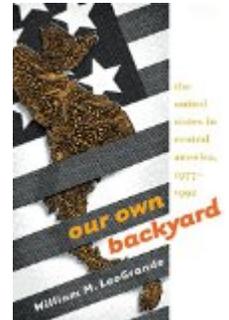


William M. LeoGrande. *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xvi + 773 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2395-8.



Reviewed by Lester D. Langley

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In his preface to this detailed study of U.S. policy toward Central America in the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations, William LeoGrande (who teaches in the Department of Government at American University) notes that his original purpose was a study of Congressional opposition to Reagan's isthmian policy. LeoGrande quickly abandoned that narrow focus, choosing instead to incorporate the parallel story of Central America's experience from 1977 to the last year of the George Bush administration. In this relatively brief span of U.S. relations with Central America, there was a sea-change in policy--from Jimmy Carter's efforts to adapt U.S. policy toward a rapidly changing isthmian politics to Reagan's determinedly hard-line approach in reversing that policy and, ultimately, to George Bush's practical decision to depart from the isthmian policy of his popular predecessor and, in effect, to admit that "Reagan's War" in Central America had failed.

Explaining those shifting currents in U.S. policy toward Central America in these critical years is a formidable task, but LeoGrande is equal to the

challenge. For one thing, he brings to this book the analytical skills of a political scientist who understands not only the dynamics of Central American history in these tumultuous years, but also the complexities of the executive-legislative wrangling over isthmian policy during the Reagan administration. For another, as consultant to the Democratic leadership in Congress in the early 1980s and subsequently as advisor to the the Democratic Policy Committee and House Democratic Task Force on Central America, LeoGrande was in an important position to assess the political struggle that ensued between the executive and legislative branches over Reagan's support of the "Contra War" (what some Nicaraguans refer to as "la Resistencia") in Nicaragua and the equally controversial decision to aid the Salvadoran government in its prosecution of a counterinsurgency against the FMLN guerrillas.

The result is a comprehensive account of U.S. policy toward Central America based on interviews with key players in Washington and in Central America, the National Security Archive, government publications, and relevant periodical

and scholarly literature. The book is divided into four parts: Part I sets the stage by providing a brief history of U.S. relations with Central America from the mid-nineteenth century, though LeoGrande's emphasis in this portion of the book is a sharp contrast between Carter's and Reagan's approaches to global issues--i.e., Carter's emphasis on detente and Reagan's pointed efforts to reverse the nation's declining influence in the world. To his credit, Carter did not look at the U.S. role in Central America through a Cold War prism, but rather with the belief that U.S. security interests could best be achieved if the United States distanced itself from entrenched dictatorships (in Nicaragua, the Somoza family). Propping up these despised regimes, critics of U.S. policy in the isthmus had long argued, meant that the United States would suffer when such tyrants were overthrown by the "inevitable revolutions" that their policies provoked. Actually, as LeoGrande makes clear, the reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua began during the Carter administration.

LeoGrande credits Carter for a constructive approach to the Nicaraguan revolution and, more important, for averting "another Cuba" in the isthmus. But the problem ran deeper than preventing the radicalization of the Nicaraguan revolution. How was it possible to advance both human rights AND stability in Central America? In the early 1960s, the John F. Kennedy administration had promoted "peaceful revolution" as a viable alternative to the "Cuban revolutionary alternative" in Latin America, yet, before his death, Kennedy had begun to acquiesce in the arming of conservative regimes in their war against domestic insurgencies. The test came in El Salvador in late 1979 and in 1980, when a reformist military regime (known by the motto of "reform and repression") ultimately succumbed under the pressure of rightist elements. By the time of the November 1980 election, it was clear that Carter's approach to Central America--a policy LeoGrande describes as both realistic and naive--was not working. As a

realist, Carter recognized that the United States could not go on sustaining the status quo in a region that had changed so dramatically, yet the president naively believed that the United States could sustain a political center capable of dealing with both the intransigent right and the radical left.

This complicated approach to the Central American conundrum made Carter look weak and ineffectual and Reagan was determined not to make that mistake. For the new president and those on his foreign policy team, Central America was clearly a test case in the East-West struggle. Human rights and socioeconomic issues were important concerns, certainly, but stability and security interests must be paramount. With Alexander Haig as secretary of state and Thomas Enders as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Central America would be made a test case for drawing the line. Some of Reagan's advisors were taken aback by Haig's bellicosity. At a meeting of the National Security Council at Blair House before the inauguration, Haig shocked the group with the suggestion that the United States invade Cuba! A few days after Reagan took the oath of office, Haig renewed his hard-line approach by arguing that the source of the Salvadoran guerrilla insurrection was Cuba. Aiding the Salvadoran government was not sufficient. Haig may have frightened most of the Reagan team with such talk, but he did persuade the military that increased aid to El Salvador made sense. (The military did not share Haig's belief that such aid would lead to a quick victory, however.)

