

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

CENTRAL AMERICA

LYNN V. FOSTER

SECOND EDITION



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 **Facts On File**
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*In memory of Susan C. Schneider,
who was with me throughout the writing of this book.*

A Brief History of Central America, Second Edition

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When the first edition of *A Brief History of Central America* was published, peace had been established for only a few years throughout Central America. Seven years later, that peace has endured. Fledgling democratic institutions have survived as well. Electoral politics have replaced military coups; democratic presidents govern where dictators once ruled. After centuries of repression, these achievements are remarkable.

The events of these past seven years also demonstrate just how difficult it has been to maintain that peace and develop more transparent and trusted democracies. The transition to democracy has not ended death threats as a political tool nor has it been attended by any reduction in social inequalities, poverty, or unemployment. Lack of economic opportunity has resulted in increased emigration to wealthier nations to the extent that more Belizeans live outside that country than within it and the total remittances sent back to Central American countries almost match some national budgets.

Illegal drug transshipment from South America to the United States and money laundering have brought violence to the isthmus and now provide other economic alternatives to Central Americans, ones that have corrupted the military and other officials, particularly in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. In the hope of stimulating the regional economy by more legitimate means, governments have adopted capitalist reforms and signed new trade agreements, such as CAFTA–DR, but many Central Americans, their expectations raised by the promise of democracy, are becoming disillusioned by the lack of improvement in their lives. As in other parts of Latin America, they are demanding an end to globalization, and their votes may lead to more populist governments, such as those already found in Brazil and Venezuela. This second edition includes coverage of these challenges to Central America's peace and democracy.

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I have been fortunate to have generous friends and diligent advisers to assist me in the preparation of both editions of this book, especially with the illustrations in it. Without Peter Selverstone, the book would have lost most of its photographic insight into life in Central America; without Naomi Smith, many individuals in this history would have names but not faces. Cherra Wyllie happily created her beautiful drawings for the revised edition. And Geri Anderson, Roger Cooper, and Mary Alice Raymond dug through their albums to find just the right shots for this book.

Many individuals and institutions are mentioned in the text and captions for their contributions, but two scholars deserve special mention. Jack Spence of the University of Massachusetts in Boston and Efraín Barradas of the University of Florida both spent valuable time in order to share their expertise with me—Jack on the civil wars of the 1980s and the implementation of the peace accords as well as their aftermath and Efraín on Central American literature and poetry.

Lawrence Foster provided critical research assistance with unflagging patience. I also want to thank others for their kindhearted efforts on my behalf. Oswaldo Chinchilla gave me assistance at the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City and George Colman provided me with helpful materials on recent Central American history. Patricia Maza-Pittsford, former Consul General of El Salvador in New York; Roberto Rosenberg, former Trade Commissioner of Guatemala in New York; and Roberto Morgan, publisher of *Presencia Panamena e Hispana News* were all very helpful with photographs for the book.

NOTE ON PHOTOS

Many of the illustrations and photographs used in this book are old, historical images. The quality of the prints is not always up to modern standards, as in many cases the originals are from glass negatives or the originals are damaged. The content of the illustrations, however, made their inclusion important despite problems in reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

Central America is a tiny region, broken into seven even smaller nations. Yet over 5 million North Americans visit these countries on their annual vacations, visiting Mayan ruins in Guatemala and Belize, exploring the rain forests of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, snorkeling in Honduras, and cruising through the Panama Canal. An increasing number retire to the region each year, taking advantage of the tax incentives in Panama and the low cost of living in Nicaragua. And each year, impoverished Central Americans make their way to the United States as both documented and undocumented immigrants. Over the past decades, the number residing in the United States has accumulated to almost three million, one-third of them from the smallest nation of them all, El Salvador. Yet Central America is poorly understood and its history is known by too few.

The isthmus has been strategically important to the United States since the Monroe Doctrine was formulated in 1823. It became critical to U.S. interests with the construction of the Panama Canal, the path between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. With immigration issues gaining importance in the political debate in the United States and the so-called Chávez-Castro alignment in Latin America increasingly demanding the U.S. government's attention, there are more reasons than ever to learn about the region's history.

