiled and replied, “Ortega has never read Karl Marx or any of the works of Lenin ... He is a populist caudillo” who believed that the revolution gave him the right to become a dictator, much like Fidel Castro.⁸ For an agreement to work, Ortega needed to back away from military-strongman dictatorship. In 2016, Arias recalled sitting in that hotel room in Guatemala City, and proposing a simple but critical question to President Ortega: “Are you willing to make concessions?” Arias insisted that Ortega be willing to step to the table and sign his plan, which involved Nicaragua accepting democratic elections and armament reductions; if he would not, the representatives “may as well just go get a drink and go home.”⁹

For all the talk of Nicaragua and the U.S.-Contra war, it may surprise readers to learn that Nicaragua and the United States were not the only potential stumbling blocks that Arias faced on the path to peace. El Salvador, led by President Duarte, was the wild card in the entire process. El Salvador faced a brutal guerrilla war against the FMLN, and the guerrillas relied on support from Nicaragua and Cuba. To prevent the government of El Salvador from collapsing, Duarte accepted significant military aid from the United States. Getting Duarte to accept an agreement that could anger the United States and/or potentially threaten its support for El Salvador was another major obstacle to peace that Arias faced.¹⁰

Contadora: The First Attempt at Peace

The first Latin American peace negotiations designed to deal with Nicaragua and the greater Central American crisis were the Contadora talks, which began on January 8, 1983, and were named after the Panamanian island where the first meeting occurred. The

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plan was to facilitate peace through the mediation of large regional powers: Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama. A second meeting in Lima, Peru, in 1985 brought further regional support for this process from more South American countries. Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama comprised the heart of the Contadora group, and Mexico was consistently the most influential player of the four.¹¹ However, the Contadora process, which lasted from 1983 to 1986, consistently failed to produce an agreement. This failure was due, in part, to the Reagan administration's escalation of military activity and its refusal to support the agreement, which meant an end to efforts at a military solution in Nicaragua. Likewise, the increased military activity furthered the divide between the Sandinista leadership and its neighbors and led the Nicaraguan government to pursue legal cases against the United States, Costa Rica, and Honduras at the International Court of Justice in The Hague for complicity in military violations of national sovereignty.¹²

In addition to an escalation of violence, state-to-state dynamics also ensured the failure of Contadora. Mexico was consistently supportive of the Nicaraguan position and angered by the Reagan administration's interventionism. On the other hand, a Mexican-led peace agreement was unacceptable to the United States because it would leave the Sandinista regime stable and intact and bolster Mexico as a regional power. While the United States worked against the Contadora agreement, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica expressed a sense that the more powerful participants were drowning out the actual Central American voices. It seemed that the talks provided little concern for the interests of these small Central American nations so accustomed to, but also uncomfortable with, the influence of their larger northern neighbors. In the summer of 1986, Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador each dismissed the Contadora plan as unacceptable. Taken together, a U.S. war policy, too little influence of smaller states, and a Mexico aligned with both Guatemala and Nicaragua offset the balance of Contadora and helped ensure its subsequent failure by that summer.¹³ Despite a failure, the Contadora effort nonetheless brought clarity to the key diplomatic issues and in this sense influenced a successful future Central American agreement.¹⁴

The Habib Mission

In the spring of 1986, esteemed diplomat Philip Habib was appointed President Ronald Reagan's new special envoy to Central America. Habib traveled to the region multiple times over the next year, acting as an agent for the Reagan administration. At the direction of Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz, he pressed for a coalition of the four Central American democratic states aligned in support of the U.S. policy of using military force to ensure a democratic transformation of the Nicaraguan government.

Costa Rica was the key state for the administration's diplomatic missions. Honduras and El Salvador were already closely aligned with the Reagan administration, and these two nations sought unity with the United States in hopes of maintaining security against leftist guerrillas and a Nicaraguan state increasingly antagonized by the U.S.-led Contra war. Óscar Arias Sánchez, the newly elected president, was skeptical of the Reagan administration's policy, however. This small peaceful nation had no military, and as a neutral country its support was critical if the coalition were to appear legitimate. Arias was a domestically oriented leader, and he did not want his government associated with the continued U.S. war effort against Nicaragua.¹⁵

Over the course of 1986 and 1987, the United States and Costa Rica tugged back and forth over the means to peace in the region. The Reagan administration sought recognition for the Contras and regional support for a policy of military escalation. Arias's goals, however, amounted to removing, not supporting, the Contras as the primary danger to sovereignty and peace throughout Central America. Because of these differences with the United States, Arias was forced to exercise savvy and work around the Reagan administration. Eventually, the Costa Rican leader was able to cut the United States out of the peace negotiations.

