

Marching for Life:

Defying threats, a movement of rural Hondurans leads Central America's struggle against illegal logging and the corruption that sustains it

By Bruna Genovese

Bloodshed in the Forests of Honduras

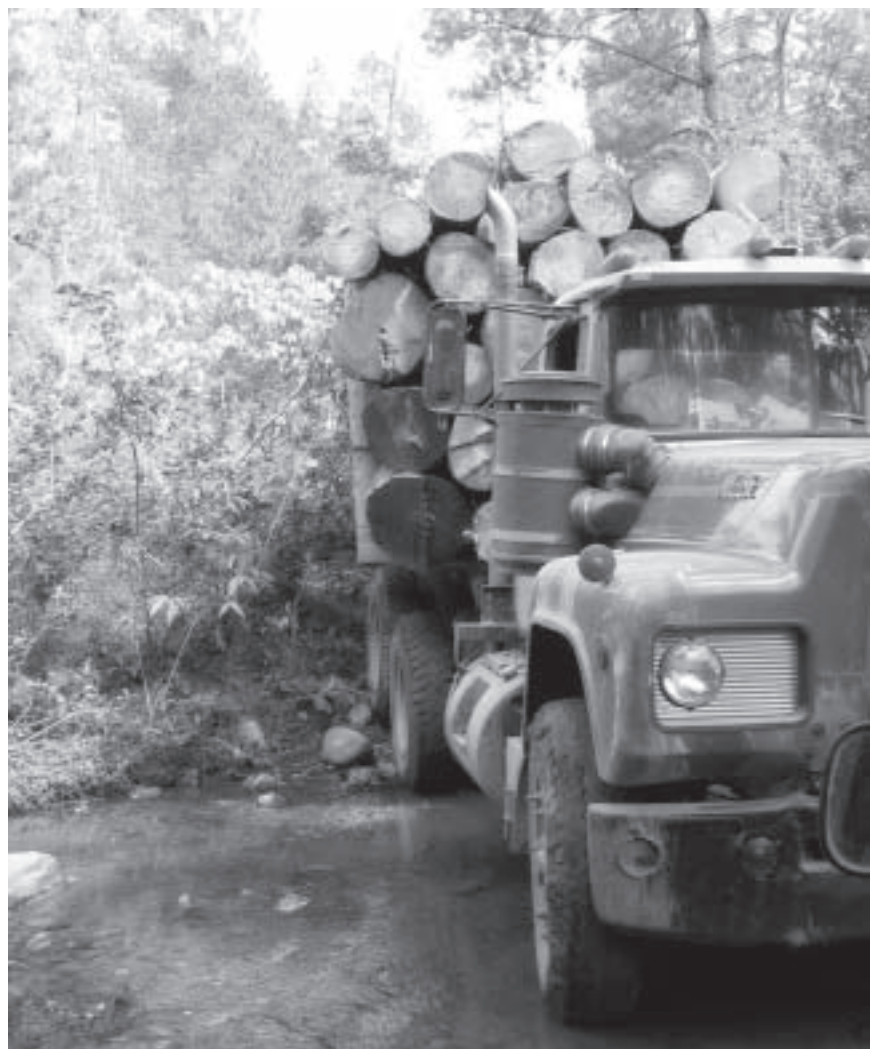
Conservationists and human rights activists in Honduras run grave risks as they fight to preserve what remains of a unique range of ecosystems in Olancho, the country's largest department. Intimidation and murder are the weapons of choice employed by those who sack the forests and despoil the environment. In the past few years, three Olancho environmentalists have met violent death. Amnesty International has published reports of ongoing threats against those who have opposed the uncontrolled and illegal destruction of Olancho's forest reserves.

On June 30, 2001, Carlos Roberto Flores was killed in the municipality of Gualaco. On November 24, 2002, community leader Mauricio Hernández from the village of Las Cañas in Jano municipality was shot in the forehead with an AK-47. In July 2003, in the municipality of El Rosario, 21-year old Carlos Arturo Reyes was riddled with bullets in his own backyard. Reyes had been receiving death threats for months, but he believed he had put them behind him when he fled his home in Guata and moved to El Rosario. Yet an assassin found him. Now others on an alleged hit list, 17 names in all, must go about their important work in constant fear that they will be next.