Central America is not much larger than Spain. Yet Central America is home to 45 distinct indigenous groups, among them the Mayan and Kuna Indians, that continue to follow their separate traditions and speak their own languages. In Guatemala, a nation about the size of Tennessee, there are 24 indigenous languages spoken. Central America is a land where peoples have mingled, creating groups such as the African-Indian Garífunas and Miskitos, but above all, creating an overwhelmingly *mestizo*, or mixed Indian and European, population, with definite traces of African. With the exception of Belize, Central American nations are predominantly Catholic and Spanish speaking; their colonial heritage results from three centuries of Spanish domination and feudalism in contrast to the more democratic and industrialized British institutions brought to North America.

Tragic misunderstandings have resulted from the cultural contrasts between the “colossus of the North” and the slender isthmus. The United States has interfered with, invaded, and even occupied Central American nations, and U.S. mercenaries, such as William Walker, have felt free to take over entire nations. And not all interventions are confined to the past, as demonstrated by the United States threatening remarks during the 2006 Nicaragua’s presidential election regarding the leftist candidate. Not too surprisingly, slogans like “Yankee go home!” often best summarize the resulting Central American attitude. Yet there is a mutual dependency, and a need for a more sophisticated understanding.

For 3 million years, the Central American isthmus has been both barrier and bridge, separating two vast oceans and linking two immense continents. The result has been a fabulous mosaic of landscapes, flora and fauna, and peoples, but also a history that has often been as explosive as its volcanoes. This history will be brief, but comprehensive, beginning with the geological formation of the isthmus and the peopling of the Americas, and spanning 3,000 years of civilization, from early pre-Columbian civilizations to the most recent political and economic challenges confronting Central America.

This history, to be brief, will focus on the seminal events and broad cultural patterns that have shaped Central America. It will probe deeply enough, however, to expose the regional differences that contribute to the individuality of the seven modern nations that share the isthmus: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Yet this history of Central America does not, and cannot, attempt to provide a thorough history, complete with lists of presidents, of each nation.

Despite the limits imposed by its length, this history will nonetheless aim to be intellectually engaging. Special themes, such as the causes of political unity and disunity in Central America, and the environmental pressures on the land from volcanic eruptions and earthquakes to banana plantations and ecotourism, will be developed throughout the book. Other themes, such as the fate of the indigenous peoples and their cultures since the Spanish conquest, will reveal the variety of human experience on the isthmus and the great contrasts that exist among the nations dividing it.

Accounts of political and cultural events too often give a monolithic and dehumanized impression of society. In addition to the special themes that will be examined in this history, close-ups of individuals, ethnic groups, such as the Quiché (also spelled K’iché) Mayans, and

regional movements will be used to enrich or contrast with the main events of that history. The book will examine, for example, the Spanish founding of the 16th-century utopian village of Verapaz to contrast with the brutalities of the Spanish conquest; it will compare the different impact of the British and Spanish empires on the isthmus, as well as spotlight such groups as the Garífuna (Black Caribs) and the semi-autonomous Kuna Indians of Panama. Illustrations will reveal the ethnic and geographic complexity of the region as well as its architecture. Quotations will add the intimacy of eyewitness reports and the texture of sacred texts; poems will give voice to aspirations not found in official documents.

There is, of course, no nation of Central America. Five nations—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—share a long history together. Under Spain, they were administered for several centuries as the Kingdom of Guatemala. After independence, they formed their own federation. And although circumstances caused them to divide the land into five autonomous states, they have repeatedly attempted to unite into a single sovereign state. From 1821 to 1960, there were 25 efforts at unification, and another serious effort was initiated as recently as 1997. These five nations provide the focus of this history. Panama and Belize, one a part of a South American country until the 20th century and the other a British colony until two decades ago, are now usually considered Central American nations. They, too, will be discussed insofar as they influenced events in Central America or shared in its history.

