

Health in the Guatemalan Highlands
by Ulli Steltzer
Douglas & McIntyre, \$12.95

**Witness to War: An American Doctor
in El Salvador**
by Charles Clements
Bantam, \$15.95

**Violent Neighbors: El Salvador
Central America and the United States**
by Tom Buckley
Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$25.95

**Days of the Jungle: The Testimony of a
Guatemalan Guerrillero, 1972-1976**
by Mario Payeras
Book Center, \$5.60

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

OVER THE PAST few years, Central America has loomed repeatedly in the ephemeral arena of world affairs, attracting a degree of attention hitherto unknown in the region's sordid and neglected past. Making Central America an international issue is the result of an interplay of numerous factors. If the overthrow, in July 1979, of the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, proved to be something of a catalyst, equally catalytic (catastrophic some would say) was the coming to power of Ronald Reagan, for his administration has placed the United States firmly at the centre of the crisis.

By choosing once again to intervene in the domestic politics of Central America, and to insist that it does so because a Communist conspiracy is at work in its own "back yard," the United States acts in such a way as to Americanize what is essentially an internal conflict. In a situation that calls primarily for North-South co-operation, the Reagan administration seeks (and finds) only East-West confrontation.

The process of Americanization has many consequences, one of which is to intensify the newsworthiness of Central America and thus to create a global audience that demands to be informed. While immediate mass need is most often met by television, scores of books on the events and circumstances of Central American life have recently appeared, written for varying purposes by people with varying experiences and talents. The four books reviewed here may not be among the very best available for public consumption, but they can be considered more or less representative of what is currently on the market.

Ulli Steltzer's fine photographic essay, *Health in the Guatemalan Highlands*, is a sensitive portrayal of the Chimaltenango Development Program, a health care scheme that has operated in the central highlands of Guatemala, under the charismatic supervision of Dr. Carroll Behrhorst, for the past 20 years. Behrhorst and his associates practise what might best be described as people's medicine, with an emphasis on appropriate technology and a keen awareness that, in countries like Guatemala, health is as much a moral and social issue as it is a medical one.

Guided by the spirit of I Corinthians 12:



Women cook for relatives at a hospital in the central highlands of Guatemala; inset: hospital founder, Dr. Carroll Behrhorst

Portraits of the dispossessed

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If one member suffers, all suffer together; If one member is honored, all rejoice together . . .

Behrhorst asserts that "before health can supplant disease among the rural poor of the world, we believe that the following problems must be tackled aggressively. Our listing of priorities generally reflects the opinions and feelings of the people we serve: (1) social and economic injustice (2) land tenure (3) agricultural production and marketing (4) population control (5) malnutrition (6) health training (7) curative medicine."

In a moving Introduction, Behrhorst explains why curative medicine is considered the last priority. For the rest of the book Steltzer documents, in photographs and words, the efforts of the predominantly Indian people of Chimaltenango to achieve the goals set by the first half-dozen priorities. Every image, every sentence conveys an overwhelming sense of the dignity and self-reliance of the Cakchiquel Maya. Steltzer has a sharp and perceptive eye, handling the camera in such a way as to show that moments of happiness and light-heartedness are miraculously still to be found in a life plagued constantly by poverty, exploitation, disease, and hunger. In a quiet but compelling way, Steltzer's book illustrates with rare objectivity the deprivation and inequality that lie at the root of unrest in Central America.

Much more subjective is Charles Clements' account of his year in strife-torn El Salvador, *Witness to War*. A medical doctor like Behrhorst, Clements came to his profession

somewhat indirectly. A distinguished graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Clements flew more than 50 combat missions as a C-130 pilot in Vietnam before becoming disillusioned with American involvement in Indochina. Following his dismissal from the air force, Clements was drawn to the Quaker cause. He studied medicine at the University of Washington, graduated in 1980, and in March 1982 illegally entered El Salvador to serve as a doctor on the Guazapa Front, one of the "controlled zones" held by insurgents some 40 kilometres to the northeast of San Salvador.

Although uneven, disjointed, and rather loosely written, *Witness to War*

is as interesting an "inside" story of the civil rebellion in El Salvador as any "outsider" has yet told. Whereas Joan Didion, in her recent *Salvador*, remains cool and detached, Clements has opted instead to be passionate and engaged. He writes from a wealth of personal experience, and although at times his emotions and reactions get in the way, for the most part he does a splendid job of allowing the people he cares for to tell their own story. Clements finds the brutality of the Salvadoran armed forces, and the support his own government lends their bloody depredations, a challenge to his Quaker principles. He writes: "A system that must make war against its own people, that defends itself by murdering its priests, its professors, and its physicians, can hardly claim to be civilized, much less to have staked out the moral high ground." One leaves *Witness to War* saddened and embittered, yet strangely uplifted.

