Voices from Costa Rica

Interviews by Andrew Reding

In Central America, a region deeply scarred by political violence, poverty, and repression, Costa Rica is the exception to the rule. As Andrew Reding points out in the preceding article, Costa Rica has enjoyed a long history of political pluralism, economic democracy, antimilitarism, and social justice—features that separate Costa Rica from its neighbors and make it a symbol of success in Central America. But, as Reding also shows, those long-standing traditions are now under assault by the Reagan administration, whose policies are helping to undermine the Costa Rican economic system, while slowly drawing Costa Rica into conflict with Nicaragua. If successful, this assault could irreparably damage the foundations of Costa Rican society.

In November, Reding explored these and other issues with three former Costa Rican presidents—José Figueres Ferrer, Daniel Oduber Quirós, and Rodrigo Carazo Odio—and with Javier Solís, an opposition delegate to the Legislative Assembly. Excerpts from these conversations are printed below.

Conversation with José Figueres Ferrer, Coordinator of the Revolutionary Junta, 1948-1949; President of Costa Rica, 1953-1958, 1970-1974; and President of Partido Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party)

Reding: Unlike other Latin American countries, Costa Rica has enjoyed a long, uninterrupted period of democracy and peace—at least since 1948. What historically accounts for Costa Rica’s distinctiveness in this regard?

Figueres: Like the United States, Costa Rica was founded by dissenters. Just as you had the Puritans, we had groups of Galicians from Spain who wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from the Spanish Captains General in Guatemala. The founders of the United States were running away from religious persecution; our founders were running away from military government. So our nation’s birth was quite different from that of the rest of Central America and much of Latin America.

Furthermore, there was no Indian population for the Spanish settlers to exploit. They had to work with their own hands—a situation unlike that in other Latin American countries where manual work was performed by Indian slaves. As a result, a tiny European country was established in the middle of the Americas.

A third important difference is that from the beginning Costa Ricans placed much more emphasis on public education than on military matters. We have had universal education for well over a century. And though we are always complaining that the educational
system could be better, Costa Rica is comparatively advanced in terms of educational opportunities.

We have had only two wars. The first was in 1856 when a group of U.S. southerners tried to turn all of Central America into slave states in order to gain another ten or so votes in the U.S. Senate. Costa Rica organized a citizens’ army that fought first in Nicaragua, and then in Costa Rica. Finally, the filibusters [freebooters] were shot in Honduras.

Then, in 1948, we had a civil war. The purpose of the war was to restore the integrity of the electoral system, which had been established for some time, but which had been violated during the 1940s. After the war, we founded the Second Republic and created an entirely new type of society. Until then, Costa Rica had been very conservative, rural, and backward. But after the war we accepted the social changes that came with the 20th century: we adopted a social democratic economic and political system, and gave women the right to vote.

All of the changes were achieved through legal means. We launched a vast program aimed at establishing as perfect a democracy as was possible by creating the network of economic and social institutions that have characterized this country ever since. Until that time the only other Latin American country to have done anything similar was Uruguay, under Pepe Batlle [José Batlle y Ordóñez] at the beginning of the century.

Reding: What has been your experience with Nicaragua, both before and after the Sandinistas came to power?

Figueres: For 35 years, I fought against the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua because it was trying to extend its power south. The Somozas were buying farms and land in Costa Rica, and we were afraid of being swallowed up by their dynasty. We helped the Nicaraguan revolutionaries of the time, but we couldn’t win against the Somozas until the Sandinistas entered the picture. Only then did we achieve our aim, and ever since I have felt quite friendly toward the Sandinistas.

Despite the fact that many people in this country and in the U.S. government are hostile toward the Sandinistas, I have maintained my friendly relationship with them. At this moment, you will find public opinion divided in Costa Rica. The people who are against the Sandinistas are the members of the Costa Rican oligarchy. They say the Sandinistas are too far to the left, whatever that means. The oligarchy owns the newspapers and the radio stations, by which it has heavily influenced public opinion in Costa Rica. Then again, the fact that the U.S. government is so opposed to the Sandinistas has a great deal to do with the state of mind here because this is the most pro-US. country in all of Latin America. I am partly responsible for that since I myself am very pro-U.S., although I now disagree with the Reagan administration on certain matters. So the situation is full of paradoxes. At this moment, I am pro-Sandinista, most of the country is anti-Sandinista, and I find that most of Latin America and most of Europe is pro-Sandinista.

The last thing I would like to see is the United States involved in overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. That would be very undesirable; it would be a historic mistake. I admit that the Sandinistas have not been very prudent or very diplomatic in their dealings with the United States. But this doesn’t surprise me given that the Somoza dynasty was installed by the United States—and then kept in power by the United States for almost
half a century. In this respect, Nicaraguan resentment of the United States is understandable.

Now, according to the U.S. government, the Sandinistas represent a danger to the United States. This is absolutely wrong: what can they possibly do to harm the United States?

**Reding:** Washington, of course, has accused Nicaragua of trying to destabilize Honduras, Guatemala, and other countries in the region.

**Figueres:** I don’t believe that this is a real problem. The Sandinistas would be very happy with the survival of their own revolution. This concern about destabilization just reflects U.S. conservatism.

Though I am at this moment pro-Sandinista, I have never been procommunist or pro-Marxist. As much as I respect the right of communists to think as they wish, I don’t think that their ideas about government are relevant to Costa Rica. Our system runs along the lines of Costa Rican thought, which was influenced by the U.S. and French revolutions. But with elections coming up in a few weeks, we are in a great deal of confusion. The same people who installed the communists here in the 1940s [the Calderonistas] are now supposed to be anticommunist, and now those of us who fought the communists in the 1948 civil war are, according to some people, procommunist. This is nonsense, but it’s the way history is made.

**Reding:** You were an observer at last November’s Nicaraguan elections. From the standpoint of your experience with other electoral systems here in Central America, what were your observations?

**Figueres:** I’ve been an observer in four elections: two in El Salvador, one in Nicaragua, and now I’m going to Honduras. The Nicaraguan elections wore as perfect and imperfect as the ones that the United States has been able to organize in El Salvador. I say imperfect because in countries where there is no tradition of elections, there is no machinery in place. These elections represent the beginning of an electoral system. Though the Nicaraguan elections had their imperfections, the results—which favored the Sandinistas by a margin of two to one—certainly seemed to reflect what you find in the streets: that the Sandinistas have the support of about two-thirds of the people. So I think it’s unfair to try to declare the elections invalid. They were as good as the Salvadoran elections, which the United States is upholding.

