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VENEZUELA, THE CARIBBEAN BASIN,  
AND THE CRISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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## ABSTRACT

### Venezuela, the Caribbean Basin, and the Crisis in Central America

This paper analyzes the expanding role of Venezuela in the Caribbean basin, especially since 1970, and discusses the dilemmas posed for Venezuelan foreign policy by the country's deepening involvement in Central America. Venezuela has used its oil wealth to become one of the major aid donors in the Caribbean, and Venezuelan authorities have played key roles in the Nicaraguan and El Salvadorean crises.

The paper argues that current Venezuelan policy toward the region is very similar to that of the United States: cool relations with Cuba; bilateral aid for selected countries; and strong support for the government headed by Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador. However, there are indications that Venezuelan authorities are uncomfortable with mounting domestic and international criticism of their role in Central America, including charges that Venezuela is a stalking horse for the United States in the region, that democratic Venezuela is supporting a repressive regime in El Salvador, and that Venezuela's COPEI party leaders have injected Christian Democratic ideology into foreign policy. It is suggested that while Venezuelan policymakers might like to adopt a low-profile policy toward the Caribbean basin, they will do nothing to weaken the position of Napoleon Duarte (a close personal friend of several leaders of the COPEI party) within the governing junta in El Salvador. As a result, the former democratic consensus supporting Venezuelan foreign policy will continue to erode.

## VENEZUELA, THE CARIBBEAN BASIN, AND THE CRISIS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Robert D. Bond  
Council on Foreign Relations

"We reject any attempt to transfer to the Caribbean the frictions and confrontation between the big powers or to convert it into an area of ideological and political influence. We hope regimes that are the legitimate expressions of the people's desires will be established in the area. We hope those regimes will promote the growing process of social, economic, political, and cultural development."

Luis Herrera Campins  
State of the Nation Address  
March 14, 1980

### Introduction

Venezuela has always been a part of the Caribbean basin. The country possesses a 600-mile coastline washed by the Caribbean sea, and there exists a long history of political and economic interaction with the peoples of the islands and Central America. Simón Bolívar and others in the liberation struggle sought refuge there, as did political exiles down to the present century.<sup>1</sup> And there has always been substantial trade and interchange of peoples between Venezuela and its Caribbean neighbors.

It is only in recent times, however, that Venezuela has assumed an active leadership role in the sub-region. Indeed, prior to 1969 it is fair to say that successive Venezuelan governments paid only marginal attention to the Caribbean basin (except for Cuba), tacitly acknowledging Spanish, British, and North American dominance of the area. However, during the Social Christian government of President Rafael Caldera (1969-73), Venezuela initiated a policy of a heightened Venezuelan presence in the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> For example, by the end of Caldera's term in office, the head of government of every political unit in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean except Barbados had visited Venezuela at least once, and Foreign Minister Aristides Calvani had made five major trips into the Caribbean. Subsequent administrations expanded Venezuela's influence in the Caribbean through the judicious use of petro-dollars following the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973-74. President Carlos Andres Pérez of the Acción Democrática party (AD) (1974-78) championed Panama's right to control the Canal, inaugurated a series of bilateral concessional loans to offset the higher cost of petroleum, and promoted the reintegration of Cuba into



the Latin American community. President Luís Herrera Campins of the Social Christian party (COPEI) (1979-83) expanded the program of concessional loans to finance oil purchases, contributed over \$100 million in financial assistance to Nicaragua following the revolution, assisted Jamaica with its balance-of-payment difficulties, and has been a staunch supporter of the government of José Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador. In recent years, Venezuelan foreign assistance has amounted to approximately 2 percent of its gross domestic product, most of which is earmarked for the countries of the Caribbean basin.

While the thrust of Venezuelan initiatives in the Caribbean basin is clear, the overarching goals of policy toward the sub-region remain elusive. Until the revolution in Nicaragua and the current crisis in El Salvador, Venezuela enjoyed the luxury of confronting the geopolitical and development issues of Central America and the Caribbean in relative isolation one from the other. The plethora of newly emerging nation-states in the area, most of them bitterly poor, made the region ideal for the disbursement of limited amounts of financial assistance, thereby deflecting charges that Venezuela was benefiting from high petroleum prices at the expense of its neighbors. In addition, the absence of any immediate security interests in Central America and the Caribbean permitted Venezuelan policymakers to pursue a long-term policy of gradually expanding Venezuelan influence in the region.

