

# Oklahoma Law Review

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Volume 38 | Number 5

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1-1-1985

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### Recommended Citation

William C. Thiesenhusen, *National Security Implications of Land Reform in Third World Nations*, 38 OKLA. L. REV. 789 (1985),  
<https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/olr/vol38/iss5/4>

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# NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF LAND REFORM IN THIRD WORLD NATIONS

WILLIAM C. THIESENHUSEN\*

## I.

From the end of World War II until the Kennedy administration, the almost single-minded national security goal of the United States was prevention of another world conflagration. The emphasis was on high technology and intricate organization of the armed forces. Cuba and Viet Nam, however, changed that view. As Premier Khrushchev repeated his endorsement of "Wars of National Liberation," President Kennedy became frustrated with the inability of the U.S. to prevent what he saw as inroads by the extreme left wing in the Third World. Although guerrilla wars are not strangers to American history, the last such war the United States was actively involved in was the conquest of the Philippines after 1898. From that time to the 1960s, American policy-makers forgot much. As the Soviet Union closed the technological gap in nuclear weaponry, President Kennedy came to believe that the U.S. might achieve its goals by guerrilla warfare without risking a conventional or a nuclear war.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, a two-track policy was established to enable the U.S. to cope with insurgency. One track was conventional, and it depended on military strength. An example of the second track was the Alliance for Progress, established in 1961 as a means for President Kennedy to win over Latin American nations and to offer a counterpoint to the Cuban threat. In a sense, this was international patronage. The strategy in its most cynical restatement seemed sanguine: avert possible warfare by making U.S. aid contingent upon reforms that gave the excluded poor—those deemed most apt to rebel—more participation in society. It was believed that this strategy would allow for a peaceful revolution without which a violent one would be inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

On January 18, 1962, President Kennedy established a special counterinsurgency group,<sup>3</sup> headed by Maxwell Taylor. The ambitious mandate of this group was "to insure proper recognition throughout the United States government that subversive insurgency is a major form of politico-military conflict equal in importance to conventional warfare."<sup>4</sup> In the process, a new term,

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1. G. BASTIAN, et al., *GENERALS FOR PEACE AND DISARMAMENT: A CHALLENGE TO US/NATO STRATEGY* 51-52 (1984).

2. J. PETRAS & R. LAPORTE, JR., *CULTIVATING REVOLUTION* 375-406 (1971); H. WIARDA & H. KLINE, *LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENTS* 70 ff. (2d ed. 1985). See generally R. AYRES, *BANKING ON THE POOR: THE WORLD BANK AND WORLD POVERTY* (1983).

3. National Security Action Memorandum, No. 124.

4. U. JOHNSON, *THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER* 329-30 (1980).

“counterinsurgency,” was added to the lexicon of foreign affairs. The appointed group preferred “internal defense,” but Taylor and the President insisted upon “counterinsurgency,” and so it remained.<sup>5</sup>

In his memoirs, U. Alexis Johnson, then Deputy Undersecretary of State and a member of the Taylor group, summarized the group’s thinking: “[W]e did not want to adopt a blanket policy of opposing all change, even violent change, in developing countries. What we wished to combat was letting small groups of native communists confiscate the revolutionary process and convert it to their own ends.”<sup>6</sup> A book, nicknamed the “CI Bible,” was the result of the deliberations of the Taylor group. Its conclusion was that military measures alone were not the answer and that “[t]he primary purpose of internal defense programs is to deal with and eliminate the *cause* of dissidence and violence.”<sup>7</sup> The cause referred to was poverty.

Thus, President Truman’s Point Four program was infused with a broader mandate. This infusion went so far as to give the foreign aid bills a constituency and helped assure right-wing support for them. Rather than stumbling through Congress as a purely altruistic program, it could now be sold to the American people on a more streamlined basis: foreign aid is vital because of what it means to U.S. national security. Congressmen from areas with large pockets of poverty, who had always had difficulty arguing for aid to poor people far away, could now talk the more understandable idiom of self-defense.