**Reding:** Today marks the second anniversary of President Luis Alberto Monge’s Proclamation of Perpetual Unarmed Neutrality. What is your view on neutrality?

**Figueres:** The Proclamation of Neutrality was a move by the present government to pursue our long-standing efforts to have a demilitarized country. We abolished the army after the 1948 civil war. Now President Monge has stepped forward to declare perpetual neutrality and to incorporate it into the country’s legal structure. I am in agreement with that.

**Reding:** And what do you think of the military training being carried out by U.S. Green Berets at El Murciélago?

**Figueres:** It is a typical U.S. idea, just like Washington’s incredible policies of persecuting the Sandinistas. For many years the United States had a police training school
in Panama, and we sent many of our boys to be trained there for our police forces. We’re very appreciative of the help we’ve received from the United States, but now the training seems to have shifted to a military emphasis. Somebody in the U.S. government came up with this idea of training people right on the Nicaraguan border just to create trouble for the Sandinistas. I don’t believe this is very helpful for peace in Central America. In fact, I believe this whole attitude toward the Sandinistas is mistaken, even though I admit that they were trained as guerrillas who read Marxism. But what were they to do when they had half a century of Somozas imposed on them by the United States?

The United States is one of the most wonderful societies ever created. But it’s always had a little streak of inquisition—McCarthyism, the John Birch Society, the Ku Klux Klan. I went to Washington during the McCarthy period, and it was horrible. Now the United States is going through another such period, which, although not as serious, is still quite undesirable.

The persecution of the Sandinistas is just one element of this trend. Another is the effort to undo Costa Rica’s social institutions, to turn our whole economy over to the businesspeople, and to do away with our social insurance, our nationalized bank, our nationalized electric utility—the few companies we have that are too large to be in private hands. The United States is trying to force us to sell them to so-called private enterprise, which means turning them over to the local oligarchy or to U.S. or European companies. We’re fighting back as best we can.

The Reagan administration’s attitude is part of a cyclical recurrence of extreme conservatism in the United States. The administration disapproves of our tendencies because we have been building a society in which, as we used to say, there’ll be a bench for every student and a bed for every sick person. This type of society calls for much more state interference—or what is really state action—than the present president of the United States likes.

Reding: This sounds like interference in your domestic affairs by the Reagan administration.

Figueres: Yes, though no doubt well-intentioned. The Reagan administration believes that if we turn the whole economy over to the merchants, we’ll be better off. They call that private enterprise, but to make it even more pleasing to the U.S. ear, they call it free enterprise because anything that’s free is agreeable! No, we believe in a combination of small private enterprise and government involvement in certain sectors. All agriculture in our society should be owned by the farmers, just as all small businesses and small industry should be privately owned. But not the electric or telephone utilities, each of which is too large to be in the hands of businesspeople. And I can’t imagine the Costa Rican insurance system being handed over to the oligarchy and turned into a business. That may be all right in the United States, but considering the size of our economy, big enterprises like the telephone utility should remain in public hands. U.S. businesspeople have developed the most productive economic system in history, which is admirable, but they are not philosophers—you can’t entrust the handling of society to them. All they look at is the bottom line; all they want is quick profits. We’re not antibusiness; we admire U.S. business, but we don’t want it to run our politics.
Reding: In a recent campaign appearance with PLN presidential candidate Oscar Arias, you stressed the importance of cooperatives for the Costa Rican economy. Why are cooperatives so critical to Costa Rican development?

Figueres: I believe cooperatives are a synthesis between capitalism and Marxism, a synthesis that happens to work very well here in Costa Rica. I am very happy to acknowledge this because some 20 to 25 years ago I was quite skeptical about most Costa Ricans’ ability to work in cooperatives. But cooperatives give many people, especially small farmers, an opportunity to participate in the running of what is really a commercial enterprise. Whereas formerly we had a feudal system with individual owners, now the farmers have more control: they appoint their own directors; they know why such-and-such prices are paid; they know where the profits go. I see this system as an educational tool for the nation. It’s part of what I call the institutional system of Costa Rica, which has been created through a prolonged struggle against selfish interests.

Reding: You have become something of a roving ambassador for peace in the region. What have you accomplished?

Figueres: A few months ago, there was a moment of crisis in Nicaragua following a border incident at Las Crucitas near the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border. People were saying that the Nicaraguans wanted to invade us, and that if Costa Ricans went beyond the border, they would be killed. So the democratic labor leaders decided to cross the border to see what would happen, and I joined them. We went to the Río San Juan, and the Sandinistas shouted, “Viva Costa Rica!” Nothing happened at all. On the contrary, we were really well received. When we went to Muelle San Carlos against the wishes of the Costa Rican government, we were received like friends. Many times war is created by myths—people are turned into your enemies, by myths.

Reding: What is your view of the problems that have developed with the Contadora peace process lately?

Figueres: Contadora is a very worthwhile effort of a few countries to help the Central American isthmus find peaceful solutions to its present problems. It may not have been very successful until now, but at least it has maintained a kind of peace. It has kept people talking and negotiating. I think, however, that the problems are deeper than the issue of peace: they involve economics and social welfare. Contadora is a step in the right direction, and deserves my respect and gratitude.

Reding: Do you agree with those analysts who argue that Nicaragua made a mistake by not signing the latest draft proposal?

Figueres: No. The Nicaraguans are faced with very special circumstances. They’ve been invaded from every side. The U.S. government is publicly giving money to conspirators and turning most Central Americans into mercenaries. This is very, very unjustifiable. I am sorry to bring this up because I don’t like to side with the critics of the United States. But the U.S. attitude toward Nicaragua is simply a huge historical mistake.

Reding: So you feel that any agreement regarding military aid, personnel, and advisors should be extended to cover U.S. actions.

Figueres: Absolutely. When today’s passions cool, perhaps the Sandinistas’ contribution will be better appreciated. I’ve been familiar with Nicaragua all my life, and never before
Reding: You realize of course that at this point most of the Democratic party is also very hostile to the Sandinistas?

Figueres: Yes, out of ignorance. They know little about what’s going on in Latin America. How could they know more? Bear in mind that until a few years ago, U.S. governments routinely supported Latin American dictatorships and armed forces. The United States maintained the Somozas for over half a century. And one of its worst blunders was to allow the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954.

Reding: How could the U.S. Congress be more helpful in its effort to assist democratic forces in Central America?

Figueres: Above all, it should stop giving money to the contras. They’re increasing corruption, turning normally decent citizens into mercenaries, and making all of us more dogmatic every day. Support of the contras is a catastrophic mistake for the United States because most of Latin America—80 to 90 percent of the population—is pro-Nicaragua. The one exception is Costa Rica. This is a very pro-U.S. country, in part because of me. I preached friendship with the United States, and continue to do so, although at this point I disagree with the present Republican administration.