Today Venezuelan policymakers confront a radically different situation in the Caribbean basin--especially in Central America--than the one prevailing in the early 1970s when Venezuela's active involvement in the region began. The political climate in several Central American countries has become increasingly polarized and militarized, raising questions about Venezuela's strategy of promoting long-term stability through economic assistance. Cuba has returned to an active role in support of revolution in Latin America, supporting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and channeling arms to the guerrillas in El Salvador. The United States, reacting to deteriorating political and economic conditions in the area and to evidence of Cuban/Soviet involvement there, is attempting to reassert its traditional dominance over the Caribbean. And finally, Venezuelan policy toward the Caribbean basin has become a hotly contested partisan issue, with the government of Luís Herrera Campins attempting to promote Christian Democracy in the region while a majority of the leaders of AD are aligned with the policy of the Socialist International in support of revolutionary change.

The internationalization of conflict in the Caribbean poses a number of problems for Venezuelan foreign policy. In the analysis which follows, I develop three main themes. First, for the last decade Venezuela has been playing a major role in the Caribbean. Second, the Herrera administration strongly supports the Salvadorean junta headed by their Christian Democratic colleague, Napoleon Duarte, but the Venezuelan government is likely to press increasingly for a political solution to the Salvadorean conflict. Finally, although Venezuela can be expected to continue its active role in the region over the long term, it is at least possible that it will decrease its involvement in the near term for essentially domestic political reasons.

## The Origins and Conduct of Venezuelan Foreign Policy

Before turning to a detailed examination of Venezuelan policy toward the Caribbean basin, it is helpful to begin with a few more general observations. First, Venezuela's role in international affairs is inextricably tied to oil. Venezuela has been a major oil producer for over 50 years, and it was a cofounder of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>3</sup> Today Venezuela continues to export more petroleum than any other nation in the Western Hemisphere--an average of about 2 million barrels per day (mbd) over the last six years. Although recent discoveries in Mexico have attracted considerable attention, Venezuela's importance to the hemispheric oil trade remains undiminished. Mexico's oil exports will probably trail Venezuela's until late in the 1980s, although total Mexican production will be greater. Venezuela has proven reserves of 18 billion barrels of conventional oil, and Venezuelan authorities claim that it is highly probable that they will discover additional deposits of conventional oil which will increase proven reserves to 30 billion barrels. There also exists an additional 700 billion to 1.5 trillion barrels of heavy crude in the Orinoco oil belt, which Venezuela is now beginning to develop with a target of one million barrels per day by the year 2000.

Second, the priority foreign-policy issues for Venezuela are those that have a direct bearing upon the nation's political and economic development program.<sup>4</sup> Since 1958, Venezuela's democratic leaders have pursued a cluster of development goals: consolidation of a democratic political system; nationalization of the petroleum industry (accomplished in 1976); diversified economic growth; and greater equity in the distribution of the benefits of economic progress. This means that Venezuelan policymakers must focus on oil matters generally, OPEC, the legitimization of cartels, and bilateral trade relations with the United States. Relations with Latin America are important insofar as Venezuela does not want to be isolated on a continent of authoritarian regimes, nor does it want to be accused of benefiting from high petroleum prices at the expense of its neighbors.

Third, personal leadership plays an important role in determining Venezuelan foreign policy, especially in non-oil matters. Both tradition and the Venezuelan constitution grant the president a preponderant role in the conduct of international relations. In recent years Venezuelan presidents have tended to be their own secretaries of state, trusting in a small cadre of foreign-policy advisers. This was particularly true of the presidency of Carlos Andres Pérez, who seemed to be guided in hemispheric policy by a Bolivarian vision of a unified Latin America. The current president, Luís Herrera Campins, is more reserved and less energetic in policymaking than was Pérez, but he remains the key actor in determining foreign policy. It should also be noted that the quality of the Venezuelan foreign service is decidedly uneven, although the level of professionalization is being slowly upgraded.