In February 1981, the State Department issued its famous White Paper on El Salvador (*Communist Interference in El Salvador*). By the time its fundamental arguments had been called into question, the National Security Council had already laid out the basic changes in U.S. policy toward El Salvador. In El Salvador, the sharp turn in U.S. policy may have persuaded the Salvadoran military that human rights and military aid were

now "delinked." As repression increased in El Salvador, congressional Democrats began to question the shift in policy. Remembering the history of escalation in Vietnam, they were particularly concerned about the dispatch of advisors to El Salvador. Within a month, Haig was "muzzled," and stories about "another Vietnam" in El Salvador diminished, but, as LeoGrande alertly notes, the analogy with Vietnam was appropriate. The Reagan administration shifted its attention to Nicaragua. Reagan was convinced that the Sandinistas were bent on turning Nicaragua into a Leninist dictatorship. A Core Group within the administration began to layout a policy for bringing down the regime. Hardliners wanted direct military action, but the U.S. military was adamantly opposed to such a plan and the Honduran military was incapable of carrying out an invasion. The option chosen was "economic strangulation" which, it was believed, would trigger an internal revolt and enable Nicaraguan exiles ("contras") to bring down the Sandinista government or, that failing, to weaken it.

In summer 1981, Thomas Enders tried to broker an arrangement with the Sandinistas--the essential issue was a Nicaraguan pledge to cut off the flow of arms to Salvadoran guerrillas--but it was soon apparent that his efforts were having little effect on the Reagan administration. By November 1981, the hardliners within the administration had taken charge, and the fundamentals of U.S. policy toward Central America were set forth-- military and economic aid to U.S. allies, principally El Salvador; a heightened U.S. military and intelligence effort; a covert war against Nicaragua; and a campaign to persuade Congress and the public that such policies were vital to U.S. interests.

In Part II, LeoGrande shifts his focus to El Salvador during the critical years from 1982 to 1984. By the second year of the "Reagan Watch," it was clear that Haig's notion of a quick victory in Central America was a chimera and the United States

was again plunging into a quagmire, as it had done in Vietnam. Why, then, was there no reversal of policy? Here, LeoGrande offers what might appear to some readers to be a simplistic explanation-- "Once the prestige and credibility of the administration had been committed, ..., there was no turning back" (p. 149). At that time, however, Reagan still had considerable leeway, at least in the short run, to expand operations in Central America through military exercises, intelligence operations, and, of course, by a covert war against Nicaragua. To win in Central America meant a longer commitment and that would require support from an increasingly skeptical congress.

In detailing the twists and turns in this two-year battle, LeoGrande is a skillful analyst. Administration spokespersons on Capitol Hill had to contend not only with the sharp criticism of liberal Democrats (who reminded their colleagues about the refusal of the Salvadoran government to negotiate with the guerrillas) but even the growing concerns of moderate Republicans (i.e., Sen. Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas), who asked Thomas Enders, "Can you see the light at the end of the tunnel?" (p. 157). Yet every effort to stymie the president floundered because Democratic leaders such as Speaker Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts or House Majority leader Jim Wright of Texas did not wish to "McGovernize" the Democratic Party by cutting off aid to the interim government of Jose Napoleon Duarte.

The situation in El Salvador worsened with rapid emergence of ex-major Robert D'Aubuisson (known to be a member of the infamous death squads) and a new political party created in 1981, the National Republican Alliance, known as ARENA from its Spanish acronym. D'Aubuisson vilified Duarte and the Christian Democrats as communists and swore to put them on trial if ARENA won the election. When it seemed probable that a coalition of old-line rightists from the military's National Conciliation Party would join with ARENA to make D'Aubuisson provisional president,