Even though Habib and Arias were destined to achieve a positive and productive relationship, in their first meeting that March of 1986 Habib chastised the Costa Rican leader for supporting a bilateral border patrol agreement with Nicaragua. Such an agreement was chipping away at the ability of the United States to make war on Nicaragua through cross-border proxy operations. The Reagan administration was livid about Costa Rica's attempt to create an agreement exclusively with Nicaragua, and Habib told Arias that "President Ronald Reagan is not a masochist and will not pay people to dump on him."¹⁶ Habib's sharp words suggested that the United States would use economic aid as leverage against Costa Rica. To this, the Costa Rican leader, perhaps somewhat intimidated, reassured Habib that "his call for a timetable for establishing democracy in Nicaragua [was] evidence of his opposition to the Sandinista regime."¹⁷ Shortly following the exchange, Arias shelved the border arrangement between the two nations in favor of the demands of the Reagan administration for an agreement that was regional and simultaneous. The United States would only accept an agreement that incorporated direct talks with the Contras and upon which all Central American states agreed. Arias disagreed with the administration, but the United States operated from a

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position of strength; the Costa Rican president was compelled to go along with the United States, at least until political realities opened a window for a successful peace on his terms, not Ronald Reagan's.

Even without Arias, there were several key concerns and differences among the other Central American leaders, and there existed little unwaivering support. President Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador was the only Central American leader to offer complete backing for the Reagan administration. On March 12, 1986, Duarte expressed to Philip Habib his support for the Contras. He agreed to tell U.S. congressional representatives visiting El Salvador that the "Nicaraguan resistance constitute[d] a much-needed barrier to Sandinista subversion." Further, he said that at upcoming talks with Nicaragua, scheduled for May in Esquipulas, Guatemala, "he would press his counterparts [the other Central American democracies] to limit discussion to regional matters and to refrain from references to external factors." In other words, Duarte planned to do everything in his power to support the continued U.S. offensive carried out by the Nicaraguan Contras, and try and push other states away from individual agreements with Nicaragua.¹⁸ Duarte was a longtime ally of the Reagan administration, on which he relied for support in El Salvador's war against the FMLN. Duarte's complete and cooperative support was, however, unsurprising and unique among the other Central American states. Even President José Azcona del Hoyo of Honduras, the first democratically elected leader since the 1930s and whose country was the centerpiece of the U.S.-Contra support program, expressed his continued backing for the program, but insisted that he could not do so publicly due to the controversy in his country over the activity of the Contras.¹⁹

Of the four Central American leaders to whom the Reagan administration appealed, Guatemala was least interested and a tentative partner at best. In private meetings with Ambassador Habib, President Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala sought to appease the administration on certain issues, but was unable to offer complete support for its military policy, although he assured Habib that he would "not publicly oppose military support for the resistance."²⁰ The Guatemalan leader expressed a sense of homage owed to the United States for his leadership position. The Reagan administration had praised his election as democratic and a symbol of the expansion of democracy in Central America; it also supported Guatemala in its continued fight against leftist insurgents. Cerezo was grateful to the United States, and he expressed that he would not be in power without its support. However, like Arias, while Cerezo promised that his government would not undermine the Reagan administration's policy, he could not give full public backing.²¹ Mexico, one of the most powerful states in the region and a nation that opposed the U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, factored significantly into the decisions of the Guatemalan leader. This relationship meant that Cerezo was unable to join the informal Central American coalition that the Habib mission attempted to create in 1986.