Conversation with Daniel Oduber Quirós, President of Costa Rica, 1974-1978, and member of Partido Liberación National (National Liberation Party)

Reding: What are the origins of the National Liberation party (PLN), and what does it stand for?

Oduber: The National Liberation party was founded in 1951 and must be understood in relation to the governments that preceded it. From 1869 until 1940, Costa Rica had a succession of liberal governments that instituted important political advances. But they neglected necessary social adjustments and economic development. In 1942, the government of the day [Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia’s National Republican party, a Christian Democratic party], joined the Communist party to form a political alliance called the Victory Bloc in order to enact very important social legislation. But the social legislation was little more than paper because there was no corresponding economic reorganization. The bloc also tampered with the elections of 1942, 1944, and 1946. Finally, when it annulled the unfavorable results of the December 1948 presidential election, the revolution was set in motion. A group of students from the newly created university joined others in following José Figueres. They became guerrillas fighting for the establishment of a more pure and active political democracy.

The revolutionaries took advantage of the transitional government, the Junta de Gobierno of 1948-49, to reorganize the economy and begin giving economic content and greater realism to the social legislation that I mentioned earlier. Then, in 1951, social democratic thinkers, democratic trade union leaders, and peasant organizations joined in forming Partido Liberación Nacional, which was influenced primarily by José Figueres and the social democratic idealism of the students of the 1940s. They decided that liberalism, as it
was understood in Costa Rica before 1948, had done a great job in the political field, but had not made a serious effort to carry out the economic reorganization the country needed.

**Reding:** What do you mean by economic reorganization?

**Oduber:** The old liberal tradition did not address the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few: coffee barons, bank owners, and two or three foreign companies that manipulated the electric, transportation, and banana industries. The Junta de Gobierno decided to reorganize all that, and made a series of important adjustments. It nationalized the banks, made the United Fruit Company pay its taxes, and took control of the electric industry, the telephone utility, and the railroads. As the state became stronger, it became very active in organizing and directing the economy according to social democratic ideals, while maintaining ample room for private enterprise.

We’ve been influenced by the Mexican and Colombian traditions, by the Argentinian experiments, by Roosevelt’s New Deal, and by European socialists, especially the Fabian Society, the British Labour party, and the social thinking of the Second Republic in Spain. But we’ve been primarily influenced by the Peruvian APRA leader, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, whose writings convinced most of my generation that Latin America had to carry out a revolution of its own and not copy communist slogans or other kinds of imported theories. Latin American history, he argued, was quite different from that of the European industrial societies that had created the capitalist and Marxist ideologies. So we looked closely at our own history in order to choose those forms of government, society, and economic development that best reflected the Costa Rican experience. In this sense, we are more national than most of the other parties—hence the word, “national,” in our party name.

**Reding:** How has the current economic crisis affected this Costa Rican process of self-determination?

**Oduber:** When the Monge government took office in 1982, it found itself broke and unable to borrow money. So for more than three years it has been trying to raise funds to rebuild the country. Today, most of these funds come directly from the U.S. government, which has been attaching strings to them in order to ensure that its own economic model is applied to Costa Rica. For instance, Washington wants to destroy state intervention in our economy. So, instead of providing cheap loans to national banks, the United States provides cheap loans to private banks, cheap money to lend dear to Costa Rican customers. But the Costa Rican banks won’t lend a cent to any state enterprises, because the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would react by cutting off aid to Costa Rica.

This sort of conditional aid causes us serious problems. For example, we used to have the Alliance for Progress to assist with agrarian reform and to strengthen the state. But when another group came to power, we found that our loans were suddenly conditioned on destroying what we had accomplished through the Alliance for Progress. The Alliance for Progress helped us a great deal with the state banks. But today’s assistance is conditioned on the destruction of the state banks. We are opposed to this. It’s all right for other countries to help Costa Rica rebuild itself, but Costa Ricans should be allowed to decide
for themselves what kind of society they want to have, rather than have a model dictated from outside.

**Reding:** José Figueres describes cooperatives as a synthesis between capitalism and Marxism. How do you see the role of cooperatives in Costa Rica?

**Oduber:** By bringing the cooperative ideal to Costa Rica, we have tried to copy the Scandinavian experience with democratic socialism. We think in terms of a mixed economy, which takes the best from capitalist private initiative and socialist justice. We have found that cooperatives are the best way of organizing society in order to guarantee these two objectives. The Reagan administration does not of course agree with this; the administration keeps talking about private enterprise while we’re talking about cooperatives. And that’s the problem with the Reagan administration today in Central America. When it talks about private enterprise, it is thinking in terms of U.S. capitalism, which is not what we believe is best for Costa Rica.

**Reding:** Would you agree that the Costa Rican media appear to be coordinating an ongoing publicity campaign against Nicaragua in order to foment a climate of fear?

**Oduber:** Of course. All the media owners are conservatives. They follow what they feel is the U.S. line, though most of the time much more aggressively than the actual U.S. line. They’re ultras in the sense that they go beyond what may be the wishes or recommendations of U.S. officials in the area in order to ingratiate themselves and secure U.S. support. And now they’re trying to defeat my party by turning Nicaragua into a domestic political issue. We want to live in peace; if the Nicaraguans hadn’t been so hardheaded, we’d have had a good, neighborly relationship by this time.

**Reding:** Since you have a formally free press in the country, why is there so little free exchange of ideas?

**Oduber:** That depends on what you call a free press. I think that the press in Costa Rica is quite free in comparison to the press elsewhere in Latin America. But the press is used in accordance with the ideas and needs of the owners of the press, and not in accordance with the needs of the Costa Rican population. For instance, if the press attacks me because I defend peace, the attack will appear in big headlines on the first page or the editorial page. If I try to defend myself, my response will be hidden deep inside the paper. There is no evenhandedness, and citizens are not allowed equal access or defense in the press, on radio, or on television.

**Reding:** Since the media are to the right of the mainstream, why doesn’t a new newspaper or television channel appear to express the views of the excluded majority?

**Oduber:** Because it would go broke. We have tried many times. The problem is that the owners of the media are the same people who own the businesses that advertise. They would simply withhold their advertising, and without advertisements no paper can survive.

This same thing is happening in many democracies today, and it is such behavior that leads to the adoption of extreme positions by Third World countries, as reflected by what has happened at UNESCO. We think something has to be done about this: the owners of the media should be made aware that what they are doing is provoking an attack against the media.
Reding: Do you share the concern that Marxist-Leninist expansionism has designs on Central America, and Costa Rica in particular?

