Question for Honduras: Was ousting Zelaya legal?

U.S. influence is needed to counterbalance Chavez

By ERIKA DE LA GARZA and NANCY HERNANDEZ

AFTER more than two decades, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias finds himself in a somewhat familiar position of negotiating peace in the Central American region. In 1987, he was the promoter of the Esquipulas Peace Agreement, which brought peace to Central America after decades of military and guerrilla confrontations. Now, President Arias is mediating between Honduras' ousted president, Manuel Zelaya, and de facto president, Roberto Micheletti.

So far, both Zelaya and Micheletti are inflexible in their positions. Zelaya, who has the backing of the international community, insists on returning to office until elections are held in November and his term is over on Jan. 27, 2010. De facto president Micheletti insists on remaining president until the November elections. He states that Congress' removal of Zelaya was in accordance with the country's Constitution.

Regardless of the reasons Congress had for removing Zelaya, was doing so legal according to the Honduran Constitution?

Zelaya broke the law by disobeying a Honduran Supreme Court ruling stating that the poll he was planning to conduct on June 28 was illegal. The poll asked Hondurans if they would be in favor of modifying the Constitution to address issues such as term limits to the presidency. Despite the court's ruling, Zelaya ordered the armed forces to distribute the necessary materials to conduct the poll. When the armed forces refused to comply with the order, Zelaya removed the chief military figure, Gen. Romeo Vásquez. Then, he illegally retrieved the poll material that had been confiscated by the Supreme Court in order to continue with his plan.

On the morning of June 28 — under Congress' orders — the military broke into Zelaya's home and forced him to board a plane, which took him to Costa Rica. Under the Honduran Constitution, Article 372, no Honduran national can be expatriated from the country. Furthermore, Congress read and gave due process to a false letter of resignation from Zelaya and proceeded to name the head of Congress, Roberto Micheletti, as the new president of Honduras.

In the Honduran Constitution, there is no legal figure to impeach a president. As in any other working democracy, elections are what bring a president to power, and their term limits are defined by law. Zelaya had seven more months before his term was over. If by breaking the law he could be stopped from finishing his term, he should be tried through the existing justice system like any other citizen. Regardless of the validity of the reasons, removing him from power through military force is a military coup, and that violates the basic principles of democracy.

Honduran critics of Zelaya explain that his political ideology radically changed during his time in office. He "turned left" to the point of joining ALBA, the proposed alternative by the Venezuelan government to the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. Zelaya's close ties to President Hugo Chavez and his fixation with conducting the poll proved too threatening for the Honduran elites. They did not want a Chavez-like president in their country. As much as we may identify and share this view, a military coup is a step backward for any democracy.

Arias will not resolve Honduras' internal conflict this week or next. However, he did manage to start a dialogue between both parties. No doubt his prestige as a Nobel Peace Prize-winner and political leader in Central America is intact. Yet, for an agreement to be met, it will take more than the good will of the Costa Rican president and the international community. Both Zelaya and Micheletti will have to be more flexible in their views and find a livable medium for the next six months. We can only hope they remember they are public servants of a democratic country. As such, they should not only uphold the rule of law and democratic principles, but also reinstitute confidence in democracy.

The international response to this break from a democratic system has ranged from getting Honduras suspended from the Organization of American States (OAS) to the Inter-American Development Bank considering suspension of loans. Honduras is the third poorest country in the region after Nicaragua and Haiti. The economic repercussions from the international community's response can be devastating. Both Zelaya, printing the poll's materials, and Micheletti, hiring American lawyers and lobbyists, have already spent hundreds of thousands of Lempiras that could have been used in much-needed social programs. They need to walk the talk of being servants of and for the people of Honduras.

This conflict, coupled with the recent one involving President Alvaro Colom of Guatemala, has revealed the fragility of democracy in Central America. Guatemala could very likely be the next coup candidate. Furthermore, both of these conflicts have restated Chavez' interest and influence in the region. Honduran and Costa Rican elites, who for the most part share views, would like to see the United States exercise more pressure to counterbalance the Venezuelan influence. However, the Obama administration has followed though with its promise of being a partner in the region. So far, the United States has appeared to be a sibling rather than a parent, which perhaps is what the region needs.