In May, the five Central American leaders met for the Esquipulas I peace talks held in that small Guatemalan town. The meeting was called by Cerezo and was informal but provocative, because the Reagan administration did not want any of the Central American leaders to meet with Ortega.²² A key component of the talks involved the discussion of an

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arms-control agreement. Nicaragua had developed a significant military, and Arias hoped that it could accept a reduction. In May 1986, however, the U.S.-Contra war escalated, and Nicaragua began to launch raids into sovereign Honduran territory in pursuit of the U.S.-supported guerrillas. With conflict escalating, and with the danger that it could spread, there was a lot of pressure on the leaders in Esquipulas. The four Central American democracies, led by Arias, presented a proposal that demanded democratization in Nicaragua and a reduction of the Sandinistas military arsenal by 20 percent, a reduction far below the figure desired by the Reagan administration. Yet Ortega, still concerned and agitated by the U.S. proxy war, did not agree to this arrangement.²³

After Esquipulas I, Arias expressed disappointment at the extent of the gap between Nicaragua and the other Central American states.²⁴ President Azcona of Honduras reiterated Arias's lament that the Sandinistas refused to downsize militarily.²⁵ Not only had Esquipulas I failed, but so too had Contadora. With the collapse of the peace initiatives in the summer of 1986, the Reagan administration was in an advantageous position to increase its military efforts. Habib left Central America in early June, 1986, believing that the United States should continue to "pursue Contra funding as an indispensable element of a two-track policy that puts military pressure on Nicaragua at the service of an active diplomacy."²⁶ The United States thus focused increasingly on efforts to use military force against the Nicaraguan government.

In early July of 1986, as the U.S. Congress moved to formally extend military aid to the Contras, Habib went back to Central America. Following up on comments made to a group of reporters, the diplomat expressed satisfaction with Arias's apparent submission to the position of the United States. Pressure in the form of tough language and the threat of economic punishment seemed to force Arias to adopt a position more in tune with the desire of the United States. Habib noted that President Arias was "more helpful than in the past" for telling reporters that "the U.S. Congress was merely responding to Sandinista aggression and repression when it approved assistance to the resistance."²⁷ In 1986, an Arias-led peace that banned support for the Contras seemed hard to imagine. The U.S. Congress for the first time officially voted to supply the Contras with military aid, Ortega appeared uninterested in a peace agreement, and Arias was left with no other choice but to temporarily go along with the Reagan administration.

The Esquipulas II Accord

On October 5, 1986, a Fairchild C-123 cargo plane flew into Nicaraguan airspace. The plane was used by those in the employ of the United States to move supplies from El Salvador to Contra guerrillas operating in Nicaragua. Not long after entering the airspace, Sandinista air defenses successfully brought the plane down. Of the four crewmen only one managed to parachute to safety. Once on the ground, the crew member was taken prisoner by the Nicaraguan armed forces. He was U.S. citizen and Wisconsin resident Eugene Hasenfus, and during the subsequent investigations, the extent of illegal U.S. involvement with respect to Nicaragua was revealed. The revelations, soon known as the Iran-Contra Affair, had a damning influence on the Reagan administration's hard-line policy in the region. Led by National Security Council members Oliver North and John Poindexter, the administration was conducting myriad illegal funding operations for the Contras. The most controversial was the organized sale of weapons to the Iranian government: Iran was considered a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States, and any sale of weapons was forbidden by Congress. Despite insisting that it would never negotiate with terrorists, the Reagan administration exchanged weapons for the release of hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Following the initial sale, North sent the illegal revenue to the Nicaraguan Contras.²⁸ As this scandal unfolded in Washington, it paralyzed congressional support for the administration's policy and created an opportunity for President Arias to become a champion for peace. At the beginning of 1987, Arias revealed his own plan for peace in Central America.²⁹

The Costa Rican president was neither a supporter of the U.S. policy or of the less-than-democratic nature of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Arias perceived U.S. leaders in the United States like President Reagan and Secretary Shultz as blinded by their grand perspective of the Cold War and their associated "obsession" with the Contras. Were the Sandinistas the equivalent of the global struggle of communism? For Arias, the answer was, obviously, no, nor did he consider Nicaragua to represent any true threat to the region either. These ideas he understood as constructs of the Reagan administration's propaganda machine. Likewise, Arias lamented that Daniel Ortega did not fashion his country as a democracy. Instead, Arias referred to Ortega as little more than a "caudillo," or Central American strongman, who had never read the works of Marx or Lenin and was hardly the pawn of a global leftist conspiracy. Ortega perceived the Sandinista-led revolution like that of Fidel Castro: granted the right to rule in perpetuity. A democratically minded individual, Arias found this attitude offensive and problematic, but not the threat alleged by Washington. From Arias's perspective, Nicaragua did not pose any real threat to Costa Rica. Instead, the primary problem resulted from a U.S. war policy that created and escalated conflict across the region and violated the sovereignty of multiple Central American nations.³⁰

