

Our Enemy's Enemy: Human Rights and the U.S. Intervention in El Salvador, 1977-1992

By

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To my teachers

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Introduction

An Unlikely Intervention

From the perspective of the United States, El Salvador bears none of the marks of a strategically important country. The tiny nation, only the size of Massachusetts, has never represented a world power with which the United States needed to contend. Militarily, as politically and economically, El Salvador has never been a country of international repute. Nor does El Salvador possess resources that make its security vital to the well-being of the United States. El Salvador is not a petroleum-exporting nation, nor even a sugar- or banana-exporting nation. There has been no United Fruit Company in El Salvador, as in Guatemala, or any single American business that dominated El Salvador and its workers to such a degree. Thus, the American intervention into El Salvador during that country's civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992, makes little sense to many observers. The seeming lack of strategic interests in El Salvador led many opponents of the American intervention to draw parallels to Vietnam. That nation, a world away in more ways than one, seemed similarly tangential to American interests. Why would the U.S. bother to expend resources on a country with so little import to American interests, and work in tandem with a Salvadoran government whose regular human rights violations made it an international pariah throughout much of the conflict? Critics would pose such questions throughout the American intervention. Yet, despite all of these realities, for a brief moment in the early 1980s, to many in Washington, El Salvador was the most important little nation in the world, a nation upon which significant political capital was expended, reputations staked, and American lives lost.

By the 1970s, El Salvador was a small nation on its way to a big conflict, and one in which the United States would become deeply involved despite lacking interest in the country for a century-and-a-half. In the aftermath of profound economic growth in the mid-20th century, the 1970s brought about economic crisis that ripped El Salvador apart. That crisis highlighted and exacerbated already existing societal tensions tied to the economic disparity between El Salvador's powerful oligarchy and the landless or near-landless masses. This disparity stemmed from a century long tradition of dispossession of land that started with the abolition of Indian communal lands in 1880. El Salvador's oligarchy and the economic inequality that it oversaw quickly gained notoriety in the aftermath of the publication of a *Time* magazine article in February of 1961, entitled, "El Salvador: Return of the Right." This article discussed the existence of the "fourteen families" that dominated Salvadoran economic and political life. The idea of the "fourteen families" has held sway over how many have conceptualized El Salvador for decades. While fourteen families represents a seemingly arbitrary number, the article's argument that a small group of families dominated the Salvadoran economy, owning most of the land and capital, and wielding disproportionate influence in political life, certainly rang true. This inequality, when combined with a stubborn political system dominated by a military-oligarchy alliance first established in 1932, all but ensured the inevitability of revolutionary violence. Economic crisis in the 1970s represented fertile ground for the seeds of violence. Latin America's "lost decade" of economic despair in the 1980s ensured that the conflict would be a long and bloody one. So too did American dollars and weapons that after 1981, arrived in El Salvador in massive amounts.

How did this happen? In contrast to Latin American countries like Nicaragua and Cuba, there was little legacy of American interventionism in El Salvador. Ultimately, the Nicaraguan

revolution in 1979, which toppled the over forty-year long dictatorship of the Somoza family, explains in large part U.S. interest in the region. That revolution, led by the Marxist-Leninist-inspired Sandinistas, provoked renewed fears in Washington of communism in America's backyard. Quickly, the language in Washington resembled the language toward Southeast Asia ten years earlier. Nicaragua had been "lost" to the communists, and while Nicaragua was not strategically important by itself, it could represent a beachhead of Soviet power in the Central American region. Furthermore, Nicaragua was just the beginning of a longer fight with radicalism in Central America. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, each government faced a burgeoning violent left. El Salvador, with the most powerful and intransigent left, represented the first likely "domino" to fall in this new, post-Vietnam Cold War hotspot. Thereafter, Mexico, strategically important for its oil reserves and its geographic position on the border of the United States, and Panama and its canal would be under threat. Policymakers in Washington felt a need to counter the growing influence of leftism in the region, and El Salvador quickly became their first and most important battleground.

The resulting war was catastrophic. Seventy-thousand Salvadorans were killed throughout the course of the conflict. While this number is roughly comparable to the number of American lives lost in Vietnam, its impact was far greater. In a country of 4.5 million people (the population at the beginning of the war in 1980), the number of those killed during the civil war represented over 1% of the country's population. In a country as small and densely populated as El Salvador, these deaths were part of a wider destruction as well. Vast stretches of the nation's land and forests were destroyed. Infrastructure was wiped out. The bleak economic situation of 1980s Central America was exacerbated by the conflict in El Salvador. In part as a result of the violence and in part as a result of the desperate economic situation, half a million Salvadorans

were displaced by the war, wandering the countryside, fleeing to neighboring countries to escape the violence and the instability it promoted. In the midst of this death and destruction, the country was wracked by a human rights crisis condemned by a diverse array of observers across the globe. The security forces and death squads, which were often led and populated by security force members working in a quasi-official capacity, spearheaded politically oriented murder, regular disappearance, torture, and terrorism of people supporting or suspected of supporting the leftists. These human rights violations earned the attention of international human rights organizations like Amnesty International, U.S.-based organizations, and Salvadoran organizations, often rooted in the Catholic Church.

Despite these stark realities, the U.S. entered the conflict on the side of the Salvadoran government in 1981, and the partnership deepened over the twelve-year period of the civil war. This relationship looked like many U.S. relationships in the era of containment, with the U.S. feeding its beleaguered ally military and economic aid in an attempt to stave off communist takeover, but without committing American soldiers to fight in the conflict.¹ By the end, the United States had provided its diminutive ally upwards of \$4 billion, a shocking sum for a country so small, and one with which the U.S. did not have an extensive history of intervention. However, this monetary commitment was but one part of a larger campaign on behalf of the Carter and Reagan Administrations to confront communist subversion in El Salvador. From 1979 to 1992, the White House worked actively to help El Salvador gain international allies, though this effort was seldom successful. As part of that effort, and as part of the attempt to continue to secure Congressional funding for military and economic aid despite the shocking human rights

¹ This limitation needs to be understood in the context of the post-Vietnam era; while landing the marines may have made an appealing option to a Reagan Administration desperate to turn the tide in Central America, it was a political non-starter given the post-Vietnam War reluctance to become entangled in a distant (at least psychologically in the Salvadoran case) foreign war.

violations associated with Salvadoran security forces, the White House, particularly that of Reagan, also worked to brandish the tattered image of the Salvadoran government. This effort took many forms, from promoting democratic advancements in the country to downplaying and even whitewashing Salvadoran government violence. It was a totalizing effort to win hearts and minds in El Salvador, the United States, and the world.

The intensity of this unlikely intervention, the shocking headlines of the war, and the drama in Washington and San Salvador that resulted from the relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador from 1977 to 1992 inspired a variety of historical studies on the topic. Throughout the course of the 1980s, a multitude of monographs emerged dealing with the crises in Nicaragua and El Salvador, with a slightly lesser number focusing upon the fledgling leftist movement in Guatemala and the civil war there that resulted in the genocide of over 200,000 Indians. Overwhelmingly these works, written during the crisis, were penned by oppositional scholars, individuals who upon seeing the nearly unbelievable levels of violence and destruction of the Salvadoran civil war and the significant U.S. assistance that seemingly exacerbated the crisis, acted to oppose U.S. and Salvadoran policy alike. Thus, the early historiography on the topic of U.S. intervention in Central America was deeply political, often motivated by a desire to affect policy. In the aftermath of the Central American crisis of the 1980s, the region has faded from view. El Salvador, once a nation largely unknown to the United States, has become again a nation close only in proximity and distant in the American mind. As a consequence, few works have emerged in the two decades following the crisis. The goal for this dissertation is to provide the historical perspective missing from the vast array of accounts on the Salvadoran civil war.

Two recent works typify a range of works on U.S.-Latin American Cold War relations. Steven Rabe's *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War*, published in 2011,

represents a more standard revisionist account of the U.S. in Central America. In his work, Rabe places culpability for the Central American crisis largely at the feet of American leaders and their wrongheaded assumptions about the region. What one saw in El Salvador was not a matter of external subversion on the part of the Soviets, Cubans, or Nicaraguans, but a reaction to bleak social, economic, and political conditions within the country. The problem thus did not demand a military solution as much as it demanded significant economic and political reform. To Rabe, this is not a story of moral equivalence. He rejects the “theory of two demons” that posits that extremist violence from both the left and the right share near-equal responsibility for the Salvadoran crisis. In this sense, Rabe is in agreement with a majority of scholars who composed their works in the midst of the crisis, and adds breadth and depth to a well-worn position on U.S.-Latin American relations. Sharing this position are scholars like Greg Grandin, who throughout his prolific career has critiqued U.S. policymakers for their roles in the disturbing violence of Central America’s Cold War. In his work, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, Grandin focuses largely upon U.S. policy in Central America and reaches conclusions repeated in Rabe’s wide-ranging work. Whereas throughout much of the world, the Reagan Administration acted in a relatively restrained way, in Central America, Reagan let the most radical rightists in his Administration dictate policy. It was there, Grandin and Rabe contend, that American policymakers hoped to expunge the nation of the Vietnam Syndrome and re-assert American power and dominance. To Grandin, this right represented the key neoconservatives that later dictated U.S. policy toward the Middle East under the George W. Bush Administration. He explains that it was in Central America “where an insurgent New Right first coalesced, as conservative activists used the region to respond to the crisis of the 1970s.”² In the accounts of Rabe, Grandin, and others, American policy was made

² Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, (New

with the false assumption that the Soviet Union and Cuba had designs on spreading communism in Central America. Another historian whose recent work has shared this sense of the conflict is Alan McPherson. In his work, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*, McPherson explains “the Reagan administration intensified military struggle in the smallest, weakest Latin American countries thanks to fears of an ideological world struggle that did not correspond to events on the ground.”³

While these works by Rabe, Grandin, and McPherson have been published in the past decade, earlier works on the subject of the U.S. intervention in El Salvador have shared their strong political bent. Walter LaFeber’s important work on Central America, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, published in 1983 and later republished in 1993 in the immediate aftermath of the civil conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador, shares many of these revisionist elements. It casts the United States as logically inconsistent if not hypocritical, a nation that expresses commitment to democratization while aiding reactionary forces in Central America to “[perpetuate the wide class differences between rich and poor that had triggered the revolutions originally.”⁴ Furthermore, LaFeber points out, revolutions play the role in Latin America that elections play in the United States. Thus, the anti-revolutionary nature of U.S. policy stymies important changes.⁵ In contrast to most Washington policymakers, LaFeber finds that such revolutions are desirable and necessary to Latin American progress.

Works by journalists Raymond Bonner and Mark Danner, shared this critical perspective of LaFeber’s work and focused in on American complicity with the disturbing violence of the

York: Metropolitan Books), 5.

³ Alan McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books Inc., 2006), 89.

⁴ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 365.

⁵ *Ibid*, 15-16.

Salvadoran regime. Both men focus upon the December of 1981 massacre at El Mozote, an incident that underscores several broad themes regarding U.S.-Salvadoran relations during the war including shocking human rights violations, governmental complicity, and White House manipulation of the media. Bonner, then a New York Times correspondent, was among the first to break news of the massacre at El Mozote in January of 1982. While at the time, the Reagan Administration and an array of other news outlets criticized Bonner for calling the incident at El Mozote a “massacre,” later evidence corroborated his account, in particular, the United Nations Truth Commission in 1993. His book, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, published in 1984, lambasted the Reagan Administration for its continued support for a widely discredited regime, in addition to its handling of such incidents as El Mozote, in which Administration officials deceived and manipulated the press. Mark Danner, writer for *The New Yorker*, subsequently published his book, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*, in 1994. Danner’s work shared Bonner’s critical perspective, highlighting the Administration’s willful deception, as well as the undeniable complicity of an American government who had trained the officers who led the massacre. The incident at El Mozote, which has inspired an array of works beyond Bonner and Danner’s, underscores a number of key themes of the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship. So too do the various accounts of this incident represent themes of the historiography of U.S.-Central American relations.

In the face of this dominant Cold War revisionism, Hal Brand’s 2012 work, *Latin America’s Cold War* represents a post-revisionist account that calls into question many of the predominant lines of thinking in U.S.-Central American historiography. In stark contrast to many of the historical texts on U.S.-Central American relations in the 1980s and 1990s, Brands extensive use of Latin American sources enables him to better capture the internal dynamics in

the region. His work incorporates sources from Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Chile, Venezuela, Paraguay, El Salvador, Mexico, and Brazil, in addition to U.S. sources that most commonly represent the backbone of such historical accounts. Brands' work emphasizes greater moral equivalence in the violence. While Brands notes the U.S. role in worsening the crisis, he also discusses in depth the complex factors at play in countries like El Salvador. Brands explains that the tragedy in Latin America "cannot be reduced to a story dominated by Right repression and U.S. complicity" and "the upheaval that afflicted Latin America during the postwar period was the result not simply of the malignity of a single group of actors, but rather of the multisided and mutually reinforcing nature of the conflicts that comprised Latin America's Cold War."⁶ Whereas Rabe, as many Latin Americanists forged in the tumultuous 1980s, emphasizes the U.S. role in perpetuating that decades violence, Brands attempts to tell an increasingly complex story in which the United States is but one of the key players feeding into the perpetuation of that violence. Nevertheless, Brands finds U.S. intervention key to the continuation of the war, suggesting that U.S. military assistance was counterproductive, and "in the hands of a repressive army, U.S. weapons enabled the very practices that had alienated the population."⁷ He also emphasizes the ways in which the intervention was not merely American, but outside intervention on the part of Cuba and the Soviet Union, too, added a new dimension to the crisis. In this emphasis on external communist subversion, Brands empathizes more with the U.S. policymakers for whom this was a central concern. Brands explains that while the United States "backed a government that knew how to kill but was unwilling to reform," Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union "gave sustenance to a guerilla force that launched deadly

⁶ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 8.

⁷ *Ibid*, 201.

attacks and wreaked havoc on the economy.”⁸ Thus, to Brands, this external subversion worsened the already-existing conflict. He concludes in the end that the crisis in Central America defies a “simple morality play” and indeed, while U.S. power did play a disturbing role in perpetuating the injustices of a “thuggish” army, so too did Washington policymakers “[support] efforts to open the political system and restrain death squad violence.”⁹ This emphasis contrasts markedly with the majority revisionist perspective on U.S. interventionism in Central America in the 1980s.

One work that further promotes this minority perspective is Edward A. Lynch’s recent book, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America*. Lynch played a role in Reagan’s Central American policy team and consequently takes a softer view of the Reagan team’s goals there. Like Brands, Lynch emphasizes the often downplayed reality of Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Soviet intervention in that region’s crisis, an interventionism that he feels necessitated U.S. action. Lynch sees the Reagan team as “co-opting” the language and policy of human rights that Jimmy Carter had hoped to make a Democratic monopoly,” though Lynch is less critical of the nature of that human rights emphasis than Brands, who notes the Administration’s narrow sense of human rights and democracy.¹⁰

The work that follows will address many of these historiographical issues. Is what occurred in the late Cold War period a story of American domination of a small and weak ally? How did the United States balance its stated commitments to laudable concepts like democracy and human rights with the popular fear that Central America was at risk of becoming a beachhead for Soviet-style communism? What factors dictated this U.S. policy? And how did

⁸ Ibid, 203.

⁹ Ibid, 221.

¹⁰ Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, c2011), ix.

Salvadoran leadership respond to American efforts to dictate the development of their civil war? What factors were at play in perpetuating one of the bloodiest struggles in the history of the Cold War?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this work relies upon an array of primary source documents. These documents include newly released materials attained at the Carter and Reagan libraries and the National Archives, which help convey the White House's sense of the conflict and its relationship with El Salvador. Archival sources from the Library of Congress archive, and the archive of Clarence "Doc" Long, a long-time Congressional opponent of Reagan's Salvadoran policy, located at Johns Hopkins University, help provide a sense of the Congressional role and the perspective of American oppositional forces. Taken together, these documents provide a detailed portrait of U.S. governmental interests throughout the period from 1980 to 1992. For the non-governmental perspective of transnational organizations, this work relies upon Columbia University's Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research Archive, as well as the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. While Columbia University houses the archives of Amnesty International and an array of other smaller human rights organizations, the Tamiment Library helps to provide the oppositional perspective of a variety of American labor groups.

For the Salvadoran governmental perspective, this work references a number of archives in San Salvador, El Salvador. The Salvadoran National Archive, the Library of the Armed Forces, and the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry's archive represent this work's main sources to the Salvadoran government point of view. Of these, the vast Foreign Ministry archive has proven most critical, and houses a vast array of documents for the period from 1970 to 1994. The Center for Information Documentation, and Support of Research (CIDAI), located at the University of

Central America (UCA), was also a critical resource for the project. CIDAI's archive of documents from the Christian Democratic Party was especially valuable in understanding that party's background and its central role in the conflict.

To better understand the Salvadoran left and counterbalance the government perspective, this work makes reference to documents attained at the archive of the Museum of the Word and Image in San Salvador, an archive of the leftist opposition. This resource contained hundreds of hours of video, audio, as well as a library of first-hand accounts from Salvadoran revolutionaries. In addition, the archive of Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuria, also at UCA, provides insight into the perspective of that critical Salvadoran religious leader, a figure who worked as a go-between between the government and left throughout much of the conflict. Finally, this work was informed by documents attained at the University of Colorado's Archive, which houses over 90 boxes of documents from the Salvadoran human rights organizations *Socorro Juridico*, *Comision de Derechos Humanos*, and *Tutela Legal*. In each of these collections, I found detailed testimonies from Salvadorans who had experienced human rights violations first-hand.

What follows is primarily a study of U.S. policy and how a robust opposition movement affected it. This emphasis on U.S. policy owes to a large extent to the preponderance of government documents on the U.S. side. Government documents on the subject of El Salvador abound in a wide variety of American archives including the presidential archives of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. In contrast, available Salvadoran sources, while bountiful, tend not to give as full of a picture of the Salvadoran perspective. This is because while internal memorandums between important players in the American bureaucracy fill American archives, Salvadoran archives, including those of the Foreign Ministry, tend to contain fewer such documents. Further, the Salvadoran archives feature relatively few documents that reveal the

inner-workings of Salvadoran foreign policy and fewer that deal explicitly with how Salvadoran government leaders viewed their allies in arms to the North.

The first chapter of the dissertation, “A Country Divided: The Foundations of Salvadoran Revolution” deals with the period from 1932 to 1977. The chapter highlights a number of central themes of the overall project. First, it demonstrates the ways in which the civil war was long in the making. *La Matanza*, or “the killing” in 1932 underscores the stark economic disparities that later prompt civil war. Unjust presidential elections in 1972 and 1977 highlight the failure of democratic solutions to those economic problems. This period thus sees the incredible growth of first, a democratic opposition, the Christian Democrats that emerge in the 1960s with a powerful critique of the structural inequalities of the country, and later, a violent opposition, tired of being stymied by a broken political process. Second, despite arguments of American dominance throughout Central America, by 1977, El Salvador was not a country of much importance to the United States. Instead, U.S. officials knew very little about the country that would become a central battleground in the late Cold War period. This lack of knowledge regarding El Salvador explains the flailing of American policy throughout much of the civil war, and the American reliance upon stereotypes to understand Salvadoran violence.

The second chapter, entitled, “Unforeseen Emergency: Carter and the Salvadoran Crisis, 1977-1981,” deals with relations between the two countries during the Carter presidency. Coming to power in 1977, Carter sounded different than his predecessors, particularly when it came to Latin American foreign policy. Carter reacted to a changing Cold War in which the Soviet Union appeared less threatening, and the overreach of executive power in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal demanded a different kind of American president. Carter, too, reacted to a legacy of interventionism and support for dictators in Latin America, and tried to cast the U.S. as

a partner in the region rather than its overseer. For the first years of his Administration, Carter made it his goal to make human rights the “soul” of his foreign policy, this despite common sentiments in El Salvador that the human rights emphasis represented undue interventionism in Salvadoran internal affairs. While human rights did represent a key emphasis of the Administration, by 1981, with the re-ignition of Cold War tensions in Afghanistan, Iran, and Nicaragua, the Administration responded in a way comparable to its predecessors.

The third chapter, titled “Two-Front War: The Reagan Administration Confronts the Salvadoran Crisis, 1981-1982,” deals with the Reagan Administration and ends with the election of a constituent government in El Salvador. From the beginning, Reagan cast himself as a foreign policy leader vastly different than Carter, who his team perceived as weak and ineffectual. The Reagan team made few promises regarding human rights. Instead, the “terrorism” represented by the Salvadoran left was the “soul” of Reagan policy. Reacting to this terrorism, his Administration mobilized a multi-faceted campaign on behalf of the Salvadoran government, which desperately needed U.S. help in its fight against a leftist insurgency that appeared to be growing in strength. The years 1981 and 1982 represented important ones in the relationship between these two countries, as the governments of the United States and El Salvador alike undertook an unsuccessful campaign to recast the Salvadoran government internationally, where it was often considered a pariah known for regular human rights violations. Upon coming to office, the Reagan team, as the Carter team, was immediately confronted with the conflict between promoting greater respect for human rights and promoting anti-communism.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation, entitled, “Confronting a Dilemma: U.S. Security Interests and the Promotion of Democratic Reform in El Salvador, 1982-1984,” covers the time

period between the selection of Álvaro Magaña as interim Salvadoran president and the election of Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte in June of 1984. During this time, human rights violations continue at a staggering rate, and more so than in 1981 and 1982, the Reagan team seems to commit more to affecting positive democratic change in El Salvador beyond simply promoting anti-communism. By 1982, Reagan had embraced major initiatives of the Carter Administration, and each Administration attempted to champion the cause of the centrist Christian Democrats in the hope that in so doing, the American Administration could mitigate the political polarization of El Salvador and weaken the radical right and left. While the Carter team seemed to recognize the ways in which most Salvadoran violence emanated from the right, and the Reagan team saw it as more of a leftist phenomenon, each Administration shared the sense that the stark differences between the two powered the Salvadoran civil war.

The fifth and final chapter of the project, with the title, ““The Transplant Has Been Made, but Will it Take?”: The Limits of Salvadoran Democratic Progress, 1984-1990,” discusses the changing nature of the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship. From 1981 until 1984, the war in El Salvador remained a deeply divisive issue not only in Washington, but internationally, as critics of the Salvadoran government lambasted its regular human rights violations. With the election of José Napoleón Duarte, much changed. Duarte, a centrist Christian Democrat, ushered in an era of relative bipartisanship in the United States, while at the same time earning international plaudits for El Salvador’s successful electoral process. Despite the optimism that surrounded Duarte’s election in June of 1984, shortly thereafter, widespread criticisms emerged from a variety of sectors in Salvadoran society as well as the international community. In the face of these contrasting visions of the new El Salvador, leaders in Washington reflected on their role over the last five years and wondered if El Salvador’s transition to democracy was a genuine

development, or a façade. The disturbing security force murder of six Jesuit priests in November of 1989 highlighted continuities in Salvadoran society and U.S.-Salvadoran relations throughout the decade, and represented a bookend with the murder of Archbishop Romero in March of 1980. This incident, when coupled with continued reports of Salvadoran human rights violations and the continued impunity that fed much of the violence throughout the civil war, called into question exactly how much progress had been made.

Chapter 1

A Country Divided: The Foundations of Salvadoran Revolution

La Matanza And Its Legacy

By 1931, El Salvador struck many U.S. observers as a country ripe for revolution. The worldwide depression had hit El Salvador especially hard. The price of coffee, the dominant crop in El Salvador throughout much of the twentieth century, crashed so hard that many land owners opted not to harvest the crop at all. With coffee such a dominant part of the national economy, the drop in prices resulted in a 33% decline in the national income, and a 40% decrease in rural employment.¹ As a result, pickers and their families across El Salvador's agricultural landscape were left without work, money, or food. This bleak reality exacerbated an already difficult situation for the country's rural poor, the majority of whom were landless, shuffling around the countryside in search of regular work. The issue of landlessness or near-landlessness represented a perpetual problem in a country in which the rural poor had few resources and fewer opportunities.²

The inequity in the rural economy stemmed largely from changes made to the system starting in the late 19th century. Many of these changes began between 1879 and 1882, when coffee became the dominant export crop in El Salvador. Prior to this, peasants had access to communal land, but with the wealth available to those landowners with large tracts of land who had the capital to produce large amounts of coffee, the government soon privatized and divvied

¹ Wim Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 14.

² *Ibid*, 14.

up those communal lands.³ In 1882, for example, the government broke up and sold communal lands belonging to Indians with the Ley de Extinción de Ejidos.⁴ By 1931, coffee produced over 95% of El Salvador's export earnings, and thus underwrote much of the Salvadoran government, at the local and national levels. Given this level of government dependence, it is perhaps unsurprising that the government would support the coffee elite despite the needs of the rural poor. Many rural peasants subsequently found themselves without land to work, and many went to work on the large coffee plantations, depending upon seasonal work to support themselves and their families. Big landowners soon monopolized all elements of coffee production, processing the grains of their less endowed neighbors, and exporting that coffee as well, bolstered by relationships with foreign traders.⁵ Changes throughout the roughly fifty-year period between 1879 and 1931 overwhelmingly worked to bolster the centralization of economic, social, and political power of the landed elite at the expense of small landowners and subsistence farmers.

By 1930, a profound desire for a social reform led many Salvadorans to the polls to support the candidacy of Arturo Araujo, a rare civilian candidate in a country long dominated by military leaders. Promising an improved standard of living for the country's poor, Araujo secured his victory in large part through the support of labor. His election and initial months in office, however, did not mitigate many worker concerns. A number of large strikes followed, the largest of which took place on May Day, 1930. It featured eighty thousand workers and peasants who marched in San Salvador to protest for a better standard of living: an end to unemployment, a minimum wage law, and improved working conditions.⁶ Araujo's Vice President and Minister of War, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, put down the strikes quickly and with little hesitation.

³ Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982), 12-13.

⁴ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ Arnson, *El Salvador*, 13.

The government-led backlash against left-wing protesters, included the banning of circulation of left-wing literature and jailing of leftist leaders, principally those from the Salvadoran Communist Party (Partido Comunista Salvadoreño or PCS).⁷ Of course, Hernández Martínez's military background made him a more traditional Salvadoran president, a fact not lost on Araujo's many rightist critics.

The subsequent coup against civilian president Arturo Araujo and his replacement by Hernández Martínez in December of 1931 quickened the pace of oppositional mobilization in the countryside, in particular, in the western part of the country.⁸ The Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS), in particular, was active with its organizing in the area between Santa Ana and Ilopango, tapping into rural unrest and a community of relatively radical rural teachers unions.⁹

Many foreign observers envisioned violence as the hardened rightist government faced a growing leftist opposition. Analyzing the Salvadoran situation in 1931, one U.S. attaché for Central American Military Affairs argued,

I imagine the situation in El Salvador today is very much like France was before its revolution, Russia before its revolution and Mexico before its revolution. A socialist or even communistic revolution in El Salvador may be delayed for several years, ten or even twenty, but when it comes it will be a bloody one.¹⁰

The frequency and popularity of strikes and the spread of serious anti-government anger likely prompted such a bleak projection. Restless and tired of perceived injustices, and devastated by economic depression, El Salvador was ripe for violence.

This U.S. official who predicted violence would not need to wait long, when in 1932 a group of impoverished peasants, many of whom were of Indian descent, staged an uprising in the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, c1982), 24.

⁹ Ibid, 26.

¹⁰ Margaret Popkin, *Peace without Justice: Obstacles to Building the Rule of Law in El Salvador* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, c2000), 14-15.

western part of the country. One major political organization that came to play a role in directing this violence was the PCS, a communist organization that was created in 1929 in part as a reaction to the country's economic stagnation. The group, led largely by Agustín Farabundo Martí, a colleague of Augusto César Sandino of Nicaragua (the two leftists later had a falling out when Sandino proved resistant to Martí's push toward communism).¹¹ When coffee prices plummeted and the Salvadoran colón collapsed, the PCS saw its power and influence in the countryside rise as many Salvadoran rural workers scrambled for an opportunity to exert what meager power and influence that they could. Of course, this discontent spread to urban workers as well. The PCS led a number of organizations like the Federación Regional de Trabajadores in fights for things like minimum wage, the guarantee of existing contracts, and services for the unemployed.¹²

The PCS-led uprising was disorganized and quickly collapsed. According to historian James Dunkerley's account, opposition forces directed much of the violence against small town mayors, landowners, and government officials, though unpopular farm foremen were targeted as well.¹³ The number of victims was limited, with roughly 30 civilians and 50 military personnel killed, though it was enough to draw the attention of government forces.¹⁴ The PCS leaders, including Martí, who had spearheaded much of the violence were quickly rounded up and arrested.¹⁵ The indigenous leaders who had taken over the leadership of the rebellion in many of the pueblos in the western departments, too, were quickly captured by government forces. Quasi-official civilian vigilante groups played a major role in the government counteroffensive that began on the 24th of January. According to Dunkerly, these *Guardias Cívicas*, "held fascist-like

¹¹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 25.

¹² *Ibid*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 27-29.

ceremonies” and quickly “proved to be the most active and unrestrained forces of the counter-revolution.”¹⁶ While estimates vary considerably, most seem to suggest that official and quasi-official forces killed between 10,000 and 40,000 people in the resulting anti-communist counteroffensive.

The ruthlessness of the government’s counteroffensive would be well-remembered. This mass killing would later be known as “La Matanza” or “the slaughter.” Many historians, including U.S. historian of El Salvador, Jeffrey Gould, consider the government counteroffensive to be not simply a massacre, but a systematic and potentially genocidal one. In his work, *To Rise in Darkness*, Gould explains, “There is no question that the military regime of Martínez fostered the mass killings through direct orders, or that racism conditioned those orders and their execution.”¹⁷ Among El Salvador’s Indian population, the failed uprising ushered in an era of decreased identification with their ethnicity.¹⁸ Many Indians discarded their native language, dress, and other symbols of their Indian heritage, likely fearful of what those symbols might mean for their acceptance into broader Salvadoran society.¹⁹

Not only were the country’s Indians targeted, but those supporters of the PCS that could be identified. As Gould explains, many were identified through lists of voters who had petitioned to register the party for elections. Gould explains, “Throughout February and March, civic patrols and the National Guard searched for those PCS supporters, and when they found them

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 219.

¹⁸ While in the census of 1930, Indians represented 5.6 percent of the population, the number ceased to be tallied in later censuses as the majority of the country’s Indians assimilated into the broader Mestizo culture.

¹⁹ Memorandum, “El Salvador in Outline,” August 1982, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

they shot them either with or without the benefits of judicial trappings.”²⁰ While Gould concedes that there is no evidence supporting widespread testimony that soldiers used this list of PCS supported to identify enemies of the state, that the Armed Forces possessed these lists is without doubt.²¹ Protestants, too, were singled out as suspect by the Catholic-dominated Armed Forces, and many became victims of government violence.²²

Violence in the countryside also served as a backdrop for anti-leftist activities in El Salvador’s expanding urban areas. The government seized the opportunity to crush burgeoning opposition, arresting hundreds of suspected Communists and assorted opponents to the ruling government. Hernández Martínez led this crackdown, as many historians suggest, in tandem with his allies in the coffee oligarchy. He passed vagrancy laws that sought in part to provide the wealthy landowners with consistent, cheap labor and peasant unions were outlawed.²³ To rightist forces, uprisings like that in the western part of El Salvador in 1932 simply could not happen again.

Digging In

Few events were more critical to the development of 20th-century El Salvador than the communist-led rebellion of 1932 and its subsequent suppression by the Salvadoran Armed Forces. On the right, the episode left the military and oligarchy with a powerful fear of communism that served as a guiding principal for many in the Salvadoran Armed Forces long before men like Roberto d’Aubuisson came to embody anti-communism on the national stage during the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s. The Directorate of Intelligence explained, “order

²⁰ Gould, *To Rise in Darkness*, 227.

²¹ Gould, *To Rise in Darkness*, 228.

²² Ibid.

²³ Arnson, *El Salvador*, 15.

and stability...became closely identified with institutionalized violence against dissident leftist elements, as well as intimidation of the rural peasant and urban labor classes.”²⁴ What resulted was a paranoid, conservative movement in El Salvador that interpreted any and all leftist forces as a threat to the nation as well as the institutional integrity of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Furthermore, that the uprising occurred while a civilian leader was in power instilled within many in the military a distrust of civilian leadership and a popular sense that civilian leaders were simply too weak.

The 1932 uprising also instilled in conservative Salvadorans an intense fear and distrust of any attempt by the lower classes to formally organize. The government of El Salvador banned trade unions of any kind until 1950 and federations of trade unions until 1963.²⁵ Unions of peasants in the countryside were of particular concern. By the late 1970s, all unions of agricultural workers remained illegal.²⁶

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, some labor unions did emerge, though a variety of factors limited those unions. As Dunkerley explains, of those unions, the government “carefully vetted” all and determined that they were “ideologically safe.”²⁷ This modest opening did reflect in part the influence of the U.S. Alliance for Progress and its promotion of anti-communist labor organizations like the American Institute for Free Labor Development--sponsored Unión Comunal Salvadoreña. With regard to industry unions, American economist Wim Pelupessy

²⁴ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Controlling Rightwing Terrorism: An Intelligence Assessment,” February 1985, Collection: Tillman, Jacqueline: Files, Contents: Box 90502-90503, 91709, Box: 3, Folder: El Salvador – Human Rights, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁵ Report, Amnesty International, International Secretariat, “El Salvador: Escalation of Political Violence,” July 25, 1979, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR# 001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Box 4, Folder: National Office, Executive Director Files, AMR 29, Americas – El Salvador, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 103.

Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 19.

points out that in 1962, there were 78 unions, with a membership of 25,917.²⁸ In 1971, there were 121 unions with 47,020 members, and in 1975, 127 unions with 64,186 members.²⁹ This gradual increase is more significant when one considers the stringent anti-labor laws adopted in the aftermath of La Matanza. Those unions that did exist also faced regular harassment by state security forces, as well as quasi-official civic groups that proliferated as union organizations grew throughout the mid-Cold War period.

The institutional fears instilled by the communist-led rebellion of 1932 facilitated the growth and expansion of conservative paramilitary groups that saw as their mission the squelching of leftism, including those leftists believed to be instigating the country's modest union movement. One of the most prevalent of these groups emerged in 1968 under the direction of Colonel José Alberto Medrano, and was called the Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN). The group's declared purpose was to maintain order, the definition of its acronym in Spanish, and to stop Communist subversion in the countryside. Under its formal relationship with the Salvadoran government, the Ministry of Defense acted as the group's coordinator, and the President acted as its commander-in-chief. Outside of these minimal details, little concrete is known of the organization, a fact that speaks to the opaqueness of ORDEN, its membership, and its activities.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, ORDEN served as a government-sponsored civic group that comprised tens of thousands of conservative peasants, many of whom had formerly worked as part of the Salvadoran Armed Forces.³⁰ Motivation for joining varied, but members often joined for the money in a countryside in which opportunities were few. At the same time, as

²⁸ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: Controlling Rightwing Terrorism: An Intelligence Assessment," February 1985, Collection: Tillman, Jacqueline: Files, Contents: Box 90502-90503, 91709, Box: 3, Folder: El Salvador – Human Rights, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Dunkerley points out, “an ORDEN carnet is the best passport to safety from the ‘security forces.’”³¹ The group served as an intelligence-gathering body as well as a police force that sought to quell any anti-government activities, and according to many, any activities that might be perceived to be against the interests of El Salvador’s powerful oligarchy. ORDEN’s role, as the role of many death squads in the 1980s, came to be the execution of extralegal violence sufficiently distanced from the official Salvadoran Armed Forces as to avoid some scrutiny from El Salvador’s neighbors and the international community. As Dunkerley suggests, “the existence of ORDEN and its sheer size meant that political conflict in the countryside could never be a simple case of whole pueblos opposing the military; the battle would also take part within the communities, with every village becoming a microcosm of the wide civil war.”³² Indeed, given that ORDEN’s ranks were made up in large part from rural people, its existence turned brother against brother. Thus, ORDEN became among other things a network of informers for rightist forces, revealing who in the countryside opposed the government.³³ ORDEN also served to mobilize supporters of the governing party, the Party of National Conciliation, or PCN, in rural El Salvador.³⁴ From 1968 to 1979, ORDEN played a critical role in running the Salvadoran countryside, though the group’s tendency toward violence, particularly against those who challenged the existing social, political, and economic order, was well known.

The prevalence of right-wing violence, like that of ORDEN, when combined with the many problematic aspects of the Salvadoran justice system, facilitated the solidification of a culture in which vigilantism reigned supreme. Throughout much of the 1950s, the extrajudicial confession, often secured through the holding and torturing of prisoners, represented “almost the

³¹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 76. “Carnet” is a Spanish word, which here indicates an identification card.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 45.

³⁴ Ibid.

exclusive method of proof,” explains Margaret Popkin, former lawyer in El Salvador and author of *Peace Without Justice: Obstacles to Building the Rule of Law in El Salvador*.³⁵ In the 1970s, this reliance upon extrajudicial confessions was further solidified by the 1973 Criminal Procedure Code, which permitted such confessions, obtained within the first 72 hours of a prisoners’ holding as “sufficient evidence” in the event that two individuals “worthy of belief” could verify that the prisoner was not tortured or intimidated.³⁶ Such laws facilitated the abuse of power of El Salvador’s police forces, which, when combined with the prevalence of ORDEN and other death squad violence, acted to stifle anti-government dissent.

However, the prevalence of this violence and its role in stymying most attempts to organize leftist political or economic organizations served to exacerbate the crisis of polarization that took place in El Salvador from the Great Depression-era to the civil war of the 1980s. On the left, frustration built as any attempts to affect positive change in the economic, political, and social organization of Salvadoran society were met with violence from the Armed Forces, quasi-official paramilitary bodies like ORDEN, and the established oligarchy’s own police forces. If the left were to affect real change in Salvadoran society, it would have to overcome a system in which any opposition to the status-quo put an individual or group at risk of violence.

By the late 1960s, with the labor union movement still relatively weak and under duress from government limitations as well as powerful quasi-official organizations like ORDEN, new elements of an old institution entered into the political fray: the Catholic Church. The transition of the Church to a more active political body began with the Second Vatican Council that took place from 1962 to 1965 and emphasized the importance of social justice as a core Church

³⁵ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

initiative.³⁷ The subsequent Latin American Bishops' Conference that met in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 further built upon this new emphasis, encouraging in Latin America the creation of Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (Basic Ecclesial Communities), or CEBs. These small religious communities sought to make the Bible more accessible to those living in rural areas and to build community among the rural poor, community that they could not otherwise have absent a local church. Church leaders designed CEBs to encourage things like lay leadership and community involvement, as well as local autonomy and democratization.³⁸ Members of these religious communities took courses in which, as Professor of Religion Anna L. Peterson explains in her book *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, "members would relate the Bible to current events or local concerns" before returning to their communities to spread this reconceptualization of the Catholic message.³⁹ Peterson continues,

In Central America...CEB members often read Exodus as a paradigm for all people struggling to free themselves from unjust rulers and the Gospels as the story of a poor man who fought for the poor and suffered the same type of persecution as people who denounce injustice today. Participants in this type of *reflexion* often concluded that Christians must follow Jesus' model, working to liberate the poor from an unjust human system."⁴⁰

This reconceptualization of the Catholic Church's message had a powerful impact upon rural El Salvador, where the poor began to see their troubles not as a matter of divine will, but rather, a matter of unjust rulers and their persecution by earthly forces.⁴¹ Subsequently, these CEBs provided the foundation for early organizing in the countryside.⁴² Peterson identifies the early 1970s as the time when many of the most significant CEBs were emerging, which as she argues,

³⁷ Anna Lisa Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, c1997), 48.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 48-49.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 50-51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² *Ibid*, 52.

gives those organizations time to develop before the worst of governmental oppression commences.⁴³ In a society in which the poor had so few outlets for their political activism, it is little surprise that the Church, when entering that domain, experienced rapid growth in the popularity of its message. While certain elements of the Catholic Church remained conservative and distrustful of the emerging progressive branches, the rise of this more oppositional movement is undeniable. Of course, this tension within the Church came to a head when the Vatican named the reputedly conservative Oscar Arnulfo Romero to be Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, and some wondered whether or not the Salvadoran Catholic Church would continue along its trajectory of increasing progressivism.

The Christian Democratic Party: An Electoral Alternative?

In the 1960s and 1970s, El Salvador changed in ways that exacerbated already existing societal problems and laid the groundwork for the country's armed conflict in the late Cold War period. During those years, the population of the tiny El Salvador almost doubled, from a population of 2.5 million to 4.8 million.⁴⁴ While this seems a small population for a twentieth century nation-state, for a country the size of Massachusetts, such a change had a profound impact. Among those effects, the largely agricultural country simply did not have enough farmland to satisfy its exploding population. Thus, the population growth led to thousands of peasant families with little to no land in an agricultural society in which wealth required land. By the 1970s and 1980s, three families continued to process over 25% of the country's coffee

⁴³ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁴ Robert Pastor, "Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy: Carter and Reagan on El Salvador," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Volume 3, Issue 2 (1984): 177.

crop.⁴⁵ At the same time, the oligarchy, in partnership with foreign capital, controlled 85% of total invested capital.⁴⁶ The system remained dominated by the few.

It was into this polarized economic situation that the new Christian Democratic Party (PDC) entered Salvadoran politics in 1962. The party emerged in part with the help of Christian Democratic parties in Europe, namely the Christian Democratic Party in Germany led by Konrad Adenauer.⁴⁷ One political figure in Latin America that came to exemplify the Christian Democratic viewpoint was Eduardo Frei in Chile, who, according to some Christian Democratic thinkers, underscored how a party did not need guns to inspire a revolution in a country's way of life.⁴⁸ To the PDC, such a revolution was required to deal with the significant structural problems of the country. The Party marked as its essential goal the reform of the economic structures of the country and the tax system in ways that would benefit the middle class and campesinos alike. It cast itself as a social justice-oriented alternative to more secular left-wing movements

The Christian Democratic critique often revolved around the government's reluctance and inability to deal with the country's severe structural problems, structural problems that had both economic and societal impact. The government instead had made itself dependent upon foreign nations and the mercurial international price of coffee. The Depression presented government leaders with an opportunity to affect real structural changes that might deal with El Salvador's dependence.⁴⁹ However, rather than break that dependence, the government, in the

⁴⁵ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 78.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁷ Interview, John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA, "El Salvador," 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Pamphlet, "Revolucion Cristiana: Organo Informativo y De Orientacion del Partido Democrata Cristiano, Epoca II – No 21, November 20, 1964, Folder: PDC/Revolución Cristiana, 1963-1973, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁴⁹ Bulletin, "Militante D.C.," Año – I, Numero – 5-6, September 1974, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletin Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

Christian Democratic analysis, resorted to the violence of La Matanza.⁵⁰ This, Christian Democratic leaders would argue, would typify the government response whenever presented with an opportunity to address the country's problems.⁵¹ The government, with its close ties to the oligarchy, which stood to gain from an El Salvador tied closely to outside money, stymied the country's structural reform at every turn.

