



On Central America, U.S. dailies parrot Reagan line

A Media Alliance study documents pervasive bias in daily newspaper coverage of Arias peace plan

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1966, when the Bay Guardian started publishing, the mainstream press was virtually unanimous in refusing to challenge U.S. policy in Vietnam — or even do much critical reporting or editorial writing on our misbegotten military involvement in that Asian civil war.

The criticism came largely from Ramparts magazine, the underground press and those of us who came to be known as the alternative press.

Today, 21 years later, the mainstream press, with some notable exceptions, is once again refusing to challenge the policies of an administration obsessed with military solutions, and once again allowing the administration to set the news and editorial agenda — this time in Central America.

There are many examples of mainstream press bias in Central America coverage, as this timely and pertinent Media Alliance study demonstrates. We're pleased to publish it just days before a verification and compliance commission is slated to visit Central America Jan. 15th.

We hope the mainstream press will begin to challenge the administration's line and help see that history doesn't repeat itself.

By Jeff Gillenkirk

ON AUG. 17, 1987, the arrest of two lawyers participating in a Managua demonstration for defying state security laws received prominent coverage in U.S. newspapers. The papers quoted Reagan administration charges that the arrests were proof of Nicaragua's failure to live up to the spirit of the peace plan signed ten days earlier by the

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leaders of five Central American countries. The two lawyers were released after serving 24 days in jail.

On Sept. 9, 1987, two high school students were arrested on their way to school in San Salvador. El Salvador's National Police charged Carlos Elias Menjivar and Carlos Adalberto Menjivar, members of the Federation of High School Students, with distributing rebel propaganda. According to the independent Mexico City press agency Sal Press-Notial, the two students were tortured with electric shock and other methods while being held for investigation.

After 12 days, Carlos Elias was released. Carlos Adalberto was transferred to San Salvador's Marina prison and released in November under the government's amnesty plan. The incident received virtually no mention in the American press.

The two cases highlight the findings of a recent study conducted by the San Francisco-based Media Alliance, a nonprofit organization of local media professionals. The study examined how major local and national newspapers covered the Central America peace plan authored by Costa Rica President Oscar Arias and signed by the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras Aug. 7th.

For a period of 42 days — between Aug. 5th and Sept. 15th — members of the Media Alliance Central America Committee monitored seven national and local daily newspapers — The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the San Jose Mercury News, the San Francisco Chronicle, the San Francisco Examiner and the Oakland Tribune — for their coverage of the Arias peace plan. The committee repeated the process for a ten-day follow-up period, between Nov. 30th and Dec. 9th. Altogether, the committee members read, sorted and analyzed a total of 496 individual articles and editorials.

Among other things, the study found:

■ More than 80 percent of the articles published during the first six weeks after the signing of the plan focused entirely or almost entirely on Nicaragua — the Reagan administration's demands on Nicaragua's Sandinista gov-

ernment, the prospects for renewed contra aid or the extent to which Nicaragua was abiding by the Arias plan.

■ While the seven newspapers published numerous articles critical of the Sandinistas and their efforts to comply with the plan, serious human rights problems and violations of the plan by the governments of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala were largely unreported.

■ Sources quoted for comments and analysis in the seven papers were almost always either administration officials, contra leaders or representatives of other conservative organizations that advocate military resolutions to the region's political conflicts.

■ Editors at the seven papers, when contacted for this article, generally acknowledged that the national press has allowed the Reagan administration to set the tone for Central America news coverage.

THE MOST striking finding of the study is the overwhelming emphasis the seven papers placed on Nicaragua's compliance with the Arias plan and the virtual blackout on similar news involving the four other signers. During the initial study period, for example, the New York Times ran 84 items on the Arias plan, the most of any paper in the study. Fifty-seven of those articles — 67.8 percent — pertained exclusively to Nicaragua.

During the same period, the Times

published only four articles on El Salvador's compliance, one on Honduras, one on Costa Rica and 17 on the impacts of the plan in general. The paper did not publish a single article on Guatemala during this period.

Coverage by the Los Angeles Times was even more skewed. Of its 82 items, 67 — 81 percent — focused on Nicaragua. The paper published four articles pertaining to El Salvador, and not a single article on any of the other Arias plan signatories. The four Bay Area papers demonstrated similar patterns of coverage (see chart below).

An independent analysis of the New York Times' Central America coverage by a national media watchdog group came to very similar conclusions. The New York-based Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found that, during a 90-day period beginning Aug. 7th, the Times devoted more than three times as many column inches of news space to Nicaragua than it did to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador combined.

During the initial study period, Nicaragua's appointment of its National Reconciliation Commission, the reopening of the opposition newspaper La Prensa and the Catholic Church radio station Radio Catolica, offers of a cease-fire with the contras — and the Reagan administration's skepticism about it all — received extensive, prominent coverage in the seven papers studied. The failure of Honduras and Guatemala to take similar steps received no coverage.