Ambassador Johnson summarized his own interest in the matter by stating that: “To the degree that we could succeed in aiding development, the conditions giving rise to insurgency would be removed.” He also recognized the need for distributive measures. Writing in the July 1962 *Foreign Service Journal*, he stated a fundamental paradox: “In some cases only radical reforms will obtain the necessary results. Yet the measures we advocate may strike at the very foundations . . . of the government’s control.”<sup>8</sup> Idealists may cringe that the same group that provided added funds for more Green Berets also provided the rationale for more United States support of development and land reform in the Third World.

## II.

In fact, history does not have to be searched long to find an example of U.S.-backed reform that redounded to its best interest (if the trade difficulties Japan now gives America can be forgotten for a moment). Post-World War II Japan is the best contemporary example of land reform for reasons of U.S.

5. *Id.* at 330.

6. *Id.* at 331.

7. *Id.* at 331-32. Charles Maechling of President Lyndon Johnson’s staff took the lead in writing the “CI Bible,” more properly called the UNITED STATES OVERSEAS INTERNATIONAL DEFENSE POLICY.

8. JOHNSON, *supra* note 4, at 336.

national security, just as it is the best example of a reform that served a wide public good. On the eve of the postwar reform, the rural social structure in Japan was made up of three segments: (1) those who owned and cultivated land; (2) those who cultivated but did not own land; and (3) those who owned land but did not cultivate it. In terms of households, there were about one-third in each group. In terms of land occupied, about one-half of Japanese land was farmed by owners and one-half was tenanted. Of the land leased to tenants, 18 percent was owned by absentee landlords, 24 percent by noncultivating landlords, and 58 percent by owner-farmers. Before the 1947 reforms, about 6 million families worked on areas of less than two acres per family, much of this extremely fragmented.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, there was a great demand for land resulting in high rents, which caused sharpened tensions and antagonisms between tenant and landlord. Land ownership and operatorship were concentrated at the upper end of the distribution curve. In an important sense, the land tenure system was a reflection of an inequitable social structure, much as it is today in most of the Third World.

Low incomes and other grievances galvanized peasants into unions, and a growing number of peasant-landlord disputes occurred until the World War II years. Some very limited land distribution between 1926 and 1936 had improved the situation somewhat, but landlords were able to obstruct reforms up to the end of the war. During the war, these agrarian problems of inequity receded into the background as Japan attempted to produce enough food, no matter what the cost.

Agrarianists believe that the instability and crises of the 1930s, and even the war, might be partially attributable to faulty land tenure relations. Indeed, Dore has attributed the Japanese desire for overseas expansion to, among other factors, a combination of: (1) population pressure on resources; (2) lack of an adequate domestic market; (3) the army finding support for its expansionist policies in the distress of the peasants; (4) the social structure of the village and the authority of the landlord, which were congenial to the development of totalitarianism; and (5) poverty, which breeds aggression.<sup>10</sup> According to Elias Tuma, "These are hypotheses but they seem logical enough as reasons for the Allied Powers to justify land tenure reforms after Japan surrendered." The social problem became clearer toward the end of the war, which brought increasing food scarcities and rising profit margins in agriculture. These rising profit margins brought some landlords back to the countryside, thus accentuating the rural class problem.

To forestall an externally imposed reform by the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP), the Imperial Japanese Government passed a reform bill in the Diet three months after surrender. The SCAP rejected the pro-

9. E. TUMA, TWENTY-SIX CENTURIES OF AGRARIAN REFORM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS (1965); much information in this section comes from *id.* at 129-46.