With regard to this outside money, the Christian Democratic Party was especially critical of the role of the United States in El Salvador, and its perceived economic domination of the region. Espousing dependency theory, the Party repeatedly spoke of the unfair deal between the countries in which El Salvador sold cheap materials to Americans while buying expensive American products.⁵² Writers for the Christian Democratic bulletin, *Revolución Cristiana*, regularly blamed Wall Street for El Salvador's underdevelopment. The answer to the Christian Democrats was to act not as a dominated nation, but an independent one. One article in the bulletin read, "It's necessary that we are able to negotiate with countries that offer us the best conditions regardless of their political and social organizations."⁵³ This writer went on,

Just like individual businessmen that look to do business with those people that give them the best advantage without caring about religious or political ideas that the contractors possess the nations have the right to do business with the countries that have the best prospectives with absolute independence from the political and social philosophy that they inspire because in commerce the only thing that counts is economic advantage.⁵⁴

If El Salvador did not change course and break this economic domination, it risked becoming an "authentic colony."⁵⁵ To Christian Democratic leaders, the country could not afford to tie itself

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Pamphlet, "Revolucion Cristiana: Organo del Partido Democrata Cristiano, Año I, No 4, May 31, 1963, Folder: Revolución Cristiana, PDC, 1963-1964, No. 7-14, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

any more closely to their northern neighbor, regardless of whatever political affinity Salvadorans may have had for the United States.

Thus, many in the Christian Democratic Party held a critical attitude toward the international capitalist system in which wealthier nations regularly took advantage of countries like El Salvador. The PDC was especially critical of the Central American Common Market, and the Central American free trade area, which brought in multinationals to operate in El Salvador in the 1960s.⁵⁶ The PDC, too, held the Alliance for Progress in low regard, as an initiative that only further tied El Salvador's dominant oligarchy to foreign monies, and left the vast majority of Salvadorans on their own. As the PDC would point out, free trade in El Salvador only further solidified Salvadoran dependence on external markets.

Many PDC leaders did not only resent the economic domination of the U.S., but also its long legacy of political domination and interventionism of the Latin American region. In the mid-1960s, no Christian Democratic leader was more high profile than mayor of San Salvador José Napoleón Duarte, who upon Nelson Rockefeller's visit to Latin America in 1969, criticized the U.S. for preaching democracy while supporting dictators.⁵⁷ Of course, this critical position toward the United States may have been strategic as well. Many on the left regularly blamed the United States for El Salvador's dire state and Rockefeller was heavily protested in El Salvador in 1969. In July and August of 1971, University of El Salvador students, on their way to demonstrations in the city, threw rocks at the U.S. Embassy Chancery, breaking windows and scaring the building's inhabitants on several occasions.⁵⁸ These kinds of attacks on the U.S.

⁵⁶ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 21-22.

⁵⁷ Pamphlet, "Revolucion Cristiana: Partido Democrata Cristiano," Año VI, No. 40, June 1969, Folder: PDC/Revolución Cristiana, 1963-1973, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁵⁸ Memorandum, U.S. Embassy to Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, July 23, 1971, Box: 1971, 800 al 804.5, Caja No. 11, Folder: 800: Asuntos Politicos (General) – No. 1, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

Embassy would represent a frequent theme throughout much of the 1970s embodying popular leftist disgust with U.S. power. In one article of *Militante*, an author indicated that “when the U.S. sneezes, Latin America catches a cold.”⁵⁹ As a result, the opposition needed to be mindful of U.S. economic activity in particular. In 1973, one author argued that the Watergate scandal revealed but a part of the putridness of Washington’s corruption while going on to say that there was no reason to believe that things would improve under the next president or the one after that.⁶⁰ The PDC view of the United States was bleak indeed, and tied it to many of the more radical opposition parties and unions.

However, the Christian Democrats saved some of their critique for the leftist alternative in El Salvador and beyond. The PDC, in its early days, as in its height during the 1980s, presented themselves as an alternative to what they considered the political extremes of their country. In their early publications, the Christian Democrats identified themselves as being in a position distinct from the arch-capitalists in power and the communist opposition.⁶¹ While cautiously supportive of agrarian reform, in many cases, the Christian Democrats saved their most cutting critique of the communist opposition, with their reliance upon violence and the totalitarianism and “bureaucratic dictatorship” that so often follows from communist revolution.⁶² In this way, the Christian Democrats saw themselves as neither too close to the United States or the Soviet Union. To them, a middle course was preferable. In one article critical of the Alliance for Progress, the writer explained that while the Christian Democrats did not appreciate the impact of U.S. interventionism, “neither have we assumed the dogmatic

⁵⁹ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año I, Numero 4, August 1974, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Report, “Declaración de Principios y Objetivos del Partido Demócrata Cristiano,” November 1960, Folder: PDC Documentos 1960-1972, #3, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁶² Ibid.



position of the communists that censor everything that has the smell of gringo and who applaud everything that is a direct translation from Russian.”⁶³

Figure 1 “Joven, pero Vigoroso.” This cartoon, titled in English, “Young, but Vigorous,” was featured in a May 1963 Christian Democratic bulletin, and depicts the Christian Democratic Party as a group not beholden to either the Soviet Union or the United States.

Pamphlet, “Revolucion Cristiana: Organo del Partido Democrata Cristiano, Año I, No 4, May 31, 1963, Folder: Revolución Cristiana, PDC, 1963-1964, No. 7-14, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

While particularly concerned with the economic domination of the United States and its patrons in El Salvador, the Christian Democratic critique also dealt with the oppressive nature of

⁶³ Pamphlet, “Revolucion Cristiana: Organo del Partido Democrata Cristiano,” Año I, No. 5, Folder: Revolución Cristiana, PDC, 1963-1964, No. 7-14, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

the Party of National Conciliation (PCN).⁶⁴ The PDC frequently spoke of PCN fascism, which was characterized by regular official and semi-official violence, as well as massacres like that of La Cayetana in 1974, a massacre that galvanized leftist mobilization throughout the latter half of the 1970s. Perhaps most damning was the presence of paramilitary groups like ORDEN. Speaking of the organization in 1974, the Christian Democrats argued, “The personnel of the government no longer hide what their final goals are... Their objective: state control of campesinos.”⁶⁵ Weak in their control of the Eastern Zone of the country, the PDC charged that without ORDEN, a group that sought to “terminate at all costs the expression of protest and all opposed organization to the regime,” the PCN was impotent in that part of the country.⁶⁶ Especially frustrating to the PDC was the regular impunity of those progenitors of anti-opposition violence.⁶⁷ Yet, according to this critique, the violence was inherent in the very structures of Salvadoran society in which violence against the masses was the only way to maintain the positions of the elite.⁶⁸ By the 1970s, many Christian Democrats were drawing parallels between the dictatorship and violence in Somoza’s Nicaragua, the violence in Guatemalan society, and El Salvador’s situation.⁶⁹

This critique against PCN violence also related closely to the Christian Democrats’ wariness of the Salvadoran military and militarism in Latin America more broadly. In one article, a Christian Democratic thinker discusses the ways in which militarism had overtaken the Latin

⁶⁴ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año – I, Numero 11, February 1975, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletin Informativo, 1975, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año – I, Numero 15, June 1975, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletin Informativo, 1975, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁶⁷ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año II, Numero 18, September 1975, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletin Informativo, 1975, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

American region, usurping the will of the people.⁷⁰ This military has served “the interest of the economic oligarchy and submit unconditionally to the benefit of the North American political hegemony.”⁷¹ However, the party continued to believe that the military could play a positive role, as a judge and protagonist in the “political tragedy comedy” rather than the instrument.⁷² The danger continued to be that many in the military had tasted the privileges of power, and found those privileges, shared “in constantly greater proportion with the traditional elite” very tempting.⁷³ The military could be made into a reformist force, but it would be a challenge.

The PDC focus on the PCN, foreign businessmen, and communist infiltrators and its more cautious critique of the Salvadoran military and the Salvadoran oligarchy more broadly was largely strategic. As some observers have noted, the Christian Democratic Party was in some ways relatively conservative. Wim Pelupessy, who played a major role in Salvadoran agrarian reform during the Carter Administration, suggests that from the very beginning the Christian Democrats “aimed at an alliance with so-called progressive elements of the ruling class.”⁷⁴ Dunkerley suggests that in its commitment to capitalism, its rejection of liberation theology, and other major tenets, “the PDC was in fact ideologically very close to the PCN.”⁷⁵ Dunkerley cites the PDC’s base as the urban petty bourgeoisie, a group attracted to the Christian Democrats conservative family values.⁷⁶ The PDC was thus careful not to heap too much blame for El Salvador’s structural problems on the presence of the dominant oligarchy. Indeed, it was some members of that oligarchy that would represent powerful allies to the PDC. Thus, many early

⁷⁰ Pamphlet, “Revolucion Cristiana: Organo Informativo y De Orientacion del Partido Democrata Cristiano, Año – I , No. 21, October 18, 1963, Folder: Revolución Cristiana, PDC, 1963-1964, No. 7-14, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 27.

⁷⁵ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 77-79.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Christian Democratic writings focused party anger on the ruling government, and those outside economic and political forces, rather than internal forces that may prove beneficial to PDC efforts to build and maintain a base of power in San Salvador.

From 1962 to 1972, economic changes within El Salvador facilitated this expansion of Christian Democratic power. During this period, El Salvador's economy grew considerably, especially in its light industry. The growth of El Salvador's industrial sector owed in part to the Central American Common Market and the Alliance for Progress, and the consequent advancement in industrialization surpassed that of El Salvador's Central American neighbors with industrial production more than doubling.⁷⁷ This expansion of light industry facilitated the development of a small middle class that would ultimately serve as the backbone of the democratic opposition, principally embodied by the PDC. This industrialization also had the effect of expanding an urban working class that would similarly tie its political aspirations to the PDC. As Dunkerley explains, by the early 1970s when the burst of industrial activity spurred on by the Alliance for Progress was on the decline, the industrial working class represented 42% of all urban wage-earners.⁷⁸ It had become a group substantial enough to merit serious political power, and it reliably voted for the Christian Democrats.

Increased urbanization also bolstered the PDC. As Dunkerley points out, between 1950 and 1980, the proportion of the population living in cities with a population over 20,000 rose from 18 to 44 percent.⁷⁹ This increased urbanization owed less to opportunities within the city and more to the lack of opportunities in the countryside, exacerbated by the closing of the Honduran border after the Soccer War of 1969. There were fewer job opportunities in the

⁷⁷ Ibid, 49-50.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 55.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 56.

countryside, as well as a severe lack of land available for even subsistence farming.⁸⁰ In urban El Salvador, the Christian Democrats quickly emerged as a force, tapping into middle and working class disaffection with the ruling government.

While the party soon became dominant in large cities like San Salvador, it had great difficulty making progress in the countryside, where groups like ORDEN often intimidated the populace from organizing or voting for the democratic opposition.⁸¹ In 1964, the party won 14 seats in Congress (to the PCN's 32) and secured control of 37 municipalities.⁸² In the countryside, the story was quite different. As John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the U.S. Bureau for Inter-American Affairs from 1977 to 1982 explained, "As soon as anyone from the Christian Democrats went out to the countryside, the local gangs or ORDEN would threaten them and, if they began to organize, kill them."⁸³ If the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador was to make gains in the Salvadoran countryside, it would prove an uphill climb. Nevertheless, the Christian Democrats achieved some early success in the initial decade of their existence.

1972: An Era of Political Crisis

In the 1960s, El Salvador's economy was rising with a small, but growing industrial sector. By the end of the 1970s, negative trends in the industrial and rural economy must have made this growth feel like a distant memory. When the Central American Common Market fell apart in the early 1970s, owing in large part to the Soccer War between El Salvador and Honduras, so too did industrialization stagnate in El Salvador and throughout the region. In rural

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 77-79.

⁸³ Ibid.

El Salvador, things were not much better. The percentage of rural population that was landless grew from 12 per cent in 1961 to 29 per cent in 1971 and 41 per cent in 1975.⁸⁴ Wim Pelupessy points out that calorie deficiency in the rural poor rose and their children suffered.⁸⁵ Powerful calls for agrarian reform resulted, but to no avail. In 1970, opposition from the landed oligarchy doomed an Irrigation and Drainage Law that would include limited expropriation and in the mid-1970s, a reform law that sought to create the Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria (ISTA), a group that would later spearhead agrarian reform, was tabled in San Salvador.⁸⁶ As “stagflation” gripped the U.S. economy, a confluence of factors was undoing the progress made in the Salvadoran economy throughout the course of the 1960s. As Pelupessy points out, “the stagnation of the regional integration-based industrialization, two international oil crises, and unstable export earnings because of fluctuating world market prices” doomed any chance that the Salvadoran economy had to continue along its positive trajectory.⁸⁷

This economic stagnation further solidified popular disaffection toward the government party, and by the 1970s, the Christian Democrats had emerged as the most powerful opposition party, though its constituency was not sufficient to allow it to seize power from the conservative Party of National Conciliation (PCN). In 1966, the Christian Democrats secured 31% of the national vote in the legislative elections, while the PCN secured roughly 54%. In the elections of 1970, riding a wave of patriotism in the aftermath of the “Soccer War” with Honduras, the PCN carried many municipal elections. In 1968, the PDC had controlled 78 municipalities. In 1970, they lost 70 of those positions.⁸⁸ It was clear to many in the Party that the PDC alone was not

⁸⁴ Ibid, *The Long War*, 63.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 64-65.

⁸⁷ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 58.

⁸⁸ Arnson, *El Salvador*, 22-23.

enough. They would require a strong coalition with other political parties, in the vein of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity coalition in Chile, to secure power on a national scale.⁸⁹

For the presidential election of 1972, the Christian Democrats' 1966 showing had earned the party its place at the head of an opposition party that came to be called the United National Opposition (UNO). The UNO included the Christian Democrats, as well as two smaller, more left-leaning organizations, the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) and the National Democratic Union (UDN). The MNR, which emerged in the mid-1960s, led by social democrat Guillermo Ungo, placed itself to the left of the Christian Democrats, putting particular emphasis on the necessity of real labor reform. The MNR, while much smaller than the PDC, had a great deal of support from intellectuals at places like the leftist haven, the University of El Salvador, and some labor leaders.⁹⁰ The UDN, for its part, was a more radical organization, which served as a front for the Salvadoran Communist Party. The alliance with the UDN caused Duarte and his Christian Democratic allies some consternation, however, a broad-based coalition seemed necessary if the opposition was to overtake the dominant government party.

The presidential election of 1972 thus pitted then-President Fidel Sánchez Hernández's (PCN) preferred candidate, Arturo Armando Molina (PCN), against the popular mayor of San Salvador, Christian Democrat and leader of the UNO, José Napoleón Duarte. Guillermo Ungo served as the party's Vice Presidential candidate. Throughout the campaign, the PCN lambasted the UNO as a communistic party, while attempting at the same time to ride the wave of patriotism and good will toward the Salvadoran military that followed the 1969 Soccer War with Honduras. For its part, the UNO criticized the PCN for its role as the status-quo party. Among its central critiques against the PCN were its connections to the broken Salvadoran judicial system.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 28.

The Christian Democrats took out full page ads in newspapers, critiquing the handling of several key cases.⁹¹ Namely, the Christian Democrats keyed in on the government's quick acquittal of General José Medrano, a known death squad participant who had been accused of murdering a police officer. Also running for President was that very General, National Guard Director José Medrano, who ran for the Democratic United Front Party (FUDI). Many in the PCN worried that Medrano's influence in ORDEN, the campesino-group that he had helped found and lead, would enable him to capture a substantial share of the campesino vote.⁹²

Throughout the course of the campaign, Duarte and his close allies endured intimidation and violence by members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. At one point, uniformed officers attacked a caravan carrying Duarte and one of Duarte's campaign aids was killed.⁹³ Though the perpetrator was known, no one would ever be convicted of the crime. Duarte explains, "No one expected an investigation, because the concept of holding a military man responsible for a crime did not then exist in El Salvador. The military forces used the law as their instrument, never as their judge."⁹⁴ The violence against Duarte continued, with him and his people being shot at on multiple occasions by members of the military reluctant to accept opposition to the PCN.

The subsequent presidential election was marred by fraud, claimed by the opposition party, as well as many American and international officials. In the months leading up to the election, besides the violence and threats of violence against the opposition, UNO broadcasts

⁹¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, "Opposition PDC Charges GOES 'Totally Corrupt,'" June 28, 1971, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Political & Defense, From POL EGY-PAR, TO POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Folder: Political Aff. & Rel. El Sal, National Archives II.

⁹² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, "Medrano Candidacy," September 17, 1971, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Political & Defense, From POL EGY-PAR, TO POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Folder: Political Aff. & Rel. El Sal, National Archives II.

⁹³ José Napoleón Duarte, *Duarte: My Story* (New York: Putnam, 1986), 71.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 71-72.

were regularly sabotaged. On election day, government supporters controlled voting booths.⁹⁵ The final results gave Molina 43.4% of the vote, Duarte 42.1% of the vote, and Medrano a whopping 12.3%. In his autobiography, Duarte alleges the PCN party bosses used some 200,000 fake identification cards, and when they learned this was not enough, rearranged ballot boxes until the PCN candidate emerged triumphant, if only by a few thousand votes.⁹⁶ When neither Molina, Duarte, or two other presidential candidates won a majority of the vote, the election went to the legislature, where it was thought that the military would pressure legislators to choose Molina.⁹⁷ The CIA reported military threats against legislators, and the Legislative Assembly consequently rushed through Molina's confirmation ten days early, prompting a boycott by all non-PCN parties. Indeed, the military was reluctant to embrace Duarte's stated desires to enact agrarian reform, considering such reforms communistic.⁹⁸ The Armed Forces also had what the CIA report noted was a "long-standing distrust of the left-of-center parties," including, of course, Duarte's Christian Democrats.⁹⁹ Duarte's short-term relationship with the more progressive MNR and UDN parties further hurt his reputation with the conservatives in the military and oligarchy alike.

While international observers seemed to universally concede to UNO charges of fraud, the PDC's good showing had nevertheless demonstrated the traction that the movement toward social reform was gaining in El Salvador. American Embassy officials suggested that the war with Honduras, in highlighting the plight of poor Salvadorans living on the border, underscored

⁹⁵ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 85.

⁹⁶ Duarte, *Duarte*, 75.

⁹⁷ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Bulletin, February 25, 1972, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

the plight of many poor Salvadorans, who struggled to find land and provide for their families.¹⁰⁰ While this is a plausible explanation, it is more likely that the expansion of reform-oriented groups coincided with the growth of a Salvadoran middle class in the 1960s and early 1970s, a middle class that tired of the dominance of the government by military and oligarchical forces and desired a more substantial role in leading El Salvador politically and economically. The realities of population pressure almost certainly had an impact as well. The State Department described this pressure as the “Damocles’ sword” that hung over El Salvador. “There are now almost 400 Salvadorans per square mile, little unused land remaining, and the population is growing at an estimated 3.2% per year,” the report noted.¹⁰¹ Given this context, increased pressure for meaningful agrarian reform is perhaps unsurprising. Nor was the subsequent clamping down on the opposition forces following the PCN’s close call in the presidential election. During the legislative elections that followed, the UNO was not permitted to run legislative candidates in five of the country’s fourteen departments, including the Christian Democratic stronghold, San Salvador.

In March of 1972, as members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces began to sense the tenuous nature of the election results, many questioned what the institution’s next step would be. The fact that the election was nearly tied was a shock to many in the military, who expected the PCN to breeze through the election and secure the presidency once again.¹⁰² With a relative

¹⁰⁰ Briefing Papers, Ambassador William G. Bowdler, DCM Terrance G. Leonhardy, Chief, Pol. Sec. Jack R. Binns, et al., “El Salvador,” July 1970, Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry# A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador; 1958-1975, LAB Labor Manpower, General El Salvador 1967 THRU PS: Protective Services El Salvador 1970, Container #6, Folder: POL – General, Salvador 1970, National Archives II.

¹⁰¹ Background Report, Department of State, “El Salvador,” Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry# A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador; 1958-1975, DEF 6: Armed Forces El Salvador 1973 THRU POL 17: Diplomatic/Consular Represent, El Salvador, Container #7, Folder: POL 1 – General Policy, Backgrounds E.S. 1972, National Archives II.

¹⁰² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, “Assessment of GOES Military Reaction to Presidential Election,” February 24, 1972, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject

absence of leaders behind which to unite, many officers wondered what to do. As American Ambassador Henry Catto reflected in a cable to the Secretary of State, “officers are angry, confused, and looking for forceful leadership, many of them are harshly blaming the President.”¹⁰³ While some blamed President Sánchez for not “muzzling” the “SOB General Medrano,” whose capturing of 12% of the vote had cost Molina an honest victory, others were simply angry that the relatively uninspiring Molina was the PCN’s choice. Whether members of the Armed Forces would back a Molina presidency, a Duarte presidency, or do what the military often did in a situation in which the government did not have the clear mandate and stage a military coup, was unclear by late March, 1972. Catto, too, sensed a generational divide in the military, with younger officers more “inclined to accept the popular will of the electorate and go with the people’s choice” and middle grade officers and their superiors fearing that a Duarte victory would mean “unleashing the wild-eyed radicals who will drag and deride the uniform in public.”¹⁰⁴ The next step was unclear to members of the Armed Forces, as it was unclear to Catto.

Thus, it did not come as a surprise to all when in the aftermath of the 1972 election, Artillery Brigade Colonel Benjamín Mejía, previously absent from Salvadoran political life, led a coup attempt against Salvadoran President Sánchez. The attempt on the presidency was spearheaded by the 1st Infantry Brigade, but did not lead to a more widespread revolt.¹⁰⁵ While the coup leaders did succeed in imprisoning President Sánchez for approximately twelve hours, they released him unharmed as the coup attempt was dispersed. While Mejía indicated that

Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Political & Defense, From POL EGY-PAR, TO POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Folder: Pol 13-2 1/1/70 El Sal, National Archives II.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” March 27, 1972, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

opposition groups were uninvolved in the coup attempt, he convinced Christian Democratic leader José Napoleón Duarte to take to the radio airwaves during the attempt, urging Salvadorans to support the rebellion. The coup leaders cited the unfair election of 1972 as the cause of their rebellion. In the aftermath of the failed coup, its leaders fled to embassies in San Salvador, fearful of what the government might do if they were caught alive.

Duarte fled to the Venezuelan Embassy, hopeful that that country's leading Christian Democratic Party would protect him against a Salvadoran government eager to see him arrested or worse. While the Venezuelans would take Duarte in, in a clear violation of international law, members of the Salvadoran security forces marched into a Venezuelan diplomat's residence and seized Duarte, subsequently beating him into a state of unconsciousness. In his autobiography, Duarte recounts being viciously beaten and interrogated in the basement of the National Police headquarters, fearing for his life throughout the ordeal. U.S. Ambassador Catto, along with a range of international leaders from Venezuela to Mexico, pleaded with the government of El Salvador not to kill Duarte. Speaking with President Sánchez, Ambassador Catto pleaded, "Any draconian reprisals against him personally would have serious repercussions here."¹⁰⁶ He went on to cite recent calls from an official of the New York Stock Exchange and Senator Ted Kennedy to protect Duarte, which he claimed demonstrate just how well-regarded Duarte was as a political leader. Such pressure and the status of Duarte as a popular figure of the Salvadoran opposition led the government of El Salvador to release him, afraid to make him a martyr, and Duarte was subsequently exiled, living for a time in Venezuela, and later, Guatemala. There, Duarte would step down as head of the Christian Democrats, whose future was unclear after the

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum, John R. Breen to Henry E. Catto, Jr., March 28, 1972, Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry# A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador; 1958-1975, DEF 6: Armed Forces El Salvador 1973 THRU POL 17: Diplomatic/Consular Represent, El Salvador, Container #7, Folder: POL 23 – Internal Security, Counterinsurgency E.S. 1972, National Archives II.

1972 election. Certainly, the election results demonstrated the popularity of the PDC as an opposition party, but the oppressive power of the government was almost certainly to be turned toward the PDC.

The Sánchez government's harsh response to the March coup attempt came as a result of widespread jitters that more anti-government action might be afoot. After all, the rebellion had emanated from the institution that had proven the bulwark of the previous PCN administration: the military. The rebellion underscored a divided military that was not entirely in agreement with PCN governance as President Sánchez had hoped. Sánchez and others on his team subsequently had to consider how to treat the coup plotters and their sympathizers. While a tough response was often preferred, it could not come at the expense of alienating the bulwark of their government.

The Violent Alternative

The rigged election of 1972 and its fallout had a polarizing effect on Salvadoran society. Moderates on the left grew disillusioned. It seemed clear that they had won the presidential election, yet the leading government party did not honor their choice. Then U.S. Ambassador Henry Catto explained, "Seeing what happened to Duarte destroyed faith in democracy... among a lot of people."¹⁰⁷ Many leading opposition figures, like Duarte's running mate, Guillermo Ungo, subsequently joined the violent opposition, taking up with the country's communist insurgents despite significant ideological differences. As one would later observe in Nicaragua, the anti-democratic, strong arm tactics of El Salvador's military-dominated government made for an easy target and a diverse political opposition under a broad umbrella mobilized against the

¹⁰⁷ Interview, Henry E. Catto, Jr., "El Salvador," 1988, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

government, despite what were often stark ideological chasms. Individuals like Ungo concluded from the 1972 election that the Salvadoran system could not be changed from the inside, but required revolutionary change.

This disillusionment with El Salvador's nominally democratic institutions manifested itself in leftist violence throughout much of the 1970s. Stories of kidnappings of government officials and other wealthy and powerful members of Salvadoran society started to emerge with more frequency. In 1975, the Salvadoran Foreign Minister was captured. Upon paying \$13 million to the kidnappers, the family received a cadaver.¹⁰⁸ This tactic of kidnapping members of the wealthy classes and extorting their families emerged as a major means of funding the violent opposition in the wake of the 1972 election.

For its part, the PCS, which had spearheaded the rebellion of 1932, had moderated in the aftermath of the rebellion and left an opening for other, more radical parties. For the 1972 election, the PCS threw its weight behind the UNO, and pushed the democratic solution. In addition, the group supported the Salvadoran war effort against Honduras in 1969, along with the PDC.¹⁰⁹ This moderation of the country's formerly revolutionary party alienated many on the left who after 1972, no longer believed in the efficacy of the electoral strategy. The result was the emergence of a wide array of leftist revolutionary groups in the 1970s, groups that sought to fill the gap left by the PCS.

Many groups on the left subsequently emerged, but three were particularly important in filling that gap. The Fuerzas Populares de Liberación-Farabundo Martí (FPL) emerged in 1970. Frustrated with the insistence of the PCS on election victories, the FPL subscribed to the belief that only through class conflict could El Salvador really change. The group, spearheaded by

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Clyde Donald Taylor, "El Salvador," 1996, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 89.

Salvador Cayetano Carpio, who had until that point been the Secretary-General of the PCS, was named after the leader of the 1932 insurrection, Farabundo Martí. The FPL sought a war of attrition in which the forces of the people ultimately prevailed.¹¹⁰ Though far more radical in much of its rhetoric and certainly its behavior, the worker-oriented group shared with the PDC a strong critique of what they considered the foreign imperialist bourgeoisie. In contrast to the PDC, in its infancy, it began with bombings of targeted locations only to move on to assassinations of figures on the right.¹¹¹

Shortly thereafter, the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) emerged as a group involved in similar activities, largely in the Department of Morazán. The ERP, however, shared with the PDC a foundation of middle-class members of professional backgrounds, and was led by Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, whose murder at the hands of his enemies in the group underscored the in-fighting that characterized the early years of the organization. The ERP believed that a quick solution was possible, if ERP-led guerilla violence could incite a broader people's war.¹¹²

The Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional (FARN) represented a third key leftist organization, one that emerged when two ERP members left the group, tired of the in-fighting that cost Dalton his life. FARN was more moderate than the ERP. The organization relied upon high profile kidnappings, often of foreign businessmen from the U.S., Europe, and Japan who symbolized the imperialist bourgeois that seemed to unite all opposition groups.¹¹³ While these groups murdered several Salvadoran, American, European, and Japanese businessmen, they

¹¹⁰ Arnson, *El Salvador*, 30.

¹¹¹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 92.

¹¹² Arnson, *El Salvador*, 30.

¹¹³ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 97.

murdered still other high profile leaders, like the Swiss Charge d' Affaires and the Ambassador of South Africa.¹¹⁴

Another key political revolutionary organization was the Unified Popular Action Front (FAPU), which in 1974, was composed of the Proletarian Vanguard (VP), the Peasants Revolutionary Movement (MRC), the Salvador Allende University Students Revolutionary Front (FUERSA), the Secondary Schools Revolutionary Movement (ARDES) and the Revolutionary Organization of Teachers (OMR). According to Amnesty International, FAPU was driven by the sense that El Salvador was “becoming a fascist state” and their “chief enemy is the country’s bourgeoisie who are one with the imperialists in Germany, the United States, and Japan.”¹¹⁵ The group’s long-term goal was the creation of a “revolutionary popular government with the participation of peasants, workers, and the democratic petite bourgeoisie.”¹¹⁶

In such a context, what led opposition forces to raise their voices against the government and in some cases, take up arms, particularly in the countryside where organizations like ORDEN reigned supreme? In her book, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, anthropologist Elisabeth Wood deals with this question. Wood cites the increasing concentration of the best land among the elite group who also controlled things like processing, exporting, and financing, a trend established in 1930 and continuing into the 1970s, as the foundation of the conflict.¹¹⁷ Wood explains,

¹¹⁴ Report, Oscar Reyes (Ambassador of El Salvador to Canada), “El Salvador in 1982: The Need for a Peaceful Revolution,” April 28, 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Caja No. 103, Folder: 800: Asuntos Politicos, Investigado, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹¹⁵ Report, Amnesty International, “El Salvador Reports: Amnesty International Opens Campaign for Human Rights in El Salvador,” October 1978, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21.

When asked about the history of the war in their community, insurgent campesinos returned time and again to several themes: the injustices of prewar land distribution and labor relations, their desire for land, the contempt with which they were treated by landlords, the brutality with which government forces responded to nonviolent strikes and demonstrations, the fear with which they lived during the war, and the suffering of their families.¹¹⁸

Wood breaks down the central causes for opposition activism as participation, defiance, and pleasure in agency. Of participation, Wood explains the centrality of liberation theology and the rise of the progressive Catholic Church. She explains, “to struggle for the realization of the reign of God was to live a life valuable to oneself and in the eyes of God despite its poverty, humiliations, and suffering.”¹¹⁹ When speaking of defiance, Wood describes the ways in which liberation theology encouraged “suffering and martyrdom,” things that were “to be expected in the course of realizing God’s reign in an unjust world.”¹²⁰ Defiance also describes those Salvadorans who participated out of moral outrage at the government’s response to protest and activism.¹²¹ Thus, Wood sees a multitude of reasons justifying anti-government action, many of which were religious in nature, and tied into the popular sense that campesinos had been cheated by too many for too long.

As opposition organizations mobilized in the countryside and in the cities, on El Salvador’s campuses, too, a number of educator and student groups also emerged to lead demonstrations against the government. This was particularly true of the campus of the University of El Salvador, long a leftist stronghold. There, the teacher’s union, Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños (ANDES), and the student organization, Asociación General de Estudiantes Universitarios Salvadoreños (AGEUS), spearheaded such opposition activity and in fact led demonstrations large enough that the Salvadoran police brought in riot

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 230-231.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 232.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 233.

¹²¹ Ibid.

gear to stop many such gatherings in 1971. In the aftermath of the election, in July of 1972, the National Police and National Guard occupied the University of El Salvador in a move against what was perceived to be the radicalization of the campus.¹²² Nevertheless, the UES continued to exist as an anti-government force throughout the 1970s.

A Society in Crisis

Government repression following the debacle of 1972 was thus not limited to Duarte's exile. The government declared martial law for the four months after the election and before the inauguration. Recalling that time period, American Clyde Donald Taylor, then Economic and Commercial Section Chief in San Salvador, discussed the constraints under martial law as "extreme," the violence culminating in the killing of over 400 people.¹²³ As part of the state of siege, government forces instituted a strict curfew, killing many individuals who violated it.¹²⁴ In many cases, the National Guard seemed to use the state of siege as an opportunity to "harass opposition activists or settle personal vendettas" in many smaller provincial towns across the country.¹²⁵ Then-ambassador Catto explained, "Opposition political leaders went into hiding or asylum as a wave of arrests, harassment and restrictive security measures followed the coup—despite the fact that there is no evidence that any political party was involved in the plot."¹²⁶ A

¹²² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, "Bi-Monthly Political Review No. 4 July-August 1972," September 6, 1972, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Political & Defense, From POL EGY-PAR, TO POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Folder: Political Aff. & Rel. El Sal, National Archives II.

¹²³ Interview, Clyde Donald Taylor, "El Salvador," 1996, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, "Bi-Monthly Political Review No. 2 March-April, 1972," May 5, 1972, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Political & Defense, From POL EGY-PAR, TO POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Folder: Political Aff. & Rel. El Sal, National Archives II.

¹²⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Political Situation: A Fragile Atmosphere," May 16, 1972, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970-73, Political & Defense, From: POL EGY-PAR To: POL EL SAL, Box 2251, Political Aff. & Rel. El Sal, National Archives II.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

quote in one article in the Christian Democratic newspaper, *Militante*, highlights the bitterness with which the Christian Democrats viewed the fraudulent election of 1972 and its repressive aftermath, noting that, “When the people tried to find a peaceful solution in the elections of 1972, a candidate was imposed upon them and any attempt to protest was drowned in blood.”¹²⁷ The Christian Democrats remained critical of Molina’s frequent calls for unity given the government’s mocking of the popular will and the subversion of the law.

In the aftermath of the election, the PDC critiqued the Molina government as one even worse than that of his predecessors in his commitment to systematic repression of all opposition forces. The Salvadoran government’s intervention at the University of El Salvador in 1972 represented but one example of this repression.¹²⁸ The PDC also cited the capture and torture of priests and other religious peoples, the massacre at La Cayetana, frequent attacks on unions and their members, as well as campesino organizations. As one Christian Democratic journalist explained, “All of these measures have a well-defined goal: destroy the organizations of the people” and “prevent that the grand majorities take consciousness of their situation” and make demands in an organized way.¹²⁹ While Molina shared with his predecessors this kind of repression, his reliance upon ORDEN and other such bodies to carry out his goals was particularly strong. ORDEN grew more active. Speaking of ORDEN, one Christian Democratic writer explained, “It deals with preventing the people from developing their own organizations and fight for their own objectives.”¹³⁰ Thus, Molina was not simply repressing from San Salvador, but through proxies in the countryside that sought to squelch opposition at its source.

¹²⁷ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año I, Numero 2, July 1974, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹²⁸ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año I, Numero 15, June 1975, Folder PDC: Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Guards and other government killers, the PDC complained, justified their violence with the idea that orders were orders.¹³¹

Molina's repression went even further as he invented new and different laws to prevent the emergence of opposition forces. One PDC article complained, "He's invented new crimes like the possession and transport of paint cans, the making of obscene posters, singing verses of protests, all of those charged with the same death sentence of various forms and without process."¹³² The issue of significant numbers of political prisoners, too, emerged as a major PDC talking point. Disappearances began to occur. As historian Dunkerley surmises, this rise in disappearances "owed much to the right's appreciation of the methods used by the Chilean military after the coup of September 1973."¹³³ Indeed, throughout the 1970s, the government of El Salvador would support the regime of Augusto Pinochet, as in 1978 when El Salvador abstained on the popular United Nations condemnation of Chile's regular human rights violations. There is little doubt that government leaders in El Salvador sympathized with Pinochet and his perceived problem of leftist terrorists. To the PDC, their strong showing in the election had done nothing to promote democratization in the minds of PCN leadership.

On July 30th, 1975, a massacre of student demonstrators on the campus of the University of El Salvador drew the rage of the UDN, PDC, MNR, and others. This violence against students, in particular, proved a turning point for many among the opposition forces, including Church leaders, who saw in President Molina's actions and subsequent manipulation of the press regarding the incident fascist inclinations reminiscent of Adolf Hitler.¹³⁴ In the aftermath of the

¹³¹ Bulletin, "Militante D.C.," Año II, Numero 18, September 1975, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1975, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Dunkerly, *The Long War*, 103.

¹³⁴ Bulletin, "Militante D.C.," Año II, Numero 18, September 1975, Folder PDC: Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

July 30th fallout on the left, the government resorted to repression on a massive scale, assaulting campesinos, and preparing a new method for confronting opposition: psychological war, which combined the legal with the illegal.¹³⁵ For example, for a member of the government to accuse a person of communism often condemned a person to death. Government forces, too, used death threats to prevent opposition forces from organizing. This included prominent members of the PDC. In this effort, Christian Democratic leaders complained that the government of El Salvador was turning the Salvadoran constitution into a “dirty rag with which the current dictators will clean the blood that they’re spilling.”¹³⁶ This anti-opposition violence typified Salvadoran society for decades, and the legacy of that violence tracing to La Matanza was not lost on those who organized against the government.

The Christian Democratic critique of PCN leadership from 1972-1974 also regularly returned to the government’s mismanagement of the economy in the aftermath of the war with Honduras, a war that devastated Salvadoran government reserves as well as exacerbated the bleak economic situation and its effects upon the Salvadoran populace.¹³⁷ The effect of the Soccer War continued to be felt into the 1970s and played a role in laying the groundwork for revolution. The Soccer War with Honduras in 1969 had led to the closure of the Honduran border to Salvadoran products. Given the length of that border, this made the land transport of Salvadoran goods deeply challenging, and most goods needed to be transported by sea. By 1977, El Salvador had the lowest per capita calorie intake in the Western Hemisphere and according to a report by the Central America and Panama Nutrition Institute, 73% of Salvadoran children

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Bulletin, “Militante D.C.,” Año I, Numero 2, July 1974, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

under age five suffered from malnutrition.¹³⁸ For the millions of Salvadorans who relied upon working on big plots of land in the countryside, the increased mechanization and population growth made it more difficult to find steady work on farms.¹³⁹ The lagging of food production and the high prices of staples like grain further exacerbated Salvadoran poverty. The closing of the Honduran border to Salvadorans also meant that the problem of landlessness grew worse. Of the economic crisis, *Militante* regularly critiqued the ways in which the government would skew the numbers to obfuscate the country's economic problems rather than making necessary changes.¹⁴⁰ The government allowed big businesses and foreign companies to benefit exorbitantly at the expense of the people.¹⁴¹ As before, to the PDC, the PCN seemed to regularly side with foreign companies in Salvadoran labor conflicts and further solidified the place of foreign companies at the head of the Salvadoran economy.

At the same time, more rightist vigilante organizations emerged to serve as a counterpoint to greater leftist organization and activism. One such group, the White Warriors Union made its mission the silencing of church leaders who sought to oppose the government. In pursuing this mission, the White Warriors Union killed priests throughout much of the 1970s, thus putting El Salvador on the radar of many American Catholics, who would later petition President Jimmy Carter to confront the Salvadoran government about the anti-Church violence.

While some in San Salvador pushed for reform to satisfy the angry masses, a strong conservative resistance put a stop to all attempts at genuine reform. In an effort to appease some elements of the burgeoning opposition, President Sánchez promised some popular reforms in the

¹³⁸ Memorandum, Research Department to All National Sections, "El Salvador: General Background," December 8, 1977, Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Bulletin, "Militante D.C.," Año I, Numero 2, July 1974, Folder: PDC, Militante, Boletín Informativo, 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

early 1970s, though those promises would go unfulfilled in part due to pressure from El Salvador's economic elite. One law, the agrarian reform law, had reeked of communism to most a few short years before, but the nature of Salvadoran land ownership seemed to necessitate the changes. Another key part of the reform was a banking law that sought to nationalize Salvadoran banks. The degree to which the Sánchez Administration's desires to enact these reforms was genuine and not simply a false promise is questionable. Nevertheless, had the Administration intended to pursue such things, they would face early opposition from an economic elite reluctant to cede its power. In a letter to Country Director John R. Breen, John A. Ferch, Chief of the Economic Section in the American Embassy in San Salvador, explained, "Salvadoran businessmen claim to fear that the Sánchez Administration is about to engage in widespread social reforms that will materially and adversely affect them."¹⁴² More frequent labor unrest, too, proved unsettling to the established class. As a result, the business community of El Salvador had "low morale" and did not invest despite promising economic conditions.¹⁴³ This foot dragging was a clear indication to the Sánchez Administration: reform was not welcome. In his letter, Ferch explains, "Non-investment is the club being held over the Government's head to stop such reforms."¹⁴⁴ The message was received, and little headway was made by the Administration to the chagrin of the reformist-minded opposition. The Molina government would face similar resistance on those rare occasions when Administration leaders hinted at modest reforms.

¹⁴² Letter, John A. Ferch, Chief, Economic Section to Mr. John R. Breen, Country Director, August 31, 1970, Box RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central America Affairs, Entry# A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador; 1958-1975, LAB: Labor Manpower, General El Salvador 1967 THRU PS: Protective Services El Salvador 1970, Folder: E- (General) Salvador 1970, National Archives II.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

The Molina government's response to the growing calls for democratization, too, met with resistance. After the 1974 legislative elections ended in controversy, with the UNO again charging the PCN with fraud, in 1976, the UNO withdrew from the legislative and mayoral elections in protest, citing "flagrant electoral fraud."¹⁴⁵ As a result, by 1977, the legislative assembly and mayoral offices across the country were composed overwhelmingly of members of the official PCN party.¹⁴⁶

In that year, PCN candidate Carlos Humberto Romero, who owed his popularity with the Salvadoran oligarchy in part to his past as an acclaimed horseman, won the presidential election despite more evidence of PCN fraud. Protests broke out in the streets of San Salvador. Colonel Ernesto Claramount had been selected to represent the Christian Democrats and an array of other opposition parties, with the idea that the Salvadoran military might be more willing to accept one of their own.¹⁴⁷ Even Claramount's Vice Presidential candidate was designed to appeal more to the right, Antonio Morales Erlich was a conservative member of the Christian Democratic Party. Their theory would be proven wrong. This time, 150,000 new voters in El Salvador were either dead, duplicated, or completely imagined, PCN proponents relocated voting booths to hurt UNO in the cities, denied UNO any observer status, and stuffed ballot boxes, in addition to the traditional intimidation, especially prevalent in the countryside.¹⁴⁸ Duarte referred to the election as "the most blatant fraud El Salvador had ever known."¹⁴⁹ In a show of his own disapproval of the election, Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero refused to attend the inauguration. The

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum, Amnesty International Latin American Research Department to All National Sections, "ICJ Article on El Salvador, August 18, 1978, Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Duarte, *Duarte*, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 106.

¹⁴⁹ Duarte, *Duarte*, 95.

CIA reported a crowd of 50,000 supporters of Claramount occupying the central plaza of San Salvador, a move that combined with a number of coordinated strikes, paralyzed the city for days.¹⁵⁰ In a repeat of 1972, in response to the protests and violence that culminated in the death of over 200 people, the government enacted a 30-day state of siege which sought to limit such assemblies and ban constitutional guarantees. The Molina government subsequently blamed the violence on “agents of communist subversion.”¹⁵¹ The Christian Democrats had tried to adapt, but the results were very much the same.

