

DEMOCRACY UNDER FIRE: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR DEANE R. HINTON

FORUM: What do you believe are the roots of revolution in Central America?

HINTON: In the case of El Salvador, I think it was political frustration with pressures building up from a difficult economic and social situation. One possible escape valve was democracy and free elections — proven not to be workable in the '72 elections stolen from Napoleon Duarte; then in the mid-seventies there was the agrarian reform effort of Molina which was opposed by the landlords and landowners who wouldn't go for a reasonable evolutionary approach to agrarian reform; and I think that the feeling that there was no way to change this system contributed a great deal. There are lots of places where there is worse poverty, but not very many places where there is a worse population ratio to resources. Ultimately, I believe, it was a sense of frustration. Then of course to make it go — and this is very important — there was outside help from very early on, and in recent years in very substantial and significant quantities.

FORUM: What do you see as the greatest security threat in Central America?

HINTON: The greatest security threat is the possibility that in a state such as Nicaragua with Cuban and Soviet ties, you're going to end up with Soviet submarine bases. They've even made noises and then retracted the noises that Nicaragua could be a place for missiles. People have got to understand that it is not that the Nicaraguans are going to overthrow the government of the United States. It's that having this kind of a Leninist police state in Central America will have an impact upon her neighbors and conceivably provide a base for a superpower. That's the problem with security there.

FORUM: What short-term and long-term objectives has the Reagan Administration set for itself in Central America? Can they be achieved?

Deane R. Hinton was U.S. Ambassador to Zaire from 1974 to 1975, and to El Salvador from 1981 to 1983. His other Latin American posts include: Director of AID in Guatemala from 1967 to 1969, and Chile from 1969 to 1971. He was recently appointed U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan.

HINTON: Well, the first one is a negative objective; that is, no more Cubas or Nicaraguas. In a positive sense, the objective is to nurture some new and rather fragile democracies and continue the development process. As the president has said, the dialogue to seek political solutions and coordinate a defense effort is intended to ensure that the development program of the young democracies won't be swamped by the Marxist-Leninist forces. Those are very general terms, but I think that's basically what it is. One of the president's speeches that is important but not usually seen in terms of Central America is his London speech. In that speech he spoke of democracy and the need for an approach contrary to the "government shouldn't do things" philosophy of the Western democracies. I remember he noted the Soviets were pretty busy advancing their ideology around the world. We should make positive, aggressive efforts to advance our ideology.

FORUM: Many Americans agree that the 1979 Sandinista revolution was backed by a broad spectrum of Nicaraguans. The Reagan Administration, however, has accused the Sandinista leadership of purging moderate elements from the government, shifting the revolution left, and aligning it with the Soviet Union and Cuba. To what extent is this accusation true?

HINTON: About one hundred percent.

FORUM: What do you believe is the appropriate U.S. response?

HINTON: I would like to see the Sandinistas carry out their commitments to the Organization of American States. It seems to me the objective is that they provide for pluralism and particularly that they provide for free democratic elections. Now how you go about doing that is now in the process of negotiation — the so-called Contadora process — let's hope it comes out the right way. There's a lot of talk about domino theories. I'd like to see a domino theory in reverse — democracy's hold improving the chance for democracy in Nicaragua.

FORUM: According to the *New York Times*, even members of the Contadora group have privately expressed little hope for a negotiated solution to the problem of Central America. What do you think the prospects are?

HINTON: Well, my appraisal of the Commandantes in Managua is that they are dedicated Leninist revolutionaries. One can be rather skeptical, therefore, that they are going to change and come to terms with the Contadora process. There are some signs that they have evolved. I just

hope that a negotiated solution will prove possible. One of the key issues for lasting negotiations is whether the Sandinistas will accept what they have promised in terms of free democratic elections. We will see. The negotiation process that is going on is complicated. In some ways it is going faster than one might have thought, in other ways slower.

FORUM: How can the U.S. government support the Contadora initiative and at the same time provide covert military assistance to rebels who openly express that their goal is to overthrow the Sandinista government? Is there a fundamental contradiction here?

HINTON: The critical decision regarding the Contadora process was made in Washington early on. We decided that we would not insist on being part of the negotiations; that we would let the Mexicans, the Venezuelans and the Colombians take the lead; and that we would support them. We have supported them to the extent that we can. Now, no matter what you think of the Contras, one thing that's reasonably certain is that had it not been for the Contras and the pressure that comes from them, it's highly unlikely that the Sandinistas would have ever gone as far as they have on the Contadora question.