10. R. DORE, LAND REFORM IN JAPAN (1959).

posed reform bill as being too conservative. The transparent aim of the bill was to preserve the social structure of the village. The SCAP order had as its central purpose the "destruction of feudal social relations in Japanese villages." The revised land reform bill became law upon the approval of SCAP on October 21, 1946. As a result of the reform, owner-cultivated land expanded from 56 percent of the total in 1947 to 90 percent in 1950. The reform reduced the average farm size appreciably. Dore believes that incomes were equilibrated enough by the reform to change the village-level power structures. New owners came to dominate village-level politics as land reform was accompanied by other government measures meant to decentralize. In sociopolitical terms, Tuma feels that the reform undermined the influence of the former landlord group and weakened the rigidity of the social structure which obstructed social mobility. In political terms, "Land reform . . . inured Japanese peasants to the appeals of socialism and made them the strongest and most loyal supporters of the conservative parties."<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean that the reform process was smooth. Reactionary forces attempted to sabotage the land reform bill by passing a weaker bill than SCAP demanded and by challenging it through the court system. Landlords also attempted to give and withdraw favors to peasants; grazing rights, which were not included in the reform, are an example. Lastly, landlords were able to influence the locally elected land commissions, which helped to administer the reforms, by electing conservative members. Landlords also kept some of the best lands, or made certain that prime property rights went to carefully chosen peasants or to relatives with whom they divided the land in order to avoid maximum size limitations. Even more landlords moved back to the countryside and began farming again to evade the expropriation that was inevitable for absentee owners. When land sale was made legal again in 1950, there was some resale of land to larger proprietors.

Citing the reforms of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India, Mexico, Bolivia, and Venezuela, and the Stolypin reforms of Russia, Huntington generalizes on land reform by commenting that:

The peasantry . . . may be the bulwark of the status quo or the shock troops of revolution. Which role the peasant plays is determined by the extent to which the existing system meets his immediate economic and material needs as he sees them. These needs normally focus on land tenure and tenancy, taxes, and prices. Where the conditions of land-ownership are equitable and provide a viable living for the peasant, revolution is unlikely. Where they are inequitable and where the peasant lives in poverty and suffering, revolution is likely, if not inevitable, unless the government takes prompt measures to remedy these conditions. No social group is more conservative than a landowning peasantry, and none is more revolutionary than a peasantry which owns too little land or pays

11. S. HUNTINGTON, *POLITICAL ORDER IN CHANGING SOCIETIES* 376 (1968).

too high a rental. The stability of government in modernizing countries is thus, in some measure, dependent upon its ability to promote reform in the countryside. . . . Land reform carried out by revolution or by other means thus turns the peasantry from a potential source of revolution into a fundamentally conservative social force. . . . Like any reform, however, some violence may be needed to produce the reform, and the reform itself may produce some violence.<sup>12</sup>

### III.

The U.S. was a reactionary influence when Mexico was instituting its land reform, and the U.S. regarded Bolivia's efforts in the same direction in the mid-1950s with circumspection. In 1956, however, Washington's mission in Saigon argued for reform in Viet Nam; the United States also pushed for land reform with the Shah of Iran. In the 1960s, as a reaction to Cuba, the Kennedy administration came to believe that land reform might work in Latin America. The rationale was simple: by conditioning aid upon reforms, the U.S. could forestall the spread of communism in the Northern Hemisphere and make its "own backyard" more secure. An opposing side to this argument also developed. Since the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China had made agrarian reform a central part of their postrevolutionary programs, were we not forgetting the sacredness of private property, long a cornerstone of the American legal system? These ideas were often generated by oligarchies and private business. It was on these same grounds that the United States had undermined the regime that had fought for agrarian reform in Guatemala in the mid-1950s.

With the Alliance for Progress in Latin America, the U.S. had much more of an uphill battle with reforms than in Japan. First, the milieu was different. Laws in many Latin American countries prohibited effective unionization. Furthermore, at the time of reform, Japan had a high level of industrialization, with labor-intensive packages of technology in rural and urban areas. Japan was also using the land in the countryside intensively and had a high level of literacy.

In contrast, Latin America had few industries at the time; therefore, rural-urban migration was not the same kind of political safety valve for surplus labor; if campesinos migrated to town, they were often unemployed. The technology used by Latin American countries was largely borrowed from countries that had developed it under conditions that called for more capital intensity in an ambience of scarce labor. Furthermore, literacy in Latin America was low.