Looking back upon the 1977 presidential election in El Salvador, Carter Administration Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, was critical. The election had not been fair, “especially in the countryside where people voting against establishment candidates could face reprisals from the likes of ORDEN.”¹⁵² That same group made labor organization a “near impossibility” despite U.S. efforts through the AFL-CIO to bolster unionism in the countryside. Furthermore, in the countryside, White explains, “Anybody we worked with ended up dead.”¹⁵³

While the opposition bubbled over, its efforts to secure power through honest elections was again thwarted by a government party unwilling to cede control and unwilling or unable to affect real reform. Carlos Humberto Romero represented a more rightist option than Molina. After splitting off from the PCN to run on the FUDI ticket in 1972 out of frustration with the excessive leftism of Molina, ultra-rightist and former ORDEN leader Medrano backed Romero for president in 1977. The PDC subsequently decided not to participate in the 1977 legislative

¹⁵⁰ Cable, National Intelligence Daily Cable, “El Salvador: Post-Election Trouble,” March 1, 1977, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁵¹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 107.

¹⁵² Interview, John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA, “El Salvador,” 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

elections after another presidential election ended in controversy. Rightist forces swept mayoral and legislative elections.

In the aftermath of the 1977 election, the government turned its oppressive actions toward the Catholic Church, making a powerful enemy in allegedly conservative Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. In February 1977, the government declared a state of siege in which it targeted Jesuits, in particular, citing ties to the leftist Popular Liberation Movement (FPL).¹⁵⁴ After a popular Jesuit priest, Father Rutilio Grande, was killed, allegedly by government forces, Romero reacted harshly, suspending Sunday services for March 20, 1977.¹⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, Romero became a powerful voice against the government, highlighting violence against priests in his regular public appearances. Rightist disgust for the church only grew more powerful, as the White Warriors Union, on June 21, threatened that all Jesuits would be killed if they did not leave the country in the next month.¹⁵⁶

As in 1972, the election of 1977 had the effect of discouraging those moderates and leftists who saw the possibility of a political solution. In one 1978 meeting with Christian Democratic leader Abraham Rodríguez, who had recently met with President Romero, Rodríguez suggested to his American audience that “the fraudulent 1972 elections were the watershed in the progressive decline of political party activity and that this process was further accentuated by the fraudulent elections of 1977.”¹⁵⁷ To Rodríguez, as political organizations like his Christian Democratic Party had lost power, groups like the Popular Revolutionary Bloc had “moved into the vacuum” and gained popularity and political power as groups more able to

¹⁵⁴ Report, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “The Catholic Church and Human Rights in Latin America,” October 25, 1977, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Memorandum, American Embassy, “Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC) Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene,” June 15, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

affect real change.¹⁵⁸ Rodríguez explained that “due to the absence of legal political activity the BPR and other groups have grown progressively stronger and more radicalized.”¹⁵⁹ Rodríguez also cited widespread distrust for the military, which Salvadorans increasingly viewed as a repressive entity and not the heroes of the Soccer War. Most concerning to Rodríguez was the “erroneous belief of many in the private sector, as well as certain elements in the security forces, that more killing a la 1932 can deal with the communist threat.”¹⁶⁰

In the Shadow of the Colossus?

The U.S. response to this burgeoning violence in El Salvador was relative apathy. In sharp contrast to its relations to El Salvador’s neighbor to the south, Nicaragua, U.S. relations with El Salvador prior to that country’s civil war were marked by a profound lack of interest on the part of the U.S. government. With its location, isolated from critical U.S. interests (Guatemala served as a buffer between Mexico and El Salvador, and Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica all stood as a buffer between El Salvador and the Panama Canal), its small size and population, and its relative lack of resources of interest, throughout most of the 20th century, the U.S. remained aloof from its diminutive neighbor. Given this lack of interest, El Salvador developed relatively independently and without American interference. Absent was the legacy of U.S. interventionism that characterized U.S. relations with Guatemala in the 1950s, and U.S. relations with Nicaragua since that country’s independence. While the presence of major American companies like the United Fruit Company made a country like Guatemala at least of tangential interest to U.S. officials, economically, there was little of interest in El Salvador. In El Salvador, the banana industry had been wiped out by blight early in that industry’s

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

development.¹⁶¹ El Salvador's monocultural economy revolved far more around coffee, which it sold largely to Europe, and in particular, to Germany.¹⁶² During the 1930s, when La Matanza was making its impact upon the Salvadoran political and economic landscape, Germany was purchasing almost twice as much coffee from El Salvador as was the United States.¹⁶³

In the aftermath of World War I, the U.S.'s economic footprint in El Salvador began to grow larger, which in part explained popular Salvadoran distaste for their neighbor to the North. While in 1913, U.S. investment was a mere \$30 million, by 1930, that figure was over \$227 million.¹⁶⁴ During that same period, British investment had decreased from \$188 million to \$131 million.¹⁶⁵ Relative to many of its Latin American neighbors, U.S. investment and economic connections to El Salvador were minimal, throughout the 20th century, they were nevertheless on the rise, while the commitment of traditional European powers like Great Britain was on the decline. Many on the Salvadoran left subsequently maintained much of the resentment toward U.S. power that has long characterized U.S.-Latin American relations to many, best typified by Nixon's rocky trip to the region in 1958 that ended with his motorcade being attacked and spit upon on the streets of Caracas, Venezuela. That many in El Salvador still bristled against the dominance of the United States despite this relative inattention underscores the nature of U.S. power in the region. Even when the U.S. is not active in a Central American country, its economic dominance can lead Central Americans to feel the weight of American power even as Washington profoundly neglects the region.

¹⁶¹ Interview, Clyde Donald Taylor, "El Salvador," 1996, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/EI%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, 14.

¹⁶⁴ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 16.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

As a result of the popular feeling in Washington that El Salvador was of limited import to American interests, successive presidential administrations tended to send inexperienced ambassadors to the region. One such ambassador was Henry E. Catto, Jr., who served in El Salvador from 1971 to 1973, an interesting period in Salvadoran history that oversaw the disastrous and widely criticized presidential election of 1972. Recalling his selection as Ambassador to El Salvador, Catto recalls being told to “Just go down there and...try not to bother us too much.”¹⁶⁶ In contrast to U.S. relations with certain other Latin American governments, the United States did not desire Salvadoran resources. As Catto explains, all the U.S. really wanted from the government of El Salvador was its votes in the U.N.¹⁶⁷ The U.S. Embassy’s challenge was that with El Salvador’s independence from the U.S., even this limited goal was often elusive. “They just couldn’t have cared less, on most political issues, what Uncle Sam thought,” Catto explained.¹⁶⁸ The relative lack of interest on the part of the U.S. government was reflected in the utter lack of visitors to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador. In contrast to the 1980s, when Congressmen and press people filed into the Embassy on a weekly basis, visitors to San Salvador during the three years of Catto’s term as Ambassador to El Salvador were a rarity. In his interview in 1988, Catto recalls the most high profile governmental visit of his term, the visit of then-Mississippi Governor Bill Waller. Arriving in San Salvador for a trade fair, Catto recalls, “he got off the plane, handed me his suitcase, and said, ‘What’s the name of this country?’ or words to that effect.” A short trip from Mississippi, El Salvador must have felt a world away.

¹⁶⁶ Interview, Henry E. Catto, Jr., “El Salvador,” 1988, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/EI%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

As stolen elections exacerbated polarization in Salvadoran society, American leaders simply had their attention on other parts of the world. The 1972 election, so critical to the hardening of the democratic opposition in El Salvador and the development of key individuals like José Napoleón Duarte and Guillermo Ungo, who would emerge as key figures during the civil war, hardly appeared in the American press. Instead, U.S. attention was heavily drawn to the opening of China at a time that American leadership saw Latin America as an unworthy distraction in the East-West struggle.

In the first half of the 1970s, the U.S. relationship with El Salvador was limited to U.S. training of members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces on a small scale and the limited sale of American weapons. Prior to 1975, the U.S. provided modest military assistance to the government of El Salvador, replenishing El Salvador's arsenals, as Dunkerley explains, "mostly from ex-Second World War stock."¹⁶⁹ However, even the latter stopped upon the beginning of the Salvadoran-Honduran "Soccer War" of 1969. Reluctant to exacerbate the crisis, the U.S. government stopped supplying arms to both nations. U.S. Ambassador Henry Catto's attempts to rectify the situation and provide minimal arms to El Salvador and its bare bones Armed Forces met resistance. In 1972, Ambassador Catto relayed to the State Department that during a military exercise, the Salvadoran Air Force had lost 25% of its operational aircraft, or one P-51.¹⁷⁰ Catto noted, "These wretched planes, 28 years old, are relics which should be in a museum."¹⁷¹ Catto's plea for even this modest aid would go unanswered. El Salvador was simply not of strategic interest.

¹⁶⁹ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 74.

¹⁷⁰ Memorandum, Henry E. Catto to Charles A. Meyer, Assistant Secretary ARA, June 13, 1972, Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry# A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador; 1958-1975, DEF 6: Armed Forces El Salvador 1973 THRU POL 17: Diplomatic/Consular Represent El Salvador, Container #7, Folder: DEF 12 – Armaments E.S. 1972, National Archives II.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

Well before the Salvadoran civil war began in 1980, the foundation for that conflict had been laid. Inequities built into Salvadoran economic, social, and political institutions in the 19th century culminated in La Matanza in 1932. This event underscored many Salvadoran problems, as well as pushed the country's political poles still further away. While on the right, El Salvador's powerful oligarchy forged an alliance with the country's military, united by a common fear and hatred for leftism, on the left, many Salvadorans hardened in opposition in response to the violence of La Matanza and the subsequent crackdown on opposition. Attempts to reform Salvadoran society failed in 1944 and again in 1960 and the government and its quasi-official allies like ORDEN stymied any attempt on the left to organize outside of the Catholic Church and some state-sanctioned unions.

This continued oppression facilitated the rise of a legitimate political opposition in the Christian Democratic Party, who quickly challenged the official party for power. The stolen election of 1972, in which government forces tortured and exiled the victorious PDC candidate José Napoleón Duarte marked a turning point from which there was no going back. Many on the left grew restless, assured that there would be no political solutions to El Salvador's structural injustices. The subsequent creation and expansion of a variety of violent leftist organizations made certain that large-scale violence would soon follow. The fraudulent presidential election of 1977 further solidified the polarization of Salvadoran society and ensured that violence beyond simple kidnappings was not far off.

Amidst the profound divisions within Salvadoran society and that country's burgeoning violence, El Salvador's powerful neighbor to the North paid little attention. Without important strategic value or critical natural resources, El Salvador had long been neglected by a country

with a myopic focus on its Cold War concerns. It did not help that during those moments of flare up in Salvadoran society, U.S. attention was elsewhere, as in 1972, when the Nixon Administration was focused upon the workings of China, and largely ignored the Latin American region, as Henry Kissinger would later proudly admit.

Thus, in sharp contrast to Latin American countries like Nicaragua and Cuba, by 1977, the United States had no legacy of interventionism in the tiny country of El Salvador. While El Salvador felt the weight of U.S. economic power, the U.S. regularly sent the country ambassadors whose task was to merely maintain the status quo and secure Salvadoran votes in the United Nations. By the time the Carter Administration arrived in Washington, however, the growing crisis in El Salvador, the groundwork for which was laid decades before, meant that this tradition of U.S. inattention would soon change.

Chapter 2

Unforeseen Emergency: Carter and the Salvadoran Crisis, 1977-1981

On Sunday, March 23, 1980, the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero gave his final homily to the parishioners of the Catedral Metropolitana of San Salvador. Romero, reflecting on the emerging civil war in El Salvador, appealed to the members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, “in the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression!”¹ These words represented an appeal to the common humanity of El Salvador’s forces, as Archbishop Romero attempted to quell the polarization that had long crippled his country, a gap that pitted the virulently anti-communist right-wing against the increasingly impatient left. Thanks in large part to the reestablishment of YSAX, the radio broadcast of the Salvadoran archdiocese that had been off the air for a month after the church’s radio transmitter had been bombed on February 17th, the Archbishop’s message reached much of the country, from those who saw him as a hero of justice and human rights, to those who saw him as a dangerous rabble-rouser.

A mere day after Romero’s homily had received wild applause in downtown San Salvador, Romero celebrated mass at the chapel of La Divina Providencia, a cancer hospital in

¹ Archbishop Oscar Romero, Homily, (speech given at Catedral Metropolitana, San Salvador, 23 March 1980). Original text: Hermanos, son de nuestro mismo pueblo, matan a sus mismos hermanos campesinos y, ante una orden de matar que dé un hombre, debe de prevalecer la ley de Dios que dice: no matar. Ningún soldado está obligado a obedecer una orden contra la ley de Dios... La Iglesia, defensora de los derechos de Dios, de la ley de Dios, de la dignidad humana, de la persona, no puede quedarse callada ante tanta abominación. Queremos que el Gobierno tome en serio que de nada sirven las reformas si van teñidas de tanta sangre. En nombre de Dios, pues, y en nombre de este sufrido pueblo cuyos lamentos suben hasta el cielo cada día más tumultuosos, les suplico, les ruego, les ordeno en nombre de Dios: ¡cese la represión!

San Salvador where Romero lived in a modest room. The mass was to mark the anniversary of the death of Doña Sarita Pinto, the mother of Romero's friend, the journalist Jorge Pinto, whose employer, the left-wing newspaper, *El Independiente*, was itself bombed earlier in the month.² It was a small service in front of Doña Sarita's family members and some nuns, nurses and patients from the hospital.³ Despite the warnings from a number of those close to the Archbishop, Romero participated in the service despite his publicized role. Many around Romero feared for his life given the number of death threats that Romero had received over the last several months.⁴ Just two weeks before Doña Sarita's service, an attempt had been made on Romero's life. On March 10th, the day after Romero celebrated mass for the recently assassinated Christian Democratic Party leader, Mario Zamora, a bomb was found near the High Altar behind the pulpit, but had failed to detonate.⁵ The aggressive denunciation that Romero had offered the government and its security forces the day before could have only served to embolden the people who had very recently threatened his life.

Those who warned Archbishop Romero that day saw their fears realized shortly after he ended his homily and began preparing the Eucharist. A shot rang out. Witness Teresa Alas explains, "I heard a shot. Just one. Maybe it was because it hit so close to the microphone, but it sounded like a bomb exploding. Then people started screaming."⁶ Madre Luz Isabel Cuevas, a nun who also witnessed the scene, describes what happened next: "The bullet struck him in the chest. He tried to steady himself by grabbing the altar, and he pulled at the altar cloth. The cup with the wine remained standing but the ciborium with the hosts was tipped over and the hosts

² James A. Brockman, *Romero :A Life*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 244.

³ Ibid, 244.

⁴ Maria Lopez Vigil, *Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic*, (Washington,DC: Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean, 2000), 401.

⁵ Report, The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, "From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador," March 15, 1993, 120.

⁶ Vigil, *Oscar Romero*, 406.

were scattered. He fell back toward the arms of the Jesus on the crucifix.”⁷ Several people rushed toward the Archbishop, knelt down at his side to help and pray for him, but there was nothing anyone could do. The bullet had pierced Romero’s chest, fragmented inside his body and lodged into his back. The severe internal bleeding that resulted caused the Archbishop to choke and gasp, a rush of blood coming from his nose and mouth. Romero was quickly taken to a local hospital, but nurses and doctors were utterly helpless to aid the wounded Archbishop. Shortly after arriving at the hospital, Romero passed away while lying on an emergency room table.

The ensuing days were chaotic. Twelve bombs exploded in San Salvador the morning after the assassination.⁸ As the American Embassy in San Salvador and the State Department sent messages back and forth, a sense of impending disaster pervading each; surely, the death of Romero would not come without serious repercussions. The city was tense; the downtown area utterly deserted as people hid in their homes, fearing the likelihood of retaliatory violence from the left or right. Salvadoran security forces were put on full alert. “El Salvador now has its Chamorro,” one American Defense Attaché official concluded.⁹

Over three decades after the assassination, questions still linger regarding the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Perhaps the most authoritative version of the events of March 24, 1980 can be found in the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador’s report, published on March 14, 1993, entitled “From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador.” According to the report, Amado Antonio Garay testified that Captain Alvaro Saravia had ordered him to drive a red Volkswagen to the chapel of the Divina Providencia Hospital, where his passenger, a bearded

⁷ Pat Marrin, “Last Living Witness Remembers Romero’s Death,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 23, 2010, <http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/last-living-witness-remembers-romero%E2%80%99s-death>.

⁸ Cable, Office of the Defense Attaché El Salvador to Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Archbishop Romero Assassinated,” 25 March 1980, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>.

⁹ *Ibid.* This is a reference to Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the Nicaraguan journalist and government critic who was murdered in Managua, Nicaragua on January 10th, 1978. Many believed that Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza Debayle orchestrated Chamorro's assassination. This event triggered widespread anger that fed into a revolutionary movement that culminated in the ouster of Somoza by the leftist Sandinistas in July of 1979.

man unknown to him, ordered him to kneel down and busy himself pretending to repair his car.¹⁰ After hearing a gunshot, Garay then saw this bearded man holding a gun; the smell of gunpowder filled the air. The bearded man then told Garay to “drive slowly” and “take it easy,” as the men drove away from the scene of the crime.¹¹

While the Truth Commission implicates Savaria as well as a multitude of others, many of whom were members of El Salvador’s security forces, it ultimately lays the blame at the feet of former Major of the Salvadoran National Guard, Roberto d’Aubuisson. The report does so in no uncertain terms, as it suggests, “there is full evidence that: Former Major Roberto d’Aubuisson gave the order to assassinate the Archbishop and gave precise instructions to members of his security service, acting as a ‘death squad,’ to organize and supervise the assassination.”¹² By 1980, d’Aubuisson was already a powerful figure in military and political circles. Prior to his role in the assassination of Archbishop Romero, d’Aubuisson served as an influential member of the Salvadoran National Guard. He was dismissed in 1979 following the coup against then acting President Romero, yet continued to wield considerable political power, particularly in the Armed Forces. One thing is clear: this assassination was not the case of a crazed, lone gunman; it was the work of an intricate clandestine network that included a number of powerful individuals in Salvadoran society, among whom was Roberto d’Aubuisson.

¹⁰ The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 122. Captain Alvaro Savaria certainly played a role in the murder of Archbishop Romero, as he admitted as recently as April of 2010, when in hiding somewhere in Latin America, Savaria gave an interview to journalist Carlos Dada of ElFaro.net. Some have even suggested that Savaria himself pulled the trigger. As late as 1979, Captain Savaria was an aviation captain of the Salvadoran National Guard, at a time in which he was also rumored to be heavily involved in death squad activities. One reputed Salvadoran hardliner and interviewee of Mr. Dada later said of Savaria, “Savaria was crazy. He would see that you had a toothache and ask you what happened. So you’d say a dentist had messed you up and the next day, the dentist would be dead.” See Carlos Dada, “How We Killed Archbishop Romero,” *El Faro*, March 25, 2010, <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201003/noticias/1416/>.

¹¹ Carlos Dada, “How We Killed Archbishop Romero,” *El Faro*, March 25, 2010, <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201003/noticias/1416/>.

¹² The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 119, 123.

Shortly after the assassination, American officials, too had a strong sense of d'Aubuisson's role. One confidential source came to U.S. officials in November of 1980 to confide his involvement in the murder of Romero. This confidential source alleged that he attended a meeting, headed by Major Roberto d'Aubuisson, at which a number of individuals from the National Guard "drew lots" to determine who would kill the Archbishop.¹³ A few short years later, two men suspected of helping to organize the murder discussed their role and that of d'Aubuisson. Captain Edward Avila, an associate of d'Aubuisson claimed to a third party, "the problem in El Salvador is that there are good and bad people. I belong to a good group, a tight close group headed by...d'Aubuisson."¹⁴ Avila continued, "With respect to bad people, there was that fool communist priest, Romero. The only thing he needed was to be shut up and we silenced him."¹⁵ He concluded, "It was an honor to kill that son of a bitch. Truth is, we were several officials each claiming that right, the right to kill Romero...It was perfect: a perfect operation. One shot of lead to the heart."¹⁶

Despite the heavy suspicions that Major d'Aubuisson arranged the assassination, d'Aubuisson ultimately escaped justice and died of tongue cancer in 1992, shortly before the Truth Commission would accuse him of orchestrating Romero's assassination. He escaped justice in part because a number of individuals who could testify to his involvement quickly wound up dead, men such as Walter Antonio "Musa" Alvarez, who received 1,000 colónes from

¹³ Cable, From American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Conversation with National Guard Officer," 19 November 1980, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchive/>. The source went on to confide that the violence attributed to the right was being carried out by Guardsmen and police. "The death squandron," the source suggested, "is made up of security forces members who leave death squadron placards by their victims so that their killings cannot be attributed to them."

¹⁴ Cable, Thomas Pickering to U.S. Department of State, "Activities of Captain Avila," April 17, 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

d'Aubuisson shortly after the murder of the Archbishop.¹⁷ d'Aubuisson also benefitted from a number of shortcomings in the investigation. Namely, the fact that, after a failed attempt on his life, Judge Atilio Ramírez Amaya, the Judge of the Fourth Criminal Court who oversaw much of the Romero murder investigation, resigned his judgeship and fled El Salvador.¹⁸ The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador would later conclude that this assassination attempt at Judge Amaya's residence represented "a deliberate attempt to deter investigation of the case."¹⁹ Such problems in the judicial system would represent a constant theme of Salvadoran society from 1980 to 1992.

Even today, much uncertainty surrounds the assassination of Archbishop Romero, but one thing was certain: those who undertook the assassination successfully silenced one of the most influential voices in El Salvador. The White House's statement on Archbishop Romero's murder, issued on March 25th, 1980, spoke in glowing terms of Romero's amplifying the voices of the downtrodden, and promoting social justice.²⁰ Perhaps more than all of these things, Romero represented a powerful symbol of peace and justice to a generation of Salvadorans. It was in these roles that Romero had evoked the anger of individuals such as d'Aubuisson, who saw Romero as a problem, someone who stoked popular anger toward the government and security forces of El Salvador. Thus, Romero stood for social justice despite the dangers implicit in getting involved. Congressman Robert Drinan, who nominated Romero for the Nobel Peace Prize, lauded Romero, claiming that "In a nation notorious for its disregard of basic human rights, Archbishop Romero stands out as an eloquent and unshakable opponent of oppression and

¹⁷ This would amount to approximately \$120 in 2013.

¹⁸ The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 120.

¹⁹ The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 119, 123.

²⁰ Cable, From Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, "White House Statement on Archbishop Romero's Assassination," 26 March 1980, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>.

violence. He has persevered in pursuit of these noble ends despite the ongoing vilification campaign that has been waged against him.”²¹ This vilification campaign cost Romero his life.

Outside of his often divisive role as a religious leader and a champion of human rights, Romero also saw himself as El Salvador’s ambassador to the world. On Sunday, February 17th, 1980, at a time in the mass when he often read aloud letters from struggling Salvadorans, Romero instead read aloud a draft of a letter that he had written to American President Jimmy Carter.²² Romero claimed that he wanted the approval of his congregation before sending the letter to Washington.²³ This letter served as Romero’s response to reports that the U.S. government planned to increase military aid to the government of El Salvador and had already provided \$200,000 in gas masks and flak jackets as well as six American experts to train the security forces in their use.²⁴ In front of a packed Cathedral in San Salvador, Romero explained his “worry” over newspaper reports of U.S. aid, saying that U.S. aid, rather than “promoting greater justice and peace in El Salvador” would “sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their most fundamental human rights.”²⁵ Romero’s letter went on to portray the government of El Salvador in bleak terms, as a government utterly unable to control the violence of the security forces run amok. He described the Salvadoran military as “unscrupulous,” an institution that only knew “how to repress the people” and “promote the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.”²⁶ Romero

²¹ Letter, Congressman Robert F. Drinan et. Al to Nobel Prize Committee, January 26, 1979, Box: 1979, A-780 to 804, Folder: 800: Asuntos Politicos No 2 1979, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²² Vigil, *Oscar Romero*, 374.

²³ Brockman, *Romero*, 227.

²⁴ Cable, From American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Text of Archbishop’s Letter to President Carter,” 19 February 1980, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>.

²⁵ Archbishop Oscar Romero, Homily, (speech given at Catedral Metropolitana, San Salvador, 17 February 1980). As translated in: Cable, From American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, “Text of Archbishop’s Letter to President Carter,” 19 February 1980, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

appealed to Carter to prohibit U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government and to ask for a guarantee that the United States would not intervene on behalf of the Salvadoran government. Romero concluded with a personal appeal to President Carter: “I hope that your religious sentiments and your feelings for the defense of human rights will move you to accept my petition, avoiding by this action worse bloodshed in this suffering country.”²⁷

If Romero wanted the opinion of his congregation as to whether or not to send the letter to Carter, the answer of his parishioners was clear. The church shook with thunderous applause as many rose to their feet. One observer referred to it as the “longest and most resounding applause ever heard in the Cathedral.”²⁸ Convinced that his letter accurately represented the views of the people of El Salvador, Archbishop Romero sent it to Washington on February 17th, 1980. The next morning, a bomb went off at the YSAX broadcasting station that the day before had broadcast Romero’s letter-reading across El Salvador.

James Earl Carter had come to the American Presidency with promises to bring morality back to American foreign policy in the aftermath of the debacle in Vietnam; Carter sought to confront the realpolitik tendencies of Henry Kissinger, tendencies that led the U.S. to support controversial foreign leaders (such as Chilean President, General Augusto Pinochet) if those leaders advanced American interests. Carter sought to make human rights the “soul” of American foreign policy.²⁹ As part of these promises, the Carter Administration sought to maintain a link between a given nation’s performance in safeguarding basic human rights and U.S. military aid to that nation. One country that came under the early scrutiny of the Carter

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cable, From American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, Brzezinski Material, Folder El Salvador 3/80, Box 20, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁹ President Jimmy Carter, Remarks on the 30th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (speech given at the White House, Washington, D.C., 6 December 1978). Carter argued, “Human rights is the soul of our foreign policy. And I say this with assurance, because human rights is the soul of our sense of nationhood.”

Administration and the U.S. Congress was El Salvador. Rather than submit itself to further evaluation from the human rights-focused U.S., El Salvador preemptively refused American military aid in 1977. However, to the regret of Archbishop Romero and many others in El Salvador, rumors began to emerge in 1979 that the U.S. would resume military aid to El Salvador. It was against this backdrop that Romero penned his letter to Carter, in the hopes that he might appeal to a man similarly devout in his Christian faith and utterly committed to the cause of human rights.

Given the Carter Administration's professed commitment to human rights, it seemed likely that Archbishop Romero's letter would resonate with the Administration, but the Administration did not heed Romero's message. On March 25th, 1980, the day after Romero's assassination, the House of Representatives began hearings on a \$5.7 million military aid package to the government of El Salvador. On April 1st, 1980, at the behest of Carter's State Department, the House Appropriations Committee approved that military aid. In January of 1981, at a time in their term in which most lame duck Administrations, liberated from political constraints, sign often ambitious, symbolic midnight legislation, the Carter Administration appropriated an additional \$5 million in military aid to the Salvadoran government.

By the summer of 1980, El Salvador had descended into a full-fledged civil war, a conflict which would envelop the country from 1980-1992 and leave approximately 75,000 Salvadorans dead. Over that time, the United States would provide over \$4.7 billion in total aid (most of it military) to the government of El Salvador.³⁰ This escalation of U.S. support for the government of El Salvador began during the Administration of Jimmy Carter shortly after Archbishop Romero, a champion of human rights who saw in Carter a like-minded Christian, had reached out to the President to urge him not to resume military aid to a government

³⁰ Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monro Doctrine, 1945-1993*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1994), 191.

seemingly unable to control the violence of its security forces. Carter, who had long professed his commitment to human rights, did not heed Romero's advice. What accounts for this seeming contradiction that found Carter and Romero, two proponents of human rights, on opposite ends of Salvadoran politics?

Carter, Human Rights, and Latin America: A Pragmatic Approach

Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear. For too many years we have been willing to adopt the flawed principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our values for theirs. We fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better fought with water. – President Jimmy Carter (May 22, 1977)³¹

Perhaps no quote better typifies Carter's early approach to U.S. foreign policy than this one, uttered by the recently inaugurated President as part of his commencement address to the University of Notre Dame's class of 1977. To many, Carter's reference to America's "inordinate fear of communism" underscored a dramatic shift from his predecessors in the White House. Early rhetoric from the Administration suggested that his was a post-Cold War presidency in which an emphasis on the East/West struggle between the U.S. and Soviet Union would give way to a focus on the problems of the North/South relationship: problems of poverty, oppression and injustice in the southern hemisphere, particularly in the Third World nations of Africa and Latin America. These problems would represent an early focus of the Carter Administration.

However, the Carter shift was in many ways less dramatic than it was later portrayed by those who saw in Carter a sharp contrast with Presidents Ford and Reagan. The Carter Administration's renewed focus of North/South relations derived in part from the

³¹ President Jimmy Carter, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," (speech given at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 22 May 1977). As quoted in Wilson Miscamble, ed., *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 197.

Administration's fears that the U.S. had been too slow to adapt to what Carter labeled the new realities of a "politically awakening world."³² The United States needed to take seriously the problems that plagued its relations with the Third World lest it be left behind. What were the implications of America's failures in the Third World? To Carter, those failures had Cold War implications. Carter explained in his 1982 memoirs, *Keeping Faith*, that he hoped his Administration's efforts to deal with the root causes of international instability and global injustice would help shape a world "more congenial to our values and more compatible with our interests."³³ He continued: "America would no longer be seen as defending the status-quo, nor could the Soviet Union continue to pose as the champion of greater equity."³⁴ Thus, the supposedly post-Cold War foreign policy of the Carter Administration, which saw the Administration turning more seriously to problems like global instability and injustice had a decidedly Cold War logic. While some of his rhetoric may have hinted at a post-Cold War presidency, the reality of Administration policy was quite different.

The Carter Administration's early attempt to focus attention on the North/South relationship is best exemplified by U.S. policy toward its southern neighbors in Latin America. With this reorientation, the Carter Administration sought to change the conversation with America's southern neighbors into one more equitable and fair. In a meeting between President Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in which Administration officials reviewed U.S. policy toward the region, this desire to re-orient U.S. policy was clear. In this meeting, Brzezinski, long known as being the most traditional Cold Warrior of the group, referenced the need for the U.S. to break with the paternalist tradition of

³² President Jimmy Carter, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," (speech given at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 22 May 1977). As quoted in Wilson Miscamble, ed., *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 197.

³³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 123.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 123.

the U.S. in Latin America.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, Carter wondered aloud if the U.S. had truly graduated from its “neo-colonial perspective.”³⁶

Carter sought to distance himself from what he perceived to be an American legacy of contempt and disinterest toward Latin America by dealing with the Panama Canal crisis, and in the process demonstrated the seriousness with which the Administration took its reorientation toward Latin America. In the two decades prior to Carter’s inauguration in 1977, Panamanian resentment toward the American ownership of the Canal and the perceived injustice of the treaty that justified that ownership had given way to significant violence around the Canal Zone. The Nixon and Ford Administrations discussed the need for a revised Panama Canal treaty. The Carter Administration invested significant political capital to complete the treaty. The Administration’s early effort to finalize the treaty, signed by September of 1977, a mere eight months after Carter’s inauguration, represented, in the Administration’s view, a symbolic effort to reestablish a more equitable relationship with Latin America.

Much like the Administration’s policy toward the region more broadly, however, the Panama Canal treaties, too, represented part of a Cold War strategy. Carter explained: “Dissident groups, some known to be the subject to strong communist influences, were using the old treaty terms to support their vituperative charges against the United States as an imperialistic colonial power.”³⁷ By completing the treaty with Panamanian President Omar Torrijos in a timely fashion, Carter sought to “prevent the strengthening of communists and terrorist groups by proving we could be fair.”³⁸ To Carter, the war with communism internationally required the U.S. to wage war for hearts and minds in the regions most susceptible to radicalism. In this case,

³⁵ Presidential Meeting Notes, “Central America and the Caribbean,” October 19, 1979, NLC-17-83-9-8-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 156.

³⁸ Ibid, 156.

the Panama Canal treaties did not represent an altruistic attempt to correct a historical injustice; it was largely a strategic decision by an Administration concerned with how the Third World perceived the U.S. in the aftermath of a dark period of U.S.-Latin American relations.

That a Cold War impetus continued to guide American foreign policy toward Latin America did not mean that the Administration's policy was not in some ways radical. Perhaps the Carter Administration's most significant break with its Cold War predecessors came in the Administration's dismissal of what historian Gaddis Smith, author of *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine* has called the "Kennan Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. Of Latin America, the Truman Administration's Director of Policy Planning and one of the preeminent foreign policy leaders in early Cold War America, George Kennan argued: "Where the concepts and traditions of popular government are too weak to absorb successfully the intensity of the communist attack, then we must concede that harsh governmental measures of repression may be the only answer."³⁹ He went on: "these measures may have to proceed from regimes whose origins and methods would not stand the test of American concepts of democratic procedures."⁴⁰ Indeed, to Kennan, Latin American dictators, though undemocratic in nature, potentially represented the only alternative to the spread of communism in nations neighboring the U.S.

While the traction of this particular document in later Administrations is unclear, the widespread employment of its core ideas is undeniable. To Kennan and others, many Latin American nations were simply not strong enough to withstand communist pressures and the only way that the U.S. could counter those pressures was by supporting often harsh and repressive anti-communist regimes in Latin America. This outlook justified U.S. support for military dictators in Latin America on a massive scale, particularly in the form of military and economic

³⁹ As quoted in Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1994), 70-71.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

aid. Furthermore, the Cold War logic of the Kennan Corollary justified several incidents of American intervention in the region from the Eisenhower Administration's intervention into Guatemala in 1954 to the Nixon Administration's foray into Chilean politics in 1970, just six short years before Carter won the presidency in 1976. When the Carter Administration took office in January of 1977, it faced a powerful legacy of American interventionism in Latin America, interventionism that sought to safeguard anti-communist leaders in Latin America whose sometimes unscrupulous tactics were overwhelmingly ignored by American leaders. It was likely this legacy that Carter had in mind when he spoke of the American "embrace" of dictators in South Bend, Indiana in May of 1977.

The Carter Administration's antidote to this legacy was in large part its emphasis on human rights, which Carter referred to as the "soul" of his foreign policy.⁴¹ In the past, dictators like Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and military governments like that of Guatemala and El Salvador would largely go unchallenged by American foreign policy leaders who saw in them critical U.S. allies in the Cold War struggle. Early rhetoric from the Administration suggested that this would no longer be the case. Instead, governments known to violate human rights on a large scale would face significant U.S. government pressure to change their ways.

While this policy seemed in many ways a rebuke of traditional U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Third World more broadly, it is important to keep in mind the degree to which the emphasis on human rights had political utility in a nation frustrated with its government. In his campaign speeches, Carter's portrayals of a nation straying from its hallowed path remained consistent. According to this rhetoric, traditional American values had been subverted, not only by a Manichean Cold War anti-Sovietism run amok, but also by recent foreign policy crises like

⁴¹ President Jimmy Carter, Remarks on the 30th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (speech given at the White House, Washington, D.C., 6 December 1978).

the Vietnam War and domestic crises like Watergate that cast a long shadow across the nation. The Church Committee of 1975 further called into question the problems of executive overreach. When Carter took to the campaign trail in 1976, he pushed his role as a president who would safeguard America's cherished values and restore America as a "beacon light of hope for all human kind."⁴² "We've lost the spirit of our nation," Carter declared.⁴³ "We're ashamed of what our government is as we deal with other nations around the world, and that's got to be changed, and I'm going to change it."⁴⁴ This argument for restoring the moral dimension to U.S. foreign policy provided Carter with a means by which to distinguish himself from his Republican predecessors. It also provided Carter with a strategic vision distinct from his opponents and it enabled him to tap into a frustrated electorate. In his memoirs, *Power and Principle*, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski frankly admits to the political expediency of Carter's human rights emphasis. To Brzezinski, human rights represented an appealing issue that "drew a sharp contrast between [Carter] and the policies of Nixon and Kissinger."⁴⁵ While Carter and foreign policy elites may have genuinely believed in the rhetoric, it is clear that it had political value that led the Carter campaign to make it a defining issue for the aspiring president.

High-minded rhetoric aside, Carter's human rights policy was not the concoction of a team of wide-eyed idealists. Much like the Administration's reorientation toward the Third World more broadly, the policy represented a strategic shift by a foreign policy team concerned about the perceived American losses in the Third World. Thus, an ambitious human rights policy was less about remedying past injustices than simply safeguarding American power and

⁴² Jimmy Carter, "Human Rights," (speech given at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 10 October 1976). Carter speaks of America's need for a "renewed commitment to civil rights, human rights, domestic and around the world, to let our country once again... be a beacon of light of hope for all human kind."

⁴³ As quoted in Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, 139.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Girous, c1983), 49.

influence in a fast-changing global order. To Carter Administration officials, a stronger emphasis on human rights was not necessarily in tension with a more traditional Cold War outlook. Rather, such a policy complimented the Administration's Cold War strategies. A human rights policy assured that the U.S. would maintain access in the Third World. Carter explained: "A human rights effort would...help strengthen our influence among some of the developing nations that were still in the process of forming their own governments and choosing their future friends and trading partners."⁴⁶ It does not seem a stretch to suggest that this statement implicitly warns of what friends countries of the developing world might otherwise choose. In a 1979 meeting on Latin America, Carter was even more explicit about these fears when he confided to his advisers that he did not think "that the people in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and perhaps even in Costa Rica feel that we care about them."⁴⁷ "Perhaps they think Cuba does," Carter warned.⁴⁸ In his May 1977 speech at Notre Dame, Carter further pushed the importance of maintaining U.S. influence in the Third World: "We can already see dramatic worldwide advances in the protection of the individual from the arbitrary power of the state. For us to ignore this trend would be to lose influence and moral authority in the world."⁴⁹ Carter and his advisers intended to promote human rights in the Third World and in the process, build and maintain a positive image of the U.S. as an ally in that world. In pursuing a human rights agenda as a prominent foreign policy goal and distancing American foreign policy from the callous realpolitik of its predecessors, the Carter Administration was not simply making a moral decision, pushed by an

⁴⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 143.

⁴⁷ Presidential Meeting Notes, "Central America and the Caribbean," October 19, 1979, NLC-17-83-9-8-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ President Jimmy Carter, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," (speech given at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 22 May 1977). As quoted in Wilson Miscamble, ed., *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 200.

evangelical Christian, nor was it simply making a political decision, to distinguish Carter from his Republican opponents, the Administration was making a strategic decision.

Beyond simply dealing with a perceived problem with American soft power, Carter's human rights policy sought to deal with leftist revolutionaries in a way reminiscent of earlier Administrations. In Carter's memoirs, he concedes that U.S. support for military dictators made sense from a strategic perspective, but saw it as a short-sighted solution to a long-term problem: that of poverty and oppression in a region that subsequently represented fertile ground for proponents of radical alternatives to the status-quo. Carter explained: "by inducing [conservative regimes] to change their repressive policies, we would be enhancing freedom and democracy, and helping to remove the reasons for revolutions that often erupt among those who suffer from persecution."⁵⁰ Here, Carter reveals his policy's ancestry in the earlier work of other Democratic leaders, principally those of the Kennedy Administration, who sought to deal with the causes of revolution in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution with the Alliance for Progress, which was designed in large part to deal with economic and social injustice which facilitated the rise of revolution. The Alliance for Progress, much like Carter's emphasis on human rights, merely represented another weapon in the Cold War. One can confront revolutionary tendencies by propping up anti-revolutionary military regimes or one can move to prevent the emergence and proliferation of revolutionary sentiments in the first place. The policies may have struck a softer tone than that of their Republican contemporaries: the rationale undergirding those policies was strikingly similar.

Beyond the strategic nature of Carter's human rights policy, the policy was also a constrained one. While Administration officials underscored that a robust human rights policy need not be in conflict with the U.S.'s broader Cold War aims, many of these officials also

⁵⁰ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 143.

recognized that conflict could occur. In such cases, it may be in the Administration's interest to downplay human rights and democracy promotion if it better served American interests. In the Administration's Presidential Review Memorandum of March 12, 1977, State Department authors distinguish Administration "wants" in Latin America, "sufficiently stable and healthy economic and political growth not to weaken our security, create new global problems, or offend our values," from "hopes," explaining that "at our most hopeful we want democratic systems to be revived in this hemisphere."⁵¹ The authors of this widely dispersed internal document went on to discuss the balance between our traditional concerns and our desire to push justice in North/South relations by explaining, "the emergence of North-South issues does not eliminate East-West concerns. We can accept more ideological pluralism in 1977 than we could in 1962—but we could not be happy with a communist Brazil, Mexico, or Panama."⁵² Thus, with the Administration's greater emphasis on human rights and a more equitable relationship with Latin America, officials had hardly ignored the Cold War implications of such initiatives.

Ultimately, the strategic nature of Carter's human rights policy often got lost in the soaring rhetoric of the campaign trail. Talk of a post-Cold War era often obscured the Cold War logic of many Administration policies. While many Carter analysts had latched onto the "inordinate fear of communism" phrase that Carter made so famous at the University of Notre Dame, an analysis of the subsequent lines reveals far more about the nature of Carter's human rights policy.⁵³ "We fought fire with fire," Carter said, "never thinking that fire is better fought with water."⁵⁴ To Carter, utilizing human rights as a major component of U.S. foreign policy was

⁵¹ Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-17, "Review of United States Policy Toward Latin America," March 12, 1977, NLC-17-26-1-1-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ President Jimmy Carter, "Human Rights and Foreign Policy," (speech given at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 22 May 1977). As quoted in Wilson Miscamble, ed., *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Addresses*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 197.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

not an altruistic endeavor, but a carefully considered Cold War strategy that better dealt with the problems the U.S. faced in the Third World. Reading between the lines, Carter's reexamination of U.S.-Latin American relations, his denunciation of the legacy of U.S. interventionism, his critical stance toward unsavory military governments in the region, and his proposed emphasis on a genuine human rights policy all drove at the same theme: a more effective means by which to wage the Cold War in Latin America.

From Rhetoric to Reality: Carter's Human Rights Program

In order to understand Carter's human rights policy one first needs to understand the degree to which that policy was not his own. Though the human rights component of U.S. foreign policy is accurately linked to Carter, who utilized that component to a degree that no president ever had or has since, Carter's policy had roots in Congressional measures that were undertaken well before Carter's inauguration. Many of the key pieces of human rights legislation represented part of a broader Congressional effort in the 1970s to wrest power from an executive for whom confidence was at one of its lowest points in American history.⁵⁵ This shift to a more assertive Congress is best exemplified by the War Powers Act of 1973.⁵⁶ A few short years later, in 1975, the high profile Church Committee, which sought to investigate intelligence gathering overreach by the CIA and FBI, further demonstrated this trend. Congress would no longer sit on the sidelines as the American president developed and executed U.S. foreign policy. By the mid-1970s, an age of greater Congressional oversight had begun.

⁵⁵ Since Gallup began polling for presidential approval ratings in the 1930s, only Harry Truman registered a lower approval rating (22% in February of 1952) than Richard Nixon's 24%, registered in July and August of 1974. "Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," Gallup, accessed April 8, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx>.