Father Andrés Tamayo of Salamá, Olancho, the charismatic leader of the grassroots Environmental Movement of Olancho (*Movimiento Ambientalista Olanchano*, MAO) is a major thorn in the side of the country's many illegal loggers. On May 5 and 6, 2003, José Ramón Ramos, the mayor of Salamá, stated publicly, "The environmental problem in Olancho will be

only resolved by ordering the killing of Father Tamayo."¹ It is a crime in Honduras to threaten a person's life, yet Ramos' comments went unremarked by the Honduran government.

On June 20, 2003, just one month before Reyes' murder, Father Tamayo led some 3,000 people on a 175-mile march to protest illegal logging in Olancho. Illegal timber harvesting has devastated the department's forests, causing



Olancho's forests are being emptied by the truckload.

water-table levels to drop and poverty to rise. Father Tamayo's "March for Life" (*Gran Marcha por la Vida*), which started in Olancho's capital, Juticalpa, culminated in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, on June 27. It was supported by twenty-seven religious, human rights, campesino, student, and labor organizations.

The marchers prepared seven demands that they hoped to discuss with Honduras' President, Ricardo Maduro, who had campaigned in 2002 on a platform of fighting corruption and similar illegal activity. Instead, they were met at the Presidential Palace by a small army of anti-riot police, armed with the usual assortment of rubber truncheons, protective

of rampant, indiscriminate logging—is now being mirrored in Olancho. And, as in Mexico, the effects promise to be widespread ecological devastation for generations to come.

Traditionally, forest ecosystems in Honduras have been valued primarily in terms of the timber they provide. However, what forests provide goes far beyond mere timber: trees diminish wind erosion, regulate climate, maintain microclimatic conditions in local areas, and preserve biological diversity. Furthermore, they protect water catchments and stream banks, reduce flooding, and regulate stream flow. Some of these important forest functions in Olancho have been disrupted. For the department's residents, serious water shortages have become a cruel reality in recent years.

Water table levels have dropped precipitously around the village of Yocón, for example, and 12 out of 15 of its springs have simply dried up. In San Pedro de Catacamas, residents have had to dig 120-140 meter artesian wells before they hit water. In San Francisco de la Paz, fresh water sources have completely dried up. Even after drilling 400-meter deep wells, people have been unable to find water. The most affected of all are rural people who are forced to move from place to place searching for water for their very survival.³

Illegal Logging: The Lion's Share

Honduras This Week, an English-language weekly, cites forestry expert Filippo del Gatto's groundbreaking study

"Governance and Poverty Implications of Illegal Timber Trade in Central America," which places logging into three categories: legal, legalized, and illegal.⁴ Legal production of timber is self-evident; all necessary permits are applied for and approved, taxes are paid, and companies act in accordance with forestry management (by cutting only the permitted amount, for instance, restraining from cutting down seedlings, or felling trees bordering water supplies).

The second category is legalized, or quasi-legal, logging. For example, Company X might obtain a legal permit, but then continue logging long after the permit's expiration date. Or Company Y may have a legal, timely permit, but harvest trees in ways that directly contradict forestry laws and regu-



Honduras

Population: 6,669,789, in an area slightly larger than Tennessee

Per Capita Income, 2002: \$925

Income Ratio, Wealthiest 10% To Poorest 10%: 92 times

Population Earning Less Than \$2 a Day: 44.4%

Ranking, Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index: 106 out of 133

Probability at Birth of Not Surviving to Age 40: 13.8%

helmets, and metal shields.

Olancho: An Ecological Mosaic

At 9,400 square miles, slightly larger than New Hampshire, Olancho makes up one-fifth of the country's territory. Forests, mostly conifers, cover 67.9 percent of this sparsely populated department.² Its rugged territory is criss-crossed by mountains separated by broad valleys, and the higher reaches of its peaks house some of the densest, most extensive cloud forests in Central America.