Nicaragua has not been perfect in its compliance with the Arias plan. It has released only 1,000 of its estimated 6,000 political prisoners. But the skewed coverage leaves the impression that Nicaragua bears sole responsibility for the success or failure of the Arias plan. The plan, however, does not differentiate between the responsibilities of the five signatories — each country must take the same steps and make the same commitments to peace in the region. Each must commit itself to social justice, human rights and a free press, and each must cease to allow outside military forces to use its territory as a staging area for efforts to destabilize other governments in the area.

All seven papers monitored, however, appear to have accepted the administration position that Nicaragua is the major obstacle to peace in the region. An Aug. 20th Examiner editorial, for example, characterized the "Soviet-aligned Sandinista regime" as "the major destabilizing force in the region," and totally ignored the responsibilities of the four other nations to implement the Arias plan. When Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the New York Times reported Oct. 28th that he was being honored "for a plan designed to end the war in Nicaragua."

"During the study period, however, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras all have allowed serious human rights violations to continue. Prominent government critics have been arrested and tortured in El Salvador, and reputed death squad killers have been freed. Honduras has allowed the contras to continue to use

its territory to stage attacks on Nicaragua, and Guatemala has broken off talks with its rebels.

None of those incidents received significant coverage in the seven U.S. papers.

ONE OF THE RARE exceptions to the blackout was the Nov. 10th San Francisco Examiner report that Guatemala's government had broken off negotiations for a cease-fire with that country's rebel forces — negotiations called for in the Arias plan. "There will be no more conversations with the guerrillas," the Examiner quoted Guatemala President Vinicio Cerezo as saying.

According to that report, then, the Arias peace process had ground to a halt in the very country in which the August accord was signed, and a nation in which tens of thousands of Mayan, Quiche and other indigenous peoples have been slaughtered by a succession of military-dominated regimes. Yet no other paper in the study picked up the story.

One can imagine how the Reagan administration — and the press — would react if the Sandinistas suddenly announced that they would no longer abide by the Arias plan and had abandoned all interest in peace talks with the contras.

When informed of the Examiner's story, Christopher Wren, assistant foreign editor at the New York Times, noted that the paper's Central America correspondent, James LeMoyné, had made a visit to Guatemala between Nov. 13th and Nov. 21st. "I assume he reported out of there, or afterward, perhaps," Wren said. "He's very pro-life."

Not about Guatemala, though. On Nov. 15th, LeMoyné reported from Honduras how support for the contras by that government is no longer certain (analysis later contradicted by Examiner correspondent Mary Jo McConahay). On Nov. 22nd, he filed a story from Mexico City portraying Salvadoran leftist leaders on the eve of their return home. No stories at all have appeared recently in the New York Times on Guatemala.

Ray Bonner, the former New York Times Central America correspondent who was reportedly removed from that beat when his reporting too often contradicted Reagan administration coverage, said he finds the pattern of coverage in the region "disturbing." In a telephone interview from his New York office, Bonner noted, "If El Salvador is the undercovered story, Guatemala is the uncovered story. Nobody's been paying any attention to Guatemala since the 1954 coup."

Bonner, the author of *Weakness and Deceit*, a 1984 book on U.S. policy in El Salvador, said he is not surprised by the preoccupation the press seems to have with Nicaragua. The coverage, he said, reflects the administration's political priorities in the region.

"It's almost axiomatic," he noted, "Any administration has that clout."

Bonner said he agrees that the press

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Number of articles/items pertaining to Central America peace plan, Aug. 5-Sept. 15, 1987*

| | TOTAL | NICARAGUA | SALVADOR | GUATEMALA | HONDURAS | COSTA RICA | PLAN IN GENERAL |
|--------------|-------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|------------|-----------------|
| NY TIMES | 84 | 57 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 17 |
| LA TIMES | 82 | 67 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| CHRONICLE | 67 | 43 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 |
| EXAMINER | 42 | 19 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 17 |
| MERCURY NEWS | 56 | 43 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 11 |
| TRIBUNE | 41 | 31 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| MONITOR | 34 | 22 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |

*In a follow-up study between Nov. 30th and Dec. 9th, the pattern was very similar: Of 66 stories, 47 were on Nicaragua, 15 on El Salvador, none on Guatemala and one each on Costa Rica and Honduras.

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"has an obligation to report what the administration is saying." However, he added, "It also has an obligation to go beyond it."

"For a lot of these major papers," he said, "for every person they have covering the State Department, the White House and the Pentagon, they ought to have a second person on the beat to report what really lies behind what they're saying."

OTHER THAN Nicaragua, the only country to receive any significant coverage, the study found, was El Salvador, where the U.S.-backed government has been battling leftist insurgents for nearly ten years. The coverage during the study period, however, was neither comprehensive nor balanced.