Oduber: That worries us, but that doesn’t mean we support foreign intervention in any of our Central American countries. My position is that we have to create in Costa Ricans themselves the necessary conditions to defend the democratic system of life we have chosen, and we can only do that by giving them social justice. So by fighting for social justice in Costa Rica, I am fighting against communism. That’s the way we understand our fight against communism.

Reding: Your administration was responsible for establishing the National Park system in Costa Rica, which has attracted global attention, particularly since yours is one of the few countries in the very vital tropical area to have acted to save your natural resources.

Oduber: As a socialist (I’m a social democrat), I believe nature’s beauty is for everyone to enjoy, not just a few. I have emphasized conservation in order to afford future generations of Costa Ricans the pleasure of enjoying the nature I enjoyed as a child and adolescent. To this end, I labored to set aside not only national parks but also forest preserves and wildlife refuges all across the country. We now have over 8 percent of the national territory protected in this way, which is among the highest percentages in the world.

I also believe we should develop tourism around the natural reserves. I am thinking of what is called scientific tourism, drawing students, professors, and nature lovers of the rich countries to Costa Rica. We could provide simple austere dwellings all over the country for people to come enjoy nature.

Reding: With its tremendous diversity of flora and fauna, and its tropical rain forest, Costa Rica plays an important role as part of the land bridge between the continents. How has the role contributed to Costa Rican development?

Oduber: We are in the middle of the cultural corridor of the Americas, across which culture has been exchanged north and south, so that we have been made very rich in the artifacts of human culture: jade, gold, etc.

But we are also lucky because we have the highest range of mountains in the isthmus, in the bridge, and therefore have all kinds of climates, and all kinds of organisms. So not only have we been a corridor for the human species, but over millions of years, for plant and animal species as well. As a result, this small country, just 100 miles wide by 400 miles long, has a diversity of climates and species that makes it important from the scientific point of view. That’s why we want to keep as much of our territory as possible in a condition to be studied and enjoyed by people.

Reding: The idea has been spreading that these are really global treasures, and that the responsibility for ensuring their conservation is not exclusively that of particular governments, which may have very limited resources for carrying that out.

Oduber: We have people here who are fighting very hard on the international front to awaken people to what you are saying. It is of global interest to be able to defend all these treasures we have. Consequently, I have been seeking aid for this very purpose from private and public sources in the United States. Of course, the most important condition for attracting aid, and for attracting people to come and enjoy our natural
resources, is that we be a peaceful country. That’s why we have to be neutral. That’s why
we have no army. So mine is a global conception of the role of Costa Rica in the world.
We’re very small, but we can be an example, like Switzerland, Austria, and the
Scandinavian countries, of a society that struggles for peace, justice, and beauty.

Rodrigo Carazo Odio, President of Costa Rica, 1978-1982, as leader of
Partido Renovación Democrática (Democratic Renewal Party, precursor of
today’s Social Christian Unity Party); President of the Peace University

Reding: What historical factors would you say have contributed to Costa Rica’s
distinctiveness in Latin America today?

Carazo: Costa Rica was fortunate to have been colonized at a time when the Spaniards
were questioning the logic and justification of violent conquest. So those who settled
Costa Rica were no longer conquistadores; they came with a sense of moderation and
social responsibility that led them to carry out a very gentle, humane form of
colonization. This was an important factor in the development of less violent
attitudes among Costa Ricans.

Costa Rica had only a small native population. The colony’s lack of natural and human
resources prevented the amassing of great fortunes. This produced unquestionable social
wealth—people who set personal values above monetary worth. It is also the source of
what has been called Costa Rican agrarian democracy, with each family owning its own
parcel of land and each community cultivating its own lands in order to satisfy its basic
needs. What is more, Costa Ricans relied on their own efforts to carry out major projects.
When, in 1601, they opened a mule trail to Panama in order to export leather and thus be
able to make purchases on the international market, they did so without outside aid. The
Costa Ricans of the time therefore developed a sense of pride and self-reliance.

Another important factor in Costa Rican development over the centuries has been the
family, which forms the base of society and plays an important part in the education of
the children. It is a very unique sort of education, emphasizing respect for one’s family
and community—a respect grounded in one’s personal qualities rather than one’s power.
There was, after all, no moneyed power, and no armed power either. From the moment
they had the means, Costa Ricans also dedicated themselves to the creation of schools.
This effort gathered great momentum during the 19th century. In this way, Costa Ricans
sought to overcome their limitations by way of intellectual and cultural improvement
based on respect for the rights of others.

So the Costa Rican temperament has developed in a peaceful environment in which
solutions to conflicts have always been sought through dialogue. Discussion is the
primary method used by Costa Ricans to resolve conflicts. The notion of domination or
conquest has been absent. During their early history, Costa Ricans developed relations
between communities and among the members of each community, laying the
foundations of a society that in its essence respects the rights of others.

In this way an ideal climate emerged for accepting the great principles of modern
democracy. The Costa Rican is a democrat by culture, because of how he or she has
lived, and not because of elections or extravagant formulas brought in from outside.
These attitudes are reflected in the name Costa Ricans gave to their first constitutional document, the Pact of Concord.

**Reding:** How has Costa Rica’s history contributed to your countrymen’s attitudes toward the military?

**Carazo:** Because we place such a high premium on education, those who seek solutions to their problems by means of violence are looked down upon. The use of weapons is repudiated. In other societies, whoever wears a uniform and bears a weapon merits social status. In Costa Rica that is not so.

We have resorted to military force on only a few occasions. The first of these was in the 1850s, with the invasion of Central America by William Walker. Costa Ricans felt themselves obligated to intervene and organized a powerful army. But after Walker was repulsed and executed, we were left with the military men who defeated him, leading to a military occupation of the country that lasted many years. The military put President Juan Rafael Mora, who confronted Walker, in front of a firing squad.

Then, for most of the remainder of the century, military dictatorships were imposed upon the country. Not until 1889 did the country return to a life-style of civility and did the army lose importance.

Yet there were to be further repercussions of this militaristic sentiment in 1917 with General Federico Tinoco’s two-year dictatorship. This sentiment was reinforced during World War II when the government of Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia organized the Unidad Móvil [Mobile Force] with military aid from the United States [ostensibly as a wartime exigency]. The Unidad Móvil came to be viewed as a military instrument capable of keeping its organizers in power. That is how the government emboldened itself to annul the elections in 1948. Fortunately, the revolution of 1948 prevented consolidation of the military power of the Unidad Móvil. Had it not been dismantled, the history of Costa Rica would have been different, and we would have become a militarized country just like the other Central American countries. So, from the 1850s until the present, there has been tension between the Costa Rican civil tradition and the militaristic sentiment stemming from military exigencies.