This ecological mosaic is also one of the most environmentally threatened places in Central America. The destruction of the huge rainforests of Oaxaca, Mexico — the result

lations. Several reliable sources say that the Byzantine nature of the government's laws make strictly legal production such an obstacle that otherwise law-abiding companies take the legalized route not out of avarice but simply from sheer exhaustion. This is not to let logging companies off the hook, however, for many of those who hold legal permits harvest as much as three times the authorized amount.

The final category, illegal logging, is responsible for the lion's share of logging in Honduras. An astounding 75-85 percent of hardwood (including premium priced mahogany) and up to 50 percent of pine is illegally harvested, an estimated total of between \$55-70 million each year. Government losses total between \$11-18 million each year from illegal logging, a combination of uncollected taxes and monies spent on forest management. Timber prices are high, and fines for breaking the law distressingly low. While a logging company can make huge profits with little or no consequences by logging when, where, and how much it wants, expediency will usually win out over ethics. Indeed, the lucrative nature of logging appears to make even murder a risk worth taking.

Politics, Logging, and Money: The Fox and the Henhouse

Though the reality of hit lists, community displacements, increased poverty, and millions in lost revenue would appear to be incentives for the Honduran government to put a halt to illegal logging, it has resisted calls to crack down on this damaging practice. Gustavo Morales, the director of AFE-COHDEFOR (*Administración Forestal del Estado – Corporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal*), the government's agency in charge of overseeing and regulating the forests of Honduras, has sought to improve the agency's performance, but with little success. The agency has been structured in a way that assures loggers the upper hand. COHDEFOR's survival depends on the funds it collects from logging concessions and timber auctions. Even with that income, the agency is starved for funds. Moreover, accepting money—depending on it for one's existence, in fact—from the people one is assigned to monitor and control, creates its own set of perverse incentives. Logging companies paying to ensure their compliance with logging laws has the distinct smell of the fox guarding the henhouse. The forestry sector would be much better off if COHDEFOR's operations were financed by fines penalizing those that log illegally, rather than profiting from concessions and timber auctions.

More fundamentally, as the U.S. State Department's 2003 *Report on Human Rights Practices* makes clear, democracy in Honduras is undermined by "considerable impunity for members of the economic, military, and official elite."²⁵ Corruption pervades all sectors of Honduran society, from local governments and small businesses to high-level government officials and huge corporations. Large landholders, timber companies, and bankers make up an informal society in which economic interests are mutually protected. Companies reach into politics in the universal way: by pouring money into political campaigns in exchange for economic favors and protection. Understandably, though regrettably, the law is on the side of those who can pay for it. The result is widespread impunity for the tiny fraction of the



country with money and connections, and widespread misery for the vast majority of the country with neither.

History of the Environmental Movement in Honduras

Honduran environmental activism got a kick start in 1991, when Stone Container, the Chicago-based world leader in paper bag and cardboard box production, signed a preliminary agreement with then-President Rafael Elías Callejas to "lease" the country's remaining virgin pine forests, located primarily in the Mosquitía forest (in northeastern Honduras along the Caribbean, the Mosquitía includes all of the department of Gracias a Dios, and parts of the departments of Colón and Olancho) for the next forty years. The company planned to harvest the pine for pulpwood to produce paper bags, packaging containers and similar items. When word got out that the terms of the contract granted Stone unre-

stricted rights to harvest between 1 and 2.5 million acres of pine forest throughout the country, different sectors of Honduran society, including environmentalists, foresters, Miskito indigenous groups, and business people, united in opposition.

The groups were concerned that neither Stone nor the government were discussing the long-term effects that the project would have on the environment. The project, they said, would result in the sedimentation of rivers and lakes, land erosion, and the loss of biodiversity. The opposition prevailed in February 1992, when Porfirio Lobo Sosa, then head of COHDEFOR, rejected Stone Container's proposal. The government's decision was hailed at the time as a testament to the fledgling Honduran democracy's capacity to tackle tough social and economic problems.

The Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO)

The current administration appears disinclined to put Olancho's ecological patrimony above financial interests. It has doggedly looked the other way while logging companies threaten the land and lives of the people of Olancho. Olanchanos themselves have had no alternative but to organize against the forest predators. A coalition of rural communities in Olancho has joined together under MAO's banner to defend the country's forests with the goal of protecting and managing them for future generations. It is truly a homegrown movement whose leaders and members are campesinos and religious figures.

Bishop Mauro Muldoon, a formidable figure in Olancho, has put his weight behind Father Tamayo and the movement, giving assent for the Pastoral Social-Caritas, a branch of the Honduran Episcopal Conference committed to social work, to work hand-in-hand with MAO. The Committee of Families of the Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), headed by noted human rights activist Berta Oliva de Nativí, is also working directly with the movement. Founded in the 1980s to seek justice for the disappearance of Honduran political activists, COFADEH became involved in MAO's cause several years ago in response to the series of threats and abuses against environmental activists.

In August 2003, the Center for International Policy's newly established Central America program, headed by Ambassador Robert E. White, decided to join MAO and COFADEH in their fight to end illegal logging in Olancho

and to protect defenders of the environment. Ambassador White is well known in the region, having served in Honduras in the 1970s as head of the U.S. embassy's political section and then as ambassador to Paraguay and El Salvador.

The program's goal is to mobilize key sectors of the nation to support effective measures to protect Honduran forests from illegal ravaging, and to take on the web of corruption that allows it to continue. CIP will work with local non-governmental organizations to protect the civil liberties of all those who organize their communities to protect natural resources.

The "Environmental Guerrilla" of Olancho

Elements in the logging business have attempted to delegitimize MAO by fabricating the existence of an armed



Olancho Environmental Movement leader Father Andrés Tamayo (left).

environmentalist guerrilla group in Olancho. Five days after the murder of Carlos Arturo Reyes, and perhaps to counter some of the press resulting from his death, the logging interests planted a story in *La Prensa*, one of Honduras' major newspapers, claiming that a movement, headed by a hooded "Comandante Pepe," had taken up arms to fight against logging.⁶ The following day, the same paper reported that the Minister of Defense, Federico Breve, had orders to disarm the Olancho groups immediately (the Olancho groups, headed up mostly by Catholic priests, are very much unarmed).⁷ He warned that any foreign activists or religious leaders involved in the "guerrilla" movement would be deported immediately. In a cynical gesture that married political calculus with the technique of the big lie, Breve associated the non-existent movement with the Shining Path of Peru.

It would appear that President Maduro did not take his minister's fabrications about the environmental movement seriously, for he quickly agreed to participate in a round table discussion with MAO and a number of government representatives. Out of that meeting came the decision to set up a commission to discuss MAO's seven proposals:

1. Ensure the implementation of the forest policy that was part of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy, designed after Hurricane Mitch.

2. Guarantee that those responsible for protecting and administering forests do their jobs properly, according to the law.

3. Restructure COHDEFOR (*Corporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal*).

4. Strengthen oversight institutions, particularly the General Directorate of Environmental Evaluation and Control, the Procurator-General of the Environment, and the Attorney General of the Environment in the judicial branch.

5. Provide immediate protection to those whose lives have been threatened for defending the forests.

6. Fire police and military personnel who are profiting from illegal logging.

7. Enact a moratorium on industrial logging in Olancho until a forest audit can be conducted.

Government representatives made clear from the very beginning, however, that the seventh MAO demand – the moratorium on commercial logging – was completely out of the question for economic reasons. Demonstrating their flexibility, MAO leaders said the moratorium request was negotiable.