It is hoped that this book, however brief, will shed light on Central America and illuminate the indomitable spirit of its people to create a better society for themselves, often against tremendous odds.

1

THE LAND AND ITS FIRST PEOPLES

Whatever might be is simply not there; only the pooled water, only the calm sea . . . only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night. Only the Maker, Modeler alone, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, the Bearers, Begetters are in the water, a glittering light. And then the earth rose because of them, it was simply their word that brought it forth. . . . For the forming of the earth they said "Earth." It arose suddenly, just like a cloud, like a mist, now forming, unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water; all at once the great mountains came forth. . . . And the earth was formed first, the mountain-plain. The channels of water were separated; their branches wound their ways around the mountains. The waters were divided when the great mountains appeared.



Popol Vuh, *Book of the Quiché Mayans* (Tedlock 1985, 72–75)

Three million years ago the isthmus of Central America was formed, dividing the sea into the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and joining the two massive continents, of North and South America. The violent clashing of the earth's tectonic plates forced mountains to surface and pushed together lands from unknown locations in the sea; the thrusting and heaving of the earth's crust melded together these separate biosystems until, finally, in what scientists consider one of the most important geological events in the past 60 million years, the land bridge between the North and South American continents was complete.

The land bridge spanned 1,500 miles of sea and permitted the mingling of the diverse flora and fauna that had evolved during the many millions of years of continental separation. Profound changes occurred in both Americas in this massive exchange of species that included

South American monkeys and ceiba trees spreading north and North American jaguars and oaks adapting to more southern environments. More than half of the current land mammals of South America originally came from the north and then adapted and diversified in their new environment in what biologists call “the Great American Biotic Interchange.” Central America was richly endowed in this process with temperate flora and fauna from the north as well as tropical species from the Amazon basin. As a result, the isthmus has more species of birds than exist in the United States and Canada combined.



Modern nations and their capitals and the major topographic features of Central America. Central America is a land of coastline: it stretches 1,500 miles along the Pacific coast and almost as far along the Caribbean. Yet the isthmus is only 127 miles at its widest, near the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, and a mere 29 miles wide at the Isthmus of Panama. (After map in CIA World Factbook, 1999)

Although only three-fourths the size of Texas, Central America encompasses an array of landscapes worthy of a continent. A wedge between two oceans, Central America has more coastline than land mass, yet it boasts everything from savannas and rain forests to highland pine and moss-laden cloud forests, from semi-arid, cactus-dominated plateaus and dry deciduous forests on the Pacific coast to Amazonian lushness and verdure along the Caribbean. The Nicaraguan Depression and the swamps of Panama's Darién barely rise above sea level while semi-alpine peaks soar to the 13,926-foot height of Volcán Tajumulco in western Guatemala. The dry and rainy seasons, not a change in temperature, divide the year everywhere except along the southern Caribbean, where the seasons are rainy and rainier. Temperatures vary greatly with altitude, if not with the seasons, from the hot, tropical lowland homes of spider monkeys and parrots to the temperate, springlike climate of oak-and fir-covered mountains and the frosty air of glaciated peaks. In Central America, even the oceans contrast: the vast and rough Pacific versus the shallow Caribbean, where the shores are protected by the second largest barrier coral reef in the world. All manner of wildlife and plants thrive in these diverse environments: 7 percent of the world's species are on this isthmus that constitutes only a small fraction (about .5 percent) of the earth's land mass.

The Ring of Fire

... there is a volcano that is the most terrifying thing ever seen, that throws from its mouth stones as large as a house, burning in living flames, and when they fall, they break in pieces and cover all the mountain with fire.