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While the Iran-Contra scandal festered on Capitol Hill, Arias seized on his opportunity. He went to the United States and met with Democrats in Congress, including Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT), who supported his pursuit of a Central American peace led by Costa Rica. Much later, Arias would remember Ambassador Philip Habib as his only real friend and ally from the Reagan administration after the peace process was under way. He was grateful to Habib because the ambassador provided communication and continuity between the other Central American states and himself, thereby making his agreement possible.³¹ However, though Habib developed as an invaluable ally, some disagreement remained between the U.S. envoy and the president of Costa Rica. On February 25, 1987, Habib reported to Washington on his perception of Arias's plan and his motivations. Habib believed that the plan was inadequate because it did not do enough to guarantee the disarmament of Nicaragua and the incorporation of the Contras into the Nicaraguan political process. He was privately skeptical of Arias, who, he alleged, possessed a "distorted and one-sided view of the American political scene" given to him by congressional leaders like Chris Dodd. The situation between the two was touchy, and Arias walked a tightrope: On the one hand, the domestically driven leader wanted to achieve peace as quickly and efficiently as possible, but on the other hand, Arias felt compelled to appease the increasingly disgruntled and embattled Reagan administration, which made veiled threats to discourage him.³²



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Figure 2: Oscar Arias surrounded by reporters.

Photo courtesy of the National Archive of Costa Rica 26258.

During the half year in which the Esquipulas agreement took shape, Arias acted with savvy and used two diplomatic tactics: First, he promoted a peace agreement that he hoped and believed would succeed, and, second, out of a desire to reduce pressure from the United States, he attempted to reassure the Reagan administration that he expected his plan to fail.

Habib understood this and reported to Washington his distrust of Arias's intentions by claiming that "at least this [failure of his initiative] is what he says he expects." Habib considered the plan to be an attempt by Arias to take the spotlight for political purposes, and he was concerned that the proposal "could seriously complicate our [U.S.] policy." However, Habib also understood that the Iran-Contra investigation had seriously damaged the position of the United States, and for this reason he advised the administration not to publicly oppose the proposal and hope for the best arrangement possible. In general, the architects of U.S. policy opposed the Arias plan. Hardliners wanted an outright opposition to the agreement, whereas moderates like Shultz and

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Habib understood that options were limited. They wanted the United States to continue its efforts to support the Contras while going along with the peace plan in the hopes that the war and the peace process might be enough to discredit the Sandinistas and facilitate its ouster through an electoral process that included the Contras. As Arias developed his plan for a Central American peace, the Reagan administration sat on the sidelines, less able than at any point previously to control the outcome.³³

In the spring and summer of 1987, the Arias peace plan gained momentum and further threatened the Reagan administration's Contra policy. During a meeting in June, the inevitable frustrations between Costa Rica and the United States over the peace process surfaced in an intense exchange between Arias and Habib. Arias was irritated by Habib's wrangling with him over the terms of the agreement. Arias demonstrated his nuanced perspective of events and insisted that the United States, following Iran-Contra, was isolated and that its intentional usage of the transnational guerrillas challenged the norms of international behavior and was widely opposed throughout Latin America and the world. Further, he was upset over the administration's manipulation of Costa Rica in the previous year, as it had basically bribed him to give up on a bilateral agreement with Nicaragua. Speaking broadly about the Contra war, he exclaimed that the Reagan administration had "used Costa Rica." Arias, in a position of strength and with a degree of annoyance, suggested to Habib that if the upcoming Esquipulas summit failed, he would "walk away" and the United States "could invade Nicaragua." He emphatically asked Habib to stay out of the Esquipulas summit, exclaiming that regardless of whether his efforts succeeded or failed, the United States should not go back to its policy of support for the Contras. Support for proxy armies continued to be a fundamental disagreement between the Reagan administration and Arias, who believed that such a policy violated sovereign rights and invited conflict in otherwise peaceful countries: The use of those transnational guerrillas threatened the region, violated international law, and implicated states like Honduras and Costa Rica, while the Reagan administration avoided the full blame that was due it. To Arias, the administration had bullied and used the smaller Central American states.³⁴

Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration's Central American policy brought on a wave of antiwar activism in the United States. Some participated in small demonstrations, others traveled to the region as aid workers, and still others wrote letters directly to their representatives in Congress. When it was clear by 1987 that Arias was the primary peace advocate, many U.S. citizens sent letters of encouragement to the Costa Rican president. George Georges of San Francisco wrote: "Our President Ronald Reagan had a military-oriented ideology and seeks a military solution to the situation/conflict in Central America. Please try to ignore his [Reagan's] obstinances—the people of the U.S. want Peace." Others, such as Rev. David Duncombe, Frank Winterroth, and Laura Ball of Philadelphia, also wrote Arias to encourage the president in his attempt to promote peace and resist the U.S.-Contra war. Throughout the conflict, which was deeply

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controversial, U.S. citizens had expressed fear and skepticism at the Reagan administration's military-oriented approach.³⁵

Once it seemed clear that Daniel Ortega was prepared to sign an agreement, the next challenge was to get El Salvador, the closest partner of the United States, to sign it. How could President Duarte sign an agreement that the United States opposed and that would sharply reduce outside military aid deliveries needed by his country? To do so, Duarte feared, would cause a collapse of his government, and as a result, he could not sign the Esquipulas II agreement when he met the other four leaders at that hotel in Guatemala City in August 1987. Duarte expressed privately to Arias that he increasingly felt that the United States did not care about the conflict in El Salvador, but was instead focused only on the Contras. In his eyes, the Reagan administration, hoping to somehow influence the Arias peace proposal, confirmed these concerns when it pushed forward the Wright-Reagan peace plan.

The Wright-Reagan proposal, which House Speaker and Texas Democrat Jim Wright cosponsored, hinged on the notion that military support for governments and insurgencies should be cut and that the Contras should be incorporated into the democratic process in Nicaragua, as opposed to support being cut only to insurgencies and irregular guerrilla proxies, as the Arias plan proposed. The proposal, which many theorized amounted to another ploy by the Reagan administration to derail the Arias peace and promote continued military support for the Contras, unwittingly facilitated the successful completion of the Arias plan by verifying to Duarte that El Salvador was not important for the United States and that the Reagan administration had no reservations about making support for El Salvador little more than a political bartering chip.³⁶

In the private interview in 2016, Arias insisted that President Duarte was so upset by the notion that no government be allowed to receive military support from a foreign power that he realized that the United States was not a friend of his country but, rather, only interested in its regime-change policy in Nicaragua. Duarte expressed to Arias that his government was on a knife edge and that it needed the military support of the United States, but to him, the Wright-Reagan proposal effectively ignored this urgent necessity. The idea that the United States was proposing a cut to this aid as a sort of ploy against Nicaragua made him feel as though he was a mere pawn of the Reagan administration. In response, Arias made a small change to the wording of the peace agreement that protected El Salvador's need for outside support. Duarte thus joined Arias, becoming the final critical ally in support of the Esquipulas agreement, which hinged, in part, on all countries repudiating support for insurgencies in the region.³⁷ It was, more than anything, an anti-Contra/guerrilla plan.

Conclusion

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Not long after the Esquipulas II accord was in place, President Arias and his family took a much-needed holiday to the Costa Rican coast. He was exhausted from an intense first year and a half as the Costa Rican leader. While vacationing at the beach, he received surprise news: He was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The president was shocked; he did not even know he had been nominated. As a testament to the importance and international attention garnered by the Esquipulas agreement, the nomination had originated from a Swedish group. The esteemed international award never factored into Arias's thinking as he was working on the famous treaty, but the reception of it made him proud. It stood as a testament to the triumph of diplomacy.³⁸

What he and the four other Central American leaders achieved was unprecedented in the history of the region and of the global Cold War. Central America, historically a place that the United States pushed around without much trouble, opposed the pressure of the United States and succeeded. In particular, Arias took advantage of the weakness brought on by the excessive adventurism of the Reagan administration and succeeded in creating a diplomatic solution that the United States had preferred to derail. Indeed, Arias achieved something incredible. The president of a small Central American nation with no military used a savvy and opportunistic diplomacy to end a U.S.-led war. This was a momentous victory for peace.