FORUM: Many people say that the U.S. military threat to the Sandinista revolution has aroused considerable nationalist pride and helped to forge unity in many sectors, offsetting defections by former government leaders. Unless the U.S. government is willing to undertake a large scale and direct military commitment, isn't the current policy of providing covert aid to the rebels counterproductive?

HINTON: It is, to some degree, true that the U.S. military threat has been a rallying cry for the Sandinista Commandantes. It is also true, as I have said, that there was no sign of any accommodation from the Commandantes until the contras began to pick up some steam.

FORUM: What do you believe are the U.S. constitutional implications and the international legal implications of an undeclared covert war with Nicaragua?

HINTON: I'll leave that to the lawyers.

FORUM: If the Sandinista government was not providing arms to the Salvadoran rebels, would that government then be acceptable to the United States?

HINTON: Well, there's a lot more to it than that. It would have been acceptable at one time. In fact, they were offered that option by the Congress in both the Carter and Reagan Administrations. But since then a lot of water has gone under the bridge. I think without question they can *say* that they don't provide arms to Salvadoran rebels. They can even stop doing it for awhile, but you need all kinds of verification mechanisms, and the most important thing you need is the option for the Nicaraguan people to change that damn government, like our government can be changed or the Salvadoran government. In El Salvador, they've had elections and the Christian-Democratic Administration went out. Why can't that happen in Nicaragua?

FORUM: It has been said that the U.S. is sowing the seeds of revolution in Honduras and Costa Rica by using them as military bases to combat the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. What do you believe will be the impact of the increased U.S. military presence on the internal situations in these countries?

HINTON: The question really surprises me as far as Costa Rica is concerned. The increased presence thus far has been some engineers who are digging wells. In Honduras, the military increase for a country that size is, I guess, noticeable. I don't see that it necessarily changes the political complexion of the government alone. The United States and our forces are committed to making the democratic system in Honduras work. Is there something inherently likely to undermine the constitutional process in Honduras because of the presence of 1200 American military men?

FORUM: Some people argue that an increase in military aid to the region will enhance the military's grip at the expense of other social institutions. How do you respond to these assertions?

HINTON: You know, it could, but it doesn't necessarily have to. In any case, given the pressures, what would happen without military assistance? There is just no way you can have everything you want. There are tradeoffs. So what are you going to do? Let the place go down the tubes?

FORUM: What elements constitute a "legitimate" government in Central America from the point of view of the United States?

HINTON: Well, you know there is a legal definition of what we recognize that applies to almost anybody who exercises power or sovereignty. What

one wants to see and looks forward to is a government that governs with the consent of the people, but in an international law sense that is not the basis of legitimacy.

FORUM: Given the increasing political polarization in El Salvador and the lack of a strong centrist party, what role can democracy be expected to play in furthering reform and achieving stability there? Is power sharing with the Salvadoran rebels a realistic option?

HINTON: The political process — democracy and forming coalition governments — is a mechanism for working out political differences and resolving problems without bloodshed. That process is working among the left-center Christian Democrats, the center party Acción Democrática, and the right wing parties. It's fragile, but it is working. It produced a new constitution and they have gone to the people for comments. For the first time in fifty years, there is a government that was elected. Of course this leaves out the extreme left, but they chose not to participate in the elections and they are saying once again that they won't participate in the upcoming elections. They say, "No, we've got to be in the government and then we will talk about elections." Power resides in the people according to our theory of government. Eighty or ninety percent of the people who voted for this government have given the responsibility of exercising power to sixty people who elected a person to establish a government and there isn't one of them who thinks that someone with a bomb trying to blow the country up or with a gun killing people in the hills should participate in the government. So power sharing is just not on.

FORUM: In a speech to Salvadoran businessmen in January 1983, you stated, "Perhaps as many as 30,000 Salvadorans have been murdered, not killed in battle, murdered since 1979." Can democracy function effectively in an environment where criminals are not brought to trial and where death squads, on both the left and the right, murder innocent people with impunity?

HINTON: Well, the short answer is, in the long run, "no." There has got to be a rule of law established. The Salvadoran government knows this as well as anyone and is working toward that. There is now a major judicial reform effort going on. There are a number of necessary preconditions for democracy to work effectively. Free and fair democratic elections is what we economists call "a necessary but not a sufficient condition." It

is the touchstone of democracy but clearly the rule of law is also extraordinarily important. Let's hope that the civil conflict can be brought to an early end. There has been a lot of progress made. As I say, there have been reforms incorporated in the new constitution. When I left there were the beginnings of a debate on how to change the "state of siege" regulations to provide for more due process. Whether it has progressed, I am not sure. I should add that the important word in the quote you mentioned is "perhaps." I'm glad your comment on it made it clear that the murders have taken place on both the left and the right. This quote has been taken out of context and has pained me ever since.