When a government refuses to negotiate and instead sets up a commission to talk about the demands, it is a dead certainty that red tape and bureaucracy will soon enshroud the proceedings. Indeed, though the commission met five times in 2003 to negotiate MAO's demands, no real progress seems to have been made. 2004 has proven even less fruitful, with the government failing to re-convene the commis-

sion. MAO leaders believe the government is using the existence of the commission as a backdrop for its plans to introduce a new forestry law, *Ley Forestal de Areas Protegidas y de Vida Silvestre*, one which they fear will weaken community involvement and tilt ever more favorably towards the logging companies.

A version which received initial congressional approval in early 2003 was heavily criticized by NGOs, which argued strongly that it favored economic interests over social issues, and that it failed to address the fundamental issue of land-property rights and, by extension, the rights to the forests themselves.⁸ Property rights are at the center of many natural resource conflicts in Honduras, because tenure and ownership are often unclear (most private owners lack titles to their lands).



In addition, the law would create a new Honduran Agency for Forestry Financing, which critics feared would simply add bloat to an already hefty bureaucracy while adding little in the way of progress. Finally, according to critics, the law would succeed in actually weakening the Social Forestry System (SSF), which seeks to include communities in the man-

agement and harvesting of forests.

In late January 2004, President Maduro presented a report to Congress listing the successes of his first two years in office. He highlighted his goals for 2004, among them his intention to present this new forestry law⁹. This law, he said, would benefit investors, as well as municipalities and communities living around forested areas.

An article published in late spring in *La Tribuna* announced that Congress has begun to pass the most recent version of the law.¹⁰ The article mentions the inclusion of several new progressive policies in the law: increasing funds for municipal governments to permit them to attend to the social demands of communities living in forested areas, establishing norms for reforestation, and no longer permitting COHDEFOR be dependent on logging concessions for its

own budget, as it will now be funded by the Secretary of Finance. Members of Congress and civil society alike hope that the law will create a new culture of forestry in the country. The article is scheduled to be approved by summer's end.¹¹

February 2004—CIP in Olancho

In mid-February, 2004, Center for International Policy (CIP) staff visited Honduras to conduct their own investigation into the extent of forest degradation and to examine



firsthand its impact on the local environment and communities. The delegation consisted of Central American program director Elsa Chang, program associate Bruna Genovese, and Rhys Thom of the Global Information Internship Program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The delegation visited various Olancho municipalities and held 42 interviews with representatives of the government, media, international organizations, human rights and environmental groups, and community organizations in both Olancho and Tegucigalpa.

The team collected statistical and testimonial data, firsthand and anecdotal evidence of uncontrolled logging, forest degradation, and lack of social-environmental justice. Representatives from different sectors of Honduran society gave CIP staff numerous examples of how impunity, institutional

weaknesses, and lack of transparency and accountability in Honduras' legal and justice systems perpetuate a vicious cycle of corruption. Accompanied by several of MAO's religious and community leaders, the CIP delegation visited a number of the municipalities in Olancho hardest hit by illegal logging: Salamá, Jano, Juticalpa, Catacamas, Gualaco/San Esteban, and Campamento. The group witnessed logging operations in remote and isolated private and national forestlands and noted many clear violations of the law: trees harvested next to water sources or on roadsides; trees felled on slopes and

steep areas, leaving the area susceptible to erosion; large tracts of land denuded of forest cover; seedling pine trees being harvested; and, ironically, many felled trees simply abandoned.

In Jano, the CIP group stopped at the village of El Higuerito, a community of eight families located beside a dirt road. One resident explained that the community had

been forced to leave their homes in the mountains of El Jimerito after two major forest cuttings dried up their wells. She added that members of the community twice attempted to file complaints with COHDEFOR, but the agency's representatives refused to respond to their case. Adding insult to injury, their efforts brought them unwelcome attention from the head of the local logging company, who threatened to have them put in jail if they persisted. And now, with signs that more cuttings are set to take place in El Higuerito, the community may be forced to relocate yet again.

Around illegal logging swirl a number of other issues, which must be faced head-on: human rights, land ownership rights (often tenuous at best where indigenous populations are concerned), labor rights, economic justice, and government transparency and governance. This important issue of-

fers MAO, CIP and their partners a rare opportunity to tackle the web of corruption that keeps illegal logging entrenched in Honduras.