Discussion of the Literature

Since the beginning of the U.S.-Contra war in the 1980s, numerous scholars have written about the conflict and the peace process. Several of the early scholars provided benchmark works on U.S.-Nicaragua relations during the Reagan administration. The first wave of writers during the 1980s and early 1990s often explain this history from economic, ideological, and political perspectives. William LeoGrande, Cynthia Arnson, Robert Kagan, and Walter LaFeber are among the most significant first scholars on the U.S.-Contra war, and their works are an integral starting point for anyone pursuing a project on the Central American conflicts of the 1980s. Kagan's book is the most in-depth interpretation of the conflict. His monograph, *A Twilight Struggle*, is a roughly 900-page metanarrative that misses no detail about the conflict. Others, such as LeoGrande and Arnson, describe this history from the view of American politics and are highly critical of the Reagan administration's efforts to gain support from Congress for the Contras. Finally, in *Inevitable Revolutions* Walter LaFeber, one of the founders of revisionist history, argues from the standpoint of U.S. imperialism. These offer an important examination of this critical period in U.S.-Central American relations.³⁹

Since the late 1990s, a new wave of scholarship on the U.S.-Contra war has emerged. Greg Grandin's two publications, *The Last Colonial Massacre* and *Empire's Workshop*, emphasize the importance of neoconservative ideology in the development of a brutal war across Central America. Grandin's books provide a new benchmark for scholarship on the subject by reinterpreting the conflicts in the region as U.S.-led terror wars. Mauricio Solaún's *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua*, Philip W. Travis' *Reagan's War on Terrorism in Nicaragua*, and Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War* are a few other examples of more recent works that examine the aggressive and hyper-interventionist foreign policy that the United States implemented against Nicaragua.⁴⁰

While there is an array of works on the Central American conflicts, most are usually from the U.S. perspective. For example, Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago and Jeffrey L. Gould's *To Rise in Darkness* on El Salvador and Jim Handy's *Gift of the Devil* on Guatemala's troubled history examine the emergence of revolution in the Central American countryside and counterbalance the often U.S.-centric narrative of the Central American revolutions of the 20th century. Jeff Goodwin's *No Other Way Out* also provides an excellent examination of revolution in the developing world during the Cold War.⁴¹

With respect to the Esquipulas peace accords, few works place an emphasis on the interactions of Central American leaders with one another during the formation of the Treaty of Esquipulas. Among those that one should consider for information on the Central American peace process are Dario Moreno's *The Struggle for Peace in Central America*, Jack Child's *The Central American Peace Process*, and Mary Kathryn Meyer's dissertation from the University of Massachusetts entitled "Latin American Diplomacy

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and the Central American Peace Process.” Harold Dana Sims and Vilma Petrash also provide a strong and in-depth analysis of the Contadora peace process in the 1987 article “The Contadora Peace Process.” Each of these authors provides substantial analysis of the Esquipulas accords as well as the Contadora process that preceded it.⁴²

Primary Sources

A primary source for this article was an interview conducted by the author with President Óscar Arias Sánchez at his residence in Costa Rica’s capital city, San José. Because there is limited material pertaining to the personal communication among the Central American leaders, an interview with the architect of Esquipulas was integral to this article. Not unlike the welcoming nature of his country, Arias is quite friendly and open to conversations with authors. It was not difficult to schedule a meeting through the Arias Foundation, and President Arias allowed a one-hour recorded interview. His accessibility and continued activity in regional peace measures through the Arias Foundation make his firsthand account of Esquipulas a primary source.