⁵⁶ For more information on the Congressional struggle for greater control of foreign policy, see Robert David Johnson, "The New Internationalists' Congress" in *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

For some Congressmen, like Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota and Representative Tom Harkin of Iowa, this extension of Congressional power needed to confront the tendency of the American president to support foreign leaders with significant records of human rights violations. To these Congressional leaders, American support facilitated the human rights crises in places like Pinochet's Chile.⁵⁷ The liberal Ninety-Fourth Congress enacted two principal pieces of legislation to deal with this perceived foreign policy problem.⁵⁸ First, in 1974, Section 502B, an addition to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 read that "except in extraordinary circumstances, the President shall substantially reduce or terminate security assistance to any government which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights."⁵⁹ Section 502B ultimately required the State Department to produce annual human rights progress reports for governments receiving security assistance so that those governments could undergo the scrutiny of a newly empowered Congress. Shortly thereafter, in 1975, a similar Congressional impetus led to the passage of the Harkin Amendment to the International Development and Food Assistance Act tied economic aid to human rights performance. Also, in 1975, Congress prompted the creation of the Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department to give voice to human rights in the formulation of foreign policy. While the Nixon and Ford Administrations largely skirted these new Congressional regulations, failing to submit annual reports on human rights progress and utterly ignoring the State Department's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs, the Carter Administration

⁵⁷ This Congressional impetus, particularly as it regarded Latin America, was often inspired by the perception that the U.S. had facilitated the ouster of socialist President Salvador Allende in Chile in favor of the repressive government of General Augusto Pinochet.

⁵⁸ For more information on the human rights legislation of the 1970s, see Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁵⁹ Schoultz, 253.

ultimately leaned upon this legislation as it sought to make human rights a central component of U.S. foreign policy.⁶⁰

With the groundwork for such a policy in place, upon Carter's inauguration in January of 1977, the Administration quickly moved to define human rights and construct a specific policy to substantiate the rhetoric of the campaign trail. In an early report on the Administration's human rights policy, it divided human rights into three groupings: the right to be free from governmental violations of the integrity of the person, economic and social rights and the right to enjoy civil and political liberties.⁶¹ Throughout Carter's term, the Administration largely focused upon the first grouping, indeed, stands against torture and political imprisonment were less controversial than stands for greater economic rights, which often raised uncomfortable questions from anti-communists. The evaluation process to determine whether or not the U.S. would act on violations took account of three broad factors: first, the nature of the case, second, the prospects that American action would prove effective and third, the importance of maintaining our sense of perspective.⁶² This third qualification related to the need for the U.S. to appreciate the context in which human rights violations occurred and would ultimately prove significant in countries like El Salvador in which the fog of civil war made evaluation of human rights violations more complicated. Finally, the Administration elected to adopt a carrot and stick approach to action when officials deemed such action necessary. In some cases of abuse, the Administration could make public statements condemning that abuse or rely more upon private diplomacy to pressure foreign governments. In the case of many countries, the U.S. could utilize Congressional legislation to limit or even eliminate security and economic assistance to foreign governments

⁶⁰ Barbara Keys, "Congress, Kissinger, and the Origins of Human Rights Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 34, Issue 5 (November 2010), 823-851.

⁶¹ Memorandum, "PRM on Human Rights," 8 July 1977, 1-6. As found at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Website, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm28.pdf>.

⁶² *Ibid*, 26-31.

that committed gross violations on a significant scale. This outline of Administration policy appeared in an early Presidential Review Memorandum, worked on throughout the Administration's first six months in office and circulated in July of 1977.

Many historians suggest that the commitment to human rights waned as the Administration entered the second half of its term, but even at the onset, with this wide-ranging memorandum, one can sense the degree to which the policy was circumscribed by broader Cold War concerns. The document recognized the potential costs of an ambitious human rights policy noting that "while there is no necessary inconsistency among any of these objectives, they will, on occasion compete for primacy." The document goes on to concede that on occasion "our human rights goals will have to be modified, delayed or curtailed in deference to other important objectives."⁶³ Later, such clauses would prove significant as human rights concerns were subsumed by broader Cold War concerns in revolutionary Central America. Human rights would indeed prove important, but early on, the Administration recognized the degree to which human rights would not overtake those national security concerns that had long represented the backbone of U.S. foreign policy.

This sense of the limits of the Administration's human rights policy becomes clearer when one analyzes the reasons for pursuing a stronger human rights policy laid out by the Presidential Review Memorandum. Of the six central reasons, two emerge as clearly evoking human rights as a weapon in the Cold War arsenal of the United States. Administration officials thought that making human rights a higher priority in American dealings with foreign nations "[promoted] the fundamental long-term American interest in a world of nations whose systems of government and societies reflect individual freedom and dignity and thus reject

⁶³ Ibid, 12.

totalitarianism.”⁶⁴ In the eyes of the Administration officials who prepared this document, greater support for human rights also “[assisted] in the philosophical debate with the Soviet Union as to the type of society worth developing, thus helping us in those European states with competitive communist parties and in much of the Third World.”⁶⁵ Thus, a strong human rights policy further distinguished the United States from its totalitarian enemy and worked to undercut the notion that the Soviet Union represented some sort of champion of the Third World.

The announcement of these objectives in an early Presidential Review Memorandum demonstrates the degree to which these objectives genuinely drove early Administration policy. Frequent references to the Cold War framing of Carter’s human rights policy in Administration memoirs seem to suggest that this was a major impetus for the Administration’s renewed emphasis on human rights. The publishing dates of many of those memoirs, however, could call into question the degree to which those comments were made for posterity’s sake. Carter’s memoirs, *Keeping Faith*, came out in 1982. The memoirs of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance were published in 1983. These memoirs were written after the heating up of the Cold War in 1979, a time in which conflicts from Afghanistan to Nicaragua had made talk of a “post-Cold War era” seem premature. Perhaps, some could suggest, these men wrote a Cold War narrative into their human rights policy after the fact to demonstrate the degree to which they understood the continued relevance of Cold War problems. Perhaps these lines sought to underscore the Administration’s appreciation for the continued threat of the Soviet Union and further, sought to undercut notions that the Administration had been soft on communism. The existence of this Cold War framing in Presidential Review Memorandum #28, a confidential, internal memo produced at the beginning of the

⁶⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 9.

Administration's term, verifies that Cold War concerns drove Administration human rights policy from the onset. The Administration did not produce this memorandum with public consumption in mind, rather, it sought to clarify the human rights policy within the Administration. It did so in a way that further cemented that policy, not as a radical shift in U.S. foreign policy, but as part of a broader strategic initiative that fit nicely into traditional American Cold War thinking.

Central America: An Early Testing Ground

Despite the strategic and circumscribed nature of the Carter Administration's human rights policy, it was nonetheless a key focus of the Administration's early years. In those years, Central America came to represent a testing ground for the Administration's novel outlook toward the Third World. Central America was where the Administration first sought to challenge perceived shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy from its legacy of domination and interventionism to its lack of emphasis on democracy and human rights in its dealings with its Cold War allies.

Why Central America? A number of factors account for its special emphasis. First, no region in the world had endured such a powerful tradition of American domination and interventionism as "America's backyard" in Central America. Carter Administration officials did not need to delve far into history to get a sense of that legacy. By 1977, U.S. control of the Panama Canal Zone had brought U.S.-Panamanian relations to a boiling point as Panamanians grew increasingly enraged at the inequitable relationship that allowed this perceived foreign occupation to continue. In Nicaragua, Dictator Anastasio Somoza owed considerable credit for his family's forty-year rule to the influence of U.S. power, which helped create the Nicaraguan

National Guard from which his family drew its source of legitimacy.⁶⁶ To Nicaragua's Northwest, the most populous and powerful country in the region, Guatemala, too, was affected by U.S. interventionism. By the beginning of the Carter years, Guatemala was already mired in a thirty-year civil war that pitted the country's burgeoning leftist insurgency against a military dictatorship that was established in the aftermath of a U.S.-supported coup in 1954. As these three examples demonstrate, the legacy of U.S. domination of Central America was long indeed. For an Administration that hoped to fundamentally alter the conversation with the Third World, Central America must have seemed like a good place to start.

Second, a number of Central American countries represented habitual violators of internationally-recognized human rights. Throughout much of the 1970s, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua took turns earning regional and international condemnation for their respective human rights records.⁶⁷ Many of these violations stemmed from the undemocratic nature of their political systems and the resulting inability of these governments to deal with political opposition in ways that conformed with international norms. In El Salvador, strikes and unrest following the fraudulent presidential election of February 20, 1977 provoked the Law for the Defense of Public Order, which denied basic political rights to opposition forces and facilitated the murder of a diverse array of church, union and other political opponents.⁶⁸ In Guatemala, the U.S.-sponsored toppling of Jacobo Árbenz in 1954 was followed by a string of military dictators whose

⁶⁶ For more on the U.S. role in facilitating the rise of the Somoza family in Nicaragua, see Andrew Crawley's work, *Somoza and Roosevelt: Good Neighbor Diplomacy in Nicaragua, 1933-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁶⁷ In Presidential Review Memorandum 17, completed on March 12, 1977, Administration officials included El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua on its short list of the "worst present offenders" in Latin America along with Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Cuba and Paraguay. Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-17, "Review of United States Policy Toward Latin America," March 12, 1977, NLC-17-26-1-1-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁶⁸ Administration officials cast doubt upon the validity of the Salvadoran elections immediately, claiming two days after the election that "there are charges of fraud and many of these charges seem legitimate." Memorandum, North-South to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Evening Report," February 22, 1977, NLC-10-1-4-2-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

repressive measures against union leaders, students, peasant leaders and indigenous peoples increased substantially after 1966. The civil conflict reached a new level in the 1970s, when the government conducted violent campaigns against the nation's Indian population when that population began to agitate for economic and political rights. In Nicaragua, too, the government of Dictator Anastasio Somoza and his National Guard responded to domestic insurgency with extraordinary violence and repression. If Carter Administration officials were genuine in their desire to make human rights the “soul” of U.S. foreign policy, they simply could not afford to ignore the gross violations occurring near America’s Southern borders.

Finally, Central America likely represented an early focus because it seemed a safe target. The area was largely ignored by the Soviet Union, which continued to see it as within the U.S.’s sphere of influence.⁶⁹ While the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua all represented habitual human rights violators, they also represented right-wing bulwarks of anti-communism. For much of its early term, Administration officials dismissed insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala as disorganized and weak.⁷⁰ Guatemala’s military, officials were sure, was simply too powerful to fall to the country’s leftist forces.⁷¹ Even in Nicaragua, while the removal of Somoza seemed inevitable by the Spring of 1979, the speed with which he was toppled and the subsequent success of the far left in securing power came as a shock to many

⁶⁹ One early CIA report on “Soviet Interest in Latin America” concluded that “The Latin American world, with the major exception in Cuba, has not been very susceptible to Soviet overtures over the past 50 years. The people have been less receptive to propaganda than Soviet leaders expected, and the major social movements of the area have been national rather than international.” CIA Report, “Soviet Interest in Latin America,” April 1977, NLC-24-64-7-8-0.

⁷⁰ The State Department authors of Presidential Review Memorandum 17 concluded that in Latin America, “Argentina has the only insurgency of major proportions.” Presidential Review Memorandum NSC-17, “Review of United States Policy Toward Latin America,” March 12, 1977, NLC-17-26-1-1-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁷¹ Talking Points, Central Intelligence Agency, “CIA Talking Points – Nicaragua,” February 21, 1980, NLF-24-37-6-8-1, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Administration officials.⁷² Carter officials felt confident that some nudges in the direction of democratic reform posed few risks for a region seemingly insulated from international communism by powerful anti-communist governments and long-time strategic allies of the U.S. In Central America, there likely seemed little to lose and much to gain.

For these reasons, the Carter Administration brought to bear early pressure on human rights abuse in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Carter and his Administration believed that a grounded human rights policy would benefit not just the people of those three countries, but the governments themselves by improving their international image and draining their insurgencies of support. All three nations had been damaged by their international reputation for human rights abuse. If these governments improved their records, they could burnish foreign opinion. Furthermore, insurgent leaders would face more difficulty in gaining recruits and public support. In a conversation with Guatemalan Minister of Finance Colonel Hugo Tulio Bucaro, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that the Guatemalan situation was comparable to the Spanish situation: in Spain, terrorist groups attempted to stoke army crackdowns in order to turn public opinion in favor of the insurgents, thus perceived as victims of government repression.⁷³ As in the case of Guatemala, the Carter Administration believed that improving its human rights situation would aid the Nicaraguan government in its fight against leftist insurgents. Many Administration officials believed that human rights violations combined with a generally undemocratic political process had much more to do with the promotion of insurgency than any external actor like Cuba or the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ The line of argumentation was very much the

⁷² In one August 11, 1980 Memorandum, NSC Latin American expert Robert Pastor notes the Administration's surprise regarding the capabilities, support and eventual success of the Sandinistas during their June 1979 offensive.

⁷³ Memorandum, Cyrus Vance, "Human Rights in Guatemala: Views of Finance Minister Bucaro," November 8, 1979, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁷⁴ A memorandum composed by a member of the U.S. embassy in Guatemala argues that "the conditions which have fomented the guerrillas' existence for so many years in Nicaragua...have been more a result of frustration with the prospect of achieving changes through peaceful democratic processes than a result of Cuban backing of the

same for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Carter's human rights policy did not necessarily contradict the American Cold War imperative to support anti-communist governments. The goal was not to undermine authoritarian governments, but to inspire gradual reform.

The Carter Administration elected to pursue quiet diplomacy with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, tying U.S. military aid to the requirement that governments grant an independent human rights organization the access needed to compile a comprehensive human rights report. The Administration then made it clear to leaders in each of these governments that U.S. military assistance would be conditioned on progress in the realm of human rights. Central American leaders bristled at this U.S. pressure, thus limiting the impact of early U.S. efforts to push human rights. On March 11, 1977, the Guatemalan government notified the U.S that it would decline in advance any U.S. military aid conditioned on human rights and then went on to threaten that Guatemala would turn to the Soviet Union for its military needs.⁷⁵ On March 17, the government of El Salvador, similarly frustrated with what it saw as U.S. interference in El Salvador's domestic issues, did the same. In Nicaragua, Somoza was enraged by U.S. pressures, arguing in April of 1977 that "those who have been discriminating against dark-skinned people for years have nothing to tell me about human rights."⁷⁶ While the Administration's early efforts on behalf of human rights in the region did not prompt the desired results, it was clear that the Administration was applying real pressure and making human rights a focus, to the chagrin of

FSLN."⁷⁴ The same memorandum concludes that "If [the government of Nicaragua] were to constructively discuss possible changes and undertake some reform measures...this would change the domestic climate so as to undercut support for extremism."

⁷⁵ "Our embassy has received a note from the foreign ministry 'declining in advance any aid or sale of military equipment that is conditioned on judgment that any foreign government might make of matters that are exclusively the internal concern' of Guatemala." Memorandum, March 12, 1977, NLC-1-1-2-71-9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library. For reference to Soviet Union, see Memorandum, From The Situation Room to Dr. Brzezinski, "Evening Notes," March 18, 1977, NLC-1-1-3-17-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁷⁶ Memorandum, Human Rights File, April 23, 1977, NLC-24-55-5-6-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Central American government leaders. However, despite the broader importance of the Central American region to the Carter Administration's emphasis on human rights and more just relations with the Third World, by 1981, the Administration had overturned its stated desires to withhold lethal military aid from the government of El Salvador. What accounts for this seeming dissonance in Carter Administration policy?

The Struggles of the Romero Administration

To understand the Carter Administration's eventual decision to reverse course in El Salvador, one must first understand the degree to which the Administration viewed the government of El Salvador differently than Archbishop Romero and many of the government's international critics. While many Administration officials shared lukewarm feelings toward the government of President Carlos Humberto Romero, the Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG) which would seize power from Romero through a coup on October 15, 1979, quickly won U.S. support. It was the government of the JRG (which remained in power until May of 1982) that ultimately secured lethal military assistance from the U.S. in 1981. The Administration's conception of key Junta members as victims of extremist violence more than progenitors of that violence challenged a popular conception of the government of El Salvador championed by Archbishop Romero as well as much of the international community, which routinely criticized the government of El Salvador for its regular violations.

Undoubtedly, the Carter Administration was wary of the Presidency of Carlos Humberto Romero from the beginning. A conservative cavalry officer who served as Minister of Defense from 1972 to 1976, President Romero's conservatism and severe posture toward political dissension surprised few. To many, Romero represented just another in a long line of

conservative military men to hold the office of President of El Salvador, and President Romero had the misfortune of inheriting much of the legacy of authoritarianism and harsh repression of his predecessors. As Brzezinski saw it, Romero represented a status-quo candidate; his conservative background, authoritarian nature and general lack of enemies made him an appealing candidate to El Salvador's military and economic elite.⁷⁷ Only days after Romero's election, Administration officials began questioning the election's legitimacy; later, Carter officials would discuss the fraudulent nature of the election as an established fact.⁷⁸ Viron Vaky, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, held a bleak view of Romero and his team, describing Romero's government as an "artificial political system" in which "armed forces rulers, in conjunction with the economic elite" utilized fraudulent elections and stifling repression to safeguard the status-quo.⁷⁹ To Vaky, stifling "any hint of political activity" represented a "near obsession" of Romero's government.⁸⁰ If President Romero hoped to win Washington's favor, he would need to contend with a hostile audience.

In the first year of Romero's term in office, his Administration passed the "Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order, a harsh law that sought to mitigate growing political and labor unrest."⁸¹ This law quickly came under criticism from a variety of human rights organizations, which saw it as a means by which the Salvadoran government restricted the activities of human rights organizations trying to report on the Salvadoran situation. It limited any free speech, which "tended to destroy the social order or the political and juridical

⁷⁷ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to the President, "Daily Report," March 3, 1979, NLC-1-9-8-19-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁷⁸ Memorandum, North-South to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Evening Report," February 22, 1977, NLC-10-1-4-2-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁷⁹ Memorandum, ARA – Viron P. Vaky to The Deputy Secretary, "Outlook for El Salvador," November 3, 1978, NLC-24-20-20-4-4-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 36.

organization established by the political constitution.”⁸² It also limited freedom of the press in an effort to clamp down on negative reports of the Salvadoran government. Trade union rights also came under fire, the law requiring a prison sentence to those who engage in “stoppages or any other action or omission which is intended to change the normal pursuit of the productive activities of the country with a view to prejudicing the national economy or to disrupt a public service or services that are essential for the community.”⁸³ According to Amnesty International, while the law was presented as a means by which to combat terrorism, in practice, “it severely restricted the activities of political parties and urban and rural trade unions and interfered significantly with the freedom of Salvadoran citizens to monitor and publicize human rights violations.”⁸⁴ The Christian Democrats, too, complained of the law and its use in continuing to oppress its party.⁸⁵ The law was wide-ranging and harsh, and ensured that Romero would face criticisms from the human rights community throughout much of his term.

Over the course of President Romero’s two years in office from July 1977 to October of 1979, the Carter Administration’s wariness did not dissipate. Treatment of political opponents had traditionally been harsh in the country and through 1977, armed with the rigid Law for the Defense of Public Order, the Presidency of Romero proved no exception. The PDC reported to Carter Administration officials that the situation in El Salvador was “much worse” than the

⁸² Memorandum, Amnesty International Latin America Research Department to All National Sections, “DOJ Article on El Salvador, August 18, 1978, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Memorandum, Latin America Research Department to Central America Coordination Groups, “El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua,” April 14, 1979, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Folder: Americas – Central America – General, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

⁸⁵ Bulletin, Partido Demócrata Cristiano, “Todos Juntos a Construir la Democracia,” April 27, 1979, Folder: Documentos 1991-1993, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

repressive situation in Nicaragua under Somoza which had prompted international condemnation and ultimately prompted the toppling of the Somoza regime.⁸⁶ Their party feared running candidates without some assurances that those candidates would not be killed.⁸⁷ When informed of the Christian Democratic request that he remove the three heads of the security forces and disband ORDEN, Romero refused, suggesting that the Christian Democrats “disband the leftist subversive organizations,” thus typifying Romero’s sense of the Christian Democrats’ background and legitimacy.⁸⁸

Christian Democratic leaders reported “sophisticated” repression throughout much of rural El Salvador.⁸⁹ Reports of continued violence seemed to validate these fears. In 1977, the White Warriors Union, a death squad with rumored connections to government officials, assassinated two priests and threatened to murder all Jesuits who remained in the country.⁹⁰ The popular attitude toward Catholic clergymen in the Romero Administration gave legitimacy to claims of government complicity in the anti-Jesuit violence. On the topic of Catholic resistance, Romero’s Vice President, Julio Astacio, explained, “priests were enjoined by the constitution from attacking the country’s laws and its officials, but they repeatedly did so. The Government’s problem...was that the alternative to taking action against priests for violating the law was to abandon the constitution, which was worse.”⁹¹ Instances of disappearance, torture, and murder were prevalent. By November of 1978, some State Department officials concluded that members

⁸⁶ Memorandum, The Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Additional Information Items,” July 27, 1979, NLC-1-11-6-19-2.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, “Assistant Secretary Todman’s Meeting with the President of El Salvador and its Vice President,” January 27, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁸⁹ Cable, American Embassy La Paz to Secretary of State, “Human Rights Coordinator’s Meeting with Salvadoran Interest Groups,” August 1977, NLC-129-17-4-5-1, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁰ Memorandum, Viron P. Vaky to Office of the Vice President and others, “U.S. Policy Toward Central America: El Salvador,” December 6, 1978, NLC-24-20-4-2-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, “Assistant Secretary Todman’s Meeting with the President of El Salvador and its Vice President,” January 27, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

of the Armed Forces were “probably responsible” for much of the kidnapping and terrorism in the country.⁹² One British spokesman, Labour MP Dennis Canavan, suggested at the press conference reviewing that country’s investigation of Salvadoran human rights violations, “I think the government of El Salvador is the most extreme rightist dictatorship I have ever seen.”⁹³ While some questioned the degree of complicity of President Romero, few were willing to exonerate him for his “sham” efforts at reform.⁹⁴ Robert Pastor, U.S. Assistant National Security Adviser on Latin America and the Caribbean, described Romero as a “weak, indecisive leader who is not very bright” and “unable, if not unwilling, to implement true reform and curb government violence.”⁹⁵ The Carter and Romero Administrations did not get off to a good start.

One upshot of this bleak view of Romero, his government, and his government’s well-publicized human rights abuses, was an undeniable deterioration in U.S.-Salvadoran relations. Through 1978, human rights remained the focus of U.S. policy toward El Salvador. The failure of Romero’s government to deal with this crisis resulted in severely strained relations.⁹⁶ The Administration denied lethal military aid and “non-lethal” military aid, often defined as policing items like tear gas and other riot control equipment, remained extremely limited. As a result, Romero and his government grew frustrated with the U.S.’s reluctance to help it in its counter-terrorism efforts as the Carter Administration lamented the lack of human rights progress in a country once a regional ally. As Romero continued to criticize U.S. efforts as undue interference, Carter Administration officials concluded that human rights would continue to be a “stumbling

⁹² Memorandum, ARA – Viron P. Vaky to The Deputy Secretary, “Outlook for El Salvador,” November 3, 1978, NLC-24-20-20-4-4-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹³ Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 118.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “US Policy to El Salvador – PRC Meeting on Monday, October 15, 1979,” October 13, 1979, NLC-132-78-1-2-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁶ Memorandum, Viron P. Vaky to Office of the Vice President and others, “U.S. Policy Toward Central America: El Salvador,” December 6, 1978, NLC-24-20-4-2-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

block” in U.S.-Salvadoran relations.⁹⁷ In mid-1978, the Romero’s Administration again criticized that the U.S. was getting too much information on the Salvadoran human rights situation from opposition groups, rather than the government.⁹⁸ The violence from leftist “terrorists” was significantly worse than that of the government, but one would simply not know from opposition reports, or so Romero officials claimed repeatedly.⁹⁹

While most in the Carter Administration would never look favorably on Romero and his government, an explosion of violence in El Salvador by 1979 prompted many to reevaluate U.S. policy toward El Salvador. Increasingly, Romero’s critics recognized the degree to which the problems facing El Salvador were simply too big for the Romero Administration, which faced a seemingly impossible situation. One 1978 evaluation of El Salvador described a “marked political deterioration” since 1975, characterized by increased terrorism, civil strikes, instability, and government repression which was further exacerbated by widespread poverty, inflation, and an enormous disparity in income and assets.¹⁰⁰ There were no simple solutions to the crises than faced El Salvador.

In this atmosphere of crisis, no issue was the subject of more worry in the Carter Administration than the rise of the armed left. By late 1978, leftist groups were carrying out kidnappings and executions (criminal and political) with “apparent impunity.”¹⁰¹ Leftist violence even reached high level government officials. In May of 1979, leftist forces murdered Minister of Education Carlos Herrera Rebollo. In June, they seized the embassies of Venezuela, France,

⁹⁷ Intelligence Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Assessment of the New Government,” July 19, 1977, NLC-24-20-3-4-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁸ Memorandum, Department of State, “El Salvador Trip,” May 16, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum, Viron P. Vaky to Office of the Vice President and others, “U.S. Policy Toward Central America: El Salvador,” December 6, 1978, NLC-24-20-4-2-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

and Costa Rica.¹⁰² Officials in the U.S. Embassy, frightened by the violence which would threaten them on multiple occasions over the next decade, considered their own retreat. Some of these guerilla organizations began formally targeting U.S. businesses and citizens. Following the strafing of an IBM building in 1979, the Farabundo Marti Popular Liberation Forces claimed that it had begun a “war against Yankee imperialism.”¹⁰³ This time period oversaw the rise of the Popular Revolutionary Bloc, a coalition of leftist organizations. According to the CIA, the group owed its incredible growth to fraudulent elections that “deprived moderate opposition groups of an effective voice in politics.”¹⁰⁴ In the Spring of 1980, a variety of leftist organizations, from the more violent, to the more moderate, joined together to create the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), a group that subsequently allied with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The armed left was coalescing and government efforts to quell those forces demanded more attention and resources than ever before.

While this situation represented a source of concern for U.S. officials, by July of 1979, it became a crisis warranting the attention of the highest levels of the U.S. government. In that month, the Marxist-inspired Sandinistas toppled the over forty-year reign of the family of Anastasio Somoza and seized power in what Nicaraguan Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo called the “worst case scenario.”¹⁰⁵ In the years preceding the successful Nicaraguan revolution, the Administration scrambled to mediate a moderate solution. The Administration attempted to do what it could to prevent the Sandinistas from seizing governmental control while distancing itself from the brutal Somoza regime, but to no avail. Thereafter, panic over another Nicaragua

¹⁰² Memorandum, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to the President, “Limiting the Consequences of a Sandinista Victory,” June 25, 1979, Box: Brzezinski Donated Subject File [Meetings—SCC 150: 3/23/79] through [Meetings—SCC 200: 11/13/79] Folder: [Meetings—SCC 171: 6/25/79], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁰³ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, National Intelligence Daily, May 22, 1979, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Some Ideas for Your Briefing on Central America and the Caribbean,” October 19, 1979, NLC-6-46-2-3-0, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

prompted increased attention for El Salvador's rising left. Throughout Washington, many saw El Salvador as the next domino to fall in an unstable region. Robert Pastor gloomily concluded "if we (and Romero) don't try something dramatic soon, El Salvador will go down the tubes very quickly."¹⁰⁶ The toppling of one entrenched Central American government encouraged the Salvadoran left. By September of 1979, Salvadoran insiders speculated that leftist guerillas had obtained approximately \$60 million from kidnappings and were using that money to purchase and store arms at a rapid pace.¹⁰⁷ "El Salvador's terrorists have compiled a series of dramatic successes against security forces," CIA officials concluded, and "are beginning to make political inroads, and are expanding ties with other Central American groups and Cuba."¹⁰⁸ Clearly, reports coming out of El Salvador could not have encouraged a Washington establishment already reeling from the "loss" of one Central American state to leftist insurgents.

If the Romero government was reluctant to institute reforms before the Sandinista revolution, they were anxious to do what they could to placate the opposition in that revolution's aftermath. Already, by August of 1979, Romero was pushing progressive reforms in his speeches. However, as Romero sought a middle ground, another enemy to his government revealed itself: the far right, for which such promised reforms represented an unacceptable concession. Here, Romero, who likened his position to being stuck between a "vise of rightist demands and leftist threats," found himself trapped: without reform he risked alienating the U.S. and exacerbating revolutionary tensions, with it, he risked losing the support of his conservative

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Owen, "PRC on Central America," August 1, 1979, Box 24: Subject File [Meetings—Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski: 10/80-1/81], Folder: [Meetings—PRC 111: 6/11/79], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "El Salvador," September 17, 1979, NLC-6-20-6-8-9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum, ARA – Viron P. Vaky to The Deputy Secretary, "Outlook for El Salvador," November 3, 1978, NLC-24-20-20-4-4-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

backers in the military and economic elite.¹⁰⁹ Nor was this push back from the right new to the Romero Administration. In September of 1977, the CIA cited military officers who were “disenchanted with what they [viewed] as President Romero’s ‘softness’ toward subversives.”¹¹⁰ At the same time, many members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces were critical of President Romero’s attempts to “appease what they consider to be ‘radicals within the USG.’”¹¹¹ A number of rightist coup plotters subsequently lined up to relieve Romero of his presidential duties. Romero found himself in an impossible situation, but this was what it meant to be the leader of the increasingly polarized El Salvador in post-Somoza Central America.

President Romero’s uneasy allies in Washington faced a difficult situation themselves. “Another Nicaragua” was acceptable to no one, but how to prevent that eventuality without abandoning the Administration’s commitment to human rights? On this question, the answer varied widely. To Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the seriousness of the threat rendered the answer clear. “El Salvador is a tinderbox,” Brown explained in a letter to President Carter, and “helping Romero may require providing him assistance to demonstrate that his ‘dialogue’ with the U.S. embassy pays dividends and looking the other way somewhat if, to offset the terrorists, he takes steps that also violate rights in the country.”¹¹² Brown went on to caution Carter from “squeezing” Romero because of human rights violations.¹¹³ Brown’s was a viewpoint that typified U.S. attitudes toward Latin America throughout much of the Cold War period.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to the President, “Daily Report,” March 3, 1979, NLC-1-9-8-19-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹¹⁰ Cable, Directorate of Intelligence, National Intelligence Daily, September 26, 1977, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹¹¹ Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, “Views of El Salvadoran General Staff Military Officers on Factors Affecting the Stability of the Government of El Salvador (GOES),” February 5, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹¹² Memorandum, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to the President, “Limiting the Consequences of a Sandinista Victory,” June 25, 1979, Box: Brzezinski Donated Subject File [Meetings—SCC 150: 3/23/79] through [Meetings—SCC 200: 11/13/79] Folder: [Meetings—SCC 171: 6/25/79], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Salvadoran Ambassador Frank Devine proposed a different view, and suggested that the Administration use the opportunity to pressure the Romero Administration to rectify its human rights situation. He suggested doing so by “recommending [the government of El Salvador] of their own prognosis” if meaningful reforms are not made.¹¹⁴ He recommended “playing upon their own stated fears that a Sandinista...Nicaragua might embolden the extreme left” in El Salvador.¹¹⁵ Thus, to Devine, the Sandinista revolution represented an opportunity. Without historical precedent in Central America, the revolution terrified Salvadoran leaders. By calling attention to the likelihood that a similar fate could befall El Salvador, Devine strongly believed that the U.S. could prompt reform in the country.

Representing a counterpoint to Harold Brown’s realpolitik, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Patricia Derian expressed her own sense of the Salvadoran situation. She suggested that any reaction that embraced the Romero regime in the name of stability would only “subvert its own goal, engender increased anti-American sentiment, undermine our human rights policy in the region and at home, and likely be a stimulus for both greater repression and greater internal polarization.”¹¹⁶ Derian cites the worsening human rights situation in the region, the extension of the state of siege, and the summary executions and disappearances as reasons to further distance the U.S. from the Romero regime. On this point, Ambassador Frank Devine seemed to be in agreement with Derian, suggesting that the “encouragement approach” only served to “affirm the validity” of hardliners within the government and without, those who have resisted reform at every turn, in addition to undermining the message of the Ambassador as well as the small moderate opposition within El

¹¹⁴ Memorandum, Patricia M. Derian to Warren Christopher, “El Salvador,” July 17, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Salvador.¹¹⁷ It would also provide the far left with the “precise identification of the U.S. government with Romero that meshes with their ideological cant.”¹¹⁸ Finally, she suggested, it would halt or significantly slow whatever progress toward reform had been made and quell any movement toward genuine elections.¹¹⁹ Derian, as Devine, saw the Sandinista revolution as an opportunity to affect real reform in El Salvador.

On July 20th, 1979 Robert Pastor seemed to follow the logic of Derian over that of Brown. Pastor explained that while the blossoming leftist popular front organizations did represent a threat to Salvadoran democracy, so too did the government’s frequent violence. Pastor explained, “[El Salvador] should announce a series of political and social reforms...and the U.S. will support them to the hilt. We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that such reforms are not necessary, or that U.S. support is sufficient to overcome the crisis of delegitimatization in the absence of these reforms.”¹²⁰ Pastor suggested “selling” these reforms to the Salvadorans with aid attached. The opportunity to do so was ideal after the Nicaraguan revolution, when Salvadoran leadership worried about the Sandinista revolution spreading across the region. Pastor continued to suggest that the U.S. should convey to Romero their desire to provide economic and security assistance if Romero takes tangible steps towards elections that included the Christian Democrats and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), and takes steps to “fully investigate any allegations of massive repression.”¹²¹ This mention of the Christian Democrats was not coincidental. Pastor, among others, saw hope in the centrist party. In particular, Pastor explained, the presence of a popular moderate party, and one led by a

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Memorandum, Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “SCC on Central America – July 20, 1979,” July 19, 1979, document sent by Robert Pastor.

¹²¹ Ibid.

popular national leader who had already won one presidential election before being exiled by the military, made the Salvadoran situation far different than that of Nicaragua. An election of Duarte as president, Pastor hoped, would “stop polarization in its tracks.”¹²² Pastor recognized it would not be easy, given that “both the extreme left and right would probably like to assassinate him.”¹²³ Pastor, as many in the Carter Administration, recognized that the real problem is El Salvador was not the violent left or the extreme right, but it was both, and the tendency of each to squelch the desperate middle.

A few short weeks later, after being rebuffed by the Romero Administration in their attempts to encourage a more conciliatory attitude, Ambassador Devine highlighted the Carter Administration’s frustrations with their Salvadoran colleagues. Devine spoke of Romero and his rightist allies as a group with an “abysmal lack of comprehension of the pressures building against them as well as a disturbing incapacity really to know and identify their true enemies.”¹²⁴ The Romero Administration’s stated solution, to clamp down on the perpetrators of leftist violence while maintaining its oppressive posture, only fed the country’s growing insurgency. In this bleak situation, Devine suggests that Salvadoran leadership “continues to cling to the hope that the United States will somehow save them.”¹²⁵ This naivety relied upon a sense that the U.S. would sacrifice its human rights initiative if the alternative was a communist El Salvador. The Salvadoran government “seemed to believe that GOES could not act to defend itself against violence and/or critical acts without incurring opprobrium under human rights policy of

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Cable, Frank Devine to Department of State, “El Salvador in the Post-Somoza Period, July 26, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

USG.”¹²⁶ While Devine emphasized that it was possible to enforce laws and observe human rights, this message was difficult to get through to Romero and his team.

The U.S. faced a stark choice, and one that would challenge American officials for over a decade. Ought the U.S. to invest in Romero and ensure the long-term stability of an anti-communist government? Or ought the Administration to stick to its human rights emphasis and disavow itself of Romero’s reputation for human rights violations. On this point, Devine and others vacillated, though facing Romero Administration intransigence prompted a more conciliatory approach. While the Romero government was “not an attractive one,” it struck Devine as far better than “any of the conceivable alternatives which we are likely to get as the result of an armed insurrection, assisted from abroad.”¹²⁷ Devine concluded, “our interest may be served by de-emphasizing the impossible, by maintaining reasonable pressure for a somewhat lesser level of improvement, and by taking such steps as we can to assist the present government.”¹²⁸ He goes on, “This clearly risks association with the unpalatable, but perhaps that risk is becoming worthwhile in such a context.”¹²⁹

Upon considering this variety of viewpoints, Carter’s team agreed to adopt a policy of offering the carrot of economic and security assistance if the government of El Salvador made some basic commitments to reform. For example, the U.S. government pushed legislative and mayoral elections for March of 1980. When the Romero Administration moved toward these elections while “stonewalling” the opposition, who consequently refused to participate, the U.S. was presented with another challenge.¹³⁰ The Romero government seemed to believe that this

¹²⁶ Cable, Frank Devine to Viron P. Vaky, “Discussion of Human Rights with New Government of El Salvador,” October 17, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Memorandum, Brewster Hemenway to Viron P. Vaky, “U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador,” October 4, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

move toward elections, however unfair, would be sufficient to justify U.S. assistance. U.S. officials did not share Romero's view. Stating that "assumptions behind our policy are no longer valid," some State Department officials concluded that the best thing to do might simply be to support a coup against Romero.¹³¹ The embassy in San Salvador had been approached by a moderate group of officers who were plotting to move against Romero, and this group cited its progressive intentions to start a revolutionary government Junta, its popularity with the Armed Forces, and ties to the Catholic Church.¹³² Leaders in the Christian Democratic Party, too, indicated that such a coup might be the best realistic alternative to the Romero government.¹³³ The question became whether or not the U.S. government should signal its support for these coup leaders. Brewster Hemenway of Derian's ARA concluded, "I can only recommend that we recognize that Romero is a dead horse who cannot be ridden to an effective democratic opening."¹³⁴ While the U.S. was not entirely comfortable with a coup against a leader who was at least hypothetically elected in a democratic fashion, Hemenway believed that a coup would be acceptable. "This present Government, maintaining itself in power through fraud and repression in a democratic façade, has no greater claim to legality and legitimacy than would a successor government which would move dramatically to open the political system."¹³⁵ Thus, to Hemenway, there was nothing left to lose.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Briefing Memorandum, Viron P. Vaky to Warren Christopher, "El Salvador: Situation Update," October 6, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Memorandum, Brewster Hemenway to Viron P. Vaky, "U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador," October 4, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

The Revolutionary Government Junta Enters the Scene

It was into this violent, polarized atmosphere that the Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG) seized power from Romero on October 15th, 1979. The first act of the new government was to decree the Proclamation of the Armed Forces, which subordinated the Constitution of 1962 and justified the coup by citing the Romero Administration's violation of human rights. In this decree, the JRG made promises that it would observe human rights norms, alleviate economic polarization, and end the violence and corruption taking place throughout the country. This decree also outlined new allowances for all political parties, the legalization of labor unions, and an amnesty to political prisoners and exiles alike.¹³⁶ Agrarian reform and a variety of other social programs, too, represented early initiatives. Upon coming to power, the Junta worked quickly to alleviate international concerns of a human rights crisis, exiling, retiring, or reassigning roughly 10% of the Salvadoran officer corps.¹³⁷ The new government also amnestied many political prisoners and dissolved ORDEN. To a Carter Administration wary of the Romero government's intransigence, the JRG must have seemed a welcome change.

What may have most encouraged Carter Administration officials was the makeup of the new government. While the five-man Junta changed three times during the Carter Administration, its general dynamics remained similar, with a mix of civilian and military elements. Initially, the Junta was made up of three civilians: Guillermo Ungo, Mario Antonio Andino and Román Mayorga Quirós and two colonels, Adolfo Arnaldo Majano Ramos and Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez Avendaño. Of the military leaders on the Junta, the Carter Administration

¹³⁶ Report, "El Salvador: New Government Promises Reform," October 26, 1979, NLC-24-20-7-10-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹³⁷ Interview, John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA, "El Salvador," 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

came to believe that Majano and Gutiérrez had “apparently clean” records on human rights.¹³⁸ Most revealing of the moderate goals of the JRG was the presence of Guillermo Ungo in the Junta. Ungo was a Social Democrat and a leftist with democratic aspirations for El Salvador. He also was a former Vice Presidential candidate of the moderate UNO in 1972, then an ally with the Christian Democrats, with whom the Carter Administration empathized. For their parts, Andino and Quirós were important members of the Christian Democratic Party.

The inclusion of civilians in the Junta encouraged Carter officials, and some government critics like Archbishop Romero as well. If this new government emerged as one more sincerely committed to the observance of human rights then it will provide “a much more internationally acceptable symbol with which other governments can afford to identify,” Ambassador Devine explained.¹³⁹ This would facilitate U.S. support. After the coup, Archbishop Romero asked that the new government demonstrate that its “beautiful promises” were not merely “dead letters,” but a “true hope that a new era has begun” for El Salvador.¹⁴⁰ Leftist organizations like the BPR, ERP, and FPL, for their part, expressed early opposition for what they termed “Romerism without Romero,” a phrase reminiscent of the then-popular “Somocism without Somoza.”¹⁴¹

The PDC, MNR, and UDN all welcomed the coup, though the PDC debated whether or not it should participate in the new government. PDC leaders wanted some assurances that the

¹³⁸ Cable, Frank Devine to Department of State, “Bio Data on Col. Gutiérrez and Col. Majano and Minister of Defense Col. José Guillermo García, October 18, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁹ Cable, Frank Devine to Viron P. Vaky, “Discussion of Human Rights with New Government of El Salvador,” October 17, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁴⁰ Cable, Frank Devine to Department of State, “Archbishop Romero’s Message on Coup,” October 16, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁴¹ Report, Amnesty International to National Sections, “Update on El Salvador,” December 14, 1979, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

Armed Forces would clearly define its political, economic, and social line.¹⁴² The PDC also wanted excluded from the Junta and cabinet representatives of private business that might compromise their mission to structurally reform the Salvadoran economy.¹⁴³ This PDC reluctance to work with private business would continue to represent a stumbling block for the party that struggled to secure the support of private business throughout much of the 1980s. Some within the party continued to oppose the Junta even after the joining of Christian Democratic members. Christian Democratic documents underscore the Party as one uncertain as to its path. Long an opposition party operating on the outskirts of Salvadoran power, the party had an opportunity to participate in the Salvadoran government at the highest levels. To what extent would this opportunity force the PDC to amend its sometimes radical critiques of Salvadoran society? PDC leaders were willing to take the chance.