Finally, over the years Venezuelan foreign policy has developed a distinctive style, perhaps as a result of ongoing attempts by Venezuela's

leaders to institutionalize democracy at home. Franklin Tugwell has characterized the foreign-policy style of Venezuela as "consociational." By this he means:

This refers not just to willingness to work together with others to resolve problems, but more important, to a strong inclination wherever possible to build institutional and associational frameworks to handle problems on a more organized, long-term basis. It also refers to a willingness to disaggregate conflicts, i.e., to prevent one issue in conflict from overlapping with others and to prevent adversarial aspects of a relationship from overriding and obscuring opportunities for cooperation in other areas.<sup>5</sup>

Examples of the preference of Venezuela's foreign-policy decision-makers for institutional mechanisms for dealing with problems include OPEC, the Andean Pact, the Latin American Economic System (SELA), and the Latin American Energy Organization (OLADE). In essence, under all of its democratic presidents, Venezuela has projected its democratic values into its foreign policy.

#### Venezuela and the Caribbean Basin from Betancourt to Herrera

During the presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt (1959-63) and Raúl Leoni (1964-68), conflict was the theme of Venezuela's relations with the Caribbean basin. Specifically, Betancourt and Leoni battled to prevent armed intervention in Venezuelan affairs from the Dominican Republic and Cuba.

The central tenet of Venezuelan foreign policy in the 1959-68 period was the "Betancourt Doctrine," which demanded the withholding of diplomatic recognition from illegitimate regimes. This doctrine was applied most importantly to two Caribbean regimes, those of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Fidel Castro in Cuba. Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, enjoyed close relations with Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-58), and correspondingly vituperative ones with Venezuelan democratic leaders. After initial attempts to establish normal relations with Trujillo, Venezuela by June 1959 had joined with other Latin American states in seeking his overthrow. For example, Venezuela openly assisted the June 14, 1959, armed invasion of the Dominican Republic originating in Cuba. In retaliation, Trujillo aided three attempts by right-wing military officers to overthrow Betancourt in 1960-62, including an assassination attempt on June 24, 1960. Ultimately Trujillo himself was assassinated on May 30, 1961, and Betancourt claimed that the policy of his government had stimulated the act.<sup>6</sup>

Hostility also characterized relations with Cuba, beginning early in 1960. During the Betancourt administration, ideological rivalry between Cuban socialism and Venezuelan democratic reformism as developmental models for Latin America was acute, with Venezuela becoming a strong advocate of civilian rule in opposition to authoritarianism of the left and right. Throughout 1960 and 1961 Venezuelan spokesmen denounced Cuban interference in Venezuelan politics.<sup>7</sup> On November 11, 1961,



Venezuela broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, and in January 1962 it voted to exclude Cuba from the inter-American system. Throughout 1962 and 1963 Venezuelan government officials repeatedly charged that Cuba was training and arming Venezuelan guerrillas, and in November of 1963 Venezuelan troops discovered a cache of arms which subsequent investigation proved to have come from Cuba. In July 1964 the OAS voted to sever diplomatic and consular relations with Cuba and to suspend trade, based on Venezuela's charges. In 1966 and 1967 Venezuela renewed its charges of Cuban subversion, and in May 1967, Venezuelan troops captured a small landing party of guerrillas led by a lieutenant of the Cuban army.

By 1969 guerrilla activities in Venezuela had become a sporadic phenomenon. Accordingly, in his inaugural address Rafael Caldera of the COPEI party announced his intention to abandon the Betancourt doctrine, replacing it with the concepts of international social justice and ideological pluralism. In his inaugural address of March 1969, Caldera explicitly stated that "public opinion favors the establishment of relations with countries of political organization and ideology different from ours, for their presence cannot be ignored."<sup>8</sup>

Under President Caldera, a new era opened in Venezuelan relations with the states of the Caribbean basin. The architect of this new Caribbean policy was Caldera's foreign minister, Aristides Calvani. Born in Trinidad and well-acquainted with the entire area, Calvani viewed the Caribbean as important to Venezuela in geopolitical terms for several reasons. First, he viewed the islands lying off Venezuela's coast as crucial in guaranteeing the safe passage of Venezuelan oil to its chief market: the east coast of the United States. Second, he was suspicious of Brazilian expansionism, and apparently believed that Brazil wanted to extend its influence through Guyana to the Caribbean.<sup>9</sup> Third, he saw the poor and backward island states as inherently unstable politically and therefore a security threat to Venezuela. Finally, he saw in the Caribbean a potential market for Venezuelan products, particularly in such areas as textiles, food processing, light industry, and petrochemicals.