Other important primary source materials are located in San José, Costa Rica, in Washington D C, and online in the *Digital National Security Archive*. The National Security Archive hosted by the Gelman Library at George Washington University and the National Archives of Costa Rica both contain valuable nondigitized material. The researcher will need to visit these archives physically to view these materials. The national archive in Costa Rica includes a specific presidential collection that contains letters sent to Arias from U.S. citizens and pictures from the Esquipulas meetings, as well as the various drafts of the Esquipulas accords.

The Gelman Library at George Washington University, which houses the National Security Archive, also provides a nice complement of primary source material pertaining to the peace process. While this archive is centered on U.S. materials, the John Boykin Collection provides a selection of memorandums from Special Envoy Philip Habib to the State Department. Habib worked closely with Arias and the other Central American leaders and provided thorough summaries of his meetings with these heads of state throughout 1986 and 1987. When coupled with Arias’s own firsthand account the Habib memorandums greatly enhance one’s ability to understand the dynamics of the peace process as it unfolded behind closed doors.

Finally, the *Digital National Security Archive* (DNSA) also contains several substantial collections specifically on the conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Within these collections are documents that relate to the Treaty of Esquipulas. The DNSA is offered by Proquest and is available only at subscribing libraries. Several prominent university libraries, including those at the University of Virginia, George Washington University, and the University of Washington, offer access to the DNSA, but researchers will need to check their library to determine nearest accessibility. Lastly, the Reagan Library in Simi

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Valley, California, houses a substantial collection of materials relating to the U.S.-Contra war and is an ideal place for individuals researching the larger history of the U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s

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Notes:

- (1.) Oscar Arias Sanchez, Interview by Philip Travis, San Jose, Costa Rica, July 28, 2016.
- (2.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (3.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (4.) "Esquipulas II" Folder, Presidencia 3429, El Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica.
- (5.) "Drugs, Law Enforcement, and Foreign Policy: A Report Prepared by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations" (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D C, 1989).
- (6.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (7.) Philip Habib, "March 13 Meeting with Guatemalan President Cerezo," Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (8.) Oscar Arias Sanchez, Interview by Philip Travis
- (9.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (10.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (11.) "Obstruction of Contadora Effort Is Charged," *New York Times*, May 11, 1984.
- (12.) Harold Dana Sims and Vilma Petrash, "The Contadora Peace Process." *Conflict Quarterly* 7.4 (Fall 1987).
- (13.) "Ambassador Habib's Meetings in Honduras," July 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (14.) Sims and Petrash, "The Contadora Peace Process."
- (15.) Arias 2016 interview by Travis.

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- (16.) "Habib-Oscar Arias Meeting," March 13, 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (17.) "Presidential Evening Reading: Ambassador Habib Meets Azcona, Arias and Cerezo," Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (18.) "Presidential Evening Reading: Ambassador Habib's Visit to Central America," March 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (19.) "Presidential Evening Reading: Ambassador Habib Meets Azcona, Arias and Cerezo."
- (20.) "Presidential Evening Reading: Ambassador Habib Meets Azcona, Arias and Cerezo."
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- (22.) Arias 2016 interview.
- (23.) "Contadora: Visit to Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala," June 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (24.) "Ambassador Habib's Meeting with President Arias," June, 1986, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.
- (25.) "Judge Upholds Embargo on Trade with Nicaragua," *Providence Journal*, April 30, 1986. <http://search.proquest/dociew/396575811?accountid=14902>
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(30.) Arias 2016 interview.

(31.) Arias 2016 interview.

(32.) "The Diplomatic Track, My Trip to Central America and Mexico, Feb. 25, 1987," Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.

(33.) "The Diplomatic Track, My Trip to Central America and Mexico, Feb. 25, 1987."

(34.) "Ambassador Habib's Meeting with President Arias," June 1987, Box 5, John Boykin Collection: National Security Archive, Gelman Library, George Washington University.

(35.) Letters to Arias from George Georges, David Duncombe, Frank Winterroth, and Laura Ball, Folder, Presidencia 3810, El Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica.

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(37.) Arias 2016 interview.

(38.) Arias 2016 interview.

(39.) Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993*, 2d ed. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993); William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Robert Kagan, *Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

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(42.) Jack Child, *The Central American Peace Process, 1983-1991: Sheathing Swords, Building Confidence* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992); Dario Moreno, *The Struggle for Peace in Central American* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994); Mary Kathryn

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