With Christian Democratic support, it did not take long for Carter Administration officials to embrace the new government. In a 2012 interview, Robert Pastor reflects, “when the coup occurred in October 1979, we heard many different reports, but soon, we came to believe that the two principal leaders wanted reform.”¹⁴⁴ In fact, before the coup took place, some in the Administration were already suggesting that the U.S. throw its weight behind the Christian Democrats as a moderate solution to the Salvadoran crisis. Robert Pastor expounded on this idea by explaining that “for too long, in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, we have supported a process while no one agrees on the rules.”¹⁴⁵ To Pastor and others, perhaps the correct tact was not merely to push elections, but to mimic the Cubans by selecting a group and giving them

¹⁴² Bulletin, Partido Demócrata Cristiano, “Plataforma de Gobierno,” December 31, 1979, Folder: PDC Militante Boletín Informativo 1974, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Pastor, e-mail message to author, May 11, 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “US Policy to El Salvador – PRC Meeting on Monday, October 15, 1979,” October 13, 1979, NLC-132-78-1-2-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

everything necessary to seize power; to Pastor and others, the choice of who to support was obvious: the Christian Democrats.¹⁴⁶ Pastor even suggested to Brzezinski that U.S. officials meet with then exiled Christian Democratic leader José Napoleón Duarte and “tell him that we will give him the support necessary to reach power.”¹⁴⁷ Such a move would prove unnecessary; upon the JRG’s coup, Duarte returned home to El Salvador to help his Christian Democratic allies lead a reformed El Salvador out of this particularly challenging crisis. Less than a month after its seizure of power, Pastor glowed: “it is clear that the members of the Junta are good people and are relating well to each other and want to work with the U.S.”¹⁴⁸ When Robert Pastor met with eventual Junta member Guillermo Ungo in September of 1978, Ungo lamented that with the increasing polarization of El Salvador, the Christian Democrats were finding the middle a “very lonely place.”¹⁴⁹ By the Fall of 1979, the U.S. determined that with its support, it was about to become a little less lonely in the middle.

As a consequence, early in 1980, Carter and his team provided \$5.9 million in non-lethal military assistance, in addition to \$9.1 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), and \$49.9 million more in other economic aid to the country. In addition, Administration officials rushed much of this aid, expediting the supplying of tear gas, gas masks, bullet-proof jackets and related non-lethal equipment held from the Romero government for so long.¹⁵⁰ Ambassador Devine was promptly given authority to supply the JRG with radios, ambulances, trucks, jeeps and

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and others, “El Salvador,” November 8, 1979, NLC-15-11-5-4-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁹ Memorandum, North-South to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Evening Report,” September 26, 1978, NLC-10-15-4-13-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁵⁰ Memorandum, Cyrus Vance to The President, “El Salvador,” November 8, 1979, NLC-128-14-13-6-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

helicopters if the Junta made such requests.¹⁵¹ Administration officials quickly spoke of sending Military Training Teams (MTTs) into El Salvador to help train the Armed Forces in their counterinsurgency efforts. This aid was conditioned upon the assurance that there would be no coups against the JRG, and the Carter Administration did recognize the possibility that a right-wing coup was forthcoming given the historically conservative resistance to Salvadoran reform efforts. If reluctance to support the internationally-condemned Romero had kept the Carter Administration on the sidelines of the Salvadoran civil conflict, with the fall of Somoza in Nicaragua and the rise of the JRG, the U.S. was in the game now.

Happily Ever After?

The criticism from the left was quick. Groups like the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (FPL) quickly complained of American support as exemplifying that country's commitment to "maintaining itself as [a partner] of disorder, of oppression and exploitation."¹⁵² The left, too, resented the Christian Democrats, portraying them as shills for a military government, present only for international consumption. "Their efforts are centered in illusively promoting a feeling of electoral process," one FPL document suggested.¹⁵³ A variety of leftist sources from this time period underscore a sense of continuity between the governments of Molina, Romero, and the JRG. All were largely undemocratic, and oriented to protect the status-quo. None of these governments posed any real threat to the traditional powers in El Salvador, powers that only bolstered their own position against the will and needs of the majority.

¹⁵¹ Memorandum, Cyrus Vance to The President, "El Salvador," October 29, 1979, NLC-128-14-12-19-1, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁵² Bulletin, Farabundo Marti Organo de Prensa de las FPL, "Informativo Semanal Internacional," July 22, 1980, Box: 1980, A – 730 to 800, Caja No. 21, Folder: A-800, Asuntos Politicos – No. 2, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁵³ Ibid.



Figure 2 “Alto a las Masacres.” This cartoon, titled in English, “Stop the Massacres,” was featured in a February 1980 bulletin of the Bloque Popular Revolucionario, and depicts the Salvadoran left’s common conception of U.S. interventionism throughout the civil conflict. On the right, the cartoon reads, “Stop the Yankee Intervention in El Salvador!!”

Bulletin, “El Salvador BPR Boletín Internacional,” No. 9, May 1980, Box: 1980, A-710 to 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos No. 1 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

While the Junta’s aim was to deal seriously with the human rights crisis, many of their initial moves aimed to establish order, to its continued critics in figures like Archbishop Romero and organizations like Amnesty International, often through violent and repressive means. The Junta established a state of siege and imposed a curfew, among other restrictions.¹⁵⁴ Workers who had occupied a variety of businesses were arrested in some cases, killed in others. Some workers complained of being tortured, including one man who suggested on October 17th, “my head was beaten, I received blows in my testicles...my body was burned with cigarettes, they put

¹⁵⁴ Report, Amnesty International to National Sections, “Update on El Salvador,” December 14, 1979, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

ants on me, they wounded me with machetes and I was bound for 12 hours.”¹⁵⁵ According to an Amnesty International report, while the violence was less, 2-3 bodies were appearing tortured and mutilated per day as opposed to 10 or 11, it continued nevertheless. Many of these bodies bore the marks of the same kind of torture.¹⁵⁶ One difference was that bodies were appearing in more public places; some people or organizations were trying to make an example of political opponents.¹⁵⁷ Amnesty International suggested that some of these murders were likely committed by members of the security forces, with others being carried out by ORDEN or organizations like it. While the JRG had dissolved ORDEN, in November of 1979, ORDEN declared in the press that their activities would continue but clandestinely, “in order to help the Junta carry out the work it is not able to carry out itself.”¹⁵⁸ Amnesty International concluded, “While the killings might seem almost random, at close examination they appear highly selective.”¹⁵⁹ While the government would continue to argue that this violence originated with non-governmental death squads, Amnesty International officials disagreed, explaining that “hundreds of individual cases” attributed responsibility for violations to the work of “regular security forces.”¹⁶⁰

This continuing violence and repression prompted changes in the government. For the JRG, the violence facilitated the resignation of all three civilian members on January 5th, 1980, and some, like Andino, even went into opposition, supporting the leftists. One post-coup decree

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Statement, Amnesty International, “Statement by Amnesty International on the Occasion of the Tenth Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States,” November 19-28, 1980, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Folder: AMR 29, Americas – El Salvador, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁶⁰ Testimony, Amnesty International U.S.A., “Testimony on El Salvador,” March 1981, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Folder: AMR 29, Americas – El Salvador, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

established a commission to investigate the issue of disappearance, but its commissioners also resigned in January of 1980, citing a lack of cooperation from authorities to permit the prosecution of persons implicated in the violence.¹⁶¹ The murder of Attorney General Mario Zamora Rivas on February 22nd of 1980 called into further question the sustainability of the Revolutionary Government Junta. This assassination was carried out just days after Roberto d'Aubuisson accused Zamora of ties with the revolutionaries.¹⁶² Consequently, Hector Dada, the civilian who replaced Andino in the Junta, resigned from the Revolutionary Government Junta and he and Ruben Zamora went into opposition, siding with the leftist revolutionaries. A few short months later, his wife's denial cast into doubt the official story that Dada resigned for "health reasons."¹⁶³ His resignation symbolized continuing struggles between the civilian members of the JRG, and their feelings of powerlessness in reigning in El Salvador's spiraling violence.

In the aftermath of the death of Archbishop Romero in March of 1980, the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CDHES) again cited an uptick in violence. The murder rate increased, as did the number of political abductions. The victims were often suspected of involvement in popular mass organizations or were thought to "look like subversives."¹⁶⁴ The CDHES also reported the frequent use of torture, and the prevalence of cadavers recovered "after

¹⁶¹ Statement, Amnesty International, "Statement by Amnesty International on the Occasion of the Tenth Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States," November 19-28, 1980, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Folder: AMR 29, Americas – El Salvador, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁶² Duarte, *Duarte*, 113.

¹⁶³ Report, Amnesty International, "CASAAnytt," April 12, 1980, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁶⁴ Report, U.N. Commission on Human Rights, "Question of Human Rights of All Persons Subjected to Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment, In Particular: Question of Missing and Disappeared Persons," January 22, 1981, Box: 1981, A – 550, Caja No. 11, Folder: 550 Naciones Unidas, Convenios y Tratados a Nivel de Naciones Unidas, No. 6, 1981, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

torture and amputation, nearly always with the tongue cut out, the genital organs amputated and the entire body flayed.”¹⁶⁵ Of these victims of violence, few ever experienced justice. As the CDHES explained, for every 100 missing persons, only one or two went before a judge.¹⁶⁶

In April of 1980, Amnesty International was similarly critical of the JRG’s agrarian reform, citing violent attacks against campesinos in the countryside, many of which ended in the deaths of peasant leaders. Especially problematic was the military’s central role in the agrarian reform. As Archbishop Romero would criticize, the agrarian reform, as it was then constructed, threatened to “lead to a systematic militarization of the whole republic.”¹⁶⁷ The result could be that the land would be transferred “from one sector of the oligarchy to another.”¹⁶⁸ The agrarian reform was not affecting the kind of structural change that many on the moderate left had hoped and charges of military corruption in its implication were rampant. While the Romero regime had ended, the violence that allegedly necessitated repressive government counter measures remained, and the JRG often responded in ways comparable to their predecessors.

As a consequence, while the coup of October 1979 sparked a brief era of good feelings between the U.S. and El Salvador, these feelings of promise were soon tempered by El Salvador’s stark realities. Promised improvements in the realm of human rights were slow to come.¹⁶⁹ “They feel they can only attempt to ensure good human rights practices for the future,”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Report, Amnesty International, “CASAnytt,” April 12, 1980, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Cable, Frank Devine to Department of State, “Bio Data on Col. Gutiérrez and Col. Majano and Minister of Defense Col. José Guillermo Garcia, October 18, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

Ambassador Devine explained.¹⁷⁰ Lack of money, and a Junta that struggled to agree on things, also slowed the process of human rights and other reforms.¹⁷¹ As the JRG struggled to institute these needed reforms, they faced a hostile opposition on both extremes. The JRG faced an empowered left, eager to take advantage of the new and untested government. Continued threats from the far right, too, would represent a constant theme of JRG-led El Salvador.

As Salvadoran leaders struggled to deliver on their promises, the Carter Administration faced its own set of problems in enacting its carrot and stick approach to the Salvadoran government. Within the Carter Administration, divisions and a lack of understanding of El Salvador undercut Administration efforts. Many groups within Carter's government continued to doubt the human rights emphasis. In February of 1980, Pastor complained of the Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency that they "pretended that the problems" the Administration was having in Central America were a direct result of the Administration's human rights policy."¹⁷² Pastor went on to complain about how understaffed these organizations were in El Salvador.¹⁷³ Deputy Assistant Secretary of ARA John Bushnell would later argue, "I would be hard pressed to think of any other situation where U.S. interests were so substantially at stake where the intelligence support was as weak as in El Salvador."¹⁷⁴ Historically, the U.S. knew little of El Salvador. Since it had emerged as a Cold War battleground in the Western Hemisphere, U.S. intelligence operations attempting to better understand El Salvador's internal workings had seemingly improved little.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Memorandum, Robert A. Pastor to David Aaron & Zbigniew Brzezinski, "DR on Mini-SCC," February 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Interview, John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA, "El Salvador," 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

One man who agreed with this harsh assessment of the U.S. operation in El Salvador was new ambassador Robert White. Upon his arrival to El Salvador, new American Ambassador Robert White complained that El Salvador was “unquestionably the most undisciplined diplomatic mission” he had ever seen.¹⁷⁵ White also concurred with Pastor’s sense that members of the Carter team were not all pulling in the same direction, suggesting that many U.S. problems arose “directly out of the mixed signals we have been sending...especially to the Armed Forces.”¹⁷⁶ The Carter team’s task continued to be to isolate the extremes and bring leftists like Archbishop Romero, the MNR, and Jesuits back into the moderate fold.¹⁷⁷ Many Carter officials like White, along with the Christian Democrats, continued to believe that the right, with its violence and threats of a coup, represented a bigger threat than the left. Pastor, as White, cited the need for SOUTHCOM and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to “send a clear message” to the “conservative military” that we would not accept a coup, and that “we believe they should be doing everything possible to help the Junta” and to submit to the “rule of law and political direction by the civilians in the Junta.”¹⁷⁸ Shortly thereafter, Archbishop Romero would be dead along with roughly 60 Christian Democratic mayors and local officials, killed by rightist forces.¹⁷⁹ Not everyone in the Salvadoran government was getting the message, and the mixed signals emanating from Washington likely explain this in part.

In the face of this ceaseless violence, the Carter Administration’s selection of Robert White suggested a continued commitment to the promotion of human rights, which deeply

¹⁷⁵ Cable, Robert E. White to Department of State, “Assistance to GOES; Timing and Composition,” March 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁷⁶ Cable, Robert E. White to Department of State, “Assistance to GOES; Timing and Composition,” March 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum, Robert A. Pastor to David Aaron, Zbigniew Brzezinski, & Henry Owen, “SCC Meeting on El Salvador, Friday, February 15, 1980—4:00pm,” February 14, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Interview, John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary, ARA, “El Salvador,” 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

worried many in the government of El Salvador. Upon Robert White's selection to the ambassadorship in 1980, Salvadoran government leaders dug into his past, finding that in the same role in Paraguay, he made many enemies due to his strong commitment to defending the ideals of human rights in a public manner. Since arriving in Paraguay, Salvadoran officials charged that White used the "pretext of human rights" in order to "seriously intervene" in Paraguayan politics, in the process greatly damaging relations between the United States and Paraguay.¹⁸⁰ JRG officials, as Romero officials, though publicly professing a greater commitment to human rights norms, remained highly skeptical of U.S. efforts to affect human rights reform in El Salvador. As Romero, JRG leaders continued to see such efforts as undue American intervention in Salvadoran domestic affairs. Salvadoran government leaders under the JRG were concerned about White's tendency for human rights-based interventionism from the very start.

White did not take long to apply the lens of human rights to the Salvadoran crisis, and ultimately shared the Christian Democratic sense of the continued violence, as he tried to dissuade officials in Washington from sending American MTTs to the country. Ambassador White explained in March of 1980, "Let me say that I perceive a substantial group within the Armed Forces, especially in the High Command, that will never accept civilian leadership and who will attempt to undermine all movement towards democracy."¹⁸¹ He believed that these individuals not only tolerated far right-wing violence like that seen against Archbishop Romero, but almost certainly approved and participated in it.¹⁸² To him, the MTTs recommended by many

¹⁸⁰ Letter, Ambassador Eduardo Casanova Sandoval to Minister Antonio Rodríguez Porth, June 4, 1979, Box: 1979 A – 780 AL 804, Folder: 800 Asuntos Politicos No. 2, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁸¹ Cable, Robert E. White to Department of State, "Assistance to GOES; Timing and Composition," March 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

in the Administration for work with El Salvador's Armed Forces would only serve to validate such figures. "With the U.S. 'in the bag,' the rightwing officers will begin to press again for the ouster of Col. Majano and the PDC," White explained.¹⁸³ Continuing this stark appraisal, he suggested, "A total incompatibility exists between this reform government and the outlook and tactics of the Salvadoran military forces as presently constituted."¹⁸⁴ Of course, this fear of the right and a right-wing coup emerged to a large extent from a fear of the left. Were a rightist government to seize power, it would facilitate the victory of the Sandinista-esque forces in El Salvador. White went on, "Another argument is that everyone to the left of Pinochet will begin shouting about U.S. intervention and lump our MTTs with the rightwing murder incorporated that is operating so freely in Salvador."¹⁸⁵ The effect would be the continued filling of "the terrorist recruitment pool."¹⁸⁶ To White, the "symbol" of U.S. assistance could not be the "green berets arriving on a C-150."¹⁸⁷ U.S. aid and MTTs needed to be brought in more quietly and after the heat of right-wing violence was off or at least lessened.

The Christian Democrats shared many of White's concerns. The Christian Democrats encouraged its American allies to "follow closely" all Salvadoran military use of U.S. aid to ensure that they were not "reinforcing repressive tendencies within the security forces."¹⁸⁸ At the same time, the PDC leadership worried of appearing too close to the U.S., particularly if the U.S. sent in MTTs, fearing that leftists and rightists alike would charge the party for "welcoming in U.S. imperialists."¹⁸⁹ This fear of right-wing charges closely related to popular PDC fears that

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Cable, James Cheek to Department of State, "Views of Christian Democrats on Deployment of Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) and Security Situation," February 18, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

their civilian leaders in the JRG would face a right-wing coup, particularly one led by Major d'Aubuisson. The PDC, regularly sought assurances that the U.S. would not support the ouster of the Christian Democrats “in favor of a more vociferously anti-communist regime.”¹⁹⁰ After twenty years on the run from violence from the left and right, and the long tradition of U.S. anti-democratic action in Central America, there is little wonder why the Christian Democrats felt so insecure. Upon coming to power, the JRG promised a variety of reforms and instilled Carter officials and moderate Salvadorans alike a new optimism. However, with El Salvador’s continuing violence and polarization, and persistent wrangling in Washington over how to adjust U.S. policy, it did not take long for the harsh realities of El Salvador to dispel any notions of easy solutions.

The Central American Response to Human Rights

As the Carter Administration moved forward with its human rights policy in Central America, the policy’s many shortcomings must have weighed heavily upon the minds of officials. In some cases, the policy resulted in deteriorated relations between the U.S. and its long-time Cold War allies. In Nicaragua, Somoza had frequently bristled against the Administration’s human rights theme. Somoza continually blamed the lack of U.S. aid and the resulting cooling relations between the U.S. and Nicaragua for his inability to deal with Nicaragua’s leftist insurgents. To Somoza, the problem boiled down to America’s human rights policy and Carter’s “excessive idealism.”¹⁹¹ On May 8, 1978, Somoza explained, the U.S. had

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Cable, American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State. “Demarche to President Somoza,” February 8, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

“made its point on human rights” and “now it was time to mend our fence.”¹⁹² At this time, under fire in his own country as well as a critical international community, Somoza was eager for public support from the U.S., support that traditionally he would have received.

Nor was Somoza alone in these sentiments. Carter’s human rights policy represented the principal cause of a serious deterioration in the relationship between the U.S. and Guatemala. The government of Guatemala’s decision to renounce U.S. aid tied to human rights predicates in 1977 was but the beginning of that deterioration. In June of 1977, Guatemalan President Kjell Eugenio Laugerud denounced the human rights policy as a “sophisticated form of colonialism” that hinted at “imperialist ulterior motives.”¹⁹³ Laugerud’s successor Fernando Romeo Lucas García concurred. In a February 1979 meeting with U.S. officials, Lucas complained that relations between the countries had reached an all-time low as a result of the U.S.’s intransigence on issues related to human rights.¹⁹⁴ Guatemalan officials complained that, in fact, their government was nothing like that of Nicaragua, where “the government acts in an arbitrary form to perpetuate it in power.”¹⁹⁵ In Guatemala, security force actions were different, justified by extreme leftist violence that necessitated a government response.¹⁹⁶

Guatemalan leadership rejected the Carter Administration’s human rights policy in part because they believed that a strict adherence to human rights norms limited their government’s ability to quell Guatemala’s own growing leftist insurgency. This belief grew especially strong in the wake of Somoza’s fall. In August 1980, President Lucas lamented to U.S. officials that he

¹⁹² Cable, American Embassy Managua to Secretary of State, “Amb Conversation with Somoza: May 8,” May 10, 1978, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁹³ Memorandum, Jessica Tuchman to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Monthly Report on Human Rights,” July 18, 1977, NLC-28-10-11-1-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁹⁴ Memorandum, The Situation Room to Dr. Brzezinski, “Evening Notes,” February 28, 1979, NLC-1-9-7-39-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁹⁵ Report, Embassy of El Salvador in Guatemala City, “Informe General de la Republica de Guatemala,” February 1977, Box: 1977, A-124 to 124.1, Caja No. 7, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

was engaged in a war of his own with leftists who were unwilling to follow the rules.¹⁹⁷ Defeating them in a “clean and legal” manner was simply not an option.¹⁹⁸ He went on to say that while he desired U.S. aid, Guatemala “could and would have to live without it if in order to obtain such assistance he had to follow a course that would deprive him of the ability to utilize measures that he believed were the only means to keep the extreme left from defeating him.”¹⁹⁹

Guatemalan leaders were also confused by what they regarded as a significant shift in U.S. policy. In response to U.S. Congressman Robert Drinan’s criticism that the Guatemalan government had an exaggerated fear of communism, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Rafael Castillo Valdez had a cutting response. “All the bad things we learned about communists, we learned from you Americans. Now that you have changed your minds, you will have to give us time to readjust.”²⁰⁰ The American emphasis on rights and democracy in the face of Cold War violence drew similar anger. After the fall of Somoza, Castillo remarked to U.S. officials that “he hoped the [U.S. Government’s] democratization efforts in El Salvador would not prove to be like those in Nicaragua.”²⁰¹ The anger and bitterness in these meetings was palpable.

Relations between the U.S. and its Central American neighbors got so bad that in early 1979, rumors emerged that Somoza, Lucas and others might strike an alliance between Central America’s dictators. At that time Somoza in Nicaragua approached Romero in El Salvador, Lucas in Guatemala and Paz in Honduras to unite in the face of American interventionism. When Brzezinski got wind of these rumors, he worried about the U.S.’s worsening alienation from Central America. The Administration’s human rights policies evoked powerful tensions in the

¹⁹⁷ Cable, American Embassy Guatemala to Secretary of State, “Emissaries to President Lucas,” August 18, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Memorandum, American Embassy in Guatemala to Secretary of State, “Private Visit of Congressman Drinan,” January 23, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁰¹ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy in Guatemala, “Conversation of Ambassador Bowdler with Guatemalan President,” August 27, 1979, NLC-16-117-6-30-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

U.S.'s Central American relationships. With the American relationship with Somoza officially ended with the rise of the Sandinistas and the relationship with the government of Guatemala as chilly as ever, there is little doubt as to why many Administration officials began to question the utility of a muscular human rights policy.

The Romero Administration in El Salvador shared this distaste for Carter's human rights initiative, though key officials continually held that the government of El Salvador honored human rights insofar as it could. While the Administration recognized the importance of maintaining and defending human rights, those efforts often had to be subsumed by the greater desire to maintain the peace and stability of the nation against terrorist initiatives. "Any society in evolution and development does not conceive the existence of absolute rights," Salvadoran Ambassador Francisco Bertrand Galindo explained.²⁰² He continued, "any right has its own legislation in accordance with moral, public interest and necessities of others."²⁰³ Thus, to Galindo and many others in the Salvadoran government, in a developing society, all rights are contingent upon those rights not being used to undermine the greater good. In cases in which those rights are used to damage society at large, it is less important that the government honors those rights, than it is that the government do what it can to mitigate the violation of that greater good. In a clear reference to the United States, Galindo went on to critique any foreign country, "regardless of how powerful it may be" that would interfere in the government of El Salvador's internal affairs "under the pretext of protecting human rights."²⁰⁴ He became more specific in his critique of the United States in arguing that "El Salvador considers that these states do not have the right to stop the social and economic development of the nations and of another nation in the

²⁰² Letter, Ambassador Francisco Bertrand Galindo to Minister Alvaro Ernesto Martinez, July 22, 1977, Box: 1988, A – 800 to 804.3 Caja No. 19, Folder: A. – 800 El Salvador, 1977, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

developing process, within the international organizations, by voting or abstaining to vote in favour of the development projects that should be financed with international funds.”²⁰⁵ El Salvador was in the midst of a civil war in which many Salvadorans were hiding behind human rights to damage Salvadoran society. In arguing for the protection of human rights in the international community and thus defending those who would threaten El Salvador, the U.S. was unjustly interfering in Salvadoran internal affairs. The Romero Administration shared the anti-U.S. sentiment of its Central American neighbors.

The Romero Administration continually contended that the time for aggressive promotion of human rights had not yet arrived. “Our goal,” claimed Romero, “is the implantation of an effective and functional democracy in El Salvador” that “accommodates the idiosyncrasy of our people.”²⁰⁶ “In order to arrive at this goal,” Romero explained “we have to overcome this stage of subversion that pursues and harasses us internally and externally.”²⁰⁷ Thus, until the perceived terrorism problem had been dealt with, human rights promotion could not be a central goal. This Salvadoran government document continues along this trajectory, suggesting that El Salvador was “in front of an equation: subversion on one hand and human rights on the other. If human rights are encouraged, subversion surges on the other.”²⁰⁸ Thus, the Romero government had a different sense of human rights than the Carter Administration, which subscribed to the idea that through the promotion of human rights, the popularity of the leftist cause would be drained. On this point, the Carter Administration seems more on target. It was the Salvadoran government’s regular trampling on the rights of its citizens that fed an angry insurgency. For the government to continue to ignore human rights violations in the name of its fight with the left only further

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Report, Salvadoran Embassy Washington, July 1978, Box: 1978, A – 710 to 800, Caja No. 19, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

alienated leftists and moderates alike, some of whom could have been pacified had the government only taken more seriously charges of significant human rights violations. The Romero Administration would never come to this realization.

Not only was the Romero Administration critical of the perceived interventionism of the U.S. government, they also criticized the international press, particularly the American press. The Salvadoran government continued to complain about poor international press coverage that favored the leftists as freedom fighters rather than terrorists and conveyed the government as a brutal violator of human rights. Citing this bad press as a reason for a declining economy, this “said campaign has intensified including spreading non-existent facts making our country seem in the exterior like a nation in a state of open insurrection and violence.”²⁰⁹ One important contrast between the international press and the Salvadoran government would be with regard to the popular conception of the Salvadoran insurgents. To the former, the leftists were a logical reaction to a repressive regime, but to the latter, these Marxist-Leninist terrorists represented violent outliers. The continued tendency of the American press to “misrepresent” the enemies of the country regularly enraged members of the Salvadoran government.

It was not only the Romero Administration that had such concerns with regard to the American government and press. The JRG Foreign Ministry of Christian Democrat Fidel Chávez Mena, too, saw Carter’s human rights policy critically. Chávez Mena saw human rights principally as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy with which the U.S. could confront the Soviet Union, a tactic and tool that could secure the Administration support from the American

²⁰⁹ Report, Embassy of El Salvador in Nicaragua, “Apreciacion de la Situacion Socio-Politico-Economica y Militar de Nicaragua,” 1978, Box: 1978, A – 710 to 800, Caja No. 19, Folder: 800 Asuntos Politicos No. 1, 1978, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

electorate, while at the same time stimulating the dissident movement within the Soviet Union.²¹⁰ In this campaign, the Foreign Ministry believed Latin America was an afterthought.²¹¹ Thus, despite Carter Administration insistence, Salvadoran leaders like Chávez Mena doubted the sincerity of the American initiative, or at least its seriousness and relevance in Latin America. The response should be, according to one Salvadoran analyst, a response marked by “prudent indifference,” a wait-and-see approach to the human rights policy to gauge the degree to which the Carter Administration intended to use it in Latin America.²¹² This test of U.S. resolve was seen as preferable to opening up a dialogue with the U.S., which could send the message to the Carter Administration that this kind of interventionism would be accepted.²¹³ Upon observing U.S. behavior toward Nicaragua, Salvadoran leaders began to consider the possibility that the U.S. effort was sincere.²¹⁴

Looking back upon the Carter Administration in February of 1980, some in the JRG speculated that the Administration had gradually de-emphasized its human rights initiatives. Some in the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry suggested that at the beginning of the Carter Administration, “almost all of the political decisions of the U.S.” were decided in the Department of State and influenced by the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.²¹⁵ However, as crises like that in Afghanistan grew worse, “the issue of human rights passes to secondary interest and the question of national security rises to priority number one, with much attention in the area near the Caribbean as a region with grave internal problems that would invite the

²¹⁰ Report, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, “Marco de Referencia Para Las Directrices de Política Exterior de El Salvador,” Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Memorandum, Lic. Roberto Jiménez Ortíz to Fidel Chávez Mena, Perspectiva del Gobierno de los Estados Unidos ante la Situación de El Salvador, February 27, 1980, Box: 1980, A -800 to 804.5, Caja No. 22, Folder: 800, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

intervention or exploitation of outside interests.”²¹⁶ With this perceived turn away from human rights, there was also a turn toward the issues of El Salvador. Conservatives on the assent in Washington too, assured skeptical Salvadoran leaders that this attitude would likely remain the same, or even strengthen, regardless of El Salvador’s human rights situation. Even the “ultra-conservative” Ronald Reagan was leading in the Republican primary polls.²¹⁷ The Salvadoran government had also observed the inconsistency of the policy, suggesting that the U.S. did not use the policy in situations where their “strategic needs necessitated against it,” such as in South Korea and the Philippines. “It’s simply a tool of the United States in its struggle with the Soviet Union,” this document concluded.²¹⁸ Carter’s human rights policy represented an undue intervention, on this point Salvadoran leaders agreed. However, to many, it was not something about which to worry; it did not apply to El Salvador.

For a wide range of Central American leaders, and Salvadoran government leaders from Romero to the Revolutionary Government Junta, Carter’s human rights policy was widely critiqued. Among these various leaders, the sense that the human rights policy represented undue intervention pervaded. So too did the idea that active human rights promotion would undermine Central American attempts to confront leftist violence. Salvadoran leaders, in particular, doubted the Carter Administration’s sincerity and commitment to human rights.

Central America: From Backwater to Strategic Focus

Despite continued Salvadoran violence, polarization, and debate over the role of Carter’s human rights policy in Central America, a more optimistic conception of the government of El

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Report, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, “Recomendaciones del Primer Seminario Sobre Política Exterior,” April 1977, Box: 1977, A – 355 to 511, Caja No. 11, Folder: 500 Primer Seminario sobre Política Exterior, del 1 al 3 de Abril, 1977, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

Salvador persisted in the White House. This conception emerged in part due to new strategic imperatives that made the “loss” of El Salvador to leftist forces more troublesome, and plausible. Three events in 1979 typify the increased Cold War tensions of the era. First, the Iranian Revolution in late 1978 and ensuing Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979 revealed the limits of American power and to many, underscored the impotence of the Carter Administration. Second, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December made clear that any notion of a post-Cold War world in 1979 was premature. Third, the Sandinista revolution in July of 1979 led many to question the utility of an aggressive human rights policy when strategic necessities seemingly dictated a more realist approach.

The Salvadoran government recognized the ways in which the Nicaraguan government changed El Salvador’s position in the mind of American leaders. Speaking of the two country’s histories, officials in the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry concluded, “industrialized countries like the U.S. don’t depend on El Salvador in any way. El Salvador has long been unimportant to the United States. Nicaragua has changed that.”²¹⁹ As a result of the Nicaraguan revolution, the distant relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador was about to change.

The explosion of headline-grabbing disasters in U.S. foreign policy not only sent Carter Administration officials scrambling for answers, it also left the Administration vulnerable to attack from its Congressional critics. This was particularly the case with regard to Carter’s Central American policies, long the target of a bloc of Congressional adversaries. Somoza, a West Point graduate fluent in English, had a number of friends in Congress, friends eager to lobby on his behalf prior to the revolution. On June 28, 1978, Representative John Murphy of New York (a close personal friend to Somoza) wrote to Carter expressing “your human rights

²¹⁹ Report, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, “Relaciones El Salvador-Estados Unidos,” Box: 1980, A – 631 to 700, Caja No.29, Folder: 700 Relaciones Internacionales, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

program has caused many to view our foreign policy as slapping our friends and kissing our enemies.” Three months later, Representative Murphy, along with Texan Representative and seventy-five other Congressmen wrote the Administration again. This time, Murphy criticized the Administration for its “misguided application” of human rights that put the Somoza government at risk of Sandinista takeover. Of course, when Representative Murphy’s greatest fears were realized in Nicaragua, it only emboldened him and his Congressional allies in their criticisms of Carter. Ultimately, the criticisms of Murphy and other conservative Congressmen foreshadowed the criticisms of the Reagan campaign. Carter’s human rights policy did not have the unifying effect that he had hoped.

Despite an American commitment of \$75 million for the new Nicaraguan regime, it did not take long for persistent reports of Nicaraguan support for El Salvador’s leftist insurgents to undercut any feelings of optimism for the Sandinista regime. Even immediately prior to the Sandinista takeover, rumors of external assistance to the Salvadoran guerillas panicked Carter Administration officials. Most of these reports implicated the Cubans, though officials quickly suspected Nicaragua and the Soviet Union as well. Robert Pastor shared with others in Washington a sense that Cuban support for Central America’s guerilla groups escalated in late 1978 and continued to rise in 1979.²²⁰ The strength of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua further inspired Cuban interventionism, leading them to the conclusion that the U.S. was losing influence in Latin America and the time was ripe for increased insurgent activity.²²¹

In the aftermath of the Sandinista victory, Administration officials increasingly felt that the situation in Central America was getting out of control and no country received more

²²⁰ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and others, “Central America in Crisis: A Priority Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy,” May 21, 1979, NLC-24-8-3-6-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²²¹ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Daily Report,” July 16, 1979, NLC-2-21-1-1-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

attention than El Salvador, which was widely regarded as the next domino to fall. Shortly after the Sandinista takeover, Brzezinski requested regular reports from the CIA on subversive activities in the region. It did not take long for the CIA to find hints of foreign involvement in El Salvador. In October of 1979, the CIA reported that the Cubans and Nicaraguans had “moved ahead in efforts to strengthen Salvadoran insurgent forces.”²²² This same report spoke of the assistance of Cuban military advisers as well as indications that former Sandinista revolutionaries were migrating to El Salvador to aid their ideological allies.²²³ This latter rumor came as no surprise given the expectation of Salvadoran revolutionaries that their revolutionary neighbors would reciprocate their generous support for the Sandinista revolution.²²⁴

Persistent rumors of gun-running to Salvadoran insurgents panicked Administration officials. In March of 1980, the CIA reported arms being funneled through Panama City to the insurgents.²²⁵ One month later, reports surfaced that insurgents were receiving weapons and training in Costa Rica.²²⁶ These reports were all the more troubling given the deeply-held suspicions that high-level officials in Panama and Costa Rica were complicit in these activities. CIA officials even speculated that Costa Rica’s Minister of Security had been bribed by the Cubans.²²⁷ In June of 1980, the crash of a Panamanian aircraft carrying illicit arms to Costa Rica seemed to further validate widely held concerns in the Administration. It was becoming increasingly clear that the Panama/Costa Rica weapons network once used to supply the

²²² Report, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “Nicaragua-Cuba: Support of Central American Revolutionaries,” October 23, 1979, NLC-6-57-1-7-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Report, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “Central America: Short-Term Prospects for Insurgency,” July 1979, NLC-6-16-6-8-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²²⁵ Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “Cuba-Nicaragua: Support for Central American Revolutionaries,” March 14, 1980, NLC-24-87-3-11-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski & David Aaron, “Cuban Support for Revolutionaries in Central America,” March 18, 1980, NLC-6-14-5-14-0, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Sandinistas had been revived to supply Salvadoran insurgents.²²⁸ This realization prompted some difficult conversations in the Carter Administration upon the realization that Salvadoran guerillas were turning up with rocket-propelled grenades and grenade launchers. “You don’t buy those in your corner supermarket,” one Carter official argued.²²⁹ Clearly, these were coming from an outside source, likely Cuba, and this put further pressure on an American Administration reluctant to tie itself too closely to the government of El Salvador.

The multitude of rumors that the Cubans were behind much of this activity had wide acceptance.²³⁰ Brzezinski saw Cuba’s work in Central America as in line with Castro’s increasingly “aggressive international posture.”²³¹ Brzezinski went on: “It is clear that [Castro] has concluded that the armed struggle is his only way to gain genuine allies in the region. He is burning bridges to moderate Latin American governments...and building bridges to guerilla groups everywhere.”²³² Castro’s own words seemed to validate this interpretation.²³³ At a meeting with Guatemalan insurgents, Castro reportedly talked of first liberating “that bastion of Yankee imperialism” in El Salvador before moving on to Guatemala and Honduras.²³⁴

²²⁸ Memorandum, Warren Christopher to The President, “Arms Movements in Central America,” June 20, 1980, NLC-128-15-6-14-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²²⁹ Newspaper Article, *Lakeland Ledger*, December 7, 1980, Box: 1980, A – 730 AL 800, Caja No. 21, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos – No. 2, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²³⁰ The participation of other communist nations was less clear. The role of the Soviet Union was often discussed, though little conclusive evidence of high-level involvement beyond diplomatic and intelligence activity emerged. This did not stop some Administration officials from speculating. Brzezinski and Vance wondered if the Soviets would step up activity in the U.S.’s “backyard” in response to America’s reaction of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the wake of the Sandinistas success, as well as the recent coup in Grenada and the increasing threat of leftist takeover in El Salvador, it seemed to many a potential opening for America’s Cold War enemy.

²³¹ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Daily Report Item: Cuban Support for Central American Insurgencies,” June 26, 1980, NLC-15-9-2-8-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Certifying Nicaragua’s Eligibility for Aid,” August 1980, NLC-34-23-8-4-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²³⁴ Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “Cuba-Nicaragua: Support for Central American Insurgencies,” June 20, 1980, NLC-24-88-6-1-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

In addition to the military aid, Cuban leadership also promoted greater unity between the Salvadoran left. In February of 1979, Brzezinski cited an “unprecedented” cooperation between guerilla groups in El Salvador.²³⁵ Diverse organizations like the FDR and FPL seemed to be rapidly coalescing into a more powerful coalition, helped in part by Fidel Castro. In January of 1980, a variety of leftist political parties and guerilla groups combined their powers to become the Revolutionary Coordinator of the Masses (CRM). The group demonstrated on January 2, 1980 to commemorate the revolt of 1932.²³⁶

Of particular interest to a government pledging \$75 million in economic aid to Nicaragua was the rumored involvement of the Sandinistas in supporting El Salvador’s insurgency. While a multitude of CIA reports from as early as October of 1979 hinted at high-level Sandinista complicity in the arming and training of Salvadoran insurgents, conclusive evidence eluded the Administration for over a year. The use of mercenaries had a big role in obscuring the degree to which supporting the insurgents represented official Nicaraguan government policy.²³⁷ Warren Christopher, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, confided to the President that while there was a “very high likelihood” that supporting El Salvador’s insurgents was official Nicaraguan government policy, there existed no conclusive evidence to challenge the \$75 million grant that Carter had invested significant political capital to justify.²³⁸ By January of 1981, however,

²³⁵ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Mexico and the Approaching Crisis in Central America,” February 13, 1979, NLC-4-17-7-11-0, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

²³⁶ Duarte, *Duarte*, 111.

After violence against these protesters, PDC members threatened to walk out of government unless Treasury Police Director Francisco Antonio Moran was fired. He was not fired, and the U.S. Embassy coaxed the Christian Democrats into staying in the government.

²³⁷ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski & David Aaron, “David’s Request for a Status Report on Costa Rican Arms Trafficking, August 20, 1980, NLC-24-10-6-2-6, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²³⁸ Memorandum, Warren Christopher to The President, “Determinations Necessary to Permit Immediate Assistance to Nicaragua, in Particular the Certification that the Government of Nicaragua is Not Supporting Terrorist Activities,” August 25, 1980, NLC-24-89-5-8-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

In his book, *Exiting the Whirlpool*, Robert Pastor suggests that Secretary of State Vance delegated much of his authority on Latin America to Warren Christopher, thus explaining Vance’s relative absence from the documents on El Salvador.

conclusive evidence emerged prompting the withdrawal of the loan and a demarche from Carter.²³⁹ Some of the worst fears of the Administration were proving true. The burgeoning left in El Salvador was being bolstered by arms and training supplied by Cuba and Nicaragua. Carter's long-standing policy of non-intervention was threatened by a transnational insurgency set to make El Salvador the next Nicaragua. The FDR subsequently denied the existence of evidence that they were receiving military aid from Cuba, Nicaragua, and others. Of documents allegedly found by the U.S. proving this military aid, the group emphasized that the "falsification of documents" was a "daily duty of American Intelligence Agencies."²⁴⁰ The Carter Administration was skeptical.

Continued reports on this ongoing crisis evoked powerful fears in Washington and further divided the Carter team. Some members of the National Security Council saw themselves as caught between a dovish State Department and a hawkish Department of Defense.²⁴¹ Robert Pastor complained that the State Department's analysis of the Salvadoran crisis was "fudge" which brushed off foreign sources of the insurgency.²⁴² Pastor went on to suggest that the CIA's

Robert Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool*, 42.

²³⁹ Statement, "Presidential Determination on Nicaraguan Support for Salvadoran Guerillas," January 1981, NLC-132-183-1-4-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁴⁰ Report, Frente Democratico Revolucionario, February 27, 1981, Box: 1980 A-800 to 804.5, Caja No. 12, Folder: A – 800 Asuntos Politicos No. 3, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁴¹ Brzezinski's distaste for the dovish elements of the State Department is well-known. In one document, Brzezinski quoted approvingly Under Secretary for Political Affairs, David Newsom, who complained to NSC staff, "You must have some patience; I am dealing with a generation of leadership in the State Department who think that power is irrelevant in foreign policy." Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, "Unity and the New Foreign Policy Team," May 1, 1980, Box 23: Subject File: Four Year Goals—[4/77] through [Meetings-Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski: 7/80-9/80], Folder: [Meetings—Miscellaneous Memos: 3/78-11/80], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁴² Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Nicaragua's External Policy," January 24, 1980, NLC-24-86-3-3-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

analysis of the situation was similarly unreliable and overemphasized the role of the Sandinista government.²⁴³

1979 proved a disastrous year for Carter's foreign policy. Highly-publicized losses from Iran to Nicaragua unleashed a diverse array of Congressional critics. The fall of Somoza, in particular, laid bare stark cleavages within the executive branch, cleavages that played a critical role in the ensuing conflict in El Salvador. In Central America, allegations of subversive activities by the government of Cuba and Nicaragua only exacerbated this break between individuals who sought a return to more traditional Cold War mentality and those who wanted to continue to hold El Salvador's government to a higher standard. In the aftermath of all these crises, El Salvador emerged as a key battleground, as exemplified by the high-level of attention it received after July of 1979; the U.S. was not about to lose another Central American country to communism without a fight. The question of how to best wage that fight, however, remained.

At the onset of 1980, to many Administration officials, the continuing deterioration of the Salvadoran situation necessitated a ramping up of American economic and non-lethal military aid. The Junta underwent frequent restructuring and reconstitution in its first two years and instability proved the norm as the Christian Democrats attempted to work with their military partners. However, in the face of growing leftist insurgency, the "marriage had to survive, however odd the couple."²⁴⁴ Indeed, with each passing month, the threat from the left grew more substantial. In January 1980, the CIA concluded that "if external support for the insurgents is half of what it was in Nicaragua, the extremists in El Salvador have a better-than-even chance to

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ This was the phrase used by Christian Democratic leader and one-time Junta member, Hector Dada Hirezi, in one meeting with American officials. Cable, American Embassy in El Salvador to Secretary of State, "PDC Junta Leaders Prepared to Face Critical Period," February 12, 1980, NLC-6-20-7-10-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

seize and hold power after the anarchy and violence they will sow.”²⁴⁵ One month later, the CIA suggested that “even with substantial foreign aid and assistance the present government’s chances of surviving more than another six months appear slight.”²⁴⁶

As the situation grew more dire, American officials clung tighter to their hopes for the Junta despite seemingly long odds of success. The Carter Administration remained skeptical of the Junta’s ability to affect positive change in the human rights situation. The CIA suggested that “the military’s commitment to crack down on human rights abuses by security forces and to eliminate rightwing paramilitary terrorism—even if genuine—will at best only marginally affect the level of officially inspired or condoned violence.”²⁴⁷ Further, “by themselves, the Christian Democrats cannot arrange a political solution with leftist groups” while “the Armed Forces are set on eliminating the revolutionaries through indiscriminate warfare and probably would reject moves viewed as hampering that effort.”²⁴⁸

The Carter Administration faced a crisis. Without significant U.S. aid, the U.S. had to deal with the prospect of another leftist government in Central America. But with continued aid, the Administration compromised its cherished human rights and non-intervention policies. Ultimately, Administration officials determined that substantial economic and military aid was necessary not just from a monetary and material standpoint, but also for the continued presence of the Christian Democrats in the Junta. The Christian Democrats faced the constant threat of a right-wing coup. The military understood that without the Christian Democrats in the Junta, U.S.