“Fixing” the problem of logging will be an uphill battle, tough, costly, requiring patience and determination. But it offers Hondurans the opportunity to make democracy work on an issue of crucial importance for future generations. The welfare of the nation requires logging to be scaled back to a reasonable, sustainable level. The government has an obligation to provide local police protection from private companies that violate the law, and ensure that land tenancy rights be respected. Success in the fight against overzealous, indiscriminate, exploitative logging would be a victory for Honduran democracy, anti-corruption efforts, accountable government, and the Maduro administration.

Second March for Life

In February, deep in the woods of Olancho, in the tiny village of Quebrada Grande, the CIP delegation found dozens of smiling faces and a warm lunch awaiting them. The community was honoring the arrival of the delegation, yes, but more importantly it was celebrating Doña Catalina’s 78th birthday. At 4’8”, 80 lbs., Doña Catalina is the mother of 12, the grandmother of 72, and one of Quebrada Grande’s most respected members. With great pride, she told the delegation that last summer she joined 15,000 other Olanchanos in walking all 175-miles of last year’s “March for Life”, noting that she would do it all over again if she could. This June, Doña Catalina will get her chance.

During the last week of June 2004, thousands of Honduran campesinos will again march on the capital city of Tegucigalpa. The marchers intend to present the government with a list of demands calculated to put the brakes on illegal logging by involving communities in the management of local timber reserves.

Father Tamayo predicts that 50,000 people will participate. Campesinos will begin the march on June 22 from five different points around the country. Marching about 20 miles a day, they are scheduled to arrive in Tegucigalpa on June 30. Each night, community leaders will hold a teach-in for the host community. They will speak with residents about their rights as citizens in a democracy and encourage them to participate more fully in the civic life of the country.

The Center for International Policy will support the “March for Life” by holding a conference during that week. Interna-

tional delegates will attend the event that will focus on the linkages between human rights, democracy, and environmental protection, with special consideration given to the issue of illegal logging in Honduras. They will also meet with defenders of human rights and the environment and Honduran government officials and business leaders alike. Delegates will visit the marchers to discuss the impact of illegal logging on their lives and their hopes for change.

As the Honduran activists prepare a second “March for Life,” deforestation throughout the country – and related corruption – is as rampant and uncontrolled as ever. Honduras urgently needs to take on its systemic impunity in order to permit the forest to be managed in ways that meet the present needs of society, while preserving this patrimony for future generations.

Notes

¹ <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAMR370092003>

² “Recurso Forestal 2002,” Instituto Nacional de Estadística, <http://www.ine-hn.org/Trifolios/rforestal2002.pdf>.

³ Chang, Elsa. “Trip Report: Tegucigalpa-Olancho, Honduras, February 9-19, 2004,” Center for International Policy: February 28, 2004, p. 5.

⁴ Fiallos, Maria. “Can We Save Honduras’ Forests?”, Honduras this Week, June 9, 2003, <http://www.marrder.com/htw/special/environment/111.htm>.

⁵ U.S. State Department’s 2003 *Report on Human Rights Practices* – 2003, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 25, 2004, p.2, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27903.htm>.

⁶ Morales, Ana. “Se arman para defender el bosque,” *La Prensa*, July 28, 2003. http://www.laprensahn.com/nacionales.php?id=932&tabla=July_2003&fecha=20030728.

⁷ Vásquez, Iván. “El Presidente ordena desarme de enmascarados de Olancho,” *La Prensa*, July 29, 2004, http://www.laprensahn.com/nacionales.php?id=967&tabla=July_2003&fecha=20030729.

⁸ “Debido a un dictamen lesivo, más corrupción, deforestación y pobreza tendrá Honduras con Nueva Ley Forestal,” <http://www.revistazo.com/feb-03/principal.htm>.

⁹ “Quieren vernos en la mediocridad: Maduro,” *La Tribuna*, January 26, 2004, p.12.