In 1949 we abolished the army. It is important to remember that this was not a defeated army, but a victorious one. Today, people such as myself have become fully convinced that a country that organizes an army becomes its own jailer, and that Costa Ricans must therefore be very careful. Recently, with military advisors coming to militarize some segments of the Civil Guard, Costa Ricans are again becoming preoccupied with the possibility that weapons could come to hold power in Costa Rica.

**Reding:** Today these units are called Lightning Battalions and are being trained by Green Berets on the El Murciélago estate you confiscated from Somoza.

**Carazo:** Yes, that’s right. The wartime Unidad Móvil was very similar to today’s Lightning Brigades. In both cases, Costa Rican campesinos with a completely civilian mentality were given military training, and, as a result, ceased to be civilians. The Unidad Móvil transformed itself into a military body similar to those found in Somoza’s Nicaragua or Carías’s Honduras. These Lightning Battalions should be dissolved long before they have any such opportunity because a spirit of militarism is like a contagious
disease. It even affects healthy bodies, and Costa Rica is a healthy body. But if the disease is brought in from outside and the people become sick, if they begin to believe that carrying a weapon is a distinction, as is the case in other countries, we could suffer a destructive military development.

So, whereas others have come to depend on arms, we have learned to live unarmed. The fundamental difference between Costa Rica and other Latin American countries is that Costa Ricans have cultivated a civilized spirit, a spirit antithetical to militarization and violence, capable of finding peaceful solutions to conflicts, and respectful of the rights of others. This respect has survived and flourished for two reasons: first, because education has fostered such an attitude; and second, because in the absence of weapons with which to impose an idea, the only weapon left is reason.

**Reding:** Has the U.S. foreign policy establishment had trouble understanding Costa Rica on its own terms? Are U.S. policymakers only able to view Costa Rica within an East-West framework, or is there any evidence that they are able to understand its uniqueness?

**Carazo:** The difference between how U.S. policymakers see Costa Rica and how I see it is very easy to explain in your own language. To them, this is their “backyard.” For me, this is my “living room,” my heart, my way of life. If, by reason of so-called defense or national security, they decide to mine the “backyard” in order to keep certain people out, they are mining my “living room.”

U.S. policymakers have a serious problem: they do not know Latin America. Some come here and become experts, but only a few. The majority cannot properly evaluate our situation for lack of detailed knowledge. So they support policies that seem good to them from the standpoint of the very generalized “background” information at their disposal. U.S. policymakers treat Latin America as though it were a single entity. But each country is different, and there are historical reasons for these differences.

We Costa Ricans are good friends of the United States because we have never been invaded. But the countries that have suffered the presence of the Marines are not your friends. Why is Costa Rica the United States’ best friend in Latin America? Because you have never failed to respect us. But recently, I’ve felt that you’ve begun to stop respecting us. When did you begin doing so? When you began to think that you could buy my country. And when you began to think that the security of this country could be maintained through military training of our police forces. This country is worth much more than that; it’s worth more than the money you can give our government and worth far more than the defense potential of the Lightning Brigades. This country will be a better friend of the United States, as will I personally, to the extent that you leave us alone.

Why? Because only then can I feel free, as an equal, to be your friend. When friendship is based on receiving money, it becomes either an interested or a cautious friendship. Some will be interested friends because they think it’s worth it for the money. Others will become, as in my case, cautious friends because I don’t like to receive free money. I want a just price for our products, not gifts of money. I want to be a worthy friend, not a bought friend. Current U.S. policy could lose you the friendship of this country. And what’s more, by training soldiers, you are laying the foundations for repression. If you
persist in doing this, you’ll be in no position to complain about the consequences: reaction, violence, revolution.

**Reding:** As you’ve been pointing out, the merely formal aspects of democracy don’t work unless you have the socioeconomic base to sustain them. With this in mind, what is the way out of Costa Rica’s current economic crisis?

**Carazo:** What is needed in our part of the world is a structural change that will allow us to compete in the provision of services. Commodities are no longer sufficient for survival in the international market. To be sure, we need to seek just prices for our commodities, but even with fair prices we won’t be able to survive. And there are other problems. Each day they come up with some other finding that beef is bad for your health, that butter has cholesterol, that milk makes you fat, and that smoking kills you. So everything we produce is a poison! Coffee is a poison, sugar is a poison, beef is a poison. How are we to survive? We need to undergo a structural change in order to permit us to compete in services. For example, we urgently need to invest in the preparation of our own computer software, with which we would be better partners in economic development. And we urgently need to make better use of the broadcast spectrum, to render us the benefits we are entitled to as our share of a resource that belongs to all.

**Reding:** What is your view of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, from the perspective of your experience with them as president of Costa Rica?

**Carazo:** The International Monetary Fund obeys the orders of its owners, the developed countries. That is the reality. And we cannot be friendly with those who harm us. I don’t believe in the IMF because it is mainly focused on monetarist issues and not on social questions. The IMF’s actions are more serious than all the revolutions in Latin America because what the IMF does endangers every democracy in Latin America. The IMF could destroy all social stability in Latin America just to defend the financial interests of some of its members.

The United States will not die or suffer irreversible damage from a planned solution to the problem of the Latin American debt. Bear in mind that the Continental Illinois Bank represented more of a problem than the entire Costa Rica debt, but in that case the U.S. government found a solution. This country, however, has no possibility of reaching such a solution because it has to deal with the IMF.

As for the World Bank, its representatives came to me with a suggestion while I was president. In response to our foreign exchange problems in 1981, they told us we should stop eating meat, that we should export all we produce in order to obtain more foreign exchange. Had I taken them seriously, there would have been an uprising here. I would have had to tell the Costa Ricans: “Look, we can no longer eat meat. We’re going to close all the butcher shops and all our meat will be eaten by the señores of the United States.” How can the World Bank dare to suggest such a thing to a friendly country that has serious problems in this very difficult part of the world?

But the policymakers in the Reagan administration don’t have the slightest idea what they’re doing because they simply don’t know us. A very important U.S. official whom I met at a cocktail party said to me, “Someday I will have to come visit your beautiful
island.” I had to tell him that at that rate he would never make it, because Costa Rica is not an island. He’d get lost on the way. And this was a high-ranking official!

