

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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Intelligence
Note - 548

July 18, 1969

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REPRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TLH*

Subject: Latin America: El Salvador-Honduras War May Stimulate Latin Defense Expenditures

The outbreak of armed conflict between the forces of El Salvador and Honduras could reinforce old efforts and perhaps generate new attempts in Latin America to obtain additional arms and equipment.

Higher echelon and junior officers alike may be tempted to press hard for funds to modernize largely World War II vintage military inventories, arguing that the war, which few believed possible, demonstrated the critical importance of planning for self-defense. Whereas the possibility of actually fighting to repel an invading force seemed remote and somewhat academic before, hawkish officers may now tend to consider the matter eminently practical and of some urgency.

Internal control concept probably somewhat weakened. The notion that military establishments should focus almost exclusively on combating subversive activities and maintaining internal order has probably been damaged by the harsh reality of the mini-war. Reports of heavy casualties, though exaggerated, and accounts of air bombardments headlining many hemisphere newspapers will be read with astonishment and probably some trepidation by various military leaders. Officers in the smaller countries will view the situation with considerable alarm and will likely be unwilling to program future military activities primarily along internal security lines. Rather,

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By *HRM/VSW* Date *11/13/03*

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the armed forces are likely to become actively interested in long range questions of national defense, in addition to the more immediate problem of guarding against internal subversion.

Defense mission in South America reinforced. To the major South American military establishments, the mini-war will probably furnish a new and welcome rationale for defense preparedness. After World War II, with US-sponsored emphasis on hemisphere defense and international peacekeeping, the traditional national defense mission was substantially downgraded. During the past few years, however, echoes of earlier conflicts have sounded insistently through increasing tensions over borders, allegations of "encirclement," and rumored plans for sneak attack. Although the growing South American preoccupation with border conflict has many causes, it is nourished by institutional concerns of the armed forces. Since the phasing-out of US military aid has reduced the credibility of hemisphere defense and of the peacekeeping mission, and because the major South American forces never have accepted internal defense as a primary mission, a popular awareness of threats from neighbors can only be regarded by the military as a positive trend. It is also true that many of the South American services look gratefully upon events that vindicate their claims to an essential role in defending the nation because they are now poised for a major cycle of modernization and cannot count on easy terms of resupply from the US.

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Efficacy of OAS may be questioned. Military leaders and government officials may also begin to question whether the Rio Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance is capable of heading off a conflict where the contending parties are not already disposed to settle differences through some peaceful means. Having gone unchecked for four days already, the war could be seen as demonstrating that the OAS, acting under the Rio Treaty, is powerless to impose a cease-fire, particularly when US interests are not directly involved. Arguments that the Latin Americans needed not be concerned with external aggressors because each country is enveloped in the Rio security pact may be greeted with a fair degree of skepticism, especially in countries where neighbors are viewed with suspicion and distrust.

US could be criticized. Although the US certainly would have been condemned severely if it had intervened, ironically it could also be criticized for not doing its duty by stopping the fighting. Some Latin leaders may privately hold the view that the US should never have allowed the situation to deteriorate to the point of military conflict. Perhaps this view was foreshadowed to some extent in a remark by a Honduran official who observed that the news media felt free to engage in excessive bravado because they were confident that the US would never permit the issue to get out of control.

Thus the mini-war which earlier seemed very improbable and even now appears rather insignificant, may come to be a catalyst in shifting Latin American thinking concerning the role of the military and the problem of national defense.

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