

Manuel Noriega



The military's role in securing democracy

In an address to Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government on Feb. 28, 1985, the commander of Panama's defense forces, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, outlined his view of the necessary role of the military in securing peace in Central America. No simple strategy of military force nor facade of "democracy" will succeed, the general argued. The military must therefore join other national sectors in defining and implementing the social and economic policies which better the lives of their countrymen.

*Noriega has been active in promoting this broadened concept of military duty, along with other military forces in the region. This question of military posture is central to political life in Guatemala, for example, while forces foreign to the country seek to turn the military and the nation against one another. Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo and nationalists within the military have set out to establish a solid basis of collaboration, what Cerezo termed "nation-building" in his inaugural address. "We have no intention of returning to the old concept of the army removed from politics, and confined exclusively to the barracks, acting as a judge over the daily lives of governments and peoples," Cerezo stated in an interview with Mexico's *Excelsior* on Feb. 18, 1986. "The army should be involved in the social process, and guaranteeing this process in the interests of the people. . . . It should be committed to the general process of institutionality in the country."*

General Noriega today is the target of an international campaign designed to drive him from power, which has painted him as variously a dictator, a communist, and a corrupt manipulator. Behind the attacks, however, lies the raging battle over policy. For that reason, we here provide excerpts of Noriega's Harvard speech.

I have been asked to speak to you especially on the subject of the role of the military in the Central American peace process. I must make some general observations on the constructive ways in which we military leaders may influence the political, social, and economic improvement of the region, putting

special emphasis on the situations in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. . . .

If you were to believe that the permanent solution to the current conflicts in Central America is purely a military one, that is, if you were to think of a solution of force pure and simple, then I should have nothing to say to you. The fact that you desire a presentation on these subjects in an academic center as intellectually prestigious as Harvard University, implies a very clear awareness on your part that other, deeper causes exist that should be analyzed and discussed, to find less costly and more productive solutions. . . .

For ourselves, the Panamanian military, attention to the increasingly belligerent and deteriorated Central American situation is a serious responsibility, of national and even broader dimensions. It is only logical that we should see things thus, because this awareness of responsibilities is based on undeniable reality. Panama belongs to that region of American *terra firma*. Panama has an interoceanic canal which has a direct influence on world security. Whatever action occurs in the Central American region directly affects the security and the stability of the canal isthmus, as it also affects the norms of international security. . . .

It is unquestionable that the thinking and actions of the different Central American armed forces are vital to whatever effective solution is being sought. If one desires peace for Central America, and that each country—respected in its dignity and national independence—be able to decisively take on the task of gradually overcoming underdevelopment, then we must objectively and realistically consider the transcendental role that the armed forces of each country must play in the overall development of their respective societies. . . .

Some individuals, groups, or sectors address the problems of Central America in very formal and simplistic terms, without logic. According to that formal interpretation, the region's problems are located between freedom and oppression, between dictatorship and democracy. But a closer look at the roots of the conflicts shows that such a view does not correspond to reality, that analysis of the problems cannot proceed in this way. To prove that that formal interpretation is incorrect, one need only ask each Central American people if they have ever been given an opportunity to fully participate in the political and economic lives of their respective countries. You cannot escape the conclusion that the answer would be negative. The Central American people have been absent from consideration of their own destinies.

To solve the Central American problem, however, one cannot fall into the belief that democracy is merely the depositing of a political vote. Democracy is not reducible to that electoral exercise. Real and effective democracy should be a teaching, aware democracy, in which man does not merely act within the political or electoral concepts cultivated by the parties in the area. That is, a democracy in which man

has an idea of economy and of social rights. I include Panama within this view and within these concepts. . . .

The causes of the crisis

We should know, with total clarity, that the deepest causes of the political and military turbulence in several of the countries of Central America stem from real, objective situations, from very concrete facts. These causes can be defined as a population in extreme poverty, the cruel and historic social injustices of illiteracy and ignorance, and all the other factors that characterize those societies placed, because of their socio-economic development, within the so-called Third World, which are:

- the predominant activity of the primary sector, above all of subsistence agriculture
- the tendency to single-crop production
- the reduced average income per capita
- under-employment
- "hidden" unemployment
- demographic imbalance with respect to the growth of real production
- the weak condition of the woman and of children
- rigid social stratification
- the high rate of illiteracy
- the limitation or absence of hygiene and sanitation
- high rate of infant mortality
- malnutrition
- shortage of housing
- scandalous rural misery
- under-industrialization

. . . El Salvador today faces a dramatic deterioration of the basic pillars of its socio-economic and political structure. A military generation, not compromised by injustices of the past, finds itself face to face, risking and losing its lives, against poverty-stricken workers and peasants ideologically attracted to the guerrillas as their only option. Today the guerrillas have lost respect for the President of the Republic of El Salvador and for the civilian governments. They only want to talk, at this time, with the military, with those whom they face on the field of battle.

In Guatemala, the Armed Forces for a long time remained divorced from the traditionally illiterate, humble, and exploited peasant and Indian population. Now those Armed Forces have been able to overcome the era of violence. Under the leadership of their military President Gen. Mejia Vitores, they were renewing contact with the large peasant and Indian majorities through a special development strategy, according to which the soldier committed himself to the literacy campaigns and to the communal development work. . . .

Nicaragua has lived the past 45 years of its history as a series of family reincarnations, with a National Guard removed from principles of security and development. This gave rise to an armed movement backed in its historic mo-

ment by the leading countries of America. Thus it was proven that the defeat of an army is directly proportional absence of popular support for the foundations of its military doctrine.

As military men, we can pass a critical and historic judgment on that National Guard of the Somoza era, inspired by the uniform of West Point but never identified with the dignified and glorious spirit of the West Pointer's soul. . . .

Honduras, within its precarious socio-economic situation, has a youthful military much closer to the people. In its majority, it is a military with university training, which has tried to and has maintained a tolerant balance with the subversive ideological tensions of its neighbors. . . .

The task of national recovery

We have posed a terrible contradiction: on the one hand, the countries of Central America need to carry out changes in internal political, economic, and social structures in order to eliminate the real causes of subversion and of war. But, on the other hand, the already declared war, a war of attrition in which there can be neither victor nor defeated, prevents and delays the implementation of any program for national recovery.

In addition, the international economic assistance that these countries have received until now has been neither sufficiently broad nor sufficiently generous. There has existed in the past, and continues to exist, too much conditional economic aid. The famous economic programs of reordering and restructuring of the economies of the underdeveloped countries, which certain international financial institutions seek to impose, become additional sources of discontent, conflict, social suffering, and confrontation with the people, as has occurred in Ecuador, Santo Domingo, and Panama. . . .

Faced with this situation, in which Central America has scarcely a word to say, the finest and most sophisticated concepts of economic analysis that you can study here in Harvard's school of economic science, are shattered into a thousand pieces. . . .

I would like agreement with you on one point, which I would dare to pose in the following way: that there can be no government alone, absent and divorced from the men who bear arms, above all in Central America and in Latin America. Because to the extent that the Armed Forces have their role defined and their functions designed in correspondence to their mission, the arms they possess remain in the service of peace. Thus we could conjugate the word "democracy" and the concept of "human rights" in a serious and profound manner, founded on the realities of the people. Not demagogically, with merely a propagandistic show lacking in the genuine foundations of human rights, but with the right to life and not to live hungry, because to live with hunger is also an assault on the fundamental rights of man. . . .