On the other hand, there are the specialists who have come to promote the Caribbean Basin Initiative. But they have handed over management of the CBI to those who have been favored by every privilege and are ill-inclined to share anything with the lower classes—right-wingers who would close the door to social progress. How do they think the CBI will work if those who promote it only want benefits for themselves? They have placed candy addicts in charge of distributing the candy and, of course, the addicts are eating it all.

Have a look at the programs they are implementing here and you’ll see that everything is being done to please a small group by boosting exports, such as seafood, in such a way that the benefits go to the intermediaries and not to the producers. Take a look at what they are paying the poor fishermen here: if the U.S. consumer is not benefiting from seafood exports, who is? Things cannot go on this way.

It is urgent that we get to the bottom of this problem. I am in favor of the CBI, but it is not in proper hands. Instead of being in the hands of those who are interested in resolving our social problems, it is entrusted to those who want to make private profits. As for the IMF, I think it could be improved by concerning itself more with human values rather than with only monetary values.

Reding: You were instrumental in the establishment of the Peace University by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. What are the goals of the university?

Carazo: The university is very much tied in with what I was saying earlier. Costa Rica has made education an instrument of life and peace, and has chosen dialogue as its means of resolving problems and conflicts. With this in mind, we offered a proposal to the United Nations to create an organization that would begin to cultivate these values at the global level. The proposal was approved and the university was established as an autonomous entity based in Costa Rica.

The Peace University concerns itself with everything that causes conflict in our time. We are, for example, enormously preoccupied with the destruction of the natural environment because that destruction is in turn causing serious outbreaks of violence in many parts of the world. What’s more, the lack of resources for human survival is itself a source of violence. So one of the areas of concern for the university is natural resource management and the quality of life.

Another of our programs is concerned with human rights, with guaranteeing essential rights based on Benito Juárez’s formula that peace is respect for the rights of others. We believe we must pay special attention to the problem of international social justice. The university has a program of studies in this field, with emphasis on the role of international organizations.

Conflict resolution is of course one of our most important concerns. Here again we concentrate on the role of international organizations and dedicate ourselves to public education about that role.

The Peace University considers violence to be in large measure a result of culture, and believes that to reduce violence, one must reduce all of the contributing causes. This
cannot be achieved by decree, treaty, or imposition. It can only be achieved as a result of a process that may take centuries to accomplish, but that a country like Costa Rica has the obligation to suggest. Obviously we are concerned about disarmament, but from our perspective the “arms race” is only the result of the violence in the way we live.

The process of education is closely tied to the communications media. These have now assumed a fundamental role in education because of the ease and speed with which television can reach the individual. Viewing Rambo, a child can rapidly become convinced of what is being preached and may start putting it into practice. I can’t understand how people in the United States can be surprised by the high consumption of drugs given that every time you turn on a television there’s a program portraying drug trafficking and consumption as a part of everyday life. There’s an education right there, loud and clear. So we are interested in helping the communications media realize that they can make a contribution to the development of humankind. As a step in this direction, we are networking with as many countries and communities as possible.

I feel fortunate to have come to know many people in many communities, villages, and organizations who by their very existence are a magnificent sign of hope for the world. It is a source of profound optimism, for if there are so many people who hold such convictions, there is much reason to think that this world can look forward to a future that is hopeful, and not simply tragic, as some think.

**Conversation with Javier Solís, member of Pueblo Unido and newly-elected delegate to the Legislative Assembly from San José**

**Reding:** What is Pueblo Unido? What are the groups that have joined in this alliance? And what distinguishes it from the traditional left?

**Solís:** Pueblo Unido has become something new and distinct from the traditional left. In the past two elections, Pueblo Unido was a coalition of three self-described Marxist-Leninist parties: Vanguardia Popular, which is the traditional Communist party of Costa Rica; the Socialist party, born in the 1970s but rooted in the student revolts of the 1960s, the Cuban revolution, and dissatisfaction with the traditional Costa Rican Communist party; and a third, somewhat clandestine, party that called itself the Revolutionary Movement of the People and that to some extent represented a Costa Rican guerrilla option. These three parties participated in the 1978 and 1982 elections as a classic leftist united front.

Today all three of these parties have changed: they have undergone an internal revision of their positions, from which they have separated into different tendencies. Vanguardia Popular split in two. The party’s majority, which believes that the political strategy of the left must be revised, has changed its name to Party of the Costa Rican People. It continues to have as chairman the elderly Manuel Mora Valverde, who founded the original Costa Rican Communist party in 1931. The other section of the party has gone its own way, and we have barred it from our coalition because it represents what we consider to be an invalid option—that of classical Marxism-Leninism, completely dependent on the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

The Socialist party likewise split between a radical sector that defines itself as the party of the working class, which just isn’t true, and a sector that sees a need to break with the
old Leninist strategy in order to open up the possibility of reaching the popular masses who presently go with the major parties. Finally, the Revolutionary Movement of the People also split between one branch that seeks to maintain the clandestine, guerrilla option, and another that favors the traditional means sanctioned by Costa Rican formal democracy: elections, popular representation, open political work. This last group went so far as to change their name to Movement of the New Republic.

The three original groups have thus been reorganized and purified through the departure of their more radical elements, and have now been joined by three additional groups. The first is the Democratic Radical party, a centrist party founded by Juan José Echeverría Brealey, former minister of public security in the government of Rodrigo Carazo. The Democratic Radical party seeks to restore grass-roots popular participation in government and to restore national sovereignty in the face of economic, political, and military dependence on the United States.

Though not organized as parties, two other groups representing important forces have joined the alliance. One is a group of social democrats that pulled out of Liberación National and is now working primarily at the community level in the province of Alajuela. This group has been able to place its leader at the head of the Pueblo Unido list of candidates for delegate from Alajuela.

The second is a Christian group that has been an important ally of the left, but has always distanced itself from the Marxist parties. This group is less well-defined but very extensive, and seeks to help convert Pueblo Unido from a classic Marxist option to a popular option of the Costa Rican people that speaks their language and shares their aspirations for national development.

So at this point, Pueblo Unido no longer represents the left. It now represents a center-left alternative that unites groups ranging from militant Catholic to Marxist-Leninist. Its program rejects chronic dependence on the present international economic order while supporting defense of national sovereignty, democratic achievements and liberties, regional peace, and a humane model of development.

**Reding:** Costa Rica is considered by many to be a middle-class country, an island of well-being in a suffering Central America. How accurate is this image from the point of view of basic human needs, such as food, health, housing?