Accordingly, Calvani initiated a flurry of diplomatic activity with regard to the Caribbean. Most importantly, Venezuela sought to institutionalize contacts with its Caribbean neighbors. An example is an informal consultative meeting of foreign ministers of Caribbean countries called by Venezuela and held in Caracas, November 24-26, 1971. The foreign ministers of Barbados, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad-Tobago attended and authorized Venezuela to call two more meetings to deal with regional transportation problems. In addition, in April 1973 Venezuela became the first non-English-speaking member of the Caribbean Development Bank.

The administration of Carlos Andres Pérez (1974-78) pursued essentially the same foreign-policy goals of President Caldera with regard to the Caribbean basin. For example, Pérez resumed diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba, a step which Caldera and Calvani had contemplated but

decided to postpone because of the 1973 elections. Moreover, the belief that the stability of the Caribbean states was important to the long-term security of Venezuela remained. What was new about Pérez's policy was the scale: the sudden rise in oil prices provided Venezuela with the financial resources to play a much larger role in the sub-region, extending Venezuelan influence to the Central American isthmus.

Pérez moved quickly to intensify Venezuela's ties with Central America.<sup>10</sup> In December 1974 at Puerto Ordaz, Venezuela agreed to a cash-loan plan program to offset the increase in the oil costs of Central American countries due to OPEC price increases since 1971. The scheme called for the Central American promoters to pay roughly 50 percent of the market price. The remainder was placed as a loan in the respective countries' banks. Interest was set at 8 percent, and repayment could stretch over 25 years; the estimated value of the program was \$460 million. Also at the Puerto Ordaz meeting, Venezuela announced a \$40 million loan to the Central American Bank for Economic Integration and pledged \$80 million to support a Central American coffee-producers' scheme to withhold their 1973-74 and 1974-75 crops from the market in an attempt to raise prices.

In addition to economic-assistance programs, the Pérez administration took strong stands on two political issues: the Panama Canal and the controversy over Belize. Pérez was instrumental in rounding up Latin American support for Panama's claims against the United States, and he also clandestinely financed publicity campaigns in the United States designed to swing public opinion behind the two treaties eventually negotiated.<sup>11</sup> In Belize, Pérez was mindful of the concerns of his Caribbean neighbors, announcing in November 1975 that Venezuela would not support Guatemala in the boundary controversy.

Perhaps the most controversial policy toward Central America adopted by Venezuela during the Pérez administration was support of the Sandinista Liberation Front in the revolution against Somoza in Nicaragua. In 1977 and 1978, Venezuela gave strong public and clandestine military support to groups in opposition to Somoza, and successfully opposed U.S. proposals in the Organization of American States for an inter-American peacekeeping force to separate the two sides in the Nicaraguan civil war. The Pérez administration adopted its stance of active opposition to Somoza for several reasons: (1) several leaders of Acción Democrática had a long-standing antipathy for the Somoza dynasty dating from their period in exile (1948-58) when the Somozas cooperated with Pérez Jiménez; (2) AD leaders believed that economic and social inequalities, not communist influence, were the root causes of the civil war; (3) AD leaders were opposed to U.S. intervention in the region; and (4) AD leaders believed the prospects for the emergence of a social democratic regime in Nicaragua would be increased if Somoza were overthrown sooner rather than later.<sup>12</sup>

President Luís Herrera Campins assumed office in March 1979 at a difficult juncture in Venezuelan policy toward the Caribbean basin. The Somoza regime in Nicaragua was about to be replaced by a revolutionary government; the escalating violence in El Salvador would soon

result in a military coup and the formation of a civil-military "reformist" junta; and Venezuela's relations with Cuba would worsen significantly. In response to these developments, Herrera soon fashioned a new policy toward the sub-region which combined the traditional support for democratic values and the use of oil as a political tool with a dramatically new orientation--the promotion of Christian Democratic interests.

The Herrera administration, like its two predecessors, viewed a politically stable and economically prosperous Caribbean basin as enhancing the long-term security interests of Venezuela. Herrera and his advisers believed that Venezuela should continue to assist its more disadvantaged neighbors in meeting their oil requirements and development aspirations. As a result, the Herrera government decided to extend the program of financial and technical assistance to the Caribbean begun six years earlier by President Pérez. More specifically, Venezuela and Mexico agreed to supply equal shares of the oil needs of nine Caribbean countries (Barbados, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic), and to extend loans for 30 percent of the oil bills for a five-year period at 4 percent interest, which could be converted to 20-year loans at 2 percent if invested in high-priority economic and energy development projects. The cost of this program is estimated at \$700 million per year. Venezuela initiated the proposal, with Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons Calderon Berti playing the leading role, as a way of promoting stability in a region where several countries are facing serious economic problems due to oil imports. However, it should be noted that the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry has failed to develop or implement a program of economic assistance for the Caribbean basin.