²⁴⁵ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “U.S. Policy to El Salvador,” January 29, 1980, Box: Brzezinski Donated Subject File: [Meetings—SCC 251: 1/14/80] through [Meetings—SCC 299: 4/4/80], Folder: [Meetings—SCC 261: 1/28/80], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁴⁶ Memorandum, The Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Additional Information Items,” February 27, 1980, NLC-SAFE 17-D-26-29-6-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁴⁷ Report, Central Intelligence Agency, “El Salvador: Military Attitude Toward Compromise,” December 17, 1980, CIA Electronic Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000049333.pdf.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

aid was less likely. Thus, without the carrot of U.S. aid, the Junta might fall apart and a right-wing coup may follow, thus exacerbating the polarization and further challenging the Administration's ability to deal with the government of El Salvador. In one Special Coordinating Committee meeting of January 28, 1980, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs William Bowdler spoke directly to this issue, explaining that if the Junta were to fall, the Christian Democrats would pull out and the extreme right would take the reins of the government. "The difference is that we can support this government, whereas we would have real problems with an extreme right government," he explained²⁴⁹ Things became so bad, that Carter himself began wondering about what the U.S. might do if the right triumphed in its ongoing power struggle with the Christian Democrats. "We may have to support the more conservative group – then force democratic reforms," Carter wrote in the margins of a February 22, 1980 memorandum.²⁵⁰ It was an eventuality that Carter and others in the Administration hoped to avoid.

Under these bleak circumstances, the Administration adopted a strategy that would last from the Summer of 1979 until the Administration's last month in office: work toward "fast-acting" economic and military assistance in exchange for promises of gradual democratic reform. These expectations were tempered by a view that government violence was not about to stop. "We should not seek the impossible," one member of a Presidential Policy Review Committee concluded; modest reform was the best for which the Administration could hope.²⁵¹ The Administration pledged the government of El Salvador an array of things in exchange for the

²⁴⁹ Minutes, Special Coordination Committee Meeting, "Policy to El Salvador and Central America," January 28, 1980, NLC-33-14-22-3-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁵⁰ Memorandum, Cyrus Vance to The President, "El Salvador," February 22, 1980, NLC-128-15-2-16-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁵¹ Summary, Policy Review Committee Meeting, "Central American Strategy," August 2, 1979, NLC 15-28-1-2-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

JRG's modest promises for reform: from a 36-man U.S. military training team to aid El Salvador's military in the use of counterinsurgency techniques to greatly enhanced economic and non-lethal military assistance. This aid trickled in to El Salvador in an erratic stream as aid was occasionally halted by events like the reorganization of the Junta in early 1980 and the churchwomen murders in late 1980. However, the themes of the Administration's policy remained constant: the deteriorating situation in El Salvador necessitated a ramping up in America's commitment.

Reaching Out

Faced with the ever-worsening Central American crisis, the Carter Administration scrambled for answers. Nicaragua was lost to the Sandinistas, who allegedly aided the Salvadoran rebels. The American relationship with the most powerful nation in Central America and a bulwark against communism, Guatemala, was in shambles. El Salvador faced a growing insurgency that was testing the limits of the delicate Salvadoran Junta, which came to power as the crisis was reaching climactic levels. While an ever-more aggressive leftist insurgency, bolstered by outside arms and training, challenged the stability of the government of El Salvador, right-wing forces constantly threatened the Junta as rumors of a right-wing coup streamed through the American Embassy in San Salvador with regularity. In addition to all of this, continued human rights violations purportedly undertaken by members of the Salvadoran security forces made U.S. support more challenging. Was further support for the Salvadoran government in line with Carter's human rights policy? What could be done to safeguard that government while at the same time appropriately distancing the American Administration from a

situation that had drawn the anger of much of the international community? The Administration's policies evolved in an attempt to deal with these issues.

As his American counterparts, Salvadoran Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena and the JRG recognized the importance of changing the international conversation about El Salvador. Indeed, many important Latin American governments, like Mexico, sympathized with the FDR more than the Salvadoran government. The strategy would be to reach out to the other Christian Democratic governments of Latin America and Europe alike.²⁵² JRG Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena spoke of trying to overcome "opposition, skepticism, and indifference" in Western Europe.²⁵³ In discussing the challenges of this mission, Chávez Mena cited the "orchestrated campaign of disinformation" of the FDR-FMLN opposition, a campaign heavily reliant upon a critical international press.²⁵⁴

Thus, in the aftermath of the Sandinista revolution, one major means by which to deal with the deteriorating situation in El Salvador was to reach out to other countries. This effort had a number of goals. First, by 1979, its human rights violations had made the government of El Salvador an international pariah. By the Fall of 1980, Cuba, no friend of the government of El Salvador, was pushing a UN Resolution to condemn it for its continued violations of internationally-recognized human rights. The move came with wide support from an international community wary of the Central American government. The bilateral campaign to help El Salvador gain friends thus represented an attempt to burnish the government's image. Second, the Carter Administration undertook this effort out of frustration with their own failures in Central America. In a February 1979 note to the President, Brzezinski complained that the

²⁵² Report, Minister of Foreign Relations Fidel Chávez Mena, "Documentos," 1983, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

U.S. was being “dragged along by events” in Central America.²⁵⁵ “We need help,” Brzezinski confided.²⁵⁶ In Latin America, they were going to seek it from Venezuela, Colombia and Costa Rica, moderate to right-wing governments that might empathize with the plight of El Salvador and by extension, the plight of the United States.²⁵⁷ Third, the U.S. attempt to find allies to help the government of El Salvador aimed to quiet domestic critics within El Salvador. The Junta feared the “Made-in-the-USA” label that would come with high U.S. assistance levels coming unilaterally from the Colossus of the North. The Christian Democrats required a “multilateral cover.”²⁵⁸ The alternative would embolden the leftist insurgency and its leadership by validating claims that the Junta was merely a tool of U.S. imperialism.²⁵⁹ Securing allies for El Salvador made sense for a number of reasons and the Carter team and the JRG alike viewed this goal as essential to safeguarding the Salvadoran Junta.

While this effort began in 1979, it became more serious in 1980. In January of 1980, at the behest of the Carter Administration, JRG officials approached Colombia, Spain, and Venezuela about military assistance.²⁶⁰ When these requests were largely brushed off, the Administration elected to step in on the Junta’s behalf. In February, American officials met separately with officials from Spain, Germany, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Panama. In these conversations, U.S. and Salvadoran officials achieved minimal success. U.S. efforts to boast about the progress of the Salvadoran Junta met with skepticism. Furthermore, a

²⁵⁵ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Mexico and the Approaching Crisis in Central America,” February 13, 1979, NLC-4-17-7-11-0, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ In Venezuela, Carter had cultivated a close relationship with President Carlos Andres Perez, which explains in part the decision to reach out first to the Venezuelans.

Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool*, 45.

²⁵⁸ Minutes, Special Coordination Committee Meeting, “Policy to El Salvador and Central America,” January 28, 1980, NLC-33-14-22-3-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁵⁹ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to David Aaron, “Evening Report,” February 4, 1980, NLC-10-27-1-8-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁶⁰ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy Bogota and Others, “Further Follow-Up on Security Assistance for El Salvador, January 29, 1980, NLC-16-120-3-36-9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

pervasive sense of America's imperial legacy in Latin America made others reluctant to go along, afraid to face domestic backlash. While Venezuela elected to support the JRG, their slow and reluctant assistance constantly frustrated American and Salvadoran officials alike.

Many European and Latin American governments, such as Mexico, sided with El Salvador's leftist insurgents. One July 1980 meeting with officials in Bonn typified American difficulties. In late 1979, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) had withdrawn its Ambassador from San Salvador for security reasons and proceeded to withdraw its \$6 million aid program. When American embassy officials tried to encourage an FRG reversal of these decisions, they met stiff resistance. American officials worked to convince their FRG counterparts that the Salvadoran leftists were not merely proponents of greater democracy, nor did El Salvador fit the European context of Christian Democrats versus Social Democrats.²⁶¹ Rather, Salvadoran leftists were radical, violent Marxists unworthy of German support.²⁶² Efforts to win FRG support failed. Desperate and increasingly concerned about the deteriorating situation in El Salvador, Carter personally appealed to a number of world leaders through an August 1980 letter.²⁶³ This effort was also unsuccessful.

In the end, the effort was a failure and the U.S. stood alone with the Salvadoran Junta. A November 1980 review of Carter's accomplishments in Latin America by Robert Pastor was bleak. "Mexico views the region's turmoil from a totally different perspective," Pastor concluded.²⁶⁴ "Brazil is focusing on its borders and believes the Caribbean is our problem not

²⁶¹ Report, Department of State, "Consultations in Bonn," July 14, 1980, NLC-132-142-3-1-3, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy Kuwait and Others, "Message from President Carter," February 10, 1980, NLC-16-105-3-10-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁶⁴ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Accomplishments in Latin America," November 20, 1980, Box: Brzezinski Donated Subject File [Meetings—Vance/Brown/Brzezinski: 1/80-2/80] through [NSC Accomplishments—Soviet Union: 1/80], Folder: [NSC Accomplishments—Latin America: 1/81], Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

theirs. Colombia is preoccupied. And Venezuela, which is playing the most constructive role in the area, enjoys consultation, but prefers parallel rather than a common policy.” By Pastor’s own admissions, the Administration’s efforts to share the burden in El Salvador were a flop.²⁶⁵

Overwhelmingly, the cause of this failure was the negative image of the Junta, which was perpetuated by continued high-profile violations of human rights. A U.S. government invested in the long-term success of the Salvadoran Junta could not help but recognize the consistent problem of government violence. Even the CIA, whose conservative position on the Salvadoran crisis tended to focus upon left-wing threats over government violence, verified deeply-held suspicions that the human rights crisis had not improved under the Junta. In February of 1980, the CIA concluded: “The involvement of security force personnel and members of the economic elite is widely accepted and substantiated by our own reporting.” William Rogers, former Secretary of State under Nixon, commented after a December 1980 visit to El Salvador: “Right now the government had no instrument of public policy except murder.”²⁶⁶ He went on: “The prisons are empty, and there is a conspiracy of silence by the security forces not to tell who may have been involved, since perhaps many may be involved.”²⁶⁷ A December 1980 State Department paper concurred with these assessments, making the “explicit indictment” that the security forces were responsible for “much and perhaps the majority of the violence.”²⁶⁸ This bleak outlook of the government’s ability to curb security force violence pervaded Carter Administration documentation throughout 1980.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Memorandum, Memorandum of Conversation, “Summary of the President’s Meeting with the Special Presidential Mission to El Salvador and US Policy to El Salvador,” December 11, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski & David Aaron, “SCC Meeting On El Salvador,” December 11, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Several shortcomings in the makeup of the Salvadoran government exacerbated this public image crisis. According to El Salvador's ambassador to Canada, El Salvador lacked a robust foreign service to make the Salvadoran case. It lacked the "personnel, the means or access to the media to engage in propaganda activities or even respond to unfounded claims, lies and accusations which are played – and replayed to regional and world audiences."²⁶⁹ This Salvadoran official cited the work of the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador, the United States, and abroad in spearheading this anti-government propaganda. The National Council of Churches, an American Protestant umbrella group, too, led efforts to criticize the government of El Salvador.²⁷⁰ This official's opinion of these groups was low, suggesting that "they wear a cloak of legitimacy and get folks to write letters about issues and problems without having the faintest idea of what they are campaigning about."²⁷¹ The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), too, came under fire as a "mouthpiece for the FDR/FMLN."²⁷² These groups had incredible success at promoting a negative image of the government of Romero and the JRG alike. To Salvadoran and American leaders, El Salvador's bleak public image, exacerbated by a critical press, made securing non-U.S. aid an impossible scenario in the first year of the JRG government.

²⁶⁹ Report, Ambassador of El Salvador to Canada, "What is Really Happening in El Salvador or Who Speaks for El Salvadoran People," May 20, 1982, Box: 1982, A – 123 Varios al 124, Folder: 124 Informes Socio-Econom. Y Politicos de Embajadas, 1981, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁷⁰ Report, Ambassador of El Salvador to Canada, "What is Really Happening in El Salvador or Who Speaks for El Salvadoran People," May 20, 1982, Box: 1982, A – 123 Varios al 124, Folder: 124 Informes Socio-Econom. Y Politicos de Embajadas, 1981, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

An International Pariah

A number of high-profile murders from November 1980 to January of 1981 made the bilateral effort to win international support for the JRG even more challenging.²⁷³ The November 1980 murder of six leaders of the left-wing Frente Democratico Revolucionario (FDR) struck many as the work of security force members. Shortly thereafter, Junta member José Napoleón Duarte and Foreign Minister Chávez Mena admitted that security forces were responsible for the killings.²⁷⁴ What was striking about this act of violence was its brazenness at a time in which the JRG was attempting to negotiate peace with the FDR and the U.S. was pleading for an end to the violence in El Salvador. Some American officials, like Patricia Derian, saw the FDR murders as the precursor to a coup. Derian pleaded that the Administration signal its disapproval by withdrawing American aid.

While the FDR murders drew serious attention from the American embassy, subsequent violence against Americans drew international headlines. On December 3, 1980, Jean Donovan, Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clark, and Ita Ford, religious missionaries in El Salvador, went missing when Father Paul Schindler of La Libertad parish began to search for them.²⁷⁵ After contacting the U.S. Consul in El Salvador, the search was on. At 8:30pm, Schindler found their burned out Toyota Van with the plates missing. On the afternoon of December 4th, the grave was found. A report filed shortly thereafter by American officials explained: “All four women had been shot in the head. Marks of torture on their bodies could have been inflicted by gun butts. Underwear was

²⁷³ Officials like Robert White would later complain that this uptick in violence owed to the election of Ronald Reagan, which White sensed gave the green light to rightists that American aid would flow with the rise of the new American administration.

²⁷⁴ Memorandum, Patricia Derian to Edmund S. Muskie, “Response to Assassination of FDR Leadership, December 4, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁷⁵ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski & David Aaron, “SCC Meeting on El Salvador,” December 11, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

found separately. The face of one victim had been destroyed by gunfire.”²⁷⁶ A subsequent investigation revealed that villagers had found the four bodies on the morning of December 3rd. Two National Guardsmen and three civil guards who happened upon the villagers as they discovered the bodies ordered the villagers to dig a mass grave. The decision of these members of the security forces to conceal what had happened underscored to many the complicity of the Armed Forces in the murder of these women. The gruesome details of the story stoked widespread anger in the U.S. and raised questions about the U.S.’s relationship to El Salvador.

In the aftermath of these high profile murders, the Carter Administration needed to reconcile its seemingly irreconcilable goals. Patricia Derian discussed these goals and potential next steps. To Derian, two goals had overrode all others in U.S. policy toward El Salvador. First, the Administration had “sought to maintain the institutional integrity of the Armed Forces irrespective of their conduct.”²⁷⁷ Second, they had worked to empower the moderates in El Salvador and “so assist the JRG to extend its control over the Armed Forces.”²⁷⁸ The inconsistency of these goals made it difficult to achieve both ends.²⁷⁹ To Derian, the security forces “are essentially dominated by the right” and “act in league with rightist terrorist groups.” Derian went on to conclude that the security forces were responsible for “much of the killings and human rights abuses in the country.”²⁸⁰ Furthermore, the moderate military was steadily losing influence, and the civilian members of the JRG exercised “no real authority over the security forces.”²⁸¹ Furthermore those leaders who do remain “threaten the survival of the JRG

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Memorandum, Patricia Derian to Edmund S. Muskie, “Response to Assassination of FDR Leadership, December 4, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Memorandum, Patricia Derian to Edmund S. Muskie, “Response to Assassination of FDR Leadership, December 4, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

and the security forces, according to Embassy reports, “are out of control.”²⁸² Derian summed it up thusly,

We must not make the difficult and deliberate choice of risking the cohesion of the armed forces in an effort to strengthen the democratic and moderate elements within both the JRG and the armed forces, or stand aside and with our silent complicity witness over the next several weeks an accelerating drift to the right the result of which can only be the total collapse of the JRG.”²⁸³

Even the conservatives winning out, of course, would only be a temporary victory as the far left would soon take over a rightist-dominated government.

In the aftermath of the churchwomen murders, many officials, including Ambassador Robert White, shared Derian’s anger, and the Carter Administration halted aid to the government of El Salvador. The harsh actions taken by the Administration seemed to have an effect. Promises of a restructured government and a rededication to controlling the military seemed to follow, as well as shifts in military personnel. The Administration tied continued aid to reconciliation between the Christian Democrats and military members of the Junta, and in terms agreed upon between the U.S. Embassy and Christian Democratic leadership.²⁸⁴ The hope was that by tying this agreement to explicit actions, it would strengthen the hand of the PDC in its deliberations with rightist military elements.

U.S. pressure did lead to the JRG offering the presidency to Christian Democratic leader José Napoleón Duarte, who accepted the presidency of the Revolutionary Government Junta on December 22nd, 1980. Warren Christopher encouraged Ambassador White to use the leverage of the U.S. cutoff of aid to affect positive changes in the Junta. He explained, “You should encourage Duarte to aim high to attain the goals we share; greater efficiency in public

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Cable, Warren Christopher to Robert E. White, “Instructions for Ambassador,” December 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

administration, curtailment of indiscriminate violence, improved human rights performance, consolidation of reforms, and progress toward dialogue with the democratic opposition.”²⁸⁵ It seemed a lofty goal, but worth trying. While he recognized that he would wield no power over the military, Duarte did insist upon some conditions. For example, he successfully removed Vice Minister of Defense Nicolas Carranza from his position citing Carranza’s reputation for human rights violations.²⁸⁶ After this, Duarte had very little success in affecting change in the military. In his autobiography, Duarte speculates that his position was weakened by the election of Ronald Reagan in November of 1980. “The Right was getting ready to take over the government, convinced they could count on Reagan’s support for a coup,” Duarte later explained.²⁸⁷

While some within the administration saw the current cut-off of aid as necessary, others were less enthused. According to Robert Komer, scholar of American defense and friend of Secretary of Defense Brown, what the U.S. was doing amounted to “fiddling while Rome burns” with all the back and forth on El Salvador.²⁸⁸ According to Komer, the CIA and DOD were likely right that the Junta simply would not last without military aid from the U.S. Komer explained, “There is an unmistakable drift. In this case, the issue is no longer human rights but whether we’re heading toward another ‘Sandinista Nicaragua’ in El Salvador. If this happens, there won’t be many human rights at all.”²⁸⁹ The only answer was to move ahead with security assistance or risk a worse outcome for all. Komer contended that while the violence, particularly against the nuns was “disgusting,” it “should not be the pivotal event for our policy in a country

²⁸⁵ Cable, Warren Christopher to Robert E. White, “Instructions for Ambassador,” December 13, 1980, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁸⁶ Duarte, *Duarte*, 131-132.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ Memorandum, Robert W. Komer to Harold Brown, “Security Assistance to El Salvador,” January 8, 1981, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

where there were 9,000 murders last year, a higher ration of deaths to population that the U.S. had in World War II.”²⁹⁰

One month later the situation would further deteriorate with the murder of two members of the American Institute for Free Labor Development, Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, and Rodolfo Viera, President of El Salvador’s Peasants Workers’ Union, a union of 150,000 members, as those men dined at the Sheraton hotel in San Salvador. Viera was also the chief of El Salvador’s Agrarian Reform Institute, a man the Carter Administration considered the very personification of the future of agrarian reform in El Salvador.²⁹¹ According to Viera’s Chief Advisor, Viera had planned to resign in January of 1981 in frustration over what he perceived to be the rampant corruption surrounding the military-led agrarian reform.²⁹² The CIA cited concern with what impact Viera’s murder would have on the country’s moderate leftists with many of those being more susceptible to recruitment from truly radical organizations.²⁹³ In his autobiography, Duarte claims that as President of the JRG, he did his best to bring to justice the killers of these two American advisors and Viera. While he had confessions from the killers, in El Salvador, confessed killers cannot serve as witnesses and co-defendants against those men who directed the violence. “To make matters worse,” Duarte explained, one of the alleged orchestrators of the murders had been allowed to dye his hair and grow a mustache before

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Memorandum, Edmund S. Muskie to The President, “El Salvador,” January 5, 1981, NLC-128-16-3-1-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

²⁹² Statement, Leonel Gomez, Chief Advisor to the President of the Institute of Agrarian Transformation, Before the House Sub-Committee on Inter-American Affairs, March 11, 1981, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: 1 Salvador: Economic Assistance Reprogramming: 4/81, Johns Hopkins University Library.

²⁹³ Report, Central Intelligence Agency, “El Salvador: Violence Impedes Agrarian Reform,” CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

appearing in a lineup.”²⁹⁴ Despite Duarte’s best efforts, the limits of the Salvadoran justice system would foil him and the U.S. in bringing to justice well-known murderers.

In the aftermath of these high-profile murders, the U.S. challenge in supporting its beleaguered ally only grew. The pressure to support the Junta, whose role in the murders was uncertain, remained, especially as the left continued to gain momentum in the tumultuous region.²⁹⁵ In the face of the murder of the four American churchwomen, the U.S. faced a difficult choice. Cuba’s proposed U.N. resolution to condemn the violence in El Salvador went up for vote. All along the U.S. had planned to vote “no” on the resolution, convinced that Cuba had presented an unbalanced account of the Salvadoran crisis. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie was obstinate, as Brzezinski related in a note to the President: “Muskie feels strongly that, as our first official act following the murder of the nuns, we cannot vote against a resolution condemning the violence in El Salvador.”²⁹⁶ Brzezinski disagreed. The Junta could not afford to lose U.S. support in such a public fashion. When the vote came up, the U.S. abstained.

While this headline-grabbing violence certainly worsened the image of the government of El Salvador, so too did changes within the Junta from 1979 to 1981, each of which made the Junta more conservative. Among the most encouraging signs to Carter Administration officials upon the Junta’s seizure of power was the presence of Colonel Adolfo Majano in the Junta, a reformist military leader who might, Carter Administration officials hoped, bring the military under control. In the military, while Majano led the more reform-minded military leaders, Vice Minister of Defense Nicolas Carranza, a d’Aubuisson ally replaced by new President Duarte,

²⁹⁴ Duarte, *Duarte*, 147.

²⁹⁵ While some would question the role of the Junta in the murder of Viera, Hammer, and Pearlman, no evidence has suggested such high-level complicity. Furthermore, for any member of the Junta to support such violence against American citizens and leaders of the key Salvadoran agrarian reform would have been counter-productive given that securing greater U.S. support was a fundamental goal of the new government.

²⁹⁶ Memorandum, David Aaron to Zbigniew Brzezinski, December 15, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

was conservative-minded.²⁹⁷ Minister of Defense, José Guillermo García, for his part, was ambitious, and his rightist politics seemed at times to be flexible.²⁹⁸ In contrast to these other figures, Majano came to represent the best hope for progress, especially to Ambassador Robert White, who fought desperately to safeguard Majano's power.²⁹⁹

However, throughout his tenure as a Junta member, Majano remained less powerful than his military colleagues and in December of 1980 would be pushed out of the JRG after he approved a raid against a d'Aubuisson base, suspecting that coup-plotting was afoot. Upon entering the compound, d'Aubuisson tried to swallow a notebook "containing details of money transfers."³⁰⁰ Apparently, the heavily armed group did not resist, but simply tried to destroy evidence.³⁰¹ What Majano found apparently did verify the involvement of d'Aubuisson in coup plotting and extralegal violence, yet the raid also implicated a variety of powerful individuals who subsequently pushed to have Majano removed from the JRG, his actions deemed illegal.³⁰² While the Christian Democrats pressed for the prosecution of d'Aubuisson and others, the military bristled. Gutiérrez, for his part, argued that "his overriding concern was with the avoidance of a breakdown in military discipline that could lead to a showdown in the Armed Forces."³⁰³ Gutiérrez was particularly worried about the fallout in the event of the likelihood that active duty officers were implicated.³⁰⁴ While Robert White, a Majano proponent, argued for a "body blow to the far right," the Salvadoran military ensured that such a thing would not happen and disturb the unity of the Salvadoran military.³⁰⁵ According to White, Majano justified his

²⁹⁷ Duarte, *Duarte*, 125.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² Duarte, *Duarte*, 126.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

actions on the very “rational basis” that the far right was not about to stop its coup-plotting, coup-plotting that would ultimately topple the JRG.³⁰⁶ For his part, PDC Mayor of San Salvador Rey Prendes suggested that if the culprits were not tried, the PDC would withdraw from the government. A power struggle resulted, and after an unsuccessful assassination attempt on his life, Majano was removed from the Junta and subsequently exiled. Prendes and his party blinked, as would a Carter Administration utterly flustered by their loss of control of one of its allies in the Revolutionary Government Junta.

In the aftermath of the Majano crisis, some worried that the far right would grow more powerful. The shakeup in December of 1980 that prompted the ouster of the progressive Colonel Majano pushed the group in an even more conservative direction. While Majano’s ouster seemed to strengthen the position of Gutiérrez and Duarte, in fact, as officials in the CIA would suggest, “the conservative high command will continue to manipulate centrist Gutiérrez , and Duarte will likely exercise little effective control over military matters.”³⁰⁷ Following Majano’s ouster, winning support for the government of the JRG would remain troublesome, and José Napoleón Duarte would remain the Administration’s best and only hope for a reformed Salvadoran government.

Lethal Aid Returns

Concerns over a regionalized war emerged shortly after the Sandinista takeover. Citing the supplies introduced to the Salvadoran leftists as “enormous and highly lethal,” U.S. officials

³⁰⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Arrest of d’Aubuisson and Cohorts; Some Observations and Comments,” May 9, 1980, Box: RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, National Archives II.

³⁰⁷ Report, Central Intelligence Agency, “El Salvador: Civilian-Military Agreements,” December 10, 1980, CIA Electronic Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000049333.pdf.

worried that without a greater commitment on the part of the U.S. government, the Revolutionary Government Junta was doomed.³⁰⁸ However, the issue of how to support the Salvadoran government without being complicit with brutal human rights violations remained an issue. Ambassador White observed a lack of willingness on the part of the Salvadoran Armed Forces to “get tough with those who carry out the orders of some kind of murder incorporated that hires and directs death squads.” White called on the State Department, “let us be very conscious of what we are getting into here as we reverse our policy on lethal equipment—almost certain denunciations in decent countries, including our own, for close military involvement with a possibly fatally corrupt military organization.”³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, given the seriousness of the situation, Robert White concluded, in what was certainly a concession to the more hawkish members of the Administration, “I recognize that at some point reasons of state have to take precedence over human morality.”³¹⁰ To White, that time had not yet come. To many others in the Administration, however, the best of a number of bad options was to cautiously support the government of El Salvador, while emphasizing to the American people and international community alike the necessity of such action given the presence of tons of Cuban and Soviet weapons to America’s South. The alternative was the almost certain Sandinistaization of Central America as a whole.

Not everyone agreed with this tactic, especially as government violence reached a new peak in December of 1980. In that month that American Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, long highly critical of the government’s violence, unwittingly revealed his displeasure with the Carter Administration’s posture. In the aftermath of the FDR murders in November,

³⁰⁸ Cable, Robert E. White to Department of State, “Resupply of Salvadoran Armed Forces,” January 16, 1981, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

White spoke with new Junta leader and Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte. In a cable to the State Department, White said that Duarte “reluctantly admitted that security forces participated in the assassination of FDR leaders.” On December 4th, Robert Pastor cast doubt upon this assertion. “It turns out,” Pastor began, “that after serious questioning by the State Department, White admitted that Duarte had not said what he reported, but rather just acquiesced in White’s assertion that security forces were involved.”³¹¹ This omission might suggest that White had lazily worded his initial memorandum. However, given that the State Department needed to “seriously question” him before White recanted, it seems more likely that White was tired of the government of El Salvador getting away with murder. On December 11, 1980, Carter followed up on this incident by asking William Bowdler, who had recently visited El Salvador with William Rogers, how White was doing in his role as Ambassador. Bowdler responded that while White was otherwise doing well, “with the press and public statements, he has alienated some of the Christian Democrat leaders.”³¹² Indeed, White had been critical of the government of El Salvador in the press and it was not making him any friends in the upper-echelons of the Salvadoran government. President Carter suggested that the State Department relay to White that while Carter was “proud” of him, he needed to stop making such public statements. William Rogers interjected to suggest that White had always had “a capacity for self-righteousness, which could explode at different points in time.” Ten days later, Robert Pastor complained to Brzezinski, suggesting that White’s failure to meet with Duarte to discuss U.S. aid, as requested by the State Department after their December 11th meeting, was not coincidental.³¹³ White’s

³¹¹ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “El Salvador at the Foreign Policy Breakfast,” December 4, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³¹² Memorandum of Conversation, “Summary of the President’s Meeting with the Special Presidential Mission to El Salvador and US Policy to El Salvador,” December 11, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³¹³ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “US Policy to El Salvador,” December 21, 1980, NLC-17-44-8-5-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

reservations about U.S. economic and military aid to the divisive government of El Salvador had been well-established before. By December of 1980, White was seemingly tired of going along with a policy in which he did not believe. When confronted with this question over White's commitment to Administration policy in 2012, Robert Pastor did not agree. Pastor explained that White was committed to human rights, "but he was under a lot of pressure," and besides, he was not a "classic, button-down, moderate, soft-spoken diplomat," but instead "wore his feelings on his sleeve and was quite independent."³¹⁴ Pastor went on, "I viewed that as strengths, even though there were times that we might disagree."³¹⁵ An analysis of a variety of Administration documents, however, reveals a man at best uncertain of the Administration's commitment to the JRG.

Later, White would seem to lament the Carter Administration's change in tactics. "Had we been bolder [after the 1979 coup], had we been more true to our principles, then the revolution might well have been avoided."³¹⁶ He went on, "I always believed that there was a negotiated solution to be had. Indeed, I think the Carter emphasis on human rights, on agricultural reform, on agricultural reform and other reforms had on negotiations could have avoided most of the killing entirely."³¹⁷ White's analysis suggests a misunderstanding of Salvadoran history. While the Carter Administration's change in tactics, and the subsequent changes of the Reagan Administration, would exacerbate the Salvadoran violence, by 1980, for one to suggest that El Salvador could avoid much of its revolutionary violence was overly optimistic. The civil war that began in 1980 had been fifty years in the making. Regardless of the

³¹⁴ Robert Pastor, e-mail message to author, May 11, 2012.

³¹⁵ Robert Pastor, e-mail message to author, May 11, 2012.

³¹⁶ Interview, Ambassador Robert E. White, "El Salvador," 1992, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/EI%20Salvador.pdf>.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

actions of El Salvador's long distant ally to the north, El Salvador was ripe for revolutionary violence.

Amidst White's persistent dissents, El Salvador's leftist insurgency undertook its "Final Offensive." Months before it began on January 10th, 1981, the newly unified Salvadoran left spoke of the "final phase" of its military campaign against the government.³¹⁸ A few key reasons explain the offensive's timing in January. First, there was a popular sense among leftist leaders that the Salvadoran government's military forces were overstretched.³¹⁹ Second, many leftist leaders were concerned with what they perceived to be the more muscular rhetoric of the incoming Reagan Administration. In her work, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States*, historian Cynthia Arnson describes a scene in which FMLN guerilla commander Fermán Cienfuegos told Mexican reporters that the rebels would "present the incoming Reagan Administration with an 'irreversible situation.'"³²⁰ If campaign rhetoric was any indication, the Reagan Administration hoped to fortify the Salvadoran government's position. The Salvadoran left needed to do what it could to make the Administration's job more difficult. The goal of the leftists was to lead a general offensive across the country in an attempt to seize a range of cities and military targets. These military actions were to be accompanied by a general strike, both of which, leftist leaders hoped, would lead to a more widespread insurrection. When the fighting began, it would last only a week. Overwhelmingly, the Armed Forces beat back the leftists, and the general strike and mass uprising would not materialize as hoped. In the end, the leftists had been overambitious and mistimed their "final" offensive, though the damage done to government forces was substantial enough to call into question the government's long-term durability, particularly as the fighting further taxed Salvadoran supply lines. As the government of El

³¹⁸ Dunkerly, *The Long War*, 176.

³¹⁹ Dunkerly, *The Long War*, 175.

³²⁰ Arnson, *El Salvador*, 68-69.

Salvador teetered on the brink, the JRG reached out to the U.S. government once again. Immediate lethal military assistance was required, lest the government of El Salvador fall to leftist forces and become the “next Nicaragua.”

Thus brought about a major policy change, just weeks before the Administration was to leave office. In a memorandum on January 14, 1981, Brzezinski reached out to Carter, pleading with him to approve immediate lethal military aid, arguing, “at stake is essentially the very concept of your policy for Central America: that we resolve long overdue inequities (Panama Canal Treaties, land reform, democratization) but without handing the region over to Castro.”³²¹ To Brzezinski and others, Castro was looming, as were the Sandinistas, as the left battered government forces. On the morning of January 16, 1981, Brzezinski met with Carter for breakfast. It was then that Carter made the decision that he had been putting off for four years, to reinstitute \$5 million in lethal military aid to a government whose human rights violations abhorred much of the international community and many members of the Administration. Carter also reinstated the \$5 million in non-lethal military aid halted due to the churchwomen murders of December of 1980. Carter did these things over the objections of Ambassador Robert White and a number of State Department officials including Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Patricia Derian.

Shortly thereafter, the Administration issued a Presidential Determination which justified the immediate military assistance and its circumvention of the Congressional oversight provided by the Arms Export Control Act. Carter cited the need for such assistance given the “unforeseen emergency” in El Salvador. In a conversation with Junta leaders, Carter Administration officials promised the Junta that in the Presidential Determination, the Administration would not reveal

³²¹ Memorandum, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The President, “Military Assistance for El Salvador,” January 14, 1981, NLC-15-99-1-4-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

just how bad the situation had gotten in El Salvador; after all, the Junta hoped to project the image that they had everything under control. If the Presidential Determination that resulted was circumscribed in this respect, it only further speaks to how desperately the Administration viewed the situation. “These...attacks have been intense, widespread, and have severely taxed the capabilities of the Government of El Salvador to defend itself.” Carter continued, “The situation in El Salvador is critical and if we wish to prevent the guerillas from toppling the government we support, we must respond rapidly.”³²² The determination went on to discuss the bleak situation for the government forces, forces that were running out of ammunition. It emphasized the role of outside forces in bolstering the leftist insurgents. Finally, it outlined the contents of the aid: grenade launchers, helicopters, rifles, ammunition, helmets, flak vests and 22 personnel for the maintenance and training of this equipment. It took almost four years, but the Carter Administration made a significant reversal that day. After years of ramping up support for a government whose human rights violations constantly brought contradictions within the Administration into view, the Administration elected to immediately provide El Salvador’s government Junta with lethal military aid of roughly \$10 million and 19 U.S. military advisers.

By 1981, in the ongoing debate between the Administration’s human rights advocates and its more hawkish Cold Warriors, the Cold Warriors had won. Throughout the course of Carter’s term, he and his team tried desperately to balance its two central concerns: to promote in meaningful ways greater justice in El Salvador while at the same time maintaining the country as a non-communist ally in an increasingly tumultuous region. The result was a meandering policy in which non-lethal military aid was promised one week, and withheld the next, as unspeakable violence committed by El Salvador’s Armed Forces continued unabated despite El Salvador’s

³²² “Justification for Presidential Determination to Authorize the Furnishing of Immediate Military Assistance to El Salvador,” January 1980, NLC-15-99-1-4-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

change in government. This meandering policy evoked confusion in many Salvadoran leaders and frustrated hawks like Defense Secretary Harold Brown. What the Administration ultimately found was that balancing these disparate concerns was simply impossible. Safeguarding the JRG from leftist revolution meant working with a government unable and seemingly unwilling to affect real change in its regular, well-documented military abuses. Even in those cases when American pleas to reform may have convinced more moderate government leaders like Duarte and Majano, these men had limited power to affect real change, and less incentive to attempt to do so given the ongoing threats of rightist and leftist violence alike. By 1980, El Salvador's was a government utterly crippled by that country's increasing polarization. The idea that the Carter Administration could affect positive reform in such a place was overly optimistic, a fact that by January of 1981, many likely realized. Flawed as it was, in January of 1981, the Carter Administration opted to save the JRG from a near-certain Somoza-like fall. Carter and his team opted to save the devil that they knew, a decision that would have profound consequences.

Conclusion

On March 11, 1980, at the President's behest, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance penned a letter to Archbishop Oscar Romero in response to Romero's letter in February of that year. In his letter, Vance expressed appreciation for the many shared views held between the Archbishop and the American President. "As you note," Vance explained, "the advancement of human rights has been and remains one of the principal foreign policy goals of our government."³²³ "I assure you that it underlies every aspect of United States policy toward El Salvador."³²⁴ Vance went on to express the Administration's profound belief that the Salvadoran Junta was moderate and

³²³ Letter, Cyrus Vance to Archbishop Oscar Romero, March 11, 1980, Box 20: National Security Affairs Brzezinski Material Country File Egypt-El Salvador, Folder: El Salvador 3/80, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

³²⁴ Ibid.

reformist. American aid, which was overwhelmingly economic, was directed at “helping the government to defend and carry forward its announced program of reform and development.”³²⁵

Vance closed by thanking Romero for sharing his concerns. Two short weeks later, Archbishop Romero would be dead, murdered at the hands of members of the security forces.

The United States did not murder Archbishop Romero, as Cuban propaganda would later suggest. Nor did the U.S. cause Romero’s death. However, the death of Archbishop Romero shortly after he appealed to the U.S. government to halt its support of the Salvadoran government underscored stark challenges for U.S. policy. How ought the U.S. to balance its professed commitment to democracy and human rights with its very real strategic concerns? How ought the U.S. to approach a weak and unstable government, seemingly unable to halt military violations of human rights, yet at the same time outwardly committed to democratic reform?

What we see in the Carter Administration’s policy toward El Salvador is a gradual reversal. Carter’s human rights policy in El Salvador always had a heavy strategic component that allowed for human rights imperatives to be overtaken by Cold War goals in situations deemed significant Cold War crises. And so the Administration’s missionary rigor in supporting human rights in El Salvador seemingly gave way to the very real strategic concerns surrounding the rise of the Sandinistas and Cuba’s growing role in the region. Nor did the shortcomings of a policy that enraged Central America’s anti-communist dictators endear that policy to Carter’s increasingly noisy domestic critics. Further explaining the Administration’s behavior was its genuine, resilient belief in the reformist intentions of the moderate Christian Democrats. During some of the worst violence of the Salvadoran civil war, Department of State officials suggested, “We continue to work on the hypothesis that the Christian Democrats...are our best hope and

³²⁵ Ibid.

virtually only middle ground.”³²⁶ This quote typified the attitude of a disparate array of Carter officials, from Robert White to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Cyrus Vance to Carter himself.

By the time the Carter Administration left office, whether or not the Christian Democrats would live up to the hopes of the Administration remained unclear. So too did the degree to which lethal U.S. aid would affect the ongoing crisis in El Salvador. By January 21st of 1981, only one thing was clear with regard to U.S.-Salvadoran relations: newly inaugurated President Ronald Reagan had inherited an awful mess.

³²⁶ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy in El Salvador, “Current Crisis: U.S. Policy Options,” December 1, 1980, NLC-16-121-4-1-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Chapter 3

Two-Front War: The Reagan Administration Confronts the Salvadoran Crisis, 1981-1982

“We are hostage to malevolent forces seemingly beyond our control,” Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, February 1st, 1982¹

Massacre in No Man’s Land

It was 12:45am on Tuesday, April 7th, 1981 and for the Rosales family of San Salvador, El Salvador, life was about to change. It had not been a restful night sleep for the Rosales’ daughter, who awoke to the screams of young men in the street. “Don’t take me!” the voices cried out into the night.² Given the nature of the San Salvadoran neighborhood of Soyapango, this distressing incident transpiring outside the Rosales’ door might not have been so shocking. Soyapango was a poor, working class suburb, described by one neighborhood family as “a kind of no man’s land savagely contested by both leftist terrorists and security forces.”³ What was occurring outside the Rosales door was but one small manifestation of the broader civil conflict which had enveloped El Salvador. Some of her neighbors outside were likely being arrested, but the young Ms. Rosales shut her eyes and went back to sleep. If she closed her eyes tight enough, if she kept her head down, she and her family would be left alone. Or so Ms. Rosales and many of her fellow Salvadorans hoped every day.

¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Saving El Salvador,” February 1, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Killings in Soyapango,” April 8, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. This account of the events of the morning of April 7th in Soyapango are based on this embassy report, filed shortly after the incident in Soyapango, and based on first-person retellings of what occurred in those early morning hours.

³ Ibid.

For the Rosales family, those hopes would be dashed when three pick-up trucks filled with heavily armed men stopped outside, the men rushing the Rosales house. The family awoke to a pounding at the door. Shortly thereafter, gunshots rang out as the Rosales' door was riddled with bullets. The men, led by one man wearing a hood, rushed into the house. The hooded man pointed to Ms. Rosales' brother who was seized and taken outside. It was the last time the Rosales family would see him alive. The next morning, Ms. Rosales struggled to explain what had happened to American embassy officials. Ms. Rosales' brother did not even have leftist ties. "He was just looking for work," she explained.⁴

The Rosales family was not the only one that suffered tragedy that night. Another eyewitness recalled a neighbor taken from his home, yelling out for the street lights to be turned on so he could see what was happening. He was beaten, then shot five times. Another young man had been shot three times in the chest, his testicles cut off and placed on top of his body. One house erupted in fire, either from a purposeful explosion or wayward gunfire piercing flammable material. At the end of the night, twenty-four people had been killed.

In the aftermath of this vicious and brutal violence, two narratives emerged to explain what had happened. The Salvadoran Treasury Police claimed that it had been part of a shootout that night, in which it had exchanged gunfire with leftist guerillas along Calle Principal. Lieutenant Colonel Mario Denis Moran, Director of the Treasury Police, alleged that he deployed a team of men to seize a small group (6 to 7 men) of FPL and ERP leaders whom his intelligence suggested were meeting in an area home.⁵ As the Treasury Police surrounded the home, guerilla guards attacked them. In the wake of the shootout, the Treasury Police retreated to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Interview with Lt. Col. Moran, Director of the Treasury Police," April 10, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

safety to deal with its wounded. It was at that point, Moran alleged, that the guerillas carried their dead to various parts of the street “removing clothing and mutilating some to make it appear the scene of an atrocity.”⁶

Shortly after the incident took place, the American embassy, recently re-constituted by the newly sworn-in Reagan Administration, scrambled to make sense of what had occurred. For an Administration that had committed itself to supporting the government of El Salvador against its leftist insurgency, a security force-led massacre less than three months into its term could prove disastrous. Securing hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and military aid for a government whose human rights record appalled much of the international community and vast swaths of the American people was already going to be challenging. Steady human rights progress, or at least the appearance of progress, would be necessary if the Reagan Administration hoped to win Congressional support for their Salvadoran policy.