¹⁰ “Según nueva Ley: 12 años de cárcel a pirómanos,” *La Tribuna*, April 27, 2004, <http://truna.icomstec.com/news/index.php?id=36239&mode=2/>.

¹¹ “Ley Forestal contempla cambios a la COHDEFOR: Virgilio Umanzor,” *La Tribuna*, May 24, 2004, <http://tribuna.icomstec.com/news/index.php?id=39002&mode=2>.

tribuna.icomstec.com/news/index.php?id=39002&mode=2.

CIP Senior Associate Elsa Chang contributed research to this report. Photos by Rhys Thom, maps courtesy of COHDEFOR.



“Let’s protect the forests,” reads every license plate in Honduras.

IPR • Central America

Center for International Policy
1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Suite 801
Washington, DC 20036-2000
(202) 232-3317
Fax: (202) 232-3440
cip@ciponline.org
www.ciponline.org

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 1503
WASHINGTON, DC



A Publication of the Center for International Policy

© COPYRIGHT 2004 by the Center for International Policy. All rights reserved. Any material herein may be quoted without permission, with credit to the Center for International Policy.

MISSION STATEMENT: The Center is a nonprofit educational and research organization that promotes a U.S. foreign policy based on international cooperation, demilitarization and respect for basic human rights.

- PLEASE SEND ME MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY
- I'D LIKE ___ ADDITIONAL COPIES OF THIS REPORT (SINGLE COPY \$2.50; 20 OR MORE \$1.00 EACH)
- I'D LIKE TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION OF _____ TO SUPPORT THE CENTER'S WORK.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

STAFF:

ROBERT E. WHITE, *president*
WILLIAM GOODFELLOW, *executive director*
RAYMOND BAKER, *senior fellow*
NICOLE BALL, *senior fellow*
LANDRUM BOLLING, *senior fellow*
PARKER BORG, *senior fellow*
EVA BOSTER, *associate*
TRACEE BROWN, *director of finance*
FRICK CURRY, *development consultant*
ELSA CHANG, *senior associate*
BRUNA GENOVESE, *associate*
MELVIN A. GOODMAN, *director, National Security Program*
SELIG HARRISON, *director, Asia Program*
ADAM ISACSON, *director of programs*
PAUL LUBECK, *senior fellow*
JENNIFER NORDIN, *director of economic studies*
BEVERLY ORR, *accountant*
WAYNE S. SMITH, *senior fellow*
SARAH STEPHENS, *director, Freedom to Travel Campaign*
EMILY STIVERS, *director of operations*
INGRID VAICIUS, *associate*
KATE CALLIGARO, *Colombia intern*
ROSALÍA MORALES, *Central America intern*
SEEMA PATEL, *Cuba intern*
ALEX PETERSON, *Asia/national security intern*
NASSEEM RAMIN, *Funding/development intern*
CHARLIE WILLSON, *Cuba travel intern*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

CHAIR:

- CYNTHIA MCCLINTOCK, *professor, George Washington University*
- MARIO BAEZA, *investment banker*
- LOWELL BLANKFORT, *newspaper publisher*
- WILLIAM J. BUTLER, *chairman, executive committee, International Commission of Jurists*
- THOMAS COOPER, *president, Gulfstream International Airlines*
- ADRIAN W. DEWIND, *attorney*
- SAMUEL ELLSWORTH, *partner, Ellsworth-Howell*
- GERALD F. GILMORE, *Episcopal minister (retired)*
- JEFFREY HOROWITZ, *city planner*
- SUSAN W. HOROWITZ, *social worker*
- ROBERT G. KERRIGAN, *attorney*
- SALLY LILIENTHAL, *president, Ploughshares Fund*
- CONRAD MARTIN, *Fund for Constitutional Government*
- PAUL SACK, *businessman*
- DONALD SOLDINI, *International Preferred Enterprises, Inc.*
- EDITH WILKIE, *president, Peace Through Law Education Fund*
- DESSIMA WILLIAMS, *professor, Brandeis University*