National Guard involvement in U.S. exercises in Central America is part of our continuing efforts to provide the maximum possible defense preparedness, realistic and deployed training for our National Guard members.

When we made the decision in the early 1970s to move to a volunteer military and reduce the size of the standing Army, the National Guard in the Defense equation significantly changed. As the Total Force Policy took full effect, we saw the National Guard being relied upon in every major U.S. defense scenario. We've seen the National Guard grow in numbers. We've seen the Guard receive better, more modern and new equipment. In short, we've seen America's investment in the National Guard grow many fold. This is significant for many reasons. But most importantly, because it placed a great responsibility on the military and civilian leaders of the National Guard to ensure that their soldiers and airmen have every opportunity to receive the finest training possible. The kind of training I'm talking about is that which ensures—should the nation ask—that the soldier or airman is confident he can fight and win, and stand the best chance of survival on the battlefield of the future. That's the bottom line, the reason we have seen the diversification of National Guard units and the increase in air- and ground-based training of Guardsmen aboard and overseas—so that we meet our moral and ethical obligations to our people. Our people expect the best training we can provide. And we owe them no less than the best we are able to give.

The other major significance is return on investment. The federal government, in investing the enormous levels of the National Guard, expects the National Guard to contribute to the national policy objectives on an increased level—in peace and war. National Guard training in Central America is not new this year. The Guard has been involved in training and exercises in Central America since 1972. What concerns me is that many of the critics you and your fellow governors must face are talking halfhearted or complete untruth. The truth is the National Guard is performing training in Central America. We are conducting training we are required to perform, training for which Congress has appropriated money. It is valid, necessary, meaningful training in a tropical environment not available in the United States or in other overseas locations.

We exercise caution to ensure troop safety no differently than we do when we send our troops to Germany, Italy, Korea or any other part of the world. We have established a safety zone between American forces and the Nicaraguan border specifically to preclude an inadvertent border crossing or any other potentially adverse incident. I can tell you for a fact that our leadership at Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is acutely sensitive to this matter and is diligent in ensuring that we take every precaution necessary—and we do.

We are not new nor have we in the past trained members of the democratic resistance. National Guardsmen training in Central America are there to train with their units or other American or Honduran units. I have been on the ground with our troops in Central America. I have had to talk with the native people at the exercise areas and with our troops. I have yet to hear a soldier say he felt unsafe, threatened or in any other way in harms way. In fact, I have had many of our people say that the training they were receiving was the finest they had received in their careers, and many express a desire to stay longer or return soon. These are not just the comments of colonels and generals, but from soldiers of every rank.

Local people in the exercise areas say they welcome and support American soldiers. Many of the local population said they appreciated the American presence because it ensured peace in their country.

We have a good track record. We have developed positive relationships. And we have no reason to believe that the status quo will change. Our troops are receiving "real world" training in a unique and challenging environment, and the result of their exercises in many instances provides additional humanitarian benefit.

There is one particular ancillary benefit to National Guard involvement in Central American exercises. Most of the countries in which they are conducted are new democracies only recently released from military rule. When the Guard is involved in these exercises, we truly have a cross-section of South American society involved. The Guard represents the very essence of our democracy—the citizen soldier. It clearly typifies the subordination of the military to civilian control, the very goal all these nations aspire to. The Guard, therefore, provides an excellent role model for each of these countries.

The other major ancillary benefit is the great wealth of knowledge brought to bear by Guard participation in such exercises. Let me relate a few stories. The Texas armor task force (see NATIONAL GUARD, July 1986) that deployed to Honduras last year was composed principally of cattle farmers. As it turned out, the Texans deployed to an area of Honduras where cattle farming was practiced. The local cattle farmers were fascinated by the major cattle nutrition and health problems. Some of the Texans on their own time worked with the local vets.

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