No such feeling is engendered by a perusal of *Violent Neighbors*, a shoddy piece of writing thrown haphazardly together by Tom Buckley, a journalist with more than 25 years' experience with *The New York Times* but whose work in this volume resembles more the uncritical and unimaginative musings of a cub reporter.

The book's dustjacket declares *Violent Neighbors* to be "the most complete and objective report to date on Central America and Mexico, and their relations with the United States, down to the present." What in fact Buckley delivers is a superficial array of anecdotes, impressions, and common knowledge that reads like a mediocre, barely passable, undergradu-



Guatemalan woman and her children

ate term paper. Gross generalizations, insufficient analysis, errors of fact, and chic journalistic clichés abound. In an endnote meant to justify his failure to employ "footnotes and other scholarly apparatus," Buckley describes his approach as "informal"; inadequate or unacceptable would have been more accurate.

One-quarter the length of *Violent Neighbors* but many times more rewarding is *Days of the Jungle*, a firsthand account of the genesis of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, one of Guatemala's four main revolutionary organizations. Written by Mario Payeras, one of the group's founding members, *Days of the Jungle* reconstructs the experience of the guerrilla insurgency between 1972 and 1976, when 16 Guatemalan exiles re-entered their country from Mexico and began the painstaking work of establishing a peasant support base upon which to prepare for popular revolutionary war.

Payeras's book is a humane and insightful account of his group's first miserable weeks in the Ixcán rainforest, of its struggle with hunger, sickness, and a hostile natural environment, and of its eventual success (after a slow and often bitter process of trial and error) in winning the confidence and respect of Guatemala's Indian majority. Tightly and elegantly written, and devoid of the sterile ideological rhetoric one normally associates with such works, *Days of the Jungle* seems destined to become a classic in the genre. A superb Introduction by George Black furnishes Payeras's chronicle with a necessary temporal framework, sketching in the relevant political events preceding the formation of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor and summarizing the devastating experience of the Guatemalan people over the seven years beyond the time when *Days of the Jungle* ends. Black predicts grimly that "it is in Guatemala that the decisive battles for the future of Central America will be fought; and the sheer human cost will surely surpass anything we have yet seen."

Four different books, four different views of the crisis sweeping an isthmus in turmoil. Payeras and Steltzer are well worth searching out, their work speaking eloquently not only of struggle and pain but of humility and joy. Clements also warrants examination, his personal testimony serving to expose the more universal errors of the country he once fought for, of a cause he once believed in. Buckley represents a nadir in journalistic reporting, but his dismal offering (one hesitates to call it a book) is instructive as a means of evaluating the unprofessional way that many in his profession think and operate. As for the people of Central America, while we read or write reviews about how their reality is depicted, they themselves, in the age of Ronald Reagan, daily confront a far more onerous task, one in which survival figures prominently. □

W. George Lovell is a Plumsock Postdoctoral Fellow, specializing in Latin American studies, in the Department of Geography at Queen's University.

Right in the thick of it

The Fateful Triangle:
The United States,
Israel, and the Palestinians
by Noam Chomsky

Black Rose, \$28.95 cloth, \$14.95 paperback

Reviewed by ELIA T. ZUREIK

I CANNOT THINK of a contemporary thinker of Noam Chomsky's international stature who has consistently espoused unpopular, though basically just, political causes and in the process managed to invite criticism from all points on the ideological spectrum — the right, left and centre. Heated exchanges between Chomsky and his critics are not uncommon on the pages of the conservative *Commentary*, the liberal *New York Review of Books*, and the leftist magazine *Dissent* — not to mention, of course, his arch enemies on the editorial staff of *The New York Times*. More recently, the letters pages of *The Globe and Mail* have joined the fray.

As an eminent professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston and one who has revolutionized the study of linguistics, Chomsky could have easily chosen the ivory-tower approach and observed neutrality in the on-going debates on pressing social and political issues. The fact that he has decided to write with commitment about the Middle East, human rights, Vietnam, Latin America, Cambodia, and other troubled regions of the world has no doubt put him in a minority position. But it was his stand on the Middle East in general and his criticism of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians in particular that put him on a collision course with the liberal establishment and influential opinion-

makers among politicians, academics and the press.

Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle*, which describes the evolution of U.S. and Israeli policies on the Palestine issue, has a dual purpose. First, it is intended to expose the arguments of his critics and condemn the silence on the Middle East conflict of otherwise socially conscious individuals. The upshot of this, Chomsky claims, is the acceptance by the general public of an unfair assessment of the Palestine-Israeli impasse in which the blame is put solely on one side, namely the Palestinians. Second, he set out to show that there is in fact an international consensus on the Palestinian conflict which could have led to a resolution of the current situation, except for the fact that Israel, aided by the U.S., has succeeded in torpedoing any negotiations that could lead to Palestinian self-determination.

In undertaking his task, Chomsky does not leave a stone unturned in his search for supporting evidence. Archival material, newspaper coverage, and other primary sources in Arabic, Hebrew, English and French are marshalled in an impressive fashion to show that a comprehensive reading of the historical record de-

monstrates that beginning with the pre-1948 period, moving to the 1967 war, the more recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the subsequent massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, both the liberal press and successive administrations in the U.S. have primarily supported the official Israeli position, often to the detriment of Israel and the cause of peace.

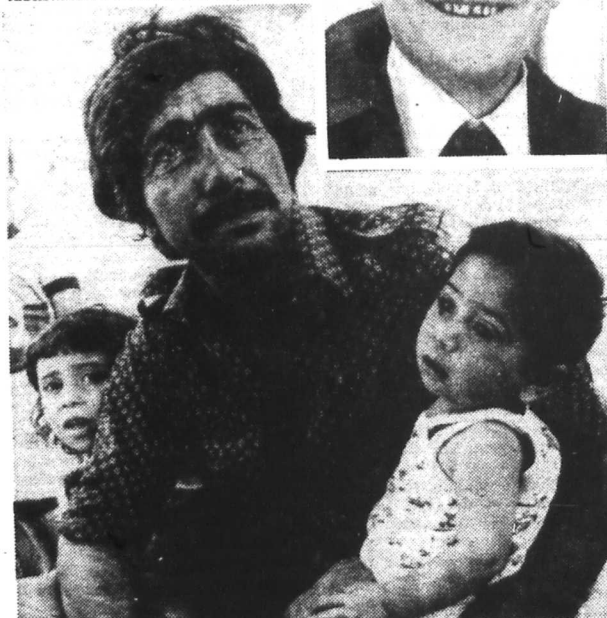
And when the administration was seen to tilt in the direction of a balanced position, the U.S. Congress would step in under the awesome influence of the Israeli lobby in Washington to restore Israel's favored status. As one example, Chomsky mentions the most recent aid package to Israel, already the highest given by Washington to any foreign country on a per capita basis. At a time when it is clear to the Congress and the White House that, contrary to U.S. stated policies, funds are being illegally diverted from this aid to pay for new settlements in the occupied territories, the U.S. Congress outbid the White House, increasing the aid package by \$500 million and enlarging its write-off of accumulated debts from previous years.

In delving into the historical evidence, Chomsky shows that rejectionism, religious fanaticism, and the resorting to violence are evident in the practices of both Arabs and Israelis — although actions and pronouncements by the latter to this effect, he contends, are usually overlooked by the media. What is frustrating to Chomsky is the unwillingness of American officials and the media to acknowledge a perceptible change in the Palestinian position from its traditionally assumed rigid stand — when such change occurs.

For example, he points to statements made by Palestinian officials expressing willingness to negotiate with and recognize Israel on a mutual basis. Yet these statements are greeted with indifference by the media and outright rejection by the Israeli and U.S. governments. It is on this point that the Israeli philosopher and peace activist, Avishai Margalit, dwells in his recent review of Chomsky's book; he argues that invariably such promising declarations by one Palestinian official are denied immediately thereafter by a more senior Palestinian official. The point is, Margalit points out, that Israelis choose to listen to denials, while Chomsky and moderate Palestinians hear only positive declarations.

The value of Chomsky's book is to show how the U.S., by adopting a biased position on the Palestine-Israeli conflict, has failed to mediate between the two sides. Indeed, had it not been for the American promise to Israel not to deal with official Palestinian representatives, unless and until the latter recognize publicly Israel's legitimacy, the U.S. would have been able to do a lot behind the scenes. By joining Israel's side and rejecting the notion of Palestinian statehood, the U.S. government has abandoned any possibility for playing a positive role in the impasse. □

Elia T. Zureik teaches in the Sociology Department at Queen's University.



A Palestinian refugee with his children; inset: Noam Chomsky

Photo by Jack Chiang