U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton managed to persuade Salvadoran military leaders that such a prospect might indeed result in a shutdown of U.S. economic aid. The strategy worked, but the price was high: Hinton had to depend on the Salvadoran military to keep D'Aubuisson out of the Salvadoran presidency. Once the chosen candidate (Alvaro Magana) was safely installed, Washington began moving to ensure that regular presidential elections would be scheduled and that the provisional government would undertake meaningful actions (i.e., in safeguarding human rights and advancing the 1980 agrarian reform law) to ensure continuing economic aid. (In 1982, Congress approved the Caribbean Basin Initiative, ostensibly designed to address trade problems of smaller insular Caribbean countries but in actuality to serve as a conduit for aid to El Salvador.) MagaNa was an ineffectual leader, however. When the Salvadoran Constituent Assembly delivered a virtual deathblow to the "Land to the Tiller" law (not a part of the original Agrarian Reform law but enacted by decree under pressure from the United States), a measure designed to transfer small plots (under seventeen acres) to the tenants and sharecroppers that worked the land, there was yet another threatened cutoff of aid.

Again Hinton brokered a deal. Again the price was high: the elections were a success, certainly, but El Salvador's abysmal human rights record and the right's virtual gutting of the agrarian reform meant that suspicions in Congress remained. Though the State Department continued to give upbeat reports on improvements in El Salvador, by spring 1983, both the CIA and Pentagon were in general agreement that without large infusions of military aid, El Salvador was in danger of collapsing. White House hardliners argued that any suggestion of negotiation between the Salvadoran government and the guerrillas would only worsen the situation. The State Department, they argued, had failed in its stewardship of Salvadoran policy. Thomas Enders and Deane Hinton, key players in Reagan's Salvadoran policy, came under assault

and were fired. The "War Party" now took control of Salvadoran policy. As Congressional criticism heightened, Reagan himself joined the fray, using rhetoric very similar to that employed by President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s and President Harry S. Truman in the late 1940s. In October 1983 came the Grenada invasion. Congressional Democrats grew wary. The polls were on their side, as they had been from the beginning of debate over Reagan's course in Central America, yet they were wary of going head-to-head with a popular president.

In summer 1983, Reagan established the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (headed by former secretary of state Henry Kissinger). The report of the Commission essentially summarized the administration's Central American policy: Cuba and the Soviet Union were to blame for the isthmian crisis, and the United States was committed to socioeconomic justice in Central America and a political solution in the region. Predictably, the report had little impact on Congress, but the administration persisted. In the 1984 Salvadoran presidential election, it found in Duarte a convenient foil to D'Aubuisson. Duarte had the kind of reputation liberal Democrats admired and he was an effective spokesman for Reagan's hardline policy. Reagan's trouncing of Walter Mondale in the November 1984 election made Democrats even more reluctant to challenge the president. Within two years it became clear that Duarte could not deliver on his pledge to improve the lot of Salvador's poor and to end the conflict. He became, LeoGrande notes, more popular in Washington than in El Salvador. Reports on the prospects of victory became more pessimistic. Reagan's persistence had paid off, however. The president had thwarted opposition to his policy early on, kept aid going to the Salvadoran military, and even flouted the spirit and letter of the law. But Reagan never had to account for these violations because the Democratic opposition could never muster the support necessary to confront him. By the late 1980s, as both Reagan's and

Duarte's terms were ending, El Salvador virtually disappeared from public view.

In Part III, LeoGrande shifts his attention to Nicaragua. The administration's preoccupation with El Salvador during Reagan's first term provided the hardliners with a certain amount of leeway in pursuing the covert war against Nicaragua. Publicly, Enders denounced the Sandinistas as marxists-leninists; privately the Reaganites solicited support for a tougher policy from several Latin American governments (Argentina was the likeliest candidate) and brought heavy pressure against several isthmian governments, especially Honduras. Yet, even with the distraction of El Salvador, Congress was already expressing its concern with the contra war. In 1982, Liberal Democrats tried and failed to cut off funding for the war against the Sandinistas. They failed, but in the debate, Congress approved the so-called "Boland Amendment" (after Rep. Edward Boland), which, as LeoGrande alertly notes, was NOT designed to halt the contra war but only to reassure Congress (and, presumably, the U.S. public) that the moneys would not be used to bring down the Sandinistas. Throughout 1982 and into 1983, as liberal Democrats were raising concerns about Reagan's purpose in waging the contra war, Boland was there to reassure his colleagues about the limited aims of U.S. policy. Yet it was clear that the administration had little intention of brooking congressional opposition to its policies. As it had learned in El Salvador, persistence and determination would ultimately prove successful, even as it became obvious that the contras offered no realistic political agenda in Nicaragua. By spring 1983, even the traditionalist Boland had become pessimistic: he joined Rep. Clement Zablocki (D-Wis.) in proposing a new amendment (the "second Boland amendment") which forbade further funding of the covert war, but did offer aid to Central American governments who wished to interdict the smuggling of arms through their territories. As Congress plunged into the debate, the U.S. military under-

