

# LYING LOW IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*Washington's new ambivalence towards Central America may offer the best hope yet for ending the region's devastating wars.*

BY PETER HAKIM

**G**EORGE BUSH AND HIS ADVISORS HAVE EVERY REASON TO BE pleased by developments in Central America. Since they took office, the two main objectives of US policy in the region have been accomplished: Sandinista rule has ended in Nicaragua and the Noriega regime has been deposed in Panama.

The situation has also brightened for the United States in El Salvador. Washington had seemed trapped in a no-win position, supporting a government and military that could not defeat a Marxist guerrilla insurgency, was unwilling to negotiate seriously, and was unable to control gross abuses of human rights. Now, for the first time, meaningful negotiations are underway to resolve that country's ten-year-old civil war.

What is remarkable is that these developments occurred during a period when US policy in Central America was marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. The Bush administration's approach to the region lacked both the direction and fervour of its predecessor. The Reagan White House was driven by ideological zeal and strong purpose. In Central America, Reagan charted a course with a clear set of goals and pursued them doggedly; he refused to be sidetracked either by the divisions his policies provoked in Congress or among the American people, or by the conflicts they produced with Latin American nations.

BUSH DID NOT COME TO POWER WITH STRONG IDEOLOGICAL MOORINGS. From the outset, his administration was motivated mainly by domestic political calculations and by a risk-avoiding pragmatism. The Bush White House saw itself engaged in a delicate balancing act of placating a distrustful Republican right while averting conflict with the Democrat-controlled Congress. The resulting policies were far more responsive not only to the political dynamics of Washington, but also to events in Central America. Latin Americans were, by and large, more comfortable with the Bush approach, a change that opened opportunities for US-Latin American cooperation in dealing with Central America's problems.

Ironically, the only opportunity that the US government grasped was in Panama. In May 1989, after General Noriega had annulled the country's presidential elections and sent his thugs into the streets to reassert his authority, the US turned to the Organization of American States (OAS) to deal with the Panama crisis. That effort at regional diplomacy, however, was half-hearted at best.

The OAS mission was given an impossibly short deadline of three months, and Washington's interpretation of its mandate was at odds with that of the Latin Americans. The White House wanted the OAS to pursue the same objective that its own policies had failed to accomplish – Noriega's departure from power. For their part, Latin American governments felt the task of the OAS was to negotiate a settlement among the different political groups in Panama. Since Washington was unwilling to accept any arrangement that involved a continuing role for Noriega, the OAS mission was effectively deprived of any real authority to conduct negotiations; Noriega quickly understood the situation and simply declined to deal with the OAS at all.

By September, the failure of the OAS initiative left Washington with

few options, it could either accept Noriega's continued rule or use force to oust him. The first option became increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of a rising clamour from Congress for tougher action. Criticism from both Republicans and Democrats intensified dramatically in October following Bush's decision not to support dissident Panamanian officers in their abortive coup attempt.

On 19 December, the US launched its invasion, and in defiance of Murphy's law, virtually everything that could have gone wrong went right. Troops rapidly subdued the Panamanian Defense Forces without an unacceptable loss of lives; the Panamanian population overwhelmingly supported the US action; the Panamanian opposition leaders, widely credited with having won last May's elections, agreed to take charge of a new government; and there was no serious guerrilla resistance. None of this was a sure bet; luck played a crucial role in the "success" of the invasion.

Absent from the administration's calculations, however, was any concern about the impact of the invasion in Latin America or regard for established international norms against armed intervention. Virtually every country of the region resented and condemned the US action. Moreover, it soon became clear that Washington had not prepared very effectively for the post-invasion period, and committed a series of blunders, starting with the inauguration of President Endara on a US military base, thereby compromising his claim to legitimate authority. It took the administration two months to lift its economic sanctions against Panama, and even now the economy remains in a shambles; promised US aid was delayed for many months; and US troops are still required to keep order.

None of this diminished enthusiasm back in the US, where the intervention provided an enormous boost to the Bush administration. The sniping in Washington about Bush's excessive caution and his ineffectiveness as a world leader was silenced. He and his administration gained stature and authority, and greater flexibility to deal with other international problems. However, Bush never sought to test his newly-acquired credibility elsewhere in the region. Ambiguity continued to characterize his policies elsewhere in the region.

NOWHERE WAS THAT AMBIGUITY BETTER ILLUSTRATED THAN IN NICARAGUA. For eight years, the Reagan White House had relentlessly supported the Contras in their war against the Sandinista government. More than any other initiative the Contra war came to symbolize what the Reagan presidency was about: the US had to reassert its power and influence, to stop further communist gains in this Hemisphere or elsewhere, and to challenge those gains wherever possible. While Congressional opposition brought a halt to military aid to the Contras a year before Reagan left office, he sustained to the end his campaign to revive that aid.

Bush chose not to engage in further battle with Congress over the Contras, but neither did he give up on the Contras as an instrument of US policy. Instead, the Bush administration, two months after it took office, hammered out a bipartisan agreement with congressional leaders. The Contras would be kept intact with another year of so-called humanitarian aid, but would continue to be denied military supplies.