The new Christian Democratic orientation of Venezuelan foreign policy toward the Caribbean basin was most evident in the cases of Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas enjoyed the strong support of the Pérez administration and the Socialist International generally, President Herrera has added an ideological dimension to Venezuelan policy toward the Nicaraguan government. During his visit to Nicaragua in 1980, Herrera conspicuously sounded the praises of democratic government and cautioned the Sandinista leaders that continued Venezuelan aid would depend on the acceptance of democratic leaders, especially Christian Democrats, into the highest levels of government.

Venezuelan-Cuban relations are at their lowest point since the mid-1960s. Although relations with Havana began to cool toward the end of the Pérez administration, they have deteriorated significantly under Herrera's government. One case of tension was the treatment of Cubans, beginning in 1975, who sought asylum by taking refuge in the Venezuelan embassy in Havana. Cuba argued that such persons were common criminals, lacking the right to seek asylum, while Venezuela maintained that they were political dissidents and therefore eligible for guarantees of safe conduct off the island. By April 1980, the controversy had escalated to the point that both countries recalled their ambassadors. For all practical purposes, the controversy over the right of asylum amounted to the end of constructive ties between

Venezuela and Cuba. A second source of tension was the decision by a Venezuelan military tribunal in September 1980 to acquit four anti-Castro Cuban terrorists believed to have been responsible for the sabotage in October 1976 of a Cuban airliner which crashed off Barbados at the cost of 73 lives. While the Herrera administration claimed to be powerless to reverse the decision, this assertion was greeted by skepticism in Havana, and Cuban diplomatic personnel were withdrawn from Caracas. Although the two governments have not formally broken diplomatic ties, relations can be accurately characterized as "very cold"--the phrase used by President Herrera in response to a question during his visit to Mexico in April 1981.

The clearest indication of the Christian Democratic orientation of the Caribbean policy of the Herrera administration is in El Salvador, where Venezuela is staunchly supporting the junta. Following the reorganization of the junta in December 1980, when José Napoleon Duarte was named president, the Herrera administration issued a statement of approval and indicated that its economic support would continue. In contrast, AD leaders have called for the suspension of economic aid until the Salvadorean junta begins negotiations with the FDR/DRU coalition.

The reasons for the Herrera administration's support of the Salvadorean government are varied, reflecting the pragmatic, personal, and ideological dimensions of Venezuelan foreign policy. From a pragmatic standpoint, COPEI's leaders argue that the current civil-military junta represents the political center in El Salvador and is therefore the only hope for a moderate solution to the ongoing civil war. COPEI leaders state that they too favor an end to the oligarchical domination of El Salvador's political and economic life, but express concern that totalitarianism of the left may replace that of the right, induced by outside agents. According to government spokesmen, the only option open to Venezuela is to continue to strengthen Duarte, for he is the key to controlling the Salvadorean security forces.

A second reason for the Herrera government's support of the Salvadorean junta concerns the personal friendships which exist between Napoleon Duarte and leading COPEI politicians. Following his exile in 1972, Duarte lived for seven years in Venezuela. During that time he formed a number of enduring friendships with his Social Christian colleagues, including ex-president Caldera and ex-foreign minister Calvani. Not surprisingly, Calvani, who is deputy secretary general of COPEI, is a leading adviser to President Herrera on Central American policy.

The final reason for the Herrera administration's support of the Salvadorean junta is ideological. The party which Napoleon Duarte heads is regarded by COPEI leaders as a sister member of the international Christian Democratic movement. Importantly, Herrera once served as secretary general of the Organización Demócrata Cristiana Americana (ODCA, Latin American Christian Democratic Organization), and Calvani is the current secretary general. They and other COPEI leaders believe strongly in the necessity of confronting Marxism in Central America with an ideology of social justice, as defined in papal encyclicals.<sup>13</sup>

For the past decade, Venezuela has been pursuing an active and vigorous role in the Caribbean. Its role evolved at a time of detente between the superpowers, a more open and flexible sub-system of international relations for "middle powers" such as Venezuela, and the vast influx of petro-dollars after the oil price hikes of 1973-74. Accordingly, Venezuela sought to further its geopolitical and ideological interests in the Caribbean basin through the use of petro-dollars to promote socioeconomic change and political stability. Now that the international environment has changed considerably, it is necessary to examine possible future directions of Venezuelan policy toward Central America.

