

Salvador's General Blandon on U.S. policy

The following is excerpted from an unedited transcript of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's "Conference on Low-Intensity Warfare," held at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., Jan. 14-15, 1986.

Two very distinct, even deeply hostile, tendencies in strategic thinking and philosophy governing the policy-making of the U.S. government emerged in the course of the conference. The two are based on wholly different conceptions of the nature and purpose of the American republic.

The conference was opened by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who situated the problem of use of military force in the experience "from St. Augustine to Aquinas to Grotius"—the struggle to establish republican nation states as the vehicle to defend human dignity. He called for the economic development of regions, like Central America, where poverty has fed low-intensity conflict, and implied use of military capabilities for economic projects. "The problem then," said the Secretary, "is what forms of government, what kinds of economic systems, are most in accord with human realities and conduce to the betterment of mankind? On our own terms, we can compete with shovels and win. Our adversaries require guns."

Directly opposing this view was former head of the U.S. Southern Command, Gen. Paul Gorman, who declared: "I believe that the U.S. value system and experience is essentially unique and non-exportable. . . ." He advocated, as he has repeatedly, "use of limited force" as an element of cynical geopolitical policy, mere projection-of-power exercise with no higher goal for the peoples of the arena of conflict. This view was echoed by Secretary of State George Shultz, whose State Department has persisted in demanding harsh austerity policies destructive to the economy of El Salvador, but in compliance with the conditionalities on foreign debt of the International Monetary Fund.

The following is excerpted from the replies to Gorman. The speakers are Gen. Adolfo Blandon, chief of staff of the Salvadoran Army, who was in the audience, and Gen. John Galvin, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command.

General Blandon: [As interpreted from Spanish] . . . Circumstantially, I've been invited to attend this meeting, and I'm very pleased to be here present with you all.

We are speaking of how to confront low-intensity warfare, although I should mention to you that I think this is very high-intensity warfare, as far as we're concerned. (Laughter) And I really can't say it any other way after being involved

in it for the last five years.

I think one of the most important things that we need to address is really how does the U.S. plan to win the confidence and the hearts and minds of the Latin American people. I regret to inform you that after a very recent trip to South America, what I bring back is really a total disillusion on the part of South Americans to the U.S. allied commission.

And it's really because there has been a loss of confidence, and you don't really win confidence just by military assistance. It's gained not only through assistance, obviously, but also how you treat other people, how do you look upon them, how do you treat them as co-equals? And it's a question that we ask ourselves, the Latin Americans, how is it that the United States can provide millions and millions in assistance to countries that are so far away, when we are really at your back door?

And if it's so important to see that the Latin American

Latin America represents a great opportunity for the United States. We look to the U.S. as a model, the only model for the future. . . . If you cannot take this into account, and do it quickly, then you better begin to run now, and don't look back, because you will not get a second chance.

countries are deciding for democracy, as we have in at least Guatemala yesterday—why is it that at the moments when the countries most need U.S. assistance for their restructuring and reconstruction of what's happened to them in these moments of very high-intensity warfare—at this moment, the tendency is to weaken them. As we see in my particular country, where you have a nation of democracy, President Duarte is everyday required to make decisions that really weaken him.

So fundamentally, I go back to my question—what is it that the United States plans to do to win those hearts, to win those minds, of the Latin American people? And if it's true that these people are really yearning towards democracy, there comes a point where they cease to be a people and become really a rabble, because they do end up feeling rather than thinking. They feel hunger, they feel the climatological conditions, they feel for a want of education, and eventually, they feel for many things that are not there for them.

What then is the U.S. to do if we see that this road begins to accelerate, where there won't be the support that's required? Where will this road take us?

General Gorman: You can see that we have not, along the lessons of Vietnam to draw upon—those of us who have been advantaged by being in a position to listen to mentors like you just heard, have learned a great deal from their experiences. And the teaching goes on day by day. Jack, do you want to comment?

General Galvin: I'd like to bring up something that Congressman Dave McCurdy mentioned and I think others have mentioned in here, and that is certainly in the direction that General Blandon has taken: Anything that we do, with reference to the Third World—specifically in this case toward Latin America—has to be part of a much larger overall plan. For one single example, to be brief, I don't see how you can solve problems—military problems in Latin America or problems that are stability problems—if there isn't some sincere and large effort to overcome the debt situation:

The remarks of General Blandon at the conclusion of the afternoon panel discussion:

[Interpreter translating from Spanish] I hope I am incorrect in my assumption that from what I've heard all day long here today, it appears to me that the United States really doesn't have a comprehensive strategic plan to deal with this threat that we confront today. (Applause)

If that is in fact the case, then all I can say is, you had

better start running and don't look back because you don't have much time left.

I think that today the Latin American people and the countries of Latin America are presenting to the United States a brilliant opportunity. They have opened the doors to democracy.

We are fighting for democracy, justice, and for liberty. And we all look North, with faith and hope. As Secretary Shultz mentioned today at noon, it is something that animates this struggle that we are now embarked on. But it is necessary to plan and comprehensively carry forth the program. And that plan should take into consideration the comprehension, the understanding, the assistance and the faith of the American people.

Note: Only a few days after General Blandon's remarks and the conclusion of this conference, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Edwin Corr demanded that President Napoleon Duarte adopt a harsh set of economic austerity measures, as stipulated by the International Monetary Fund for refinancing of the Salvadoran debt. Duarte reportedly protested, saying that if he implemented the measures demanded, there would be suffering among his people, and he would be overthrown in a military coup. The ambassador replied: "You implement the measures. I'll worry about the coup."

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