took a major exercise in Honduras. But Boland-Zablocki passed the House in July 1983. The reaction of a senior National Security Council official was chilling: "It requires no modification in our plans." Doubtless, the official knew that such restrictions on contra aid could never survive in a Senate where Republicans dominated. In the end, the two legislative bodies thrashed out a compromise. It was a Pyrrhic victory: By the time of the Grenada invasion (October 1983), the House had taken nine votes on contra aid and the administration had won only one. But the covert war continued, and Democrats realized that if they were going to stop the covert war, they would have to do so in the 1984 election year.

Despite Reagan's overwhelming victory in the November 1984 presidential election, however, the struggle in Congress to end contra aid would be won in 1985. The hardliners in the administration and Congress simply went too far: first, there was the secret mining of Nicaraguan harbors, designed not to interdict arms, but to undermine the Nicaraguan economy; then, the verbal assaults on the character of congressional Democrats trying to create a dialogue with Nicaraguan leaders by Rep. Newt Gingrich (Rep., Ga.). Moderates who had thought the Boland amendment was too severe now began to turn against the covert war. Stymied in the Congress, the hardliners found new sources of support. Casey found a way to pay for the contra war with the CIA budget. Later, of course, Reagan had another "operative" within the White House to ensure continuing support for the contras--Col. Oliver North. It was North who concocted the plan for diverting monies from the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran to the contra war. In the aftermath of Reagan's November 1984 victory, as national polls showed an escalation of sentiments against the president's policies in Central America, the opposition in Congress continually weakened. This was nothing new in U. S. history. Harry Truman had capitalized on congressional worries about being too soft on communism. During the Mexican War, President James K.

Polk had wrenched continuing support for an aggressive campaign against Mexico because his outspoken congressional opponents did not wish to be accused of failing to support U.S. soldiers. In June 1985, when extending the Boland prohibition on military aid came up for a vote, liberal Democrats suffered a defeat. O'Neill explained the Democratic defections: "They're afraid. They're afraid of Ronald Reagan. They think Reagan is supreme" (p. 435).

O'Neill was right about one thing. Reagan was a supreme communicator. In 1985 and 1986, he managed to deflect congressional criticism of his Nicaraguan policy by focussing on the evil nature of the Sandinistas. Contra aid was restored, even as most in congress believed that the \$100 million in funds that went to the contras in fiscal 1986 would end the war. The Contadora peace negotiations (the provenance of which had been a meeting of the foreign ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama in January 1983) seemed dead in the water. But, in late 1986, revelations over the diversion of funds to the contras by North began having an impact on the president's razor-thin majority in the Congress. Reagan's popularity plummeted. There were embarrassing divisions within the contra leadership. The majority report on Iran-contra dutifully blamed Reagan for the secrecy and deception committed by his appointees, yet neither Democrats nor Republicans wanted to put the country through another constitutional crisis. The president had maintained his ignorance about the diversion of funds; Congress accepted his explanation. Contra aid continued, but the divisions within the Congress over the contra war deepened.

What Central Americans and many North Americans now called "Reagan's War" began to unravel in 1987. Wounded by the Iran-contra revelations, Reagan hit upon the notion of keeping contra aid going by proposing that Speaker of the House Jim Wright join him in a joint peace initiative in Central America. Wright knew the political

risks, but he relished the role of peacemaker. The plan was announced in August 1987. In its essentials, it called for a cease-fire in Nicaragua, a suspension of U.S. and Soviet bloc aid once the cease-fire went into effect, lifting of the embargo, the lifting of Nicaragua's state of emergency, amnesty for the contras, and a reconciliation among the warring factions in Nicaragua. There was even a promise of including Nicaragua in a U.S. economic aid package for Central America. Both Congress and the administration divided over the plan. Many were skeptical about its acceptance by the Sandinistas. Hardliners leaked details of the plan, hoping to provoke the Nicaraguan government into denouncing it.