Also, Japan had a viable system of small-scale operatorship. In this context, it is not difficult to change a small-scale tenant into a small-scale owner-

12. *Id.* at 375-78.

operator. On the other hand, with Latin America's bimodal agrarian structure, not only the ownership but also the scale of operation often had to be fundamentally altered, and the institutions serving agriculture had to be redirected. Further, the traditional structure of Latin American agriculture was based on large-scale haciendas owned by the elites, on one hand, and tiny *minifundios* owned by the majority of those in the agricultural sector—and landless labor or service tenants—on the other. It proved to be a wrenching change in Latin America to convert from large-scale to small-scale owner-operatorship, and the ill-understood production cooperative was arrived at as a compromise. While class oppression was present in both Japan and Latin America, the institutions responsible for such oppression were distinct.

Second, ideological battles over Latin American land reforms were intense and protracted, and the U.S. could not impose reforms in Latin America even if it had wanted to because it was not an occupying force. Some United States' economic advisers felt that the change in production structure would imperil the capacity of countries to produce a marketable surplus and, hence, would arrest industrial growth. The influence of these economic advisers was deeply felt within the Agency for International Development and United States' embassies, which, in turn, developed ambivalent attitudes on reforms. During the Lyndon Johnson years, U.S. support for reforming agrarian structures lessened. This was because there were other strong reactionary forces within the United States, often represented by the multinational corporations operating in Latin America, which wanted short-run stability for business. Also, the landlord class in Latin America was far from neutralized. The landlord class could act in concert with the multinationals and other conservatively inclined groups to slow the enactment of reform laws and their administration, or simply to embroil the process in rhetoric. In many cases, however, the political will for reform was absent. Yet, in some cases where it was present, like in Chile, the U.S. read marxism into the equation and stifled reform as it had in Guatemala in 1954.

In recent years in Latin America, there has been a rollback of reforms in some countries, like Chile and Peru.<sup>13</sup> Other countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, never had reforms. In still others, like Colombia, reform sectors were nothing but Potemkin villages. The result of this is that social problems of inequality in Latin America and other parts of the Third World may be more acute today than several decades ago.

#### IV.

Recent years have also seen profound changes occurring in most of the Third World. At the United States' collective peril, it tends to regard these poor countries as homogeneous masses of humanity with curious customs and culture, poor and outside of the mainstream—a group of nations that can

13. Thiesenhusen, *The Illusory Goal of Equity in Latin American Agrarian Reform*, in *INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF LAND REFORM* (Montgomery, ed. 1984), at 31-62.

be forgotten when considering national security. Indeed, revolutions and coups there seem endemic. The exceptions to America's general lack of interest are those few countries that seem to be developing nuclear capabilities, those countries that have recently created havoc with our international financial markets, those countries with imports that interfere with American producers on certain down-scale items, and those countries whose labor migrates to the United States. The press only rarely covers Third World events in more than episodic terms except when something dramatic happens, and even then its interest wanes quickly.

In fact, changes in the Third World are occurring rapidly. The United States cannot alter these changes very much because its day as a prime source of strength, development capital, and even ideas has passed. Hegemony is difficult to achieve, even in America's own backyard.<sup>14</sup> The days when the United States or the Soviet Union could command by their very presence are largely over. What the United States State Department opts for is to influence, not to determine, what is happening in Third World nations.

Major changes that are occurring in the Third World include:

1. The less developed countries separated into two subgroups: the middle-developed countries or MICs (having average per capita incomes of \$440 to \$6,850), and the least-developed countries or LICs (with per capita incomes below that of the MICs).<sup>15</sup> The MICs are noteworthy for their growing industrial capacity, the inequality of their income distribution patterns, the recency of their entrance into the financial markets, their debts, their new-found interest in international trade in industrial products, and their growing feelings of nationalism.

The upper end of this MIC category is comprised of countries that grew economically at a very rapid rate during the 1960s and 1970s. These countries now have a self-confidence about themselves in world affairs. Examples include Brazil, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, and Mexico. These countries, however, have great remaining social problems and perhaps no need to solve them in agriculture—or, at least, not in agriculture alone—because of their substantial nonagricultural sectors. Their economies are increasingly complex, and the countries have at their disposal more policy options for dealing with poverty and dissonance.

Soon it will be difficult, if not impossible, to view all MICs as one group because the upper middle-income countries are coming to demonstrate these characteristics to a greater extent than the lower end of this group. At the lower end of the MICs are El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Philippines, countries in great ferment in which the possibility of solving pressing social problems through reform of the rural social structure still exists.