**Solís:** Costa Rica has a middle-class mentality, ideology, and culture. This much is certain. Virtually the entire population is middle-class in terms of its notions of well-being and its emphasis on consumption. From the perspective of basic human needs, however, 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty level, meaning that the great majority of our people’s needs are not satisfied. The phenomenon of a Costa Rican middle-class mentality has of course been an instrument of ideological domination by those who hold power, in order to oppose change as well as all popular organization and mobilization. As a result, the grass-roots organizations and popular movements in this country are weaker, smaller, and less developed than those found anywhere else in Central America.

On the other hand, Costa Rica has made great strides in ensuring certain democratic rights, particularly in relation to other Central American countries. The most important
factor in this respect was the distribution of land. Though this has certainly changed, Costa Rica’s democratic system was originally built on the very fair distribution of the country’s primary wealth, its land.

This helped the population attain greater social goals, like education and health care, which are today pillars of our democratic society. Primary education is available to all and, in principle, the same holds for secondary education. But the present deterioration in the material conditions of much of the population denies real access. Many youngsters never enter high school because they can’t afford to buy school clothes, because they have to work, because they lack shoes to walk to school. But from a formal standpoint, the opportunity is there for all.

The national health services, clinical as well as preventive, cover 90 percent of the population. Clinical services are of the highest quality and are open to all. These two pillars, health and education, have been important in our development. But they are still only distant goals in the other countries of Central America.

**Reding:** What are the origins of Costa Rica’s current economic problems?

**Solís:** The national economy has stagnated primarily because of the foreign debt. This problem has various causes. All of our resources are primary resources: land and unexploited minerals. Most of our agricultural exports—beef, sugar, bananas, and coffee—are poorly organized. Though the cultivation of bananas is highly efficient, the industry is entirely in foreign hands. Coffee, which is likewise highly productive, is in national hands. But the sugar and beef industries suffer from extremely low productivity rates. At this point our agriculture produces an average of only 5,000 colones per hectare per year [about $40 per acre per year]. The productive structure is, with the exception of coffee and bananas, extremely inefficient. This keeps the economy stagnating, unable to respond to the basic needs of the population. It is a disgrace that we aren’t even able to produce the basic foods consumed by our people, so that we have to import beans, rice, and maize. And beef is produced mainly for export: national consumption is low and of poor quality. Overall, our agriculture is extremely inefficient.

The second major reason for our economic stagnation is our equally inefficient assembly industries. We have no completely indigenous industry, only assembly industries requiring the importation of primary materials. These industries contribute very little added value to the final products and therefore create little employment in the country. What’s more, these industries have become the country’s greatest fiscal burden, because they are exempt from practically all taxes, and because foreign ownership and patents extract profits abroad. The assembly industries created for the Central American Common market have been a source of national impoverishment.

In the face of this agricultural and industrial stagnation, the government began in the early 1970s to try to generate employment and production by investing in large state enterprises in some areas of production. The problem was that the state receives 70 percent of its funds from indirect taxes—that is to say, sales taxes and import duties. Only 30 percent comes from direct taxes on income, wealth, and profits. This meant that during all those years the state was fiscally very weak. It lacked money for its obligations, for the production it was starting to promote, and for its internal needs.
This is what led to our foreign debt. Since the government was unable to raise internal funds, it fell back on two expedients. One was to print money, in the process drastically reducing the buying power of our national currency. The other was to borrow those astronomical sums that are now our principal problem—our $4.5-billion foreign debt that consumes two-thirds of our export earnings in interest payments alone. Our export earnings are about $750 million per year, though perhaps we’ll reach $800 million this year. But we paid $400 million in interest on our debts last year. Hence the continuing stagnation of our economy.

**Reding:** How might these problems be solved?

**Solís:** We in Pueblo Unido are setting forth a proposal that is contrary to the measures that the IMF wishes to impose on us. The IMF formula is based on producing for foreign markets. That means that what is produced, how it’s produced, and for whom it’s produced are decisions that are to be made abroad. We are to produce the foods that are in demand in the restaurants of California or Wyoming—for their desires and not our basic dietary needs. We are to produce for the gourmets of the industrialized countries by means of the more efficient technologies that they will bring here through their investments and patents, which we will in turn have to pay for by selling our labor and primary resources cheaply. Naturally, by this path we will never escape underdevelopment and poverty.

We propose the opposite path, a development path based on increasing the power of our national market. This will be achieved by two steps: first, by reinforcing the buying power of the population through across-the-board salary raises, which will enable access to products; and second, by means of a production plan that emphasizes the production of foods for the entire population.

Naturally, this is where the plan becomes more complicated because it depends on the productivity of our primary resource, the land. So the central problem is not so much the distribution of land as its productivity. If a landowner has 100,000 hectares but is producing a high yield, there is no need to disturb him. On the contrary, he should be assisted in maintaining productivity. But if another landowner has 10,000 hectares with five cows, this is a situation that must be brought to an end. So we need to classify our lands in terms of their capacity to produce the basic grains, proteins, and other foods needed by our population. And, of course, we must reserve a certain percentage of land for export crops to be exchanged for other goods on the international market. All of this implies well-defined credit and technical assistance programs. It also implies access to technology, especially for small producers who do not now receive any such incentives because the great landholders have cornered the entire capacity of the national credit system.

A second leg of our development program consists of an aggressive international commercial policy. We need to begin by exploring political alliances with countries similar to our own in order to break the present economic order and change the terms of trade. We cannot continue to sell cheap and buy dear. We must alter the terms of trade from the perspective of a new moral standard and a new political conception of the development of mankind. We believe this is possible. Other countries are working on it, and we even have potential nonsocialist allies on this continent, as well as in Africa and
Asia. We believe we share common interests not only with other Central American countries, but with countries like Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, and even Colombia, where political changes are also taking place.

This aggressive international commercial policy has other goals as well. We need to explore other forms of commerce, perhaps by means of barter, that would circumvent the international price system. There are countries that are interested in their own development with which we could engage in barter. I believe Central America could take better advantage of trade with the Europeans. And we also need to think in terms of commercial relations with the socialist countries with which we might be able to negotiate long-term fixed-price contracts for our exports, such as five- or ten-year contracts for coffee and sugar. The traditional markets for these exports are saturated, so we need to open new markets.

**Reding:** Two years ago President Monge issued a Proclamation of Neutrality. But since then, the Costa Rican government seems to have moved closer to the Reagan administration’s Central American policy. Is anything left of the proclamation in reality?