Pedro de Alvarado, 1524 (Mackie 1972, 88)

The geological violence that created the isthmus still wreaks havoc upon it. Shifts and thrusts and fault lines in the earth's crust have created a spine of more than 350 volcanoes that parallel the Pacific coast from Guatemala into western Panama. Central America is one of the most turbulent regions in the Ring of Fire, a volcanic rim around the Pacific Ocean from South America into Asia that contains 75 percent of the world's active volcanoes. In Guatemala the volcanoes are the highest on the isthmus and the most active, with the dreaded Fuego, near Antigua, producing a glowing display against the night sky. The

CERÉN: THE POMPEII OF THE NEW WORLD

As for me, I bring down the sky, I make an avalanche of all the earth.



Popol Vuh, *Book of the Quiché Mayans* (Tedlock 1985, 89)

Volcanic eruptions have devastated pre-Columbian cities as well as historic ones. In 1976, a bulldozer at a construction site in central El Salvador accidentally uncovered part of Cerén, a pre-Columbian Mayan settlement buried under 17 feet of volcanic ash. Although the bulldozer destroyed some of the ancient structures, it also enabled archaeologists to discover complete households, their contents just where they were left at the end of the sixth century A.D. when the owners fled from the lava bombs and ash surges of the erupting Loma Caldera. Archaeologists can surmise the early evening hour of the eruption by the pots on hearths, the tools scattered about, and the rolled-up sleeping mats, items that together indicate a family gathering at the end of the workday. Plaster casts of ash-entombed gardens and fields have revealed the maturity of the fruit and maize on that fateful day, pinpointing August as the month of the disaster. Perishable items were so

volcanoes thrust their way along the Pacific side of Honduras, nearly edging El Salvador into the sea. They form memorable peaks on the islands of Lake Nicaragua and cluster into a smoking and gas-puffing cordillera in central Costa Rica. The volcanic spine is interrupted by the impressive granite range of the Talamanca Massif, but resumes its course in western Panama, where Volcán Barú appears like an explosive punctuation mark. From Guatemala into Panama, these threatening mountains dominate the Central American landscape.

At least 20 volcanoes are active, and another 20 may yet prove themselves to be so: Irazú in Costa Rica was declared extinct until it spewed ash over the heavily populated Meseta Central in 1963, killing 73 people and polluting the region for much of the decade. Young and unstable geologically, the Central American isthmus has been repeatedly devastated by both volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. In 1835, Cosiguina in northwestern Nicaragua exploded with a violence that

well preserved that archaeologists have been able to reconstruct a string of chiles that hung from a kitchen rafter and a cord that tied up a cornstalk almost 1,500 years ago. Cerén was uniquely preserved, but it was not the only pre-Columbian settlement devastated by a volcanic eruption. In El Salvador, Chalchuapa, part of the emerging Mayan civilization along the Pacific slope, was buried in about 250 C.E. by the Ilopongo volcano; the devastation was so great that the region was not resettled for two centuries. Farther south, the Chiriquí chiefdoms under the Volcán Barú in western Panama were forced to relocate in 600

C.E. Even when these volcanoes were not erupting, they were an imposing presence in the pre-Columbian world: creation myths incorporated them into the sacred landscape and designated them the homes of the ancestral gods.



Izalco last erupted in 1966; it is one of the more than 100 volcanoes in El Salvador. (Photo National Geographic Magazine, February 1922)

reduced the mountain to less than half its original height, from 6,600 to 2,660 feet. Fuego in Guatemala, Central America's most active volcano, has erupted over 60 times since the Spanish conquest; in 1971, it filled the ravines at its base with 66 feet of glowing lava and embers. Poás in Costa Rica spewed ash more than half a mile into the air in 1989; Arenal in Costa Rica approached the millennium with nightly fireworks; and Ilamatepec in El Salvador erupted for the first time in a century in 2005, forcing the evacuation of thousands from their homes. All are reminders of the explosive potential of Central America's volcanoes.

Earthquakes have damaged many Central American cities, and left them bereft of their architectural history—San Salvador has been rebuilt nine times since 1528. Antigua, Guatemala, the once magnificent regional capital of the Spanish empire, never was rebuilt after its destruction by earthquake in 1773; instead the capital relocated to Guatemala City, and Antigua was left to survive as a quiet town, its