With these concerns in mind, Reagan Administration officials were likely distressed to read their Embassy’s analysis of what transpired in Soyapango. The official Salvadoran government narrative contrasted markedly with that of eyewitnesses and members of the international media who were quick on the scene. Theirs was not a narrative of two equal forces, but a massacre in which security forces dragged innocent victims from their homes and killed them. Clearly, one of these narratives badly misrepresented what had occurred that night. On April 8th, the Embassy concluded that “the discrepancies between [the Treasury Police] communiqué and eyewitness reports are impossible to reconcile, but the eyewitnesses are more credible.”⁷ Embassy officials indicated that the bullet holes suggested that there had been

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Killings in Soyapango,” April 8, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

“massive firing by those security elements seeking to enter the houses.” Furthermore, many of the victims had seemingly been bound prior to their deaths. The brother of Ms. Rosales was photographed “with his shirt on but also to have a teeshirt around his neck as though his head might have been covered at the time of his death.” One day later, L. Paul Bremer, Executive Secretary to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, confided that “it is becoming more apparent that some indiscriminate executions probably took place.”⁸ On April 16th, Richard Allen, Reagan’s National Security Adviser, wrote to the President that the operation “got out of hand, and the police killed (more precisely executed) a number of innocent bystanders.”⁹ The incident in Soyapango that night had been a massacre. It marked an inauspicious start for the new Administration, so eager to aid the Salvadoran government in its war against leftist insurgents.

An examination of the Reagan Administration’s correspondence in the aftermath of the Soyapango massacre reveals a bleak outlook toward their Salvadoran partners. Several Administration officials demonstrated a belief that such incidents had happened before and were likely to happen again. “This event differs from similar ones which regularly take place in El Salvador only in scope and notoriety,” the Embassy concluded.¹⁰ The difference with the Soyapango violence was not the level of violence nor strategy implicit in the behavior of government forces. Rather, the difference was the presence of members of the international press close by in San Salvador. This time the world knew about it.

⁸ Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer, III to Richard V. Allen, “April 7 Treasury Police Killings in Soyapango,” April 9, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁹ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to The President, “Soyapango Killings in El Salvador: Fallout,” April 16, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Killings in Soyapango,” April 8, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

It was this aspect of Soyapango that seemed to most trouble Reagan officials trying to construct a Salvadoran policy distinct from their predecessors. Richard Allen lamented that “Whatever the final outcome of the Soyapango killings, it is likely its effect will make our position on El Salvador more difficult.”¹¹ How was the Administration to win support for the government of El Salvador in the U.S. and abroad when such incidents were appearing in the international press? Not only did Administration officials know that such incidents regularly occurred in the past, they were certain that similar incidents would occur in the future. Even Salvadoran officials conceded this reality. In a meeting with Embassy officials, Junta member Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez Avendaño, suggested that a similar incident was sure to occur “sooner or later” because the Treasury Police was undermanned and overtaxed in its counterinsurgency efforts.¹² This troubling reality made the Administration response to the Soyapango massacre all the more important.

Administration officials, however, were quick to rationalize security force behavior. The Treasury Police, in particular, had a brutal history of unlawful violence and was “almost certainly responsible” for the murder of the four American churchwomen.¹³ However, “civil wars bring out the worst in a society,” according to Richard Allen, and across Latin America, “terrorist warfare caused the breakdown of centralized control of the security forces.” Furthermore, Salvadorans were simply accustomed to this kind of violence. The Embassy explained,

¹¹ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to The President, “Soyapango Killings in El Salvador: Fallout,” April 16, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Vice President Gutiérrez and the Murder Cases and the Soyapango Incident,” April 23, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to The President, “Soyapango Killings in El Salvador: Fallout,” April 16, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

This 'anti-subversive' action is typical of the killing occurring daily at the hands of security forces. It has drawn more attention and complaint we believe, outside El Salvador, than within this country, where savagery of this kind has become routine. The revulsion one might expect with this kind of act is not widespread.¹⁴

This sense that violence was in ways inherent to Salvadoran society and culture permeates many Reagan Administration documents, and is repeated as an idea by an array of Administration figures. Administration officials tended to be critical of victims of government violence as well, in the case of Soyapango, as in other cases of government violence. One can see this in the responses of certain officials to the churchwomen murders in December of 1980. To Haig, the churchwomen had "[run] a roadblock," while Jeane Kirkpatrick referred to the churchwomen as "political activists" associated with the leftist cause.¹⁵ In Soyapango, civilians too close to leftists found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When the State Department prepared Embassy officials for their meeting with Salvadoran leaders to discuss the Soyapango massacre, Administration officials pushed the importance of El Salvador's international image. Embassy officials were encouraged to be "non-confrontational" in meetings with Junta leader José Napoleón Duarte, Junta member Gutiérrez, and Minister of Defense, José Guillermo García.¹⁶ "You should tell them that events of this kind risk losing the war in the U.S. and could easily lose it in El Salvador," Haig suggested. He continued, "You should say that the U.S. public and Congress will be watching closely how [Salvadoran government] responds." A number of officials encouraged Embassy officials to convey to Salvadoran leadership the importance of protecting the international media in El Salvador from

¹⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Interview with Lt. Col. Moran, Director of the Treasury Police," April 10, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵ Duarte, *Duarte*, 149.

¹⁶ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, "April 7 Treasury Police Killings in Soyapango," April 8, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

security force violence.¹⁷ Many officials foresaw a media firestorm similar to the one that surrounded the death of Bill Stewart in Nicaragua, should a member of the international press be injured, kidnapped, or killed by Salvadoran security forces. The murder of ABC's Bill Stewart by the Nicaraguan National Guard "destroyed whatever sympathy or even neutrality remained toward Somoza by the U.S. media."¹⁸ This was something that the Reagan Administration needed to avoid if it hoped to win support for its Salvadoran policy, seen as essential to the long-term survival of the government of El Salvador and the defeat of the leftist insurgency. In conversations like these, it seems clear that to many in the Reagan Administration, government violence was less troubling than the negative international reaction that the violence provoked.

Ultimately, the Soyapango massacre forced the Reagan Administration to make some difficult choices regarding its Salvadoran policy at the onset of its first term. Reagan and his political allies had long criticized the Carter Administration for its failure to sufficiently support our besieged allies in Central America and across the world.¹⁹ Carter's short-sighted insistence on human rights progress in countries besieged by leftist guerillas risked losing teetering nations like El Salvador. However, how would the Reagan Administration respond to such distressing incidents of government violence? What moves would it make to discourage similar acts in the future? For the Reagan Administration, its initial answers to these questions came in April of 1981 as it scrambled to address the Soyapango massacre, an incident the Administration viewed as a "watershed event" for its Salvadoran policy.²⁰ The U.S. would maintain a non-confrontational stance toward the government of El Salvador and hold tight to its financial

¹⁷ Memorandum, Roger Fontaine to Richard V. Allen, "Soyopango Killings in El Salvador," April 10, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Abrams suggested as much during my recent interview with him.

²⁰ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to The President, "Soyapango Killings in El Salvador: Fallout," April 16, 1981, Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, El Salvador Box 30, Box 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

promises to El Salvador, in contrast to the more wavering financial commitments of the Carter Administration. It would press the government of El Salvador to address its behavior lest that behavior negatively affect American perceptions of the Salvadoran government. It seemed a calculated and cynical political move, but could it work?

Reagan's Human Rights

What place would human rights have in Reagan's Central American policy? While the answer to this question was still being formulated as Reagan hit the campaign trail in 1980, many Central American leaders felt that they knew what to expect: a de-emphasis on human rights and a renewed commitment to anti-communism throughout Latin America. These expectations troubled Carter Administration officials and in their view, constrained their ability to act. In August of 1980, retired Foreign Service Officer John Dreyfuss and Southcom Commander General Wallace Nutting led a mission to Guatemala to impress upon President Fernando Romeo Lucas García the need to confront his government's human rights abuses. In this, the diplomatic mission failed. "He said he was engaged in a 'war' with subversive leftists who did not follow the rules," the Embassy review reported, and "there was no possibility of defeating them in a 'clean and legal manner.'"²¹ This obstinance in the face of Carter Administration pressure had long typified Guatemala's posture toward the U.S., but this time it was different. Lucas felt that if he simply outlasted Carter's term, he would get a different response from Washington. Lucas felt that Reagan was not only sympathetic to Guatemala's plight, but Reagan would support his conduct of the war, alleged human rights violations and all.²²

²¹ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, "U.S. Policy to Guatemala – SCC (I) Recommendations and Next Steps," August 20, 1980, NLC-24-89-7-1-0, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²² Ibid.

A similar theme emerged in U.S.-Salvadoran relations. “The right-wing, with the acquiescence of the high command, is trying to squeeze out what remains of the middle and exterminate the left,” Carter’s National Security Adviser on Latin America and the Caribbean, Robert Pastor, predicted.²³ However, Administration efforts to put a stop to the extermination and right-wing seizure of power were compromised by the looming Presidency of Ronald Reagan. “[The right-wing] is encouraged by Reagan’s election,” Pastor continued, and “believe that even though Reagan might not like the killings, he will support them.”²⁴ To Central America’s right-wing leaders, the Reagan Administration would not emphasize human rights in his foreign policy and would privilege anti-communist counter-insurgency above all else.

One thing was clear: Reagan’s conception of human rights was distinct from that of his predecessor. Reagan Administration officials made no claims that human rights represented the “soul” of U.S. foreign policy. Secretary of State Haig was explicit in this distinction. “International terrorism will take the place of human rights...because it is the ultimate abuse of human rights,” Haig claimed, signaling the Administration’s focus upon leftist insurgents rather than abusive governments. So while human rights and its centrality in U.S. foreign policy was a constant talking point of Carter on the campaign trail and in office, Reagan’s words on the topic were far more limited. In contrast to Carter, Reagan did not dedicate any major speeches to the topic of human rights, nor did his Administration produce any major reports on how the concepts of human rights would play into U.S. foreign policy. To deduce Reagan’s concept of human rights, one need only examine his intellectual allies on the subject and then analyze how those ideas are incorporated into policy decisions.

²³ Memorandum, Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, “El Salvador at the Foreign Policy Breakfast – December 5, 1980,” December 4, 1980, Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²⁴ Ibid.

The work of Jeane Kirkpatrick, scholar of political science and eventual Ambassador to the United Nations, and its reception by Reagan can tell one much about how the President conceived of human rights. In Kirkpatrick's November of 1979 essay in *Commentary* magazine, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," she criticized Carter's foreign policy and in particular, the Carter Administration's role in facilitating the toppling of pro-American leaders in Iran and Nicaragua by more leftist, anti-American oppositions. Kirkpatrick's essay depended upon a distinction between traditionalist, authoritarian states and radical, totalitarian states. Kirkpatrick cited the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Somoza's Nicaragua as traditional authoritarian states in which traditions were valued, wealth, power, and status were concentrated, but the "habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations" went undisturbed.²⁵ In contrast, totalitarian regimes, exemplified by communist Cuba, claimed jurisdiction over the whole life of the society" and "make demands for change that so violate internalized values and habits that inhabitants flee by the tens of thousands."²⁶ While the former tolerated social inequalities, brutality, and poverty, the latter created them.

In addition to this sense of the levels of human suffering associated with each system, a realist line pervades much of Kirkpatrick's analysis. To push regimes like Somoza's toward democratic change was not simply wrong-headed, it was counter to American interests. Authoritarian regimes, like that of Somoza, were friendly to U.S. interests. Their leaders were anti-communist, and "regularly supported American interests and positions even when these

²⁵ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November, 1979.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

entailed personal and political cost.”²⁷ Strategically, pushing our authoritarian allies toward progressive reform was risky and in many cases, counter-productive.

What did this distinction mean for the employ of human rights in U.S. foreign policy? Kirkpatrick’s analysis suggests that pushing our concerns on our authoritarian allies should only be done cautiously and in many cases not at all. For starters, the abuses of authoritarian governments, while they would not stand the test of American values, are something to which their victims are accustomed. Kirkpatrick explains, “Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill.”²⁸ The victims of authoritarian oppression are simply acclimated to their hardships. Pushing for progress in such a case seems less vital. Kirkpatrick goes on to discuss that there is a time and place for the U.S. to encourage the progress of liberalization and democratization. The U.S. could, in some cases, play such a role, Kirkpatrick concedes. However, Kirkpatrick warns against any effort that is made at a time in which “the incumbent government is fighting for its life against violent adversaries.”²⁹ To Kirkpatrick, such encouragement was more appropriate when the country was more stable and at peace. In places like El Salvador and Guatemala in the late Cold War period, the time was simply not right.

This essay spoke directly to how Reagan, the presidential candidate, viewed the world, human rights, and its place in U.S. foreign policy. Reagan was so impressed by “Dictatorships and Double Standards” that once elected, he reached out of his party and named Kirkpatrick, then a Democrat, Ambassador to the United Nations.³⁰ When the Reagan Administration

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 85.

discussed human rights crises in El Salvador, Central America, and across the world, Kirkpatrick often had a place at the table. As a consequence, this uneven analysis of human rights became core to Administration policy as officials highlighted leftist abuses in El Salvador and Nicaragua while downplaying those abuses of rightist governments like those of El Salvador and Guatemala.

While Reagan's admiration for "Dictatorships and Double Standards" and his subsequent allegiance to Jeane Kirkpatrick underscored his belief in the limited espousal of human rights in state-to-state relations, the words and ideas of former Reagan Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Elliott Abrams, speaks to Reagan's narrow definition of human rights. Elliott Abrams, perhaps most well-known for his neoconservative roots and involvement in the Iraq War, discussed the Reagan Administration's conception of human rights in a 2009 article for *National Review Online*. In it, Abrams condemns the idea that human rights includes economic and social rights as a communist effort to obscure the true nature of human rights and excuse their own shortcomings in instituting and upholding basic political rights. "Communist officials" worked to demonstrate that the "really important human rights were not the freedoms the West kept talking about, but the 'social rights' guaranteed (well, on paper anyway) in the Socialist bloc."³¹ Throughout the 1980s, Abrams says, the Reagan Administration spent a good deal of time debunking these claims.³² To Abrams, "human rights" meant political rights, not social or economic rights and indeed, the latter flowed from the former. This narrow conception of human rights permeated the Reagan Administration and accounts in large part for the Administration's early behavior. Abrams' analysis explains both the Administration's

³¹ Elliott Abrams, "The Soviet Standard Returns," *National Review Online*, August 26, 2009. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/228124/soviet-standard-returns/elliott-abrams#>.

³² Ibid.

emphasis on elections in El Salvador and also the Administration's initial discomfort with that country's agrarian and other economic reforms.

This narrow conception of human rights in which human rights was subsumed to broader concerns of leftist terrorism represented the key ways in which the Reagan team's human rights outlook contrasted with its predecessors. Ultimately, the human rights program of Kirkpatrick and others in the Reagan Administration represented an attempt to maintain the image of a country for which human rights was an important concern, but without the problematic aspects of a robust human rights program. Human rights could not get in the way of other strategic concerns, and could not make more challenging the U.S. relationship to its allies. Maintaining this veneer while returning to more traditional Cold War concerns would prove more challenging than Kirkpatrick and others anticipated.

“A Mess In Our Own Backyard”³³

“This message contains my first personal assessment of the situation in El Salvador. It's bad. The war is not being won, and in a close call, I conclude that unless new measures are adopted it may eventually be lost.” – Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, June 24th, 1981³⁴

By the time Ronald Reagan took the oath of office, deepening economic crisis in El Salvador was exacerbating an already violent civil conflict. The dire nature of El Salvador's economic scene represented one of the most serious concerns of the new Administration. If the Reagan team hoped to stymie leftist insurgency in El Salvador, the plummeting Salvadoran economy required stabilization. The “lost decade” of economic development in Latin America,

³³ National Security Adviser Richard Allen uttered this phrase in a February 25, 1981 memo claiming, “[El Salvador] is somewhat like the U.S. economy, we have inherited a mess in our own backyard. Just as the U.S. economy cannot be remedied with quick fixes in an '81 Supplemental or an '82 Amendment, a disaster in Latin America, and particularly Central America, will not be reversed with quick military fixes, essential as they are.” Memorandum, From Richard V. Allen, “National Security Council Meeting,” February 25, 1981, Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

³⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

characterized by abnormally high market volatility, growing foreign debt, high inflation, and high unemployment throughout the 1980s, hit El Salvador especially hard. Much of the trouble stemmed from a significant drop in the price of coffee, long a staple of the Salvadoran economy. Healthy in 1977, coffee prices dropped significantly from 1978 to 1982. While this alone could serve to destabilize large parts of El Salvador's agricultural sector, expanding violence in the country further limited the amount of foreign investment coming in to the country. In March of 1981, the Central Bank estimated a shortfall in foreign exchange, which would build to a total balance of payments deficit of approximately \$190 million for the year 1981, and a "decline of net international reserves to minus \$250 million by the end of the calendar year."³⁵ In 1980, the GDP had fallen by 8.7%, a number expected to be higher in 1981.³⁶ L. Paul Bremer estimated that the stagnation of the Salvadoran economy had brought the unemployment rate to roughly 40%, a number that was predicted to get worse as the GDP fell further.³⁷ The Salvadoran economy was spinning out of control at an absurd rate and many Reagan officials felt that the JRG would not survive should El Salvador continue along this trajectory. The Embassy suggested that without a remedy to the problem, the survival of the Salvadoran government was "severely imperiled."³⁸ The armed left must have agreed with this assessment as, following the failure of the Final Offensive in January of 1981, it turned its attention to sabotage and the further destabilization of the Salvadoran economy. Despite its failure in January of 1981, the left would continue to pose a serious threat to the government of El Salvador, the nature of the threat

³⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Recommendations on Additional Economic Aid," March 1, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer, III to Mr. Richard V. Allen, "Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador," February 17, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

³⁸ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Recommendations on Additional Economic Aid," March 1, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

was simply different as guerillas attacked power lines and other key elements of the country's tenuous economic infrastructure. The Salvadoran economy was in crisis and that crisis defied easy fixes.

Leftists in El Salvador, citing the "serious, prolonged structural problems" that once animated the Christian Democratic Party in the 1960s, criticized Salvadoran reform efforts as incapable of dealing with El Salvador's economic problems in a serious way.³⁹ This, despite robust economic aid from the United States, meant that El Salvador's economy would continue to struggle, and instability would remain with many Salvadorans continually suffering under an inequitable international economic system. This distinction between Reagan Administration views of the Salvadoran economy and the Salvadoran center-left view of that economy would define the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship throughout much of the Salvadoran civil war. To the Reagan team, with enough economic aid and free market economics, the Salvadoran economy was destined for vast improvement. To the Salvadoran left, nothing short of substantial structural changes to a broken and inequitable economic system would mitigate the country's economic crisis. To many, it required a socialist transformation of the economy.

If the economic scene in El Salvador was bleak, the military situation may have been even worse. The Salvadoran security forces faced a large and growing guerilla opposition and one bolstered by outside aid. In January of 1981, the Salvadoran general staff estimated guerilla forces at 9,200, with 3,700 full-time guerillas and 5,500 in militias, (the State Department called these numbers into question, seeing them as inflated).⁴⁰ While guerilla forces had been weakened in San Salvador in the aftermath of the failed Final Offensive, in other parts of the country,

³⁹ Report, La Representacion FMLN-FDR, "Informe Presentado en el Primer Foro Nacional De Solidaridad con la Revolucion Salvadoreña," June 27, 1981, Box: Fondo Politico-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Folder: SU/MUPI/CE3/H, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁴⁰ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, "El Salvador," January 26, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

guerilla forces were as strong as ever. In June of 1981, the American Embassy in San Salvador concluded that in the lower Lempa River region, in Morazán and Chalatenango, “the situation is worse today than ever.”⁴¹

To the new U.S. foreign policy team, widespread assistance from outside forces facilitated the buildup of guerilla forces in some parts of the country. During a National Security Council meeting with the President, Secretary of State Haig, and Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, John McMahon, Deputy Director for Operations at the CIA, estimated that approximately 1,000 Salvadoran guerillas had been trained in Cuba, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Middle East.⁴² Beyond training, Cuba, with “somewhat nervous” involvement by some high-level Sandinista leaders, helped to arm the guerillas, an effort that was thought to have escalated in October of 1980.⁴³ Richard Allen cited documents that indicated that “at least 600 tons of arms have arrived or are en route from Vietnam and Eastern Europe.”⁴⁴ On February 18, 1981, the CIA suggested that Nicaragua was trying to deliver 100 tons of arms to El Salvador’s guerillas each month.⁴⁵ To National Security Advisor Richard Allen and others, warnings from the Carter Administration had not been sufficient to halt substantial foreign arms transfers to El Salvador’s growing leftist forces.

The Reagan Administration’s lack of confidence in the Salvadoran security forces exacerbated their fears of a growing insurgency. Undermanned and undersupplied, Salvadoran

⁴¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴² Meeting Summary of Conclusions, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, “Caribbean Basin, Poland, F-15s,” February 18, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴³ Memorandum, Richard Allen to The President, “El Salvador: External Assistance to Left,” January 28, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Meeting Summary of Conclusions, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, “Caribbean Basin, Poland, F-15s,” February 18, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

security forces were stretched thin across the country. “The Salvadoran army has a total of 16,000 men, which is half of what they need,” the CIA’s John McMahon concluded in a February 18th inter-agency meeting.⁴⁶ While the officer corps, which totaled approximately 500 men, was generally well-trained, the non-commissioned officer corps was “non-existent” and the typical soldier was poorly trained.⁴⁷ The Salvadoran army also lacked the logistical support necessary to fight a guerilla war, including necessary transportation equipment, radar, and other vital technologies.⁴⁸ On January 26, 1981, Secretary of State Haig wrote to the President that while the Salvadoran officer corps was “generally well trained...they do not have experience with larger than guerilla operations and are woefully weak on logistics.”⁴⁹ The shortcomings of the Salvadoran security forces were a familiar reality to Salvadoran soldiers themselves. News of outside arms entering the country for the growing guerilla forces likely added to security force fears. For these reasons, it is unsurprising that American Embassy officials reported morale problems in the Salvadoran ranks.⁵⁰ Salvadoran security forces were tired, overstretched and faced an opponent seemingly on the rise.

The economic and military news coming out of El Salvador shortly after the Reagan Administration came to office concerned an Administration that saw in El Salvador a critical Cold War battleground. With the Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua, the threat to the government of El Salvador had become more pronounced. If El Salvador fell, could Guatemala and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer, III to Mr. Richard V. Allen, “Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador,” February 17, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁸ Meeting Summary of Conclusions, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, “Caribbean Basin, Poland, F-15s,” February 18, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴⁹ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, “El Salvador,” January 26, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Honduras, which faced leftist insurgencies as well, be next? Then what of Mexico and its oil? Or Venezuela and its own oil reserves? These concerns permeated early discussions of the crisis in El Salvador.⁵¹ So too did concerns regarding what the “loss” of yet another neighboring nation to radical leftist forces would do to U.S. credibility internationally. On February 23, 1981, Richard Allen expounded on this fear: “A demonstration of U.S. ineffectuality in dealing with threats close to our own shores could make it even more difficult for us to increase cooperation and confidence among strategically placed countries many times more distant (for instance, in the Persian Gulf).”⁵² While El Salvador represented a tiny nation with a sinking economy, unable to project its military power far beyond its borders, to the Reagan Administration, it came to represent one of the most important countries in the world. There, the Reagan administration resolved to stymie the advance of communism and safeguard American legitimacy as a nation able to project its own power far beyond its borders.

Administration officials determined early in President Reagan’s first term to make El Salvador a priority and correct the Carter Administration’s mistakes in the region. In a recent interview, Elliott Abrams expressed the Administration’s sense of Carter’s work in Central America. “Our view on entering in ’81 was that El Salvador was the next domino... I think that had Jimmy Carter been re-elected the FMLN would have won in El Salvador.”⁵³ On January 21, the day after the inauguration, the new president called a National Security Council meeting in which policymakers discussed El Salvador extensively.⁵⁴ Just days after coming to office, Secretary of State Haig called for a major inter-agency study of U.S. policy toward El Salvador.

⁵¹ Memorandum, Mr. Richard V. Allen to The White House, “Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador,” February 23, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Elliott Abrams, interview by author, Nashville, TN, October 21, 2011.

⁵⁴ Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, c1984), 77.

Days later, Haig urged President Reagan to depart from Carter Administration policy toward El Salvador. Haig lamented the meagerness of U.S. aid to the teetering Salvadoran government.⁵⁵ Haig went on to complain that among the bigger problems with Carter's policy was that it was woefully inconsistent and with disastrous consequences. "Assistance was promised one day, turned off the next," Haig complained.⁵⁶ He continued, "Neither the Salvadorans nor our friends around the world knew where we stood." This problem of inconsistency to Haig, could only be solved with a firm policy that the U.S. abided unrelentingly. Nor was Haig alone in this critique. In a clear reference to the Carter Administration's handling of Nicaragua, Richard Allen urged the President that "we not repeat a situation...of permitting a government to fall because we have denied it legitimate means of self-help while the insurgents have received unlimited assistance from the communist countries."⁵⁷ To Abrams, Haig, Allen, and others, Reagan Administration help to the government of El Salvador needed to come quickly, consistently, and over the long-term.

One of the first moves to shore up Administration policy was to replace Ambassador Robert White, who had frustrated some Carter Administration officials for his public criticisms of Salvadoran human rights violations. White, too, had earned some important enemies in El Salvador. Many in the military, for example, considered White to be "Communist White."⁵⁸ "I know you share the view that at times his actions have been too much in the public eye,"

⁵⁵ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, "El Salvador," January 26, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Memorandum, Mr. Richard V. Allen to The White House, "Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador," February 23, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵⁸ Duarte, *Duarte*, 142.

Secretary of State Haig wrote of Robert White to Junta leader José Napoleón Duarte.⁵⁹ Pedro A. Sanjuan, part of the Reagan transition team critiqued White before the Administration removed him from his post. Sanjuan claimed that while ambassadors ought to be “aggressive” or keep a “low profile,” depending upon the needs of the post, “what they are not supposed to do...is to function in the capacity of social reformers.”⁶⁰ Sanjuan was especially critical of White’s role in promoting the Salvadoran nationalization of the banks. Sanjuan called this “disturbing,” and claimed that “the advocacy of policies and doctrines the implementation of which in the United States would cause violation of our own constitutional guarantees cannot be permitted to affect U.S. relations with other countries.”⁶¹ The Reagan Administration, as opposed to their predecessors, needed to be “less publicly confrontational toward specific governments.”⁶² He concluded, “internal policy-making procedures should be structured to ensure that the Human Rights area is not in a position to paralyze or unduly delay decisions on issues where human rights concerns conflict with other vital U.S. interests.”⁶³ The Administration replaced White over the protestations of important Congressmen like Clarence ‘Doc’ Long of Maryland, and many in Congress who opposed the Administration’s hardline policy from the beginning.⁶⁴ Reagan replaced White with Deane Hinton, an experienced Foreign Service Officer who most recently served as the Ford Administration’s ambassador to Zaire (1974-1975). Prior to that, Hinton was posted as a Foreign Service officer in Syria (1946-1950), Kenya (1950-1952), Guatemala (1954-1969), and Chile (1969-1973). His experiences in Guatemala may have made

⁵⁹ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, “Message from Secretary Haig to President Duarte,” February 2, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Letter, Clarence D. Long to Secretary Haig, December 30, 1980, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: El Salvador: Ambassador White, Folder 69, Johns Hopkins University Library.

him an attractive choice to an Administration looking to stabilize and bolster relations between the U.S. and an oppressive, unpopular Latin American regime. Likewise, his experience in Chile, then a tumultuous post in a Cold War battleground nation, may have made him appealing to the Reagan team. One thing seemed eminently clear, under the new Administration, things were going to be different.

For his part, White soon criticized the Administration for their white washing of the situation in El Salvador. Speaking of Reagan's Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, John Bushnell, White later complained, "it turned out Bushnell really wanted me to say in a telegram that things were getting better."⁶⁵ White recalls telling Bushnell, "I cannot say that because they are not getting better, they are getting worse. What's more, unless you take a stand on this, the killing is going to increase."⁶⁶ White's critical views toward the Salvadoran government simply did not mesh with the Administration's commitment to burnishing that government's international image. White would remain a key critic of Reagan policy from 1981-1989, constantly highlighting the Administration's insistence upon distorting human rights realities for political purposes, and also underscoring what he perceived to be the stark differences between Reagan and Carter Administration policies. By 1981, his diagnosis seemed accurate given the Reagan Administration's active attempts to distance itself from Carter-era policy in El Salvador.

⁶⁵ Interview, Ambassador Robert E. White, "El Salvador," 1992, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Interview, Ambassador Robert E. White, "El Salvador," 1992, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

First Steps: Diagnosing the Problem

To understand the Reagan Administration's early behavior toward the Salvadoran crisis, one must first understand the ways in which Administration officials defined that crisis. The Carter Administration, at least initially, saw the conflict as largely internal. The Salvadoran civil conflict resulted from decades of undemocratic governance, coupled with an inequitable economic system, and social dislocations caused by recent economic shifts. As the crisis stemmed from internal problems, any potential solution needed to deal seriously with reforming broken political, economic, and social systems within El Salvador. In this Carter outlook, which dominated Administration thought into 1980, the role of external agitators was considered relatively unimportant. It was not until after the Nicaraguan revolution that the role of Cuba and the Soviet Union was carefully considered. The need to deal with a fundamentally broken society remained vital despite the growing external presence. In this analysis, the Carter team agreed with the oppositional Christian Democrats in the pre-JRG era, as well as the leftist insurgents who made it their goal to fundamentally alter the inequitable Salvadoran economic and political system.

In contrast to this outlook, the Reagan Administration tended to see the problems of El Salvador in East-West terms. The ideological, financial, and tactical support of the Cubans and Sandinistas was central to the survival of the Salvadoran left. "It has become a classic case of internal unrest capitalized upon by foreign communists to increase violence and attack our interests," Secretary of State Alexander Haig concluded in a message to President Reagan just five short days after arriving in office.⁶⁷ Thus, if one hoped to quell leftist insurgency in El Salvador, one needed to deal seriously with one of its principal sources: foreign aid to the

⁶⁷ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, "El Salvador," January 26, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

guerillas. The true threats were leftist guerillas and their foreign sponsors. In contrast to the Carter team, Reagan, and many of his key allies, did not see the Salvadoran right as dangerous as the Salvadoran left. In his autobiography, Reagan described the Salvadoran left as “infinitely more barbaric” than the much-maligned Salvadoran right.⁶⁸ In this analysis, Reagan found intellectual allies in men like d’Aubuisson, rightists who lamented the role of Cuba, and saw in the Salvadoran left a violent minority inspired by foreign ideas and outfitted in foreign equipment.

To Haig, the new Administration had a choice. They could attempt to secure enormous military aid spending for the government of El Salvador and expand the U.S. military presence there. Vast aid packages and an increase in the number of U.S. Military Training Teams (MTTs) would be necessary given the seeming imbalances between the battered Armed Forces and the expanding guerilla forces. This choice struck Haig and others as deeply problematic because these tactics would require widespread Congressional support that was not forthcoming. On the ground in El Salvador, these tactics would also raise a number of issues. Would more Salvadorans flock to the anti-government ranks and unite against Yankee interventionism? What of international opinion? The government of El Salvador was already alienated, but could the more marked impression of a puppet regime in San Salvador worsen the government’s image?

This suggestion of a substantially increased U.S. commitment concerned many in the Administration and satisfied few. Instead, Haig supported an alternative strategy. If the U.S. could merely cut off outside support to the guerillas and secure low profile, relatively minor increases in military assistance, “the current or modestly expanded Salvadoran forces can control the situation.”⁶⁹ With this strategy, Haig attempted to split the difference; only modestly

⁶⁸ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, c1990), 478.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

increasing the U.S. commitment while still safeguarding El Salvador from leftist takeover. The crux of the U.S. commitment would be exerting its power and influence in places like Cuba and Nicaragua. On February 17, 1981 Executive Secretary and Special Assistant to Haig, L. Paul Bremer III, echoed similar ideas. U.S. military assistance “should be targeted to deal with infiltration,” Bremer explained, “leaving the GOES to deal fairly independently with the internal aspects of the insurgency.”⁷⁰ The military assistance that the U.S. did supply needed to be done on a “low profile basis,” Bremer continued.⁷¹ These ideas, echoed across a range of Administration bureaucracies, represented the broad framework of U.S. policy for much of 1981. The U.S. was to deal with interdiction of arms coming into El Salvador, while only modestly more substantial U.S. aid enabled the Salvadoran government to fight its own war.

From the beginning, El Salvador was an important test case to Haig, and something that ought to be a top priority to the Administration. Some resisted Haig’s emphasis on El Salvador. According to Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, many White House officials feared that El Salvador would “upstage” the new president’s economic initiatives and “divide the bipartisanship he was trying to cultivate.”⁷² Haig had already provoked concern when in a meeting on Central America, Haig said of Cuba, “Give me the word and I’ll make that island a fucking parking lot.”⁷³ For his part, Haig was critical of the piecemeal support he felt the rest of the Administration was promoting. He feared that this incrementalism would create another Vietnam, and was counterproductive to the Administration’s aims in El Salvador.

⁷⁰ Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer, III to Mr. Richard V. Allen, “Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador,” February 17, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Cannon, *President Reagan*, 196.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

With the cessation of external support for El Salvador's guerilla forces as a principal goal, by February of 1981, the Administration was already attempting to clamp down on what it perceived as Sandinista interventionism. At the urging of Haig and others, U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, Lawrence Pezzullo, firmly warned the Sandinista government to halt its support for the Salvadoran guerillas, giving them thirty days to cease the arms flow. Concluding that their "revolution is more important to them than victory in El Salvador or friendship with Cuba," the Sandinista government assented to these demands.⁷⁴ At the prompting of Secretary of State Haig and the American embassy in San Salvador, Junta leader José Napoleón Duarte agreed to take a tougher stance toward the Sandinistas. In a February 3, 1981 meeting with Embassy officials, Duarte admitted to being reluctant to antagonize Nicaragua given Sandinista popularity throughout much of Central America, but no more. This change in posture toward Nicaragua coupled with a campaign to get tough with Cuba. Administration officials discussed the need to scare Castro into submission. "We can raise their anxiety levels further through phony military communications traffic," Secretary Haig suggested in one November of 1981 National Security Council meeting.⁷⁵ There was much the United States could do to the Cubans, Haig concluded, before irking the Soviets.⁷⁶

In addition to this initiative to curtail the flow of arms into El Salvador, the Reagan Administration pursued modest increases in U.S. military assistance to the government of El Salvador. In March of 1981, the State Department announced their decision to send \$25 million in military aid. U.S. assistance was not merely monetary, but also related to the dispatching of

⁷⁴ Meeting Summary of Conclusions, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, "Caribbean Basin, Poland, F-15s," February 18, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁵ National Security Council Meeting Minutes, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, "Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America," November 10, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 21-30, Box: 3, Folder: NSC 00024, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

U.S. MTTS to El Salvador. The goal for these training teams was to help shore up many of the organizational, logistical, and technological weaknesses of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Others in the Administration like Robert L. Schweitzer, the highest military adviser to the National Security Council staff, and Roger Fontaine, NSC assistant on Latin America, touted the psychological benefits of placing additional U.S. advisers in El Salvador. The presence of U.S. troops could ameliorate any “sense of despair and fear” that tends to set in when soldiers are “in combat alone and losing.”⁷⁷ Schweitzer and Fontaine saw such a morale boost as important too if the U.S. sought to discourage human rights violations by the Salvadoran Armed Forces. After all, what army would not want to “show better” in front of foreign observers?⁷⁸ For these reasons, the Administration acted quickly to add more advisors, increasing the number from 19 to 39 in February of 1981 and from 39 to 54 in March of that year. In this way, Reagan sought to bolster El Salvador’s teetering Armed Forces in their fight against the resilient armed left.

Opposition Coalesces

Administration efforts to enhance U.S. support for the government of El Salvador faced stiff Congressional resistance from the beginning. Such resistance served as a central theme of U.S.-Salvadoran relations throughout Reagan’s first term in office. Nor did Reagan’s Congressional opposition give the Administration a grace period in Central America. On January 29, 1981, cognizant of the Administration’s intent to secure additional military assistance for El Salvador, Representative Gerry Studds (D-Mass) introduced a resolution that would bar U.S. military aid to El Salvador. While the resolution failed, just eight days into Reagan’s first term,

⁷⁷ Memorandum, Robert L. Schweitzer & Roger Fontaine to Richard V. Allen, “NSC Meeting 25 February; SIG Paper on El Salvador,” February 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Studds found 90 cosponsors for his resolution. If Reagan and his Administration hoped to draw the U.S. closer to its anti-communist allies in El Salvador, it would not be easy.

Nor was Representative Studds the only Congressman eager to constrain Administration behavior toward El Salvador. The Administration attempted to rush through an additional \$5 million in military aid in March of 1981, and the Congressional resistance the Administration promptly met foreshadowed the Congressional resistance that Reagan would face throughout his first term in office. Speaking of the \$5 million, Congressman Doc Long criticized that while \$5 million was a small amount of money, it represented “an attempt to get the Congress to go along with the Administration’s efforts in El Salvador—a kind of Gulf of Tonkin resolution to legitimize intervention.”⁷⁹ If Long and his Congressional allies had anything to say about it, Reagan would have no blank check to bolster the much-maligned Salvadoran JRG.

The Administration was in constant fear that the War Powers Resolution of 1973 would be mobilized against the Administration’s deployment of U.S. military trainers in El Salvador. Officials constantly debated how many trainers to deploy and in what capacity they would be used, as they were insistent on referring to them as “trainers,” so as not to gain the attention of a critical Congress. By May 1st of 1981, those fears were realized when twenty-nine Congressman filed suit against the Presidential action in El Salvador as violating the War Powers Resolution and the Foreign Assistance Act, the former allegedly prohibiting the Administration’s sending 55 military advisers, and the latter prohibiting U.S. aid to countries violating human rights. Over one-hundred labor, human rights, and other oppositional organizations supported the Congressmen’s case, which would be dismissed before reaching the lower court.

⁷⁹ Statement, Rep. Clarence D. Long to Subcommittee on Foreign Operations House Appropriations Committee, “El Salvador Reprogramming,” March 24, 1981, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: El Salvador, Folder 72, Johns Hopkins University Library.

Popular Congressional concern over U.S. policy toward El Salvador, both through increased military assistance and the deployment of additional U.S. military trainers also manifested itself in the Solarz-Bingham amendment of April 1981. This proposed Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 sought to halt all U.S. aid, military and economic, to El Salvador and remove all 55 military advisers if the President could not demonstrate Salvadoran progress on a range of issues. Those issues included human rights, Salvadoran government oversight of the Armed Forces, economic reform, negotiations with the opposition, democratic elections, and resolutions to the murders of four American churchwomen and two American labor leaders, still unsolved from 1980. This Amendment was ultimately integrated into the International Security and Development Act of 1981 and required two certifications each year, one in January and the other in July. If the Reagan Administration hoped to enhance aid to El Salvador, it would need to demonstrate progress to Congress on a regular basis. This certification process wielded considerable influence over Reagan Administration policy and required that the Administration take Congressional concerns seriously and early in the Administration's first term. While the Administration loathed the amendment for its constraints on Administration policy, so too did the Salvadoran Christian Democrats, who felt that it represented both undue American interventionism and undercut Duarte's power in the Salvadoran government. In his autobiography, Secretary of State Shultz, agreed, suggesting that the six-month designation made it difficult for the Salvadoran government or military to plan ahead given its dependence on aid that may never arrive.

Undergirding these Congressional constraints were an array of popular concerns. The nature and extent of government human rights violations were no secret and many stories of government abuse, like the Soyapango massacre, had made it to the front pages of major

American newspapers. Early Administration documents lamented the realities of their necessary ally. “The National Guard man outposts throughout the country,” Secretary of State Haig noted in January of 1981, “and have often been used by leaders of the local power structure as their private enforcers, leading to abuses against the population.”⁸⁰ This blurring of the lines between El Salvador’s powerful oligarchy and government security forces represent a constant theme of Administration documents. “A continuing serious problem here,” Ambassador Deane Hinton commented, “is officially tolerated, if not sponsored rightist terrorism and violence.”⁸¹ Beyond the problem of seemingly indiscriminate quasi-official rightist violence was the continued problems of impunity in Salvadoran society. On January 15, 1982, Ambassador Hinton lamented that El Salvador’s criminal justice system was utterly “awash in a sea of violence.”⁸² “It is now completely normal for someone to exact his own vengeance outside any formal system of justice,” Hinton concluded.⁸³ The realities of Salvadoran society were not unknown to many of Reagan’s Congressional opponents, nor were they unknown to the vast, oppositional organizations forming against Reagan’s early Central American policies. Why did the Administration want to sponsor such government abuse? Why deepen America’s relationship with a government whose human rights record did not seem to be improving?

It was not only that these violations were occurring but to whom they were occurring. The Catholic Church seemed a regular target of rightist violence, owing to the Church’s left-leaning reputation in the aftermath of the spread of liberation theology. By the Summer of 1977, the Carter Administration was already receiving panicked letters from concerned Catholics who

⁸⁰ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, “El Salvador,” January 26, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00003, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁸¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁸² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, “A Statistical Framework for Understanding Violence in El Salvador,” January 15, 1982, Collection: Tillman, Jacqueline: Files, Contents: Box 90502-90503, 91709, Box: 3, Folder: El Salvador – Human Rights, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁸³ Ibid.

had heard that El Salvador's rightist terrorist organization the White Warriors Union was threatening the country's Jesuit population to leave or be killed.⁸⁴ By 1981, such anti-Catholic repression had continued. Catholics in El Salvador were regularly the targets of violence, threats, and harassment. One episode, reported by the American Embassy in San Salvador in 1981, typified the level of disgust and hatred that many in the security forces had felt toward the Church. In June of that year, members of the army entered a parish house in Chalatenango. Shortly thereafter, "there was found in the parish church urine and human excrement near the principal altar; in another site there were found cloaks with blood stains in the sacristy."⁸⁵ An altar cloth had been found "with indications that a sexual act had been performed on them."⁸⁶ These hateful acts were but the beginning. On June 24th, the military surrounded citizens of this small town and "broke down the doors of the building used as a chapel, destroying a poster of Mons. Romero and throwing the altar to the ground."⁸⁷ Shortly thereafter, these men took away two men from the church and murdered them. On June 27, eight more men were taken away and murdered. This episode typified a popular rightist attitude toward the Catholic Church during the early years of the Civil War. Far from seekers of social justice, leaders like the deceased Archbishop Romero were instigators and traitors, utterly beholden to the guerillas.