14. There is disagreement on this point. It is not as obvious to Henry Kissinger as to Richard Feinberg, for example. See H. KISSINGER, REPORT OF THE NATIONAL BIPARTISAN COMMISSION ON CENTRAL AMERICA, Submitted to the President of the United States (Jan. 10, 1984); Feinberg, *The Kissinger Commission Report: A Critique*, 12 WORLD DEVELOPMENT 8 (Aug. 1984).

15. WORLD BANK, WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT, 1985, at 174-75.



2. Many Third World countries (LICs and MICs alike) contain substantial populations of the very poor—perhaps one-half the total population of the country. Gradually, the bulk of poor people, especially in MICs, is shifting to the urban sectors, even though it is the agricultural sectors that have the highest proportion of persons in poverty.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that this group of poor is monetized, it is hurt greatly when depressions occur but is not helped proportionally in recovery. This group consists of a large hard-core population of poor who are squeezed out of the system when the population grows rapidly, when new technology decreases the number of industrial jobs, and when excess population is unable to find decent employment opportunities in agriculture.<sup>17</sup> In most of these countries, institutional patterns have not enjoyed the transformation needed to meet changing economic conditions without developing more social problems as a by-product. Rather, there has been a herculean effort on the part of past elites to remain in power; the technological imperative does not seem to challenge these traditional institutions. The net result appears to be a dominant economy and one or several nondominant economies operating with different rules and with some relation of one with another (usually through the labor market) within a single country.

3. Within nearly all Third World countries, especially in the MICs, while traditional power structures tend to remain, increased social development for the poor has been implemented. Thus, even for the very poor, educational facilities are improving, as are health conditions. These developments are still rudimentary, but if the statistics of today are compared with those of fifteen years ago, changes are great. Furthermore, mass media are quickly becoming available to Third World countries, especially Asia and Latin America. This means the poor are becoming familiar with how upper classes live. The increased social benefits resulting from economic growth, coupled with severely rationed economic progress, have produced restlessness, which many countries feel they must quell with progressively more repressive measures. In the richer MICs, the state apparatus is frequently able to contain these pressures with force; this, one supposes, is a temporary expedient. In the poorer MICs, the result is often low-level civil disturbance, terrorism, rebellion, land invasion, and sometimes revolution.

In Asia and Latin America, one way of adjusting institutions to this situation is through land reform.<sup>18</sup> Land reform can be, all at once, a method to cope with economic, social, and political problems. Economically, land

16. M. RIAD EL GHONEMY, *DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE RURAL POOR* (Food & Agric. Org. of UN, 1984); Lopez Cordovez, *Trends and Recent Changes in the Latin American Food and Agricultural Situation*, CEPAL Rev. (Apr. 1982).

17. *TECHNICAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN AGRICULTURE: LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES* (M. Pineiro & E. Trigo, eds., 1983); Thiesenhusen, *Economic Effects of Technology in Agriculture in Less Developed Countries*, in *TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL AREAS* (G. Summers, ed. 1983), at 235-52.

18. P. DORNER, *LAND REFORM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT* (1972); R. KING, *LAND REFORM: A WORLD SURVEY* (1977).

reform helps production to increase and lay the groundwork for a mass market and more on-farm savings and investment. Socially, land reform can reduce income gaps between classes and lay the framework for a more democratic society that can bring social services to more people. Politically, land reform can stabilize the population in a rapidly growing and politically volatile group and reduce demands made upon governments, in effect, buying support for the government that gave out land. Land reform, however, is no panacea.

Pressures for land reform occur in countries in which the population is competing for inadequate resources. The reason for this is not that there physically is no more land in the country, but that much of the good land tends to be tied to large estates owned by traditional elites who are not using it most advantageously for the general public.

The major economic advantages of land reform, from the standpoint of Third World countries, which are later translated into social and political benefits are: (1) production per hectare tends to rise; (2) ownership implies more care to resources on the part of peasants than does tenancy; (3) year-round in situ employment is offered so that tranference costs are low; (4) income distribution improves; (5) peasants come to demand more products of industry as incomes rise in the reformed sector; (6) on-farm savings and investment increase; and (7) communities develop as their members are more willing and able to support local institutions.