When the Salvadoran government took nearly a month to name its National Reconciliation Commission, none of the seven papers took any note (the Sandinistas had taken that action two weeks earlier). When the government finally did appoint its commission, in September, it excluded government critics except for a member of a far-right opposition party.

Only the Christian Science Monitor reported the appointment of the commission, and not until a week later, on Sept. 15th. The Monitor's Salvadoran correspondent, Chris Norton, also reported that since the Arias plan had been signed, more than a dozen labor activists had been arrested and the head of the university workers' union had been kidnapped.

"If this were going on in Nicaragua," one political analyst was quoted as saying, "international observers would be going crazy."

Since that time, the situation in El Salvador has hardly improved. Two human rights leaders have been gunned down, and peace talks between the government and leftist forces have

ceased. An amnesty bill absolving the perpetrators of El Salvador's more than 30,000 unsolved civilian murders has been passed and the notorious death squads have resumed their killings and "disappearances" throughout the country.

Yet these gross human rights violations and blatant failures to comply with the Arias plan have received only a tiny fraction of the attention the press has given to what can only be called far milder problems in Nicaragua.

Honduras, which has allowed the contra rebels to use its southern border as a base from which to launch raids on Nicaragua, is unquestionably a key player in the Arias peace process. If the Honduran government continues to allow the contras to use the country as a staging area, it could seriously undermine the entire plan.

By all accounts, contra camps remain in Honduras. And on Nov. 24th, Newsday reported that the U.S. has increased weapons deliveries to the contras from CIA supply bases in Honduras — a clear and unequivocal violation of the Arias plan. And while the country finally appointed its reconciliation commission (in October, six weeks after Nicaragua had done so), to date it has discussed none of the key issues the country must resolve to comply with the peace plan.

Yet Honduras received almost no attention in the seven newspapers monitored during the study period. Several papers merely mentioned in passing that Honduras, the principal U.S. ally in the region, was accused by some of the region's foreign ministers of "dragging its feet" over peace talks.

THE MOST tragic oversight, however, may be Costa Rica.

According to Costa Rica-based reporters Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, the Reagan administration has responded to Costa Rica President Arias' peace initiatives by undertaking a series of punishing moves against his country (see Bay Guardian, 9/26/87).

The U.S. suspended aid payments to Costa Rica of between \$85 million and \$140 million since the details of the plan were released last spring. Avirgan and Honey reported. The U.S. also delayed appointing a new ambassador, tried to force the resignation of a liberal Arias advisor and maneuvered to block international bank loans to Costa Rica.

That the U.S. would risk destabilizing the most solidly democratic and non-militarized country in the region is outrageous. That these moves have not been widely reported in the U.S. media is incredible.

In general, the editorial positions taken by the seven papers were consistent with the tone of their news coverage. In the news columns, Reagan administration officials and other conservative commentators were quoted frequently criticizing the Sandinistas' "sincerity" in implementing the Arias plan, and observers critical of the administration were largely ignored. On the editorial pages, that line was repeated. And almost never were the U.S. government's current actions on the Arias plan put in the context of the administration's past intransigence and policy blunders in the region.

Major exceptions to this trend appeared to be the Mercury News and the Oakland Tribune, which ran several editorials critical of the administration's policy. An Aug. 7th Mercury News editorial on the Arias plan, for example, stated that "for an administration that has consistently preferred war to diplomacy, even to the point of illegally aiding the contras after Congress cut off funds, this plan is progress." That same day, a Tribune editorial noted the Reagan administration's history of "stonewalling" Central America peace efforts.

News reports in the Mercury News and the Los Angeles Times generally made it clear that widespread opposition exists in Washington to the administration's Central America policies. However, in the New York Times, the Monitor and the Oakland and San Francisco papers, dissenting voices were noticeably absent, while objections to the Arias plan from the right — most notably by Senators Bob Dole and Jesse Helms and Representative Jack Kemp — were cited frequently.

Dole and Kemp were the only current presidential candidates whose views on the Arias plan were cited in any of the seven papers. Kemp's vigorous criticisms ("The plan is a dead-end for freedom") was given wide coverage in five of the papers.

WHEN CONTACTED for comment on the Media Alliance study, editors at the seven papers generally acknowledged that they had devoted more attention to Nicaragua than to the other countries in the region. Some also acknowledged that their coverage of Central America was a result of the administration's preoccupation with Nicaragua. But all editors denied that their papers had been giving the public an unbalanced and inaccurate picture of Central American events surrounding the Arias plan.

"We do give extensive coverage to Nicaragua, because it's a subject and issue that I think has gone to the forefront of the American consciousness as a result of the Iran-contra affair," said the New York Times' Christopher Wren. "The emphasis comes both from the administration's interest in the area and the importance of the events in the area. There's more of a developing story in Nicaragua, [while] the stories are more subtle elsewhere. But I don't think we consciously try to ignore the other parts of Central America."