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## Main content

Article Preview :

Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992

By William M. LeoGrande University of North Carolina, 1998 773 pages; \$45.00

At a massive 590 pages of text, this book will not find its way onto many people's nightstands--particularly now that Central America has faded back into obscurity. But it should be read: Our Own Backyard tells us a lot about U.S. policy-makers and about the United States as a nation.

William LeoGrande, a professor of government at American University and a specialist in Latin American politics and U.S. foreign policy, is one of the few left-liberal academics who advised congressional committees during the 1980s. His experiences enable him to combine extensive research with an insider's knowledge of the policy-making process.

The author's insights into how Washington works, together with his penchant for detail, fairness, accuracy, and extensive sourcing, make Our Own Backyard a "must read" for students of Central American policy during the Reagan-Bush years. LeoGrande also has an ear for the well-crafted sentence and a fondness for the policymaker's glib but revealing soundbites. Add his pithy thumbnail bios of major players, and you have a good reason for the non-academic to keep turning pages as well.

This book should be of particular interest to U.S. citizens who opposed U.S. policy in Central America, but never followed the threads of events far enough to fully appreciate why their opposition--which was the majority view, after all--had so little effect in Washington.

LeoGrande untangles a number of threads, particularly the ones leading to the complicated and divisive congressional votes that gave aid to El Salvador's army on the one hand and to Nicaragua's rebels--the contras--on the other. He explains why the votes went as they did, and how hard it would have been to alter their outcomes.

LeoGrande takes the reader on a guided tour through the multi-tiered field on which the war for those votes was fought, including the bedrock debate over whether foreign policy was or was not an exclusively executive prerogative. The author spends most of his time, however, on where the pitched battles took place--between the Democrat-controlled House...

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|a Cover Page -- Our Own Backyard -- Copyright Page -- Dedication -- Contents -- Preface -- Abbreviations Used in the Text -- I Origins -- CHAPTER 1 A New Beginning -- CHAPTER 2 The Dragons' Teeth of War -- CHAPTER 3 From Carter to Reagan -- CHAPTER 4 The Vicar Draws the Line -- CHAPTER 5 A New Policy for Nicaragua -- CHAPTER 6 Tough Guys -- II El Salvador -- CHAPTER 7 The Tonic of Elections -- CHAPTER 8 The War Party Takes Control -- CHAPTER 9 The President Moves to Center Stage -- CHAPTER 10 The Politics of Murder -- CHAPTER 11 From Conflict. - CHAPTER 24 Why Were We in Central America? - - Notes -- Bibliography -- Index. 520. |a Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992. 588. William M. LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America 1977–1992, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998, xvi + 773 pp. notes and index, US\$39.95. July 2000. Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research 6(1):137-139. William LeoGrande has written an important history of U. S. policy in Central America with a focus on the crucial period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The author is exceedingly well qualified to write critically about the Reagan years. In the late 1970s he gained a reputation for his research on Cuban foreign policy, and after 1981 he emerged as a major critic of the Reagan administration. While Central America was the site of some of the last battles of the Cold War, it was in Washington that foreign policy bickering tied the vicious internecine struggles over Central America to other policy concerns -- leading inexorably to the Iran-contra affair. By paying so much attention to Washington, however, LeoGrande gives too little credit to the Central Americans themselves for the ultimate outcome of peace. In the end, contrary to warnings of Democrats and Republicans in Congress, Central America became neither a Vietnam-style quagmire nor a communist region of "dominoes toppli