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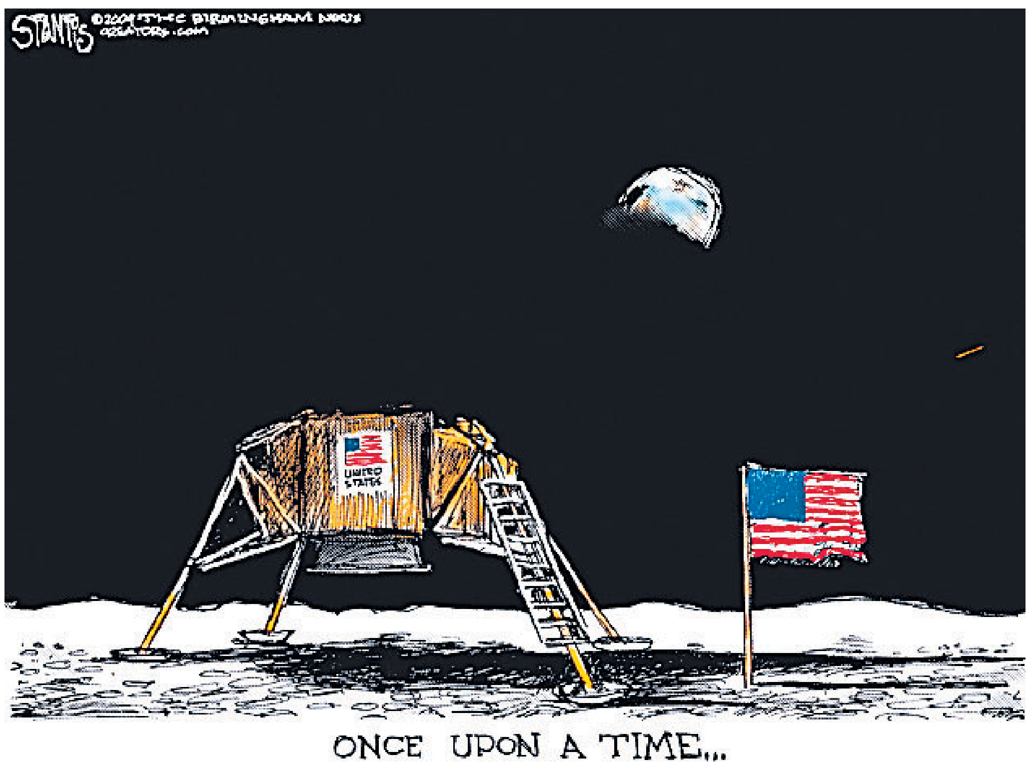

PHOTO COURTESY OF SCENIC HOUSTON

NO SHORTAGE OF SIGNS: Signs such as these along Richmond Avenue would be allowed to remain in place under "grandfathering" rules in Houston's new ordinance.

Sign ordinance a positive, but city needs to do more

Houston's competitors have stricter regulations

By MAX WATSON and ED WULFE

THE Quality of Life Coalition acknowledges that the Houston City Council's passage of the new sign ordinance is an upgrade for the city, and we commend Mayor Bill White, his administration and the City Council for taking an important step toward sign code improvement, including a commitment to strongly monitor signs that are in need of repair. We also agree with the Chronicle's opinion that "over the long haul … Houston still has a long way to go, and is in danger of looking even worse in the coming years."

The city of Houston's minimal sign laws and enforcement since the 1960s has allowed signage blight to perpetuate throughout our city with perpetual "grandfathering" of on-premise signs, which exempts all existing signs from conforming to current sign regulations. The cluttered results seen every day driving down many unrestricted roads in Houston will remain. Meanwhile, in city-designated scenic districts and in planned communities, such as The Woodlands and Sugar Land, almost all the properties have some type of sign restriction requiring moderate on-premise signage to the benefit of all.

> *Visual blight seriously damages Houston's public image …*

Last week's new sign ordinance addressed roof, wall and window signs throughout the city as well as some reductions in height and size for on-premise signage installed after the effective date of the new ordinance and some limits on electronic changeable message signs. As newly constructed signs are built, business must comply with the new sign ordinance. With the exception of changeable message signs, all existing structures may add new sign faces without complying with current code standards because of the city's grandfathering allowance.

There are reportedly more than 60,000 grandfathered on-premise signs in the city of Houston, including 22,000 pole signs that were constructed years ago. These signs will continue to be in their current locations for years to come without a law that requires grandfathered signs to conform to the current sign laws at some time in the future. The result of this lack of strong sign regulations citywide has left a majority of the city — particularly freeways and thoroughfares — cluttered with on-premise signs and visual congestion of signage that is difficult to read and unhelpful as a way-finding tool for the businesses they are meant to serve

The Quality of Life Coalition comprises more than 85 endorsing organizations dedicated to a significant reduction in signage blight through reviewing current ordinances, researching signage comparisons with competitive cities and exploring incentives to reduce existing grandfathered signs. Most of Houston's major competitor cities have some type of conformity provision that requires grandfathered signs to ultimately be brought into compliance with current sign regulations: Austin, Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte, Denver, El Paso, Fort Worth, Irving, Sugar Land, Los Angeles, Raleigh/Durham, San Antonio and San Jose are some examples. Smart cities across the country are adopting comprehensive but simple sign regulations that are relatively easy to enforce and provide businesses with an even playing field, stronger economic development opportunities, increased property values and safety/aesthetic improvements — all at the same time.

