

that matter, pre-eminently local in character. The citation above, from President Reagan himself, is an example of this genre of interpretation, as is ex-Secretary of State Haig's postulate that the East-West competition was being decided in El Salvador. A third would be Senator Helms' statements to the effect that Nicaragua was the first Soviet step on the road to Washington. Jeane Kirkpatrick maintained in a 1980 essay that even at that time,

the deterioration of the US position in the hemisphere has already created serious vulnerabilities where none previously existed and threatens now to confront the country with the unprecedented need to defend itself against a ring of Soviet bases on its southern flanks from Cuba to Central America.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Howard Wiarda, one of the foremost American specialists on Central America, asserted in a recent publication that "no one really believes, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, that the Soviet Union is the prime cause of the upheavals [in Central America]".<sup>3</sup> Although with the passage of time the Reagan Administration has clearly developed greater sophistication in its analysis of regional issues, this generalization is difficult to accept without reservation. As Robert Packenham once noted, with regard to US doctrine concerning the Third World, often "the rhetoric is the reality".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, even if one accepts that this kind of argument is merely rhetorical posturing, it none the less has significant and pernicious political consequences. Once there is a public perception that instability in the region is the product of Soviet meddling and that the victory of hostile forces will bring serious threats to national security, it is difficult to withdraw from regional conflicts or to accept unfavourable changes in regime. Backing off or failing to act risks being criticized as a failure to defend the vital interests one said were at stake. In other words, those who employ such rhetoric risk being trapped by it. It favours entanglement and inhibits disengagement.

One also hears frequently, from domestic liberals, radical groups in the region, Soviet commentators and others that the Soviet Union has no significant role as a source of conflict in the Caribbean

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<sup>2</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, "US Security and Latin America", in H. Wiarda, ed., *Rift and Revolution* (Washington: AEI, 1984), p. 329. The essay appeared originally in *Commentary* (January 1981).

<sup>3</sup> H. Wiarda, "The Origins of the Crisis", in *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> R. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. xix.