FORUM: What, specifically, are the present U.S. economic aid policy objectives in Central America and in El Salvador? Are they successful, and if not, what changes would you recommend?

HINTON: The problem in El Salvador is just to keep the economy afloat and to provide humanitarian relief to a quarter of a million people who have been displaced as a result of the civil conflict. We've spent a lot of time supporting agrarian reform; there's been a lot of money spent trying to bring in imports so that all the factories are not totally closed down. There has been an effort to provide fertilizer and pesticides for agriculture and we spent considerable effort in the repair of war damage. The guerrillas blow up the power system; now the government at least has a copter to fly in repair crews and provide generators to hospitals so when the power is down the hospitals can continue to function. We provide generators for water pumping stations — same thing, we find it's impossible to protect them. High power transmission lines are being knocked out all the time. We are also providing rolling stock for the railway, which is being bombed all the time. The guerrillas are trying to destroy the economy. It's their tactic of "prolonged war." It is our objective to keep the economy going. Now, we are beginning, at long last, to turn to standard development concerns — like education and basic health services.

FORUM: What criteria should be used in determining the amount and the composition of U.S. bilateral assistance to the countries of Central America?

HINTON: Well, ideally, for the long run, I think in Central America or Latin America as a whole, we ought to go back to some of the basic concepts of the Alliance for Progress, which was really not understood. It's a shame that we didn't stay with it, or we wouldn't be in the bloody

mess we're in in Central America today. It's a cooperative arrangement that involves negotiation and mutual goal setting and then self-help efforts and outside support. My own prejudices run very heavily toward the formation of human capital and education. When the economies are in such sad shape, as they have been for the last four years, the situation is more drastic. But there is a lot of room for assistance and you can start with some of the easier things. For a big program you need a long-term commitment and you go back to basics — build institutions and try to deal with the basic human needs of the population. You have got to be careful because there's a danger on the upside — you can put too much money in. It is very important that the programs be Central American, or at least cooperative, and not something just made up by the United States.

FORUM: What role should human rights play in this policy?

HINTON: Well, I think that our commitment to human rights is basic. It is a consideration that has got to be pursued, and I think that is one of the reasons why aid programs, and certainly I would include the security program in El Salvador, have done a great deal for the advancement of human rights. I believe that you have got to pursue individual violations. Some of the theories that you should punish a whole country by terminating aid because there are human rights violations don't make sense to me, particularly if a country is under attack by external people from places like Havana and Managua. This is again part of the education process; it's linked to the question of the rule of law. If the legal system had worked in the early days of the leftist terrorism, and if the terrorists had been stopped by a functioning legal system or police system, there wouldn't have been a tendency for right wing groups or even police forces to take the law into their own hands. So this is an important area. Incidentally, we are still forbidden by statute from supporting police forces. There were good reasons for abolishing the old policy. On the other hand, if you can't help create counterterrorist police forces that are incorruptible and dedicated to handling the situation compatible with the rules of the game we consider to be appropriate, we're handicapping ourselves. One of the critical steps in Central America is to create a perfected investigatory capability. Now, such a thing exists in Costa Rica, and it's one reason why they haven't had so many problems. When something goes wrong, they get on it, they find the guilty party, they put him before the courts and, more or less, it works. El Salvador doesn't have any investigatory capacity that's comparable, and we are forbidden to help them. It's crazy.

FORUM: What do you believe the impact of the U.S. invasion of Grenada will be on the inter-American system and on international law?

HINTON: Many or most of the Latin American states traditionally, for legal reasons have never explicitly condoned intervention for fear of damaging the OAS. My guess, however, is that an awful large number of them privately are saying, "Right on!" There is a very serious problem here. There is not very much you can do about situations like Grenada. The situation had deteriorated considerably. There was not a government there that was representative of the people of Grenada. In the President's words, "They were a bunch of thugs that killed Bishop." What do you do?

FORUM: What types of economic and social reform do you think would contribute to stability in the region?

HINTON: This is a region with lots of problems. Think of a difficulty and they've got it. I think attention to the population dimension is critical. I've already said institution building should be our long-term goal. I would like to see an effort to go back and get the common Central American institution working again. There's some possibility that the Central American democratic community could become an important factor if some institutional content were put into that organization.