**Solís:** The situation is more complicated than that. The principle of military neutrality reflects the will of the overwhelming majority of the Costa Rican people. As such, it is politically rewarding. Whoever tries to adhere to it will always have the backing of most of the Costa Rican people. Support for neutrality is ingrained in the Costa Rican character, along with civil attitudes and the desire to suppress the military. And President Monge has sincerely tried to be faithful to the principle of neutrality.

But two things have altered Costa Rica’s behavior in relation to neutrality. First, the Reagan administration has applied pressure and blackmail against the Monge administration. I know of one example in which Secretary of State Shultz sent a letter to our foreign minister, signaling that he should not engage in any bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua. On Monge’s instructions, Foreign Minister Gutiérrez replied that we are going to proceed in accordance with our own interests regarding Nicaragua. The present ambassador, Arthur Lewis Tambs, is a little more refined, but Curtin Winsor, his predecessor, was a completely uncultivated cowboy who freely interfered in our national politics and who would have been thrown out of other countries for much less.

The Reagan administration is applying these pressures in the midst of our economic crisis. High inflation and unemployment have left our government in no position to negotiate because that would entail losing the financial injection being provided by Washington. Between loans and grants, the country is presently receiving an average of $1.3 million daily, which is what has maintained social peace as well as the government itself. It is this money, for example, that provides the salaries of public employees and pays for the government’s capital investments in paved roads, buildings, and other public infrastructure.

At this point, the government is practically mortgaged to USAID. Economic and financial policy decisions are neither made in the Presidential House nor in the Central Bank. They are made in the office of USAID director Daniel Chaij. The ministers themselves admit as much. We have reached the point where the economic council appointed by the president hasn’t even bothered to meet because it would be pointless. They have the power neither to decide nor to negotiate.
These U.S. pressures have given rise to a second factor affecting neutrality: toleration of armed Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries in our national territory. The existence of encampments and the movement of arms, provisions, airplanes, and guerrillas in our national territory have been proven. The press itself knows all this but publishes little of it because the entire mass media of this country is allied with the counterrevolution and, even more importantly, is a precious instrument in its fight against the Nicaraguan government.

This toleration of the contras has been reinforced through the active collaboration of government employees at all levels, from ministers to simple soldiers. Although President Monge doesn’t approve of it, he knows what’s going on and is responsible for it. But he’s very weak and is not a fighter. There are even published articles on the participation of Civil Guards in the training of private paramilitary terrorist groups that back the contras.

It is also widely known that Edén Pastora complains about all the money he has to pay in order to buy out officials, as in the case of Vice Minister of the Interior Castro. Dismissed public officials have revealed how the contras paid for and received the aid of public security officers in the frontier zones. Money has played a critical role in this, because many of these officials would not otherwise collaborate.

So the Proclamation of Neutrality has lost its meaning due to two factors: U.S. pressures and toleration of the contras. This has resulted in a total loss of credibility for the Costa Rican government and its foreign policy. The only four Latin American countries that make common cause with Costa Rica are Haiti, Paraguay, Honduras, and El Salvador—the last two of which are occupied by the U.S. military. So discredited is Costa Rica’s foreign policy in the world at large that President Monge stayed away from the recent 40th anniversary celebration of the founding of the United Nations for fear that the delegates would walk out on him in the General Assembly, as they had earlier done at the International Trade Organization.

**Reding:** Why is there such strident anti-Sandinism in Costa Rica? It is claimed that the Sandinistas have invaded across the northern border, that they have murdered Rural Assistance guards, that they are destroying hamlets, and that they have invaded the Costa Rican embassy in Managua.

**Solis:** There are two reasons. First, we need to acknowledge that the Sandinistas have made many mistakes. They are valiant, but they are young and inexperienced, and have made errors of tact, of language, and of analysis and comprehension of Costa Rican concerns. This has complicated our relations.

But what is even more important is the sustained campaign by the Costa Rican media—television, radio, and press alike—against the Sandinistas, in which the very arguments advanced by Washington are repeated with some local additions. Our mass media are entirely one-sided, without the slightest concern for objectivity or truthfulness: they are completely aligned with the counterrevolution, and have adopted its positions as their own. It is known that the media directors meet with each other regularly, sometimes in the U.S. Embassy, to coordinate their editorial lines in relation to the war against Nicaragua. In this way, all incidents are presented in accord with the contra version of
what happened. That means that border incidents provoked by the contras are attributed to the Sandinistas.

Yet in spite of this crushing campaign, public opinion polls have revealed that 63 percent of the Costa Rican people, although anti-Sandinista, do not approve of harassment, invasion, and war against the Sandinistas. They believe Nicaragua should be left to deal with its own problems. This attitude is still deeply rooted in our people.

**Reding:** Are the new Lightning Battalions an incipient army? What is their purpose? Has their formation been approved by the Legislative Assembly?

**Solís:** No, the Legislative Assembly has not authorized their formation. The participation of military advisors in the training of the Costa Rican police forces is illegal. But the internal allies of the United States have been much stronger than the democratic forces, and it hasn’t been possible to keep the training from taking place. Even so, Ambassador Tambs himself announced that these Green Berets will leave in December because popular sentiment against any Costa Rican military involvement, especially with the political campaign under way, has been so substantial as to threaten Washington’s credibility in Costa Rica.

Are these battalions an incipient army? Yes. They’re an incipient army whose ostensible purpose is to maintain a temporary “lightning” defense force in case of a Nicaraguan invasion while Costa Rica applies for the military assistance necessary for its defense. Such is the ideological justification. Nevertheless, these battalions are clearly components of an eventual U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. At the very least, they help maintain the feeling that Nicaragua is an aggressor country and that we need to develop our defense.

In the long run, the militarization and professionalization of the Costa Rican police forces will contribute to popular repression. There is no doubt about it. Our current regime based on “supply-side” economics cannot be sustained with this country’s democratic tradition; it can only be sustained through popular repression forbidding strikes, demonstrations, barricades in the neighborhoods, and popular organization in general. This is because the price the people will have to pay—low salaries, shortages of consumer goods, curtailed public services, less education, health care, and social welfare—will augment discontent. To maintain this economy of agricultural exportation, sacrificing national development for the international market, requires powerful police forces. The classic example of this is Chile. Chilean democracy could not put up with the model of development desired by capitalist businessmen. Hence the dictatorship.

The same is true for Uruguay, Argentina, all of them. To be sure, the results haven’t always been those desired by the businessmen. The Argentinian generals have been such poor administrators that no one now wants them running things, which has led to a return to civilian rule. But the political problem in Argentina has not been resolved with the advent of Alfonsin’s democracy. We have yet to see what will happen with the workers and national development, because the price Alfonsin is paying is almost as high as that of the military dictatorship, though without repression— for now.