The regulation of electronic changeable message signs is as critical an issue as grandfathered signs that lack a future obligation to conformity, particularly along Houston's freeways and thoroughfares. There are emerging technologies in electronic changeable message signs, available for wall and pole signs, that will need to be addressed in order to prevent 24-hour light pollution and nuisance.

The city's new sign ordinance allows one electronic changeable message sign per business, which leaves the possibility of thousands of electronic changeable message signs all over Houston in the future. As the electronic sign industry grows, the issues of brightness, intensity, 24-hour use and emerging computer technologies create a need for more ground rules by the city that will help all businesses succeed on an even playing field. Other cities are dealing with these new electronic sign issues and, if Houston acts soon, our city has an opportunity to effectively address these new technologies in a moderate and productive way.

Visual blight seriously damages Houston's public image, impairs quality of life and impedes economic development. It's important that the business and civic community work together to ensure that Houston maintains an appealing and visually inviting environment in an economically competitive marketplace. We look forward to additional efforts by the city to improve signage in Houston.

Watson and Wulfe serve on the Quality of Life Coalition's steering committee.

What's good for Goldman Sachs is bad for America

PAUL KRUGMAN says that by rescuing the financial system without reforming it, Washington has done nothing to protect the public from a new crisis.

THE American economy remains in dire straits, with one worker in six unemployed or underemployed. Yet Goldman Sachs just reported record quarterly profits — and it's preparing to hand out huge bonuses, comparable to what it was paying before the crisis. What does this contrast tell us?

First, it tells us that Goldman is very good at what it does. Unfortunately, what it does is bad for America. Second, it shows that Wall Street's bad habits — above all, the system of compensation that helped cause the financial crisis — have not gone away. Third, it shows that by rescuing the financial system without reforming it, Washington has done nothing to protect us from a new crisis, and, in fact, has made another crisis more likely.

Let's start by talking about how Goldman makes money.

Over the past generation — ever since the banking deregulation of the Reagan years — the U.S. economy has been "financialized." The business of moving money around, of slicing, dicing and repackaging financial claims, has soared in importance compared with the actual production of useful stuff. The sector officially labeled "securities, commodity contracts and investments" has grown especially fast, from only 0.3 percent of GDP in the late 1970s to 1.7 percent of GDP in 2007.

Such growth would be fine if financialization really delivered on its promises — if financial firms made money by directing capital to its most productive uses, by developing innovative ways to spread and reduce risk. But can anyone, at this point, make those claims with a straight face? Financial firms, we now know, directed vast quantities of capital into the construction of unsellable houses and empty shopping malls. They increased risk rather than reducing it, and concentrated risk rather than spreading it. In effect, the industry was selling dangerous patent medicine to gullible consumers.

Goldman's role in the financialization of America was similar to that of other players, except for one thing: Goldman didn't believe its own hype. Other banks invested heavily in the same toxic waste they were selling to the public at large. Goldman, famously, made a lot of money selling securities backed by subprime mortgages — then made a lot more money by selling mortgage-backed securities short, just before their value crashed. All of this was perfectly legal, but the net effect was that Goldman made profits by playing the rest of us for suckers.

And Wall Streeters have every incentive to keep playing that kind of game.

The huge bonuses Goldman will soon hand out show that financial-industry highfliers are still operating under a system of heads they win, tails other people lose. If you're a banker, and you generate big short-term profits, you get lavishly rewarded — and you don't have to give the money back if and when those profits turn out to have been a mirage. You have every reason, then, to steer investors into taking risks they don't understand.

And the events of the past year have skewed those incentives even more, by putting taxpayers as well as investors on the hook if things go wrong.

Wall Street in general, Goldman very much included, benefited hugely from the government's provision of a financial backstop — an assurance that it will rescue major financial players whenever things go wrong.

You can argue that such rescues are necessary if we're to avoid a replay of the Great Depression. In fact, I agree. But the result is that the financial system's liabilities are now backed by an implicit government guarantee.

Now, the last time there was a comparable expansion of the financial safety net, the creation of federal deposit insurance in the 1930s, it was accompanied by much tighter regulation, to ensure that banks didn't abuse their privileges. This time, new regulations are still in the drawing-board stage — and the finance lobby is already fighting against even the most basic protections for consumers.

The bottom line is that Goldman's blowout quarter is good news for Goldman and the people who work there. But it's bad news for almost everyone else.

Krugman, a New York Times columnist, won the 2008 Nobel Prize in economics.