Internationally, land reform in the Third World is one of those policies which serves the best security interest of the United States and of the Third World country in which the land reform takes place. The major advantages for the United States in helping this process are numerous. The United States benefits from trade with an invigorated Third World. Moreover, trade usually has a stabilizing effect which staves off extremism. In the presence of a land reform, the U.S. reaps the benefits of favor which attach to the government that instituted the reform. By not helping the Nicaraguan reform, the United States alienated the Nicaraguan peasantry and much of the region. This did not have to occur. If the United States desires friendship and cooperation of a nation, good politics suggests it be on the side of the reformers.

There are, however, cases in which land reform may be an immoral expedient. these cases include situations where:

- (a) land reform buys the support of the peasantry for a corrupt regime;
- (b) the form of agrarian reform is clearly not in keeping with standards of environmental conservation;
- (c) reform gives land to some poor as it deprives other poor people of land, or worse, reform benefits the rich at the expense of the poor;
- (d) reform freezes the peasantry on worn-out land for which insufficient yield-increasing inputs are made available;<sup>19</sup>

19. This is a matter for considerable discussion. In a recent article, Grace Goodell concludes: If there is to be life after land reform . . . we cannot look to the state and its funders to provide it. Everything about the planners' and funders' intensified and well-coordinated "packaged" agricultural program is laudable on paper. It is

(e) short term gains for the peasant (which roughly correspond to the period during which the government needs support until it can develop repressive capacity) are offset by massive probable long-term losses;

(f) the peasantry has little or no voice in determining the shape of reform or its administration;

(g) the land-taking and administrative procedures are brutal and even inhuman; and

(h) reform involves public deceit so that only a few obtain land and the remainder receive highly publicized promises.<sup>20</sup>

If a book were to be written on this subject it should be entitled "The Morality of Land Reform." In one sense, land reform can be thought of as patronage from the government—the price of political support. This appears often to apply within countries and internationally. When a government acts to secure peasants on the land who might ordinarily be swept up by insurgents, it ensures peasant support. When a foreign government helps with land reform, it is part of counterinsurgency, of "winning their hearts and minds." Most of the time this will result in a large number of beneficiaries: the government, the peasant, the economy, and the foreign power that protects the government. The losers are the insurgents and the landlords.

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economical, progressive, comprehensive, humane; it does not overlook a single detail; it demands that the government replenish its own coffers, making every program pay; it finally recognizes society's responsibility to the rural sector. And it worked in Taiwan. Surely, the argument runs, "integration" is more efficient than chaos, packaging more rational than piecemeal development, higher yields more desirable than stagnation, supervision better than neglect. Surely, peasants need to be protected, chemicals to be distributed, and rural banks to be supported.

In a basic text for "getting agriculture moving" in the Third World, a leading agricultural economist portrays the peasant victim in typical terms: "A small holder's normal state is to be absolutely at the mercy of middlemen . . . against whom he has no economic strength." Quite the contrary, in fact. Empirical studies in the Latin American, African, and Asian countryside and provincial market towns confirm such factors as the great proliferation of middlemen even among the villagers themselves, their extremely high risks, and the keen competition among them for the small farmers' business. But international funders and local ruling elites stand to gain from fostering a strong anticapitalist bias against these local and provincial entrepreneurs and thus paint a grim picture of their alleged extortions.

Goodell, *After Land Reform*, 23 POLICY REV. 38 & 2 (Spring 1983).

Few would argue against utilizing the private sector to the greatest extent possible, if there is one to use and if it does compete as much as Goodell suggests for the business of land reform beneficiaries. The facts in most countries are that the private sectors are not so pristine nor are the public sectors so universally evil as Goodell implies.

20. J. DUNKERLEY, *THE LONG WAR* 158-60 (1982); R. BONNER, *WEAKNESS AND DECEIT* 187-204 (1984). See also "The Discontented: A Squatters' Village Illustrates Divisiveness of Mexican Land Issue," *Wall St. J.*, Aug. 27, 1985.