
THE CARIBBEAN BASIN -- OUR THIRD BORDER

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This brief precis was prepared by Robert E. Trapp, Executive Editor of the Journal, to give the reader a glimpse of the rich heritage of the Caribbean, its troubled past, and hopefully, its promising future. The precis is intended as an introduction to the subsequent feature article describing the security assistance activities of COMUSFORCARIB.]

Caribbean -- what graphic images that word creates. In the cold grey days of December, thoughts turn to white sand beaches, tropical trade winds, the glorious sun of the region and other lovely impressions. To a romantic it conjures up visions of pirates, "pieces of eight," buccaneers, Spanish galleons lying low in the water heavy with Inca gold, Sir Francis Drake, Blackbeard, buried treasure, and high adventure. To a historian it means the four voyages of Columbus, the opening up of an enormous continent to exploration and exploitation by Cortez, Pizarro, and others, new colonies and the consequential movement of European peoples to a new life. To a sociologist -- the specter is conjured of great wealth and grinding poverty, emigration of thousands of poor to the U.S., slavery and violated human rights, five hundred years of subjugation and deprivation, the triad of landed gentry, the army and the church, tiny island nations with extremely limited resources and high birth rates, single crop economies, and European customs, governmental models, and judicial systems. To a geo-politician the area creates a perception that this is the soft "underbelly" of the United States, growing American interests in industry and commerce, the political ramifications of military bases, critical shipping lanes and the threats thereto from hostile chokepoints, Cuban and Soviet adventurism, and the instability of governments and shaky economies. The list of images could go on for pages but you get the idea that the word "Caribbean" means many things to many people.

The Caribbean Basin is, for all intents and purposes, the "Third Border" of the U.S. Its dimensions are impressive, and depending upon where the lines are drawn, the size of the area can vary from 750,000 to 1.5 million square miles. Traditionally, the Caribbean is separated from the Gulf of Mexico at a line drawn between the Yucatan Peninsula and Cuba. Its eastern boundary is formed by the great arch of the Antilles which separates the sea from the Atlantic. It also serves as the turning point of the vast force of water known as the Gulf Stream. (See map on page 6.)

The sea was named by the early European navigators after a fierce tribe of aborigines, the Caribs, who occupied the southernmost part of the Lesser Antilles and the northern shores of what is now called South America. The natives of the northern or Greater Antilles, the Arawaks, also dreaded the raids of savage Carib warriors. The Spaniards, during their ascendancy, decided to exterminate the Caribs as a nuisance, and they almost succeeded, scattering the tribe's remnants around the mainland of South and Central

America. Thus, an interracial, international turmoil began which persists today.

When the area was opened to colonization, European settlers occupied island after island and displaced the natives. Looking for a source of cheap labor, the Europeans took to importing enslaved black Africans for cultivating the newly imported crops of sugar cane. Cocoa was earlier introduced in Grenada and Trinidad by Cortes who first tasted the bitter and spicy brew in the Courts of the Aztecs. After the palates of Europe were acquainted with sugar and cocoa, great island fortunes were made and the single crop economies which continue to plague the basin were born.

The sea was the main route of Spanish fleets returning home loaded with treasure seized from the Aztecs and Incas. The heavily laden ships were easy prey for the raiding English, Dutch, and French freebooters who plundered to enrich their own and sometimes, national coffers, a la Sir Francis Drake. Many of the buccaneers settled on the islands, intermarried with native or slave women, and left their imprints on the language and customs of the newly adopted homelands. Today, one can see and hear these imprints in the former English, French and Dutch colonies, with their languages a colorful patois of native tongues, African rhythms, and European idiom.

The island nations are tiny in comparison with the rest of the world. As a matter of measure, it is estimated that "two thirds of the islands of the Caribbean would fit together into the King Ranch in Texas or inside the Everglades. Cuba is by far the largest island, 745 miles long; even Cuba is smaller in area than the state of Ohio. Trinidad is smaller than Rhode Island, and Grenada is not much larger than the District of Columbia." [1]

Although we may perceive the Caribbean nations as being far away, they are in reality, our close neighbors -- Washington, for example is closer to Costa Rica than to San Francisco; and what happens in the region affects the daily life of Americans.

Diversity is the nature of the region, with twenty-six independent states and sixteen dependent territories. To this rich amalgam, add considerable amounts of ethnic, linguistic and racial flavors, a liberal mixture of diversity of size, available resources, levels of economic development and a wide spectrum of governmental forms ranging from far left to far right.