#### Venezuela and Central America: Future Directions

As in the United States, governmental policy toward recent events in Central America is a hotly debated topic in Venezuela. Currently, the posture of the Herrera government toward this sub-region converges remarkably with that of Ronald Reagan: very cool relations with Cuba; bilateral aid for selected countries; encouragement of democratic forces in Nicaragua; and support for the government headed by Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador. There are, of course, major differences. Venezuelan authorities clearly favor an end to the oligarchical and military regimes in Central America, they would prefer that the United States not intervene in the region nor make the Caribbean an area of ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union, and they would like to see the democratic states in the sub-region work together to prevent situations like the one in El Salvador from becoming polarized.

The Herrera government is not very comfortable with its role as a leading supporter of the Salvadorean government. Nor are government officials pleased at what they term a "coincidence of interests" with the United States with regard to the crisis in El Salvador.<sup>14</sup> The ongoing civil war in El Salvador confronts Venezuelan policymakers with a number of apparent contradictions:

1. Under its democratic presidents, Venezuela's foreign policy has exhibited a pronounced democratic bias. From the Betancourt doctrine of the early 1960s to the strong support of Presidents Pérez and Herrera for the return to democracy in the Andean countries, Venezuelan foreign policy has firmly opposed authoritarian regimes of the right and left. Yet Venezuelan leaders now find themselves supporting a government whose security forces are believed to be responsible for 80 percent of the deaths in El Salvador.

2. Venezuela has taken the position that the Caribbean basin should not be the arena for an ideological confrontation between the superpowers. Yet Venezuelan policymakers increasingly find a coincidence of aims between their country and the United States in supporting the Salvadorean junta at a time when the Reagan administration is clearly drawing the line in Central America against Soviet expansionism.



3. Venezuela's consociational foreign-policy style, and its belief that actions in the Caribbean should be taken only by democratic states in the region, naturally inclines it to work with Mexico to resolve the El Salvadorean crisis. Yet while relations between Mexico and Venezuela are good, the El Salvador issue is a source of tension because the two nations have chosen to support opposite sides in the civil war.

4. For the past decade Venezuelan policy toward the Caribbean basin has enjoyed considerable bipartisan political support. Yet efforts by the Herrera administration to use oil diplomacy on behalf of the Christian Democratic ideological movement have eroded the consensus undergirding Venezuelan foreign policy generally.

The Herrera administration has attempted to mix oil and ideology in its relations with the countries of the Caribbean basin. The main elements of this diplomacy, as well as the dilemmas it poses for Venezuela, are well-conveyed by John Martz:

What seems implicit is a Venezuelan approach whereby oil-related assistance would be conditional for governments of an ideological outlook congenial with Christian Democracy. Contracts and commitments may be negotiated only for a short term, subject to periodic review and reassessment in Caracas. Such an outlook has not only stirred animosity in some recipient countries, but has fanned the flames of opposition within Venezuela. While foreign affairs are often regarded in a non-partisan fashion, the injection of Christian Democratic objectives has precipitated predictable criticism from the AD as well as the Marxist organizations. An important element has been the concomitant charge that current Venezuelan policy toward El Salvador, Nicaragua, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba is perilously similar to that of the United States, stirring allegations that Herrera is serving as a virtual sword carrier for Washington in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Such charges are clearly exaggerated. Venezuela has no interest in serving as a U.S. proxy in the region, nor does the country possess the financial resources, military power, or bureaucratic capacity to play such a role. For example, Venezuela's armed forces are adequate for purposes of self-defense, but they are not capable of exercising authority in the Caribbean basin. Nevertheless, the charges will mount, particularly as Venezuela moves toward elections in December 1983.

There are some recent indications that the Herrera administration would like to lessen its involvement in Central America, perhaps through the medium of a negotiated political settlement of the Salvadorean crisis. Mounting domestic criticism in Venezuela, the increasing military involvement of the United States in El Salvador, and the continued inability of the Duarte regime to control the violence perpetrated by the security forces all serve to push the Herrera administration toward this position. During his state visit to Mexico, Herrera discussed the possibility

of a negotiated political solution to the Salvadorean conflict, but it is unclear how far he is prepared to go in pressuring Duarte to negotiate with Guillermo Ungo, spokesman for the FDR. In addition, in March 1981 Venezuela's foreign minister made a much-publicized trip to the Southern Cone countries, which some observers interpreted as heralding an attempt by Venezuela to involve Brazil and Argentina in a Latin American mediation effort of the El Salvadorean conflict.