What salvaged the plan was the announcement of a summit meeting by the five Central American presidents in Esquipulas, Guatemala. The meeting had come about largely due to the efforts of Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, who had won the 1986 Costa Rican presidential election with a courageous peace campaign. Democrats were ecstatic when they learned the details--a pledge of democratic pluralism, free elections, a ceasefire, amnesty, and the pledge of reconciliation. The Reagan administration had not planned on this eventuality, but the president got assurances from Duarte and Honduran president JosE Azcona that they would not sign. Arias outfoxed his U.S. counterpart: He locked the presidents in a room and refused to let them out until they had signed! Unintentionally, the Reagan-Wright plan had spurred the Central Americans into fashioning a peace plan, though the president and the speaker soon began quarreling. Central American emissaries were talking to Wright, not Reagan. By early 1988, it was apparent that Central not North Americans were directing the course of affairs in the isthmus. Arias again played a key role in getting the Sandinistas to open negotiations with the contras. Support for contra aid in Washington virtually disappeared. The last significant vote came on a motion for non-lethal aid, a Democratic proposal designed to mitigate Repub-

lican bitterness. When it went down to defeat, Reagan was ecstatic: now the entire country would see who had finally betrayed the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters." A cabal of vindictive Republicans set out to destroy Jim Wright. In Nicaragua, a truce hammered out between the government and the contras had unraveled and opposition to the government had become more vocal. In July 1988, opposition political leaders launched a major rally in Nandaime, which provoked a riot. The next month, as the U.S. presidential campaign was getting into full swing, Republicans led by Sen. Robert Dole (Rep., Kansas) hoped to force a vote on contra aid and perhaps embarrass the Democrats. (Democratic vice-presidential candidate Sen. Lloyd Bentsen was a contra supporter.) But this time, conservative southern Democrats sided with the Democratic leadership. Ronald Reagan's last effort to revive contra aid went down in defeat. There was no reconciliation between Washington and Managua, however. Nicaragua was thrown into economic chaos. Contras who had gone to Honduras were launching hit-and-run raids. In November, vice-president George Bush handily defeated Michael Dukakis in the presidential election. Asked to comment on his policy toward Nicaragua, the president-elect said, "I will press to keep pressure on the Sandinistas to keep their commitment ... to democracy and freedom" (p.549).

In Part IV, LeoGrande details the subtle but crucial differences between Reagan's and Bush's approach to Central America. Unlike his successor, Reagan had no fallback position in Nicaragua. Bush worked actively against them, threatening military exercises, helping the Nicaraguan opposition, but he was willing to live with them if they kept their promise of a free election. When the opposition candidate Violeta Chamorro unexpectedly won the Nicaraguan presidency in 1990, Bush rejoiced; he lifted the economic embargo and pressed Congress to provide much needed economic aid. But when President Chamorro came to Washington in April 1989 to solicit that aid, few in

Congress showed up to listen to her speech. Nicaragua had been quickly forgotten.

The denouement of Reagan's policy in El Salvador followed a different pattern. In the 1988 Salvadoran elections, the ARENA party triumphed. The victor (Alfredo Cristiani) was the political antithesis of the fiery Roberto D'Aubuisson. In 1984, Duarte had pledged economic recovery and an end to the war; he had failed. Cristiani made a similar pledge. Perhaps remembering Duarte's tolerance of military abuses, congressional liberals vowed to hold Salvadoran aid conditional on living up to Cristiani's promise to end the war and guarantee human rights. When the resurgent military balked at negotiations, however, the guerrillas launched an urban offensive in November 1989. Their initial success prompted a revival of the death squads and harassment of the political opposition. Soldiers murdered six Jesuits at the Central American University. Two things seemed clear by these events: the guerrillas were still a powerful force and civilians could not control the military. But the cumulative impact of these events in the Bush administration and in the Congress was to reinforce arguments for a negotiated settlement. Though the peace process would require another two years to reach finality, the accord reached between the guerrillas and the Salvadoran government in early 1992 effectively brought to an end Reagan's "other war" in Central America.

LeoGrande's sentiments about the folly of Reagan's policy in Central America are apparent throughout this book, yet I found the conclusion a balanced and fair summing up. Hardliners were illogical in their arguments about the effectiveness of contra aid; liberals should concede that without the pressure of the Reagan administration, the Sandinistas would not have agreed to an election in 1990. Nicaraguans paid a heavy price for his "saving" of their country. Similarly, there was no clear-cut victory in El Salvador. Military aid in 1981 prevented a guerrilla triumph, doubt-

less, but a billion dollars in economic assistance did not bring a guerrilla defeat. The only certainty was the death of 80,000 Salvadorans, most of them victims of government forces.

In brief, the United States neither won nor lost in Central America. The nation avoided "another Vietnam," but the Central American experience did not provide U.S. leaders with any clear prescription for reconciling the often conflictive demands of waging war abroad and maintaining the nation's democratic traditions.

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