The governments of the English speaking island states reflect the traditional British parliamentary model, clinging to strong foundations of democracy. The French territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique are Departments of France and regularly send representatives to the ministerial meetings in Paris. Other Caribbean states have adopted governments which seem to suit their needs of the moment and, as such, are easily toppled, adding to the ferment of the region.

Democracy is not deeply rooted in some of the region's nations which are confronted by serious problems of government, the pressures of an ever growing population, unfavorable exchange rates and inflation, inequality of opportunity, and severe limits imposed by land size and resources. Conspicuous opulence shares whatever territory there is with debilitating poverty and obvious differences in standards of living. With their different

societal structure, the region's English speaking nations fare somewhat better in economic and social terms

Can the Caribbean be considered an "American Lake"? That depends on who you talk to and what you read. One certainty is that the region's shipping lanes are vital to U.S. defense and national well being. We long have had strong interests in the region -- political, defense, economic, altruistic, and cultural. Our interests are evidenced by the Monroe Doctrine, military campaigns during the war with Spain, the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo, involvement in Haiti in 1967 and in Grenada in 1983, hurricane and other disaster relief, development funds, humanitarian largesse, and commerce.

Further elaboration of these interests is published in the May 1982 "GIST," titled "U.S. Interests in the Caribbean Basin": [2]

The U.S. has important economic interests in this region. U.S. imports from the Caribbean countries total about \$30 billion a year, including significant amounts of oil, sugar, coffee, bauxite and meat. Our imports -- about \$31 billion in 1981 -- include transport equipment, industrial machinery, chemicals, grain and manufactured goods. The Basin countries have attracted some \$13 billion in U.S. direct investment; an estimated 6 million Americans vacationed in the area last year.

Expanding on the history of our commercial interests in the region, Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth W. Dam, during his address to the Seventh Annual Conference on Trade, Investment, and Development in the Caribbean Basin, December 1983, recalled the words of the second President of the U.S., John Adams:

The commerce of the West Indies islands is part of the American System of Commerce. They can neither do without us nor we without them. . . . We have the means of assisting each other and the politicians and artful contrivance cannot separate us.[3]

These and other bonds that unite the region and the U.S. suffer the same strains that tug at the bonds of a healthy marriage relationship. President Reagan's remarks to a conference of Caribbean leaders at the University of South Carolina on 19 July 1984 described that relationship in these terms:

Over the past four years we've strived to encourage democracy, enhance the economic vitality of the region, and cooperate in the defense of freedom. Now, these are not separate goals. They are mutually reinforcing. President Jorge Blanco [Dominican Republic] pointed that out earlier this year when he observed "Bread, health, education, liberty, democracy and peace are indivisible and irreplaceable values."

I firmly believe that democratic government is the birthright of every American. And when I say American, I'm talking about all of us in this Western Hemisphere, which together is called the

Americas. All of us from the north slope of Alaska to the tip of Tierro del Fuego.[4]

U.S. interests in the Caribbean remain firm and grow stronger. Our policy in the Caribbean is not driven solely by Soviet-supported Cuban subversion; rather, it also seeks to overcome long-standing social, economic, and political problems. These problems must be addressed head-on as part of our opposition to the attempts of shifting the region's strategic balance against our interests. In conclusion, the policy to support our interests in the Caribbean is presented in three aspects:

- Support for free elections and broadly based democratic institutions as the best way for the individual countries to pursue their own destinies according to the wishes of their people.
- The Caribbean Basin initiative to help Basin economies overcome structural underdevelopment. The initiative, as it is proposed, is to integrate programs of trade, investment and financial assistance. At its centerpiece, is the U.S. offer of one way free trade to the region's smaller countries. It also seeks authority to offer U.S. firms significant tax incentives for new investment and to increase direct financial assistance for both urgent balance of payments problems and longer term structural imbalance.
- Collective security efforts and security assistance to help democratically oriented governments resist violent, externally supported insurgents who would impose totalitarian regimes inimical not only to the interests of the region but also to those of the U.S.

ENDNOTES

1. Lowenthal, Abraham F., "The Caribbean," The Wilson Quarterly, Spring, 1982, p. 117.
2. "GIST" is a quick reference sheet published by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State.
3. "The Political Economy of the Caribbean Basin," Current Policy No. 530, U.S. Department of State, December 2, 1983.
4. "A Force for Freedom," Department of State Bulletin, September, 1984, p. 1.