As long as Napoleon Duarte remains in the government, the Herrera administration will staunchly support him. While the Venezuelan government might prefer a political solution to the crisis, it is unlikely to adopt any policy which would weaken Duarte's tenuous control of the military-civilian junta. However, a number of events could trigger a withdrawal by Venezuela: a sharp escalation of U.S. military involvement in El Salvador, the overthrow of Napoleon Duarte by rightist factions in the military, U.S. efforts to destabilize Nicaragua economically or through covert means. Moreover, Venezuela's geopolitical and economic interests in the region are more imagined than real. Venezuelan trade and investment in the Caribbean are slight, and Venezuela's conservative private sector has been very slow to follow the government's lead into the region. Militarily, there is little likelihood that Venezuela would be invaded by any country in the area, or that the United States would permit a disruption of the flow of Venezuelan oil through the Caribbean to the United States.

### Conclusion

There is little question that Venezuela will continue to expand its influence in the Caribbean basin in the 1980s. Geography, natural resources, ideology, and the constellation of domestic forces all suggest an active Venezuelan presence. The challenge confronting the Venezuelan government is how best to contribute to what it sees as a desirable outcome in the region: the fostering of democratic governments, the promotion of social and economic change, and the prevention of great-power rivalry for ideological and political influence.

Until the crisis in El Salvador, bipartisan political support for an active Venezuelan role in the Caribbean basin existed. The consensus between AD and COPEI was based on the belief that it was in Venezuela's national interest to encourage the establishment of stable democratic regimes in the region capable of promoting economic change. That consensus has evaporated because of serious domestic disagreements between the two parties which have spilled over into foreign policy, because of the personal and ideological dimension of COPEI support for the Napoleon Duarte regime, and because of the decision by the Reagan administration to make Central America the focus of ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. Thus, Venezuela's role in the Caribbean has become a hotly contested political issue, with opponents of the Herrera government contending that Venezuela has become a proxy for the United States in El Salvador out of narrow partisan concerns for the survival of Napoleon Duarte.

Venezuelan policymakers are confronted by a dilemma in El Salvador. On the one hand, they do not want to be drawn into the East-West

confrontation being promoted by the Reagan administration, nor do they want Venezuela to be viewed as a "sub-imperialist power" doing Washington's bidding in the Caribbean. On the other hand, Venezuelan authorities do not want to abandon their support of the Duarte-led junta, nor to retreat strategically from the area. The only policy that would reconcile these conflicting desires--i.e., a negotiated solution to the Salvadorean conflict--seems beyond reach. Consequently, the Venezuelan government will probably continue to support the Salvadorean government, the AD-led opposition will become increasingly vocal, and the democratic consensus supporting Venezuelan foreign policy will continue to erode.

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<sup>3</sup>See Kim Fuad, "Venezuela's Role in OPEC: Past, Present, and Future," in Robert D. Bond (ed.), Contemporary Venezuela and Its Role in International Affairs (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 120-155.

<sup>4</sup>See my essay, "Venezuela's Role in International Affairs," in Bond, op. cit., pp. 227-262.

<sup>5</sup>Franklin Tugwell, "Venezuelan Foreign Policy," unpublished manuscript, 1976, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Rómulo Betancourt, Tres Años de Gobierno Democrático, 1959-61 (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1962), vol. 2, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup>On Cuban involvement in Venezuela in the 1960s, see D. Bruce Jackson, Castro, the Kremlin, and Communism in Latin America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in John Martz, "Venezuelan Policy Toward Latin America," in Bond, op. cit., p. 162.

<sup>9</sup>Donald L. Herman, Christian Democracy in Venezuela (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>Martz, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Confidential interview.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Simon Consalvi, former Foreign Minister of Venezuela, March 1978.

<sup>13</sup>Demetrio Boersner, "Fuerzas e intereses de las potencias medianas regionales: el caso Venezolano," unpublished paper, presented at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Bonn, Germany, March 9-11, 1981.

<sup>14</sup>Personal interviews.

<sup>15</sup>John Martz, "Ideology and Oil: Venezuela in the Caribbean," paper presented at the Caribbean Studies Association meetings, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, May 27-30, 1981.