Couple such widely reported incidents with the widely publicized and unsolved murders of four American churchwomen, including three nuns, in December of 1980 and the pressure from American Christians was powerful indeed. In his presidential diary, Reagan notes National

⁸⁴ Memorandum, Secretary of State Vance to The President, "Jesuits in El Salvador," July 9, 1977, NLC-128-12-10-1-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁸⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Army and Death Squads Harass Catholic Church," July 16, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Council of Church protests in front of the White House as early as April of 1981.⁸⁸ Early in Reagan's term, transnational religious organizations began to unite against U.S. intervention, like Overview Latin America and Salvadoran groups like *Cáritas*, the Committee of the Animators of Pastoral Health, the Conference of Men and Women Religious of El Salvador and others. These organizations suggested in a joint document that under the Junta, violence was "as bad as ever" with "cruelty unparalleled in the history of the country."⁸⁹ These organizations continue, "the first thing that a just insurrection tells us is that God's patience has run out. It is a repetition of Israel's experience in Egypt."⁹⁰ The Salvadoran insurrection was thus a Christian insurrection. Pressure from religious organizations like these persisted and represented an early pressure point on U.S. policymakers.

So too was pressure from American labor a theme. The murder of AIFLD representatives Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman by members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces in a San Salvadoran hotel in December of 1980 ensured that. The snail-like progress of the Salvadoran justice system enraged many American labor organizations that saw the Salvadoran government as getting away with murder. This was the source of considerable stress for the Reagan Administration who shared their critics' bleak sense of the Salvadoran justice system. Of the AIFLD murders, Ambassador Hinton complained that "veteran observers do not recall the arrest of a member of the upper classes on a criminal charge in the memory of man."⁹¹ As a result of growing labor frustration, in November of 1981, the AFL-CIO passed a resolution declaring that unless there was significant progress toward land reform, human rights improvements, and death

⁸⁸ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, c2007), 13.

⁸⁹ Report, Overview Latin America, "A Christian Stance Toward the Insurrection of the Salvadorean People," January 1, 1981, Box: PE 029, Subjects, 4, Folder: El Salvador II, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "AIFLD and the Sheraton Murders," April 06, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

squad violence, the organization would oppose all further U.S. military aid to the country.⁹² So too were labor leaders in the AIFLD upset with the lack of progress in the Salvadoran agrarian reform. By the end of 1981, the Salvadoran labor organization and AIFLD ally, the Union Comunal Salvadorena (UCS), criticized the Salvadoran government for frequent evictions of the murder of land reform promoters.⁹³ The situation had not gotten better under the “reformist” JRG.

Many American opposition groups drew connections between Reagan’s economic policies and violence in El Salvador. One New York Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador bulletin argued, “of the \$48 billion we’re losing in social services, *every single penny is being directly transferred to the Pentagon for increased military spending.*”⁹⁴ This bulletin continued, “Workers are losing big in the U.S. as U.S. money is going toward harassing and killing union workers in El Salvador.”⁹⁵ CISPES described the bombing of union halls in El Salvador, violence and murder of trade union leaders, and the dissolution of unions. Labor leaders also critiqued the Administration for refusing to grant Salvadorans refugee status out of fear that granting such status would represent an acknowledgement of the “overwhelming repression of Salvadoran peoples carried out by the military forces, supported through U.S. aid.”⁹⁶ If the Reagan Administration hoped to win the support of many American Catholics,

⁹² Bulletin, Labor Committee on El Salvador & Central America, “Struggle in El Salvador: A Labor Viewpoint,” May 1983, Box: PE 036 Orgs, Folder: Of Labor Committee on El Salvador & Central America, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁹³ Statement, William C. Doherty, Jr., Executive Director American Institute for Free Labor Development before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, March 17, 1983, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America El Salvador 1982-1983, Library of Congress.

⁹⁴ Bulletin, N.Y. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, “March on Washington,” March 27, 1981, Box: PE 036, Orgs, 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.) 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Bulletin, Salvadoran Refugee Committee, “Stop Deportation of Salvadoran Refugees,” 1982, Box: PE 029, Subjects, 4, Folder: SF, El Salvador I, 1982-, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

labor organizations, and many of their Congressional representatives, that would have to change and fast.

Human rights organizations, too, actively opposed Administration policy. Amnesty International reports suggested that the death squad violence lamented by Catholics and labor leaders transnationally was systematic and frequent. One report suggests that ORDEN, supposedly disbanded in 1979 upon the JRG coup, was in fact still active and operating under the name “Frente Democratico Nacionalista.” Another concluded that evidence collected by Amnesty International suggest that the death-squads were “in fact made up of ORDEN personnel and of off-duty or plainclothes security personnel acting in close conjunction with regular military and security squads.”⁹⁷ This report cites testimony from a Salvadoran military doctor who argued, “It is a grievous error to believe that the forces of the extreme right, or the so-called ‘Death Squads,’ operate independent of the security forces.”⁹⁸ Persistent rumors of active death squads and their ties to the security forces would challenge U.S. policymakers attempting to draw the U.S. closer to their ally to the south.

Another driving force of opposition was the popular allusion to El Salvador as the new Vietnam. The similarities of the U.S. commitment to El Salvador and America’s unpopular venture in Southeast Asia represented a constant theme for the Administration’s vast opposition. Members of the Administration frequently discussed how to deal with this comparison, as powerful of a rhetorical device as it was in 1981 America. National Security Adviser Richard Allen advised Attorney General Ed Meese and Chief of Staff James Baker to “Try not to mention

⁹⁷ Memorandum, Amnesty International, “Assigning Responsibility for Human Rights Abuses: El Salvador’s Military and Security Units,” September 1982, ox: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Vietnam” in dealings with the press because “even its use may tend to validate its thesis.”⁹⁹ Allen continued, “Instead, refer to the ‘misleading comparison of El Salvador and previous historical situations.’”¹⁰⁰ Much thought was put into how to deal with this powerful comparison, though it would never fully go away and bumper stickers claiming that “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam,” would continue to adorn college campuses across the country. One popular transnational organization, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) pointed out that the training of members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces was taking place at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, home of the Green Berets and of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center.¹⁰¹ CISPES argued that “the use of Huey helicopters, military advisors, massive training programs, counterinsurgency strategy, and government ‘White Papers’, points in the direction of a new Viet Nam War in Central America.”¹⁰² The label would be difficult to shake for an Administration working to change the conversation about Central America.

Efforts by religious, labor, and human rights organizations to challenge the Administration’s policy in El Salvador seemed to have an impact. While in March of 1981, 43% of Americans approved of the way President Reagan was “handling the situation in El Salvador,” and 41% disapproved, by February of 1982, only 33% approved and 49% disapproved.¹⁰³ While in 1981, 47% of Americans thought that the U.S. should “stay completely out of the situation” in

⁹⁹ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to Ed Meese and James Baker, “Why El Salvador Isn’t Vietnam,” February 25, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bulletin, N.Y. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, “March on Washington,” March 27, 1981, Box: PE 036, Orgs, 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.) 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Article, Newsweek, “Reagan’s Dilemma: The Fire Next Door,” 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

El Salvador, in 1982, that number was 54%.¹⁰⁴ Finally, whereas in 1981, 31% of Americans polled thought it was “very likely” that the “U.S. involvement in El Salvador could turn into a situation like Vietnam,” by 1982, 44% thought it was very likely.¹⁰⁵ Despite attempts to change American public opinion in their favor, the Reagan team was finding it a difficult task.

The existence and nature of Salvadoran government violence and the comparison to Vietnam did not merely constrain Administration efforts domestically. Early Administration attempts to reach out to potential allies for the Salvadoran government failed for similar reasons. Public opinion in Western Europe overwhelmingly supported the guerillas, long cast as the democratic opposition to a vicious, unpopular government. Thus, European nations like the Federal Republic of Germany, frequently an American ally in Latin America, refused to invest the necessary political capital to throw its support behind the government of El Salvador.¹⁰⁶ In Latin America, the government of Venezuela continued its modest support for U.S. policy that it had begun during the Carter Administration. However, the Reagan Administration, as the Carter Administration, was constantly disappointed by lukewarm Venezuelan support. Richard Allen explained the nature of Venezuelan support by saying that the Venezuelans insisted on “keeping help quiet for public opinion reasons.”¹⁰⁷ This typified the problem that the Administration had in winning Latin American support more broadly. No nation wanted to appear to help the Yankee imperialists trample on tiny El Salvador. As in Western Europe, much of Latin America sympathized with El Salvador’s anti-government forces. In this, the Administration faced a long legacy of American interventionism in Latin America that dated back to the nation’s earliest

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Report, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “El Salvador—International Support for the Insurgency,” February 5, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum, Mr. Richard V. Allen to The White House, “Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador,” February 23, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

days. Even those few nations that would aid the U.S. in its support for the government of El Salvador presented a powerful set of problems. Allen went on to question how conservative military governments like Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala could help when their assistance raised further issues regarding the repressive nature of the Salvadoran regime.¹⁰⁸ Their assistance would likely alienate Western European nations that would inevitably question the commitment to moderating and reforming El Salvador's much maligned national government.

As part of the initiative to stem the tide in El Salvador, the Administration sent special emissary Lawrence Eagleburger to Europe to change the conversation on the divisive nation and emphasize external involvement in that country's civil conflict.¹⁰⁹ Jon David Glassman, Deputy Chief of Political Section in Mexico City went on the trip with Eagleburger and later recalled their reception. "The basic reaction to the mission was that the Europeans said yes – we don't like the Soviets but the Soviet problem is here, it's in the Middle East, it isn't in Central America," he recalls.¹¹⁰ Their effort thus proved challenging. El Salvador caused tension between the U.S. and even its staunchest European allies. Even British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher questioned whether President Reagan was "thinking clearly" on El Salvador.¹¹¹

For their part, many among the Salvadoran left believed that it was this, international public opinion that limited the American intervention in El Salvador. These leftists did not appreciate domestic critics as the cause for the circumscribed nature of U.S. support for the Salvadoran Junta. Instead, they believed that the Reagan Administration did not lead a broader

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Haig, *Caveat*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Interview, Jon David Glassman, Deputy Chief of Political Section, "El Salvador," 1997, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Article, New York Times, "El Salvador Creates U.S.-Europe Tension," 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

intervention against El Salvador due only to European and Latin American worries.¹¹² Their sense was that international pressure, more than domestic, forced the Administration to constrain its actions in El Salvador. Given their point of comparison, the Salvadoran government, in which the executive and military dominated the legislative body and judiciary alike, it is little wonder why the left misjudged U.S. internal dynamics so badly. It was likely difficult to believe that the American Congress and public opinion could make such an important difference, and represent a genuine constraint upon Reagan Administration power.

As before, Catholic leaders in El Salvador played a central role in propagating a center-left critique of the government of El Salvador and the Reagan Administration alike. In the aftermath of Archbishop Romero's death, one figure who emerged as particularly important was Jesuit priest and liberation theologian, Ignacio Ellacuría. As the rector of the Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (UCA) from 1979 to 1989, Ellacuría was a prolific essay-writer and speaker who fervently promoted the process of negotiation. As a result, Ellacuría and his university came under frequent fire from the government of El Salvador, which only seemed to strengthen his critique of the Salvadoran state.

Ellacuría's criticisms of American power represented a theme of his writings from 1981 to 1989. As rightist critics of the American role in El Salvador, Ellacuría lamented the degree to which American "interventionism" represented undue interference in Salvadoran affairs and denied the Salvadoran people their self-determination.¹¹³ Reagan behavior in El Salvador fell in line with a long legacy of American alliance with "anti-democratic, genocidal" regimes like that

¹¹² Report, Comisión de Solidaridad Internacional del FMLN-FDR, "A 3 Años de la Declaración Franco-Mexicana," August, 28, 1984, Box: Fondo Político-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Folder: SU/MUPI/CE3/H, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹¹³ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuría, "Interpretación Global," 1982, Box: Caja 12, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuría, San Salvador, El Salvador.

of Somoza and Pinochet.¹¹⁴ In Ellacuria's writings, he presented the U.S. as the dominant force in Salvadoran politics, suggesting that "against the will and the veto of the North Americans nothing important can occur in El Salvador."¹¹⁵ In this scenario, El Salvador was nothing but an American protectorate, a truly shameful reality for El Salvador and its government.¹¹⁶ He also faulted Reagan and the Salvadoran right with what he termed as the "internationalization" of the conflict. Thus, Ellacuria downplayed the role of Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union, instead suggesting that it was the U.S. and those in El Salvador who were "radically" anti-communist who caused the Salvadoran civil war to gain greater and more destructive force.¹¹⁷ As a proponent of negotiations between the government and guerillas, Ellacuria, like many on the left, rejected what he perceived to be the military emphasis of the Reagan Administration and his allies in El Salvador. He critiqued the Administration as one whose "fundamental interest is to stop what it thinks to be Soviet expansionism without caring what this stopping will mean in human costs to the Central American area." Speaking of the country's human rights crisis, Ellacuria also frequently rejected the Reagan Administration and JRG notion that human rights violations on the part of the left were as significant as government violations. The left's violence was military, while repression was an "essential element of the anti-revolutionary strategy."¹¹⁸ Any suggestion of moral equivalence was a deliberate misrepresentation of what was really occurring. While the Reagan team and JRG alike cited the misinformation campaign of the Salvadoran left, to Ellacuria, it was they who propagated such misinformation, quelling any and

¹¹⁴ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "La Verdad Sobre La Intervención Norteamericana en El Salvador," 1983, Box: Caja 13, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador.

¹¹⁵ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "Interpretación Global," 1982, Box: Caja 12, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹¹⁶ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "La Verdad Sobre La Intervención Norteamericana en El Salvador," 1983, Box: Caja 13, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador.

¹¹⁷ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "Interpretación Global," 1982, Box: Caja 12, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

all “independent or favorable” opinions of what he called the “popular movement.”¹¹⁹ Thus, in contrast to many in the Salvadoran far left, Ellacuria did seem to have some appreciation for the limits of Reagan Administration power, as he cited the Watergate-like deception that the Administration utilized to trick the American Congress and public opinion.¹²⁰ Ellacuria represented one of the most important voices of anti-government critics throughout the Salvadoran civil war, and one that was more in tune with American realities.

Administration opponents in the U.S. fed off such narratives coming out of El Salvador. Outside of Ellacuria, the Salvadoran left more broadly remained highly critical of the U.S. role, and even figures toward the middle of the Salvadoran political spectrum held challenging views toward the Reagan team. In the aftermath of the assassination of Rodolfo Viera, head of the JRG’s agrarian reform effort, Viera’s chief adviser, Leonel Gomez shared his critical take with Administration officials. Gomez critiqued the Salvadoran government, citing the absurdity of Majano being chased out while Moran remained in a position of power in the Salvadoran military, before criticizing the American Administration.¹²¹ “What [U.S. military aid] tells the army is that it can kill at will,” Gomez argued.¹²² He continued, arguing that with its aid, the U.S. “has in effect said that it agrees that the army has the right to destroy all those organizations and people who want the army to share power.”¹²³

Congressional testimony from Captain Ricardo Alejandro Fiallo, in April of 1981, further validated Gomez’s point that the government of El Salvador remained dominated by military

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, “La Verdad Sobre La Intervención Norteamericana en El Salvador,” 1983, Box: Caja 13, Folder: Carpeta 2, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador.

¹²¹ Statement, Leonel Gomez, Chief Advisor to the President of the Institute of Agrarian Transformation, Before the House Sub-Committee on Inter-American Affairs, March 11, 1981, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: 1 Salvador: Economic Assistance Reprogramming: 4/81, Johns Hopkins University Library.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

forces that regularly violated human rights and did not respect civilian control. In his testimony, Fiallo discussed the failures of President Duarte, despite his best efforts, to remove Moran as the head of the Treasury Police due to his continued dominance by military leaders García and Gutiérrez.¹²⁴ His testimony went on to make similar conclusions to that of Gomez, as he argued that “any military assistance or training which the United States provides to the current government is perceived by the people of El Salvador as support for the forces of repression which are destroying the country.”¹²⁵ As men like Gomez and Fiallo were criticizing U.S. aid and its effect of giving a green light to the military-dominated JRG, Duarte himself shared similar feelings. In his autobiography, Duarte criticizes the Reagan Administration for dealing directly with García and circumventing his power altogether.¹²⁶ The Salvadoran right, for their part, were delighted to go around Duarte altogether and work with Republicans.¹²⁷ Few critics of the JRG, however, were encouraged by the military’s continued dominance of the Salvadoran state, particularly as military violence against Catholics, labor leaders, and others continued unabated.

Ultimately, the Reagan Administration came to office with a sense of how they might deal with the quandaries of El Salvador. It became immediately evident, however, that their task would not be easy. While often remembered as a popular American president who united Republicans and Democrats in many of his initiatives, during the first year of his Administration, Reagan was an utterly embattled president in foreign policy, who divided the country with his policy toward El Salvador. The Reagan Administration was experiencing this difficult

¹²⁴ Testimony, Captain Ricardo Alejandro Fiallo Before the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, April 29, 1981, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: 1 Salvador: Economic Assistance Reprogramming: 4/81, Johns Hopkins University Library.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Duarte, *Duarte*, 172.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 174.

Congressional battle on El Salvador while it was winning many of the domestic battles for the President's economic programs. Reagan had arranged a coalition with Blue Dog Democrats, and with a Republican Senate and Democratic House, had experienced a good first year with Congress. On the subject of El Salvador, however, Reagan faced stark challenges. On this policy, Reagan did not have the support of Blue Dog Democrats, a group whose loyalty he came to expect. So too did the Reagan team face a dearth of international allies willing to aid the U.S. in its quest to safeguard the teetering El Salvador from communism. Bolstered by a large and vocal array of opposition groups in the United States and El Salvador alike, Congressional and international opponents stiffened against Reagan attempts to aid the Salvadoran government. If his first year in office was any indication, the Salvadoran issue would remain a divisive one that would challenge Reagan and JRG goals.

The Reagan Response

The Salvadoran government grew frustrated with this widespread opposition, and in contrast to many in the Salvadoran left, seemed to appreciate its import in constraining U.S. aid. To the JRG, the issue was one of message: the Salvadoran left's message resonated with many in the international community. Their true Marxist nature unknown, these were simply freedom fighters reacting against a century of oppression. Salvadoran officials complained of "inexact analysis" of El Salvador's situation, analysis that did not appreciate El Salvador's "ambitious process of structural reforms and democratization" that was taking place despite the "destabilizing actions of groups of extremists who try to return to conquered schemes like those supported by the Soviet Union and their surrogates in Latin America to impose a dictatorship"

and despite “the aspirations and interests of the majority of Salvadorans.”¹²⁸ The U.S. Congress, as the international community more broadly, did not understand the ways in which the Salvadoran left had rejected government attempts to work them into the democratic process, instead resorting to the “path of terrorism,” and also tended to ignore the presence of a legitimate democratic opposition within El Salvador.¹²⁹ Many in the government sensed that the Salvadoran left had successfully promoted this narrative of an oppressive government with an abused democratic opposition, with devastating impact in the U.S. and abroad. Many among El Salvador’s government leadership recognized the importance of swaying international public opinion to their cause to secure further U.S. aid.

Nor was the centrality of Congress, and American public opinion more broadly, lost on Reagan’s team. Indeed, the idea that the Salvadoran civil war would be won or lost in Washington, more so than in El Salvador, permeated Administration documents throughout Reagan’s first term. The war thus took on two fronts, one a guerilla war in El Salvador, the other a war of public relations centered in the American capital.

The Reagan Administration’s public relations campaign began shortly after Reagan took office, though efforts on its behalf would later intensify. The campaign was multi-faceted. First, the Administration sought to cast the conflict in Cold War terms as a matter not of a patriotic revolution, but of external provocation. On February 23, 1981, the Administration released the White Paper for public consumption, a document which detailed the depths of Cuban and Nicaraguan interventionism in the Salvadoran struggle. If the American public saw the Salvadoran conflict as part of the broader Cold War, many would be more likely to support the

¹²⁸ Memorandum, Ambassador of El Salvador Ernesto Rivas Gallont, February 15, 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Administration's backing of El Salvador's anti-communist government. While El Salvador remained a divisive topic, especially for a new Administration intent on escalating military aid, building a consensus against the Cubans was relatively easy, at least in the U.S.

Not all accepted the validity of the White Paper. The FMLN forces in El Salvador denied the existence of external aid to their cause and critiqued the document as one that misrepresented the Salvadoran crisis. Describing the current Salvadoran government as "the most repressive government in the history of the country since 1932," these groups complained that the Junta had moved increasingly to the right since seizing power in 1979, as best exemplified by the ouster of Colonel Majano.¹³⁰ They also criticized the dominance of the Armed Forces by Gutiérrez, despite a constitution that gives that role to the president.¹³¹ Thus, the issue for the left remained domestic: the continued violence and oppression of an illegitimate government. Any attempt to portray the crisis as one of external aggression was simply wrong. While the Reagan team hoped that the White Paper would challenge American public opinion, continued efforts on behalf of the Salvadoran left to dismiss the document would ensure that many would continue to oppose Administration policy.

Second, the Administration actively worked to change the conversation about the government of El Salvador, which had often found itself in the American headlines for negative reasons. In February of 1981, National Security Adviser Richard Allen referenced the White House's need to "characterize the GOES as a centrist, reformist regime."¹³² It was this effort that led the Administration to bring Duarte to Washington in September of 1981 in an attempt to sell

¹³⁰ Bulletin, FMLN & FDR, "Commentary of the FMLN-FDR on the Informational Material Circulated by the Department of State Regarding El Salvador," February 19, 1981, Box: PE 029 Subjects, 4, Folder: El Salvador III, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Memorandum, Mr. Richard V. Allen to The White House, "Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador," February 23, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 1-10, Box: 1, Folder: NSC00004, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Duarte as the kind of strong, democratic leader that could bring reform to El Salvador without Congressional mandates regarding human rights and other progress.¹³³ Given the popular notion that Duarte did not wield much control, particularly over the military, these efforts too experienced limited success. Casting the Salvadoran government as a reasonable, democratic government working to reform itself while battling leftist terrorists would continue to prove a challenge as stories of regular human rights violations filled the headlines.

Third, the Administration sought to recast how Americans, and people internationally, viewed the U.S. role in the conflict. The Administration was wary of charges of U.S. imperialism, charges that would make it much more challenging to secure international assistance and Congressional support. This seemed particularly important given that disgust for American intervention was one thing that united the left and right throughout Latin America. In March of 1981, Alexander Haig encouraged the President to push economic aid to El Salvador and thus de-emphasize military aid.¹³⁴ The narrative needed to be that the conflict was not all about violence seen on the front pages of the New York Times, but U.S. aid to a struggling people. In pressing for rapid economic aid, the Administration highlighted the decline of El Salvador's GDP. Congressional testimony from James L. Buckley, Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance in April of 1981, emphasized that "a failure on our part to respond promptly with the additional assistance we are requesting would be a devastating blow to the economy, perhaps bringing down the Duarte government and with it hopes for economic and social reform

¹³³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Visit of President Duarte to Washington," September 18, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³⁴ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, "Additional Assistance for El Salvador," March 13, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

and a peaceful solution to the conflict through elections.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, “the increase in hunger, poverty, and unemployment would lead to greater political polarization.”¹³⁶

Administration officials also emphasized Salvadoran independence and sought to counter any claims from a variety of Salvadoran sources that the U.S. was dominating its weaker neighbor.

When these early efforts to change the conversation met sturdy resistance from Congress and others, this prompted a re-examination of Administration efforts and ultimately, an intensification of those efforts. During the Fall of 1981, the Administration held a variety of discussions in which the Reagan team grappled with the harsh realities of the situation. NSC Latin American specialist, Roger Fontaine, and NSC military adviser, Robert Sweitzer, argued in September of 1981, “Major decisions must be made soon if Central America – and El Salvador in particular – is to remain non-communist.”¹³⁷ Fontaine and Sweitzer went on, “We are precisely at that point which comes in every epic struggle where both sides are nearly exhausted, where victory goes to the side which makes the renewed second effort.”¹³⁸ The problem, to Fontaine and Sweitzer, was that El Salvador could not count on its northern neighbor to aid in its struggle. This was because the press, Congress, and the American people were seemingly against the Administration’s policy. Of Congress, Fontaine and Sweitzer explained, “A soft public opinion will certainly lead them to take an easy way out: reduction of funds for ‘moral reasons’ with a hideous disregard for the consequences.” In a National Security Council meeting in November of 1981, President Reagan echoed many of these concerns. “How can we solve this

¹³⁵ Testimony, James L. Buckley, Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology before the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations Committee on Appropriations, “El Salvador Reprogramming,” April 29, 1981, Clarence D. Long Papers Ms. 382, Series 1: Office Files, Subseries 3: Washington Office, Box 14, Folder: El Salvador: Economic Assistance Reprogramming: 4/81, Johns Hopkins University Library.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Memorandum, Roger W. Fontaine and Robert L. Schweitzer to Richard V. Allen, “Central America: Biting the Bullet,” September 12, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

problem with Congress and public opinion being what they are?” the President asked Jeane Kirkpatrick and others.¹³⁹ The problem was that all most Americans knew of El Salvador was its government’s powerful tradition of human rights violations. All most knew of the Salvadoran opposition were its noble slogans.

Continued government violence in El Salvador made presenting the government as moderate and reformist an incredible challenge. The El Mozote massacre in December of 1981, in which the U.S.-trained Salvadoran Atlacatl Battalion massacred hundreds of campesinos in the Department of Morazán brought what the Administration perceived as its public relations nightmare into clear view.¹⁴⁰ The news of the massacre hit the presses as the U.S. Congress prepared for the certification process of January of 1982. Administration officials agonized over what they saw as the “alleged” massacre’s implications on their public relations war. Many, like Secretary of State Alexander Haig, lamented how poorly the government of El Salvador defended itself in the press. On March 12, 1982, Haig further explained to the Embassy, “as evidenced by the media coup staged by guerilla forces in advertising the alleged Morazán massacre, the left is far ahead of the GOES in this field...The cost of losing the struggle for public opinion has already been high.¹⁴¹” To Haig, that cost was likely felt most heavily as Congress debated the Salvadoran government’s worthiness for additional aid.

And so too was the cost of losing the struggle for public opinion high abroad when the security force murder of four Dutch journalists in El Salvador in March of 1982 made the headlines across Europe and presented the possible “Bill Stewart” scenario that the

¹³⁹ National Security Council Meeting Minutes, Participants: The President, Secretary Haig, Ambassador Kirkpatrick and others, “Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America,” November 10, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: Meeting Files, Contents: NSC 21-30, Box: 3, Folder: NSC 00024, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁰ For more information on the massacre at El Mozote, please read Mark Danner’s *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (Vintage Books, New York: 1994).

¹⁴¹ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, “Human Rights Action Plan,” March 12, 1982, Collection: Tillman, Jacqueline: Files, Contents: Box 90502-90503, 91709, Box: 3, Folder: El Salvador – Human Rights, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Administration so feared. “We face a very real possibility that over the next couple of days, negative opinion will have formed and to put it bluntly – we will look like we’re in bed with a bunch of thugs,” Reagan Director of Communications and media whiz David Gergen warned.¹⁴² Indeed, by March of 1982, continuing violence in El Salvador highlighted the ways in which the Salvadoran government did not have security force violence under control, and in many cases, the commitment of military leaders to quell that violence was in question. The Administration could no longer conduct its public relations campaign alone. It secured private sector assistance in public relations for the government of El Salvador in the hopes that the government of El Salvador could better handle future violence in the press.

Thus the problem of El Salvador’s image increasingly became a focus for the government of El Salvador as well. In the Salvadoran documents during this period, one sees an increase in the amount of attention paid to press opinion in the United States. There is constant reference to *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles and what such outlets were reporting about issues relating to El Salvador. In February of 1982, the Salvadoran government developed a plan to counteract the “liberal American media.”¹⁴³ A large part of this effort was to embed certain American journalists, “so that with a survey guide they travel to El Salvador and work in conjunction with Salvadoran counterparts in preparation of material and count on the total collaboration on the part of the Salvadoran government.”¹⁴⁴ The Salvadoran counterpart would include a delegate of the Armed Forces, as well as a delegate of the secretary of information,

¹⁴² Memorandum, Dave Gergen to Bill Clark and Jim Baker, “Journalists in El Salvador,” March 20, 1982, Collection: Gergen, David: Files, Contents: OA 10522, 10523, 10524, Box: 4, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴³ Memorandum, Salvadoran Ambassador Rivas Gallont, “Mensaje al Presidente Duarte,” February 3, 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

both of whom needed to speak English fluently.¹⁴⁵ Just as the U.S. government was working to dispel popular notions of a violent Salvadoran government, so too was the Salvadoran government.

This ambitious, transnational public relations campaign could only do so much so long as the human rights record of the government of El Salvador remained so bad. The Reagan Administration consequently pressured the Salvadoran government to control its security forces and take its human rights situation more seriously. This represented a constant theme of interactions between the two governments, with U.S. officials regularly thrusting American newspapers in front of their Salvadoran colleagues to ensure them that this war in the press and in the American Congress would not soon end. The war in Washington remained a necessary battleground.

In some cases, such warnings met resistance or disbelief as when, in an interaction between Ambassador Deane Hinton and Salvadoran Head of the National Guard and reputed hardliner Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova met in April of 1981. During the discussion, Vides Casanova “made plain his viewpoint that the mutual strategic interests of the United States and El Salvador should take priority over concerns of secondary importance.”¹⁴⁶ The issue of secondary importance, in this case, were the unsolved murders of six Americans, including the churchwomen and AIFLD representatives. As in this case, however, Embassy officials were quick to correct their Salvadoran counterparts: this war would be won or lost in Washington, a sentiment that likely struck Vides Casanova, who regularly saw the violence of his country, as

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Defense Minister and National Guard Chief on Investigations,” April 27, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

off-base. Thus, both leftist and rightist extremes seem to undervalue the significant role of domestic politics in the Reagan Administration's ability to deliver needed aid.

In the initial years of Reagan's first term, these repeated warnings seldom affected real change in the Salvadoran situation, to the chagrin of U.S. policymakers. In February of 1982 Ambassador Deane Hinton reached out to Secretary of State Haig. His message was prompted by reports of a security-force led massacre of seventeen San Salvadorans, and shortly after the American Embassy had warned Salvadoran Minister of Defense José Guillermo García and military leadership of the devastating impact of the El Mozote and Soyapango massacres. "We are hostage to malevolent forces seemingly beyond our control," Hinton commented, exasperated.¹⁴⁷ Hinton recommended that the U.S. support a significant reorganization of the military and the dumping of García, but he would not be successful. Hinton concluded with a word of caution, "If anyone up there still thinks we can pull this one off on the cheap, and without drastic changes in the Salvadoran military, they should think again."¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the U.S. was in deep, the insurgency continued to pose a real threat, and the job of selling a government utterly unable or unwilling to control the violence of its security forces was not getting any easier.

While most in the Administration recognized the challenging nature in the task ahead of affecting human rights progress in El Salvador, their expectations had been tempered by the end of 1981. So too were their attempts to control the violence tempered by popular conceptions of the nature of El Salvador and the Salvadoran people. Hinton discussed El Salvador's violent cultural heritage in an effort to better understand government violence. "El Salvador is a

¹⁴⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Saving El Salvador," February 1, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America
Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

traditionally violent society,” Hinton explained.¹⁴⁹ The violence of El Salvador’s institutions merely reflected the violence of the society at large and the civil war had exacerbated already existing cultural norms. The problem was not simply a wayward government, but the Salvadoran people. Hinton sounded a bleak tone, “The nature of violence has changed this unhappy land ... Still we look for gradual, not rapid improvement over a period of years. Violence is too engrained in this society to expect more.”¹⁵⁰ And so the Administration, as the Carter Administration before it, dealt with the limits of their power. The continued violence in El Salvador, which included government human rights violations, were a reality with which the Administration would need to deal.

This conception of Salvadorans as inclined to violence was further popularized by Jeane Kirkpatrick in her 1981 essay, “The Hobbes Problem.” In this piece, Kirkpatrick expressed the ways in which strength and machismo were valued in Salvadoran political culture. Order, not nonviolence, represented the “highest value” in such political systems. President Hernandez Martinez, who oversaw La Matanza, was thus a heroic figure to Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick explained, “To many Salvadoreans the violence of this repression seems less important than the fact of restored order and the thirteen years of civil peace that ensued.” She went on to critique the Carter Administration for its embrace of the more progressive Revolutionary Government Junta. Former President Romero oversaw an orderly state, and order was “much easier to destroy than reconstruct.” Kirkpatrick explained, “the primacy of order as the basic value of a political system without which no other value can be enjoyed” meant that U.S. action would best be served to promote and facilitate an orderly El Salvador. In this, Kirkpatrick seemed to agree with

¹⁴⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Department of State, “A Statistical Framework for Understanding Violence in El Salvador,” January 15, 1982, Collection: Tillman, Jacqueline: Files, Contents: Box 90502-90503, 91709, Box: 3, Folder: El Salvador – Human Rights, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

El Salvador's last president, Carlos Humberto Romero, who earlier suggested that the time was simply not ripe for the promotion of non-vital things like human rights. In this, Kirkpatrick would have many supporters in El Salvador. To Hinton and Kirkpatrick, perhaps expecting rapid, tangible change was unrealistic. To them and others, changing the international conversation about El Salvador would continue to prove a problem as the international audience would continue to place unreasonable expectations on a society long plagued by violence and accustomed to its aftermath.

The Election of 1982

Perhaps no part of the Administration's public relations campaign was more significant than an emphasis on prompt, internationally-recognized national elections in El Salvador. Such elections could serve American ends in a variety of ways. Elections could give the government of El Salvador the sheen of legitimacy it so badly needed at home and abroad. They would lend credence to Administration claims that the government was moderate and democratic. Elections could also do much to unite a divided land and undercut support for a growing insurgency. And so the Reagan Administration supported elections for a new Constituent Assembly in El Salvador, a Constituent Assembly which would oversee the election of an Interim President, and conceptualize a new, post-Revolutionary Junta government.

Such a pro-election stance was particularly important to the Administration because of its official view on negotiations with the Salvadoran opposition. As Alexander Haig noted, having lost its bid for military dominance with the Final Offensive, the Salvadoran left was seeking a

new and different route to power through negotiations.¹⁵¹ However, Haig noted, “What the Marxists want to negotiate is sharing power.”¹⁵² This, the idea of “negotiations” between the government of El Salvador and its opposition, was utterly unacceptable to Ambassador Hinton, Secretary Haig, and most others in the Administration.

Conversations regarding the undesirability of negotiations also served to underscore the Reagan team and Salvadoran rightists’ outlook of the left. When a proposal emerged from Federal Republic of Germany diplomat Hans Jürgen Wischnewski to facilitate a negotiation between the Salvadoran government and the leftist opposition led by Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) leader Guillermo Ungo, Ambassador Deane Hinton did not hide his feelings. “Ungo has no following in this country,” Hinton suggested to Haig.¹⁵³ He was “completely controlled” by the Cubans and Soviets. Hinton concluded of Ungo’s party, “the FDR is mainly a problem abroad where it has conned a number of European socialists into believing that people like Ungo have some appeal domestically.”¹⁵⁴ This attitude typified the Reagan team and Salvadoran rightists’ outlook toward the Salvadoran opposition more broadly. The Salvadoran government need not meet with the opposition on equal footing because the opposition was small, unpopular, and only had to be reckoned with insofar as they were propped up by outside arms and money. The notion of “sharing power” with the likes of Ungo was a complete farce.

The Administration’s strong position against negotiations was not without its problems, however. The Wischnewski proposal was the first among many that would emanate from Western Europe, encouraging negotiations between El Salvador’s two warring parties. In August

¹⁵¹ Memorandum, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to The President, “Elections or Negotiations in El Salvador,” February 27, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State “Wischnewski’s Proposal on El Salvador,” March 5, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

of 1981, the French-Mexican communique also encouraged negotiations between the government of El Salvador and the leftist opposition. So how ought the Administration and Salvadoran government to avoid a backlash from those who saw justice in a mediated negotiation? By supporting negotiations regarding elections, how they would be conducted, and who would participate, the Reagan Administration and JRG hoped to seize the moral high ground despite their rejection of negotiations between the leftists and government forces.

The Salvadoran response to negotiations such as those proposed by the French-Mexican communique was mixed. Not all in the government of El Salvador were against such negotiations. Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena and his Christian Democratic Party were tempted by the Wischnewski proposal. It was pressure from the Salvadoran military, and the ongoing threat of a right-wing coup, more so than pressure from the Americans, that discouraged the Christian Democratic-led junta from partaking in negotiations. In the U.N., the Salvadoran government response to the French-Mexican proposal was harsh. It represented a violation of the principles of non-intervention and self-determination, Duarte claimed to the UN General Assembly. Mexico's role in the proposal, "which seems more like a longing in favor of the just changes that should occur in their country," was especially troubling to El Salvador. Duarte criticized a Mexican government dominated by one party who oversaw an impoverished society and its own failed agrarian reform movement.¹⁵⁵ He went on, "El Salvador doesn't accept pressure from anyone, much less from Mexico."¹⁵⁶ Duarte continued to suggest that the assumptions upon which the communique was based were simply false, explaining "the intervention of Mexico seems more like the result of an arrogant posture in which it wants to

¹⁵⁵ Memorandum, Doctor Chavez Mena, "Discurso Pronunciado por El Ingeniero José Napoleón Duarte," March 12, 1981, Box: 1981, A-550, Caja No. 12, Folder: 550 Organización de Las Naciones Unidas, Asuntos Relacionados con Determinados Países, No. 3, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

feign generosity to the outside in front of the left, but which it's not consequent with the same ideas inside."¹⁵⁷ Suggesting that Mexico's actions violated El Salvador's self-determination, he went on to critique Mexico's posture. "Paradoxically, he who should most profess the phrase of Benito Juarez "respect towards the right of others is peace" turns out being the one who has most forgotten it."¹⁵⁸ France, of course, did not escape criticism, as El Salvador's representative highlighted French hypocrisy in implicitly criticizing U.S. interventionism in supporting the government of El Salvador while intervening themselves.¹⁵⁹ This harsh Salvadoran response typified military posture toward negotiations with the "enemy" and fit nicely into the Reagan Administration's own views toward the possibility of negotiations.

To many in the Administration, the nature of Salvadoran society necessitated national elections. Indeed, it was the closest thing to a cure-all that seemed to exist. They would serve to challenge a popularly-held negative impression of the government of El Salvador. Perhaps more importantly, however, elections could serve to unite an utterly divided nation. Duarte and the Reagan team continually lamented the thin base of support upon which the JRG operated. In Hinton's first overarching summary of the situation in El Salvador, there were few points about which he was more emphatic as when he described the "unimaginable...distrust between and within all parts of this society."¹⁶⁰ This level of distrust was visible to Hinton across a wide-range of groups. It was on display daily in the interactions between the military and civilian elements of the Junta, an uneasy marriage of convenience. It was on display in much of the private sector's distaste for many of the announced reforms of the Duarte regime. Constant coup threats from the far right, particularly those connected to Roberto d'Aubuisson, testified to the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

level of fracture in the highest levels of Salvadoran government. In one particularly frank exchange between Hinton and Junta member, General Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez, one can clearly see this on display. When confronted with rumors of coup-plotting, Gutiérrez vented, “the high command would not need to do any advance planning for a coup – a single telephone call to the security detail around Duarte would suffice.”¹⁶¹ Thus, the notion of coup-plotting was ridiculous; no such plotting would be required given the power of the military and widespread disapproval of Duarte’s position. Hinton noted after the conversation that in talking about a coup with Gutiérrez there was “always a qualifier keeping the denial in the present tense.”¹⁶² Gutiérrez’s words and attitude suggested that Duarte’s place in the JRG was tenuous indeed, and their relationship accurately represented the fragile coalition between military and civilian leaders more broadly. The divided nature of the current government could scarcely continue lest a military coup wrest the Christian Democrats from power completely.

To the Salvadoran opposition, this emphasis on elections by both the U.S. government and the JRG was an utter farce. The Salvadoran government feared negotiations or any genuine political opening because the government understood the popularity of the left. Thus, the government would never allow truly free elections. As General Commander of the FMLN, Joaquin Villalobos explained, “they’re putting all their resources in putting all their efforts into a military solution, afraid of what would happen if they opened up politically to the revolutionary forces.”¹⁶³ Furthermore, any elections that might occur would be inequitable. How could free elections take place in such an atmosphere of government-inspired violence and terror? As one

¹⁶¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “No Crisis Now Say the Colonels,” July 21, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Report, Comandancia General del F.M.L.N. Joaquin Villalobos, “Acerca de la Situacion Militar en El Salvador,” July 1981, Box: Fondo Politico-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Folder: SU/MUPI/CE3/H, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

FMLN-FDR report explained, “Elections can only take place in cemeteries, refugee shelters, jails, and exile.” It continued, “elections are not possible here.”¹⁶⁴ Writing dismissively of the Reagan and Carter Administrations alike, this document distinguished the Reagan team’s emphasis on “repression and elections” rather than Carter’s “reform and repression.”¹⁶⁵ While elections may have represented a positive alternative to the weary leftist forces, few believed that what the Reagan and JRG teams were promoting were genuine elections.

The far left were not the only Reagan opponents that did not see in elections a meaningful fix to the Salvadoran crisis. One New York Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador bulletin suggested that “free elections are impossible in a country where every opposition leader has been assassinated or placed on a government ‘hit list’ and where freedom of speech and assembly are prohibited.”¹⁶⁶ It was simply a pretext to justify greater military involvement.¹⁶⁷ Robert White echoed these statements in the press, claiming that elections represented an impossibility in such a crisis scenario. The Salvadoran Bar Association did not aid the government in drafting a new electoral law, explaining that “we must frankly say to you that at present we do not find the necessary conditions to hold elections.”¹⁶⁸ While the ideal solution to a range of Salvadoran issues to the Reagan team, to the Salvadoran left and its supporters, the prospects for fair elections in El Salvador were poor.

For those participating in the electoral process, two political parties were most prominent. Representing the centrists, Duarte and his Christian Democrats ran in the hopes of seizing

¹⁶⁴ Report, La Representacion FMLN-FDR, “Informe Presentado en el Primer Foro Nacional De Solidaridad con la Revolucion Salvadoreña,” June 27, 1981, Box: Fondo Politico-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Folder: SU/MUPI/CE3/H, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Bulletin, N.Y. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, “March on Washington,” March 27, 1981, Box: PE 036, Orgs, 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.) 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Flyer, Solidarity Publications, “Elections in El Salvador: Political Solution or Deception,” 1981, Box: PE 029, Subjects, 4, Folder: El Salvador II, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

control of the interim government. Representing one of several rightist parties, which included the PCN of Molina and Romero, Roberto d'Aubuisson's newly created National Republican Alliance (ARENA) sought to remove Duarte and his party from power (while d'Aubuisson was arrested for coup-plotting in March of 1981, he was amnestied so that he could participate in the elections).¹⁶⁹ A common theme in the election campaigns was the rightist parties' distaste for Duarte and the Christian Democrats. This came from the military, the political far right, and much of the private sector. Some, like ARENA leader Manuel Enrique Hinds, suggested that Duarte and the Christian Democrats were "out to establish a worse dictatorship than Castro's."¹⁷⁰ While Duarte had long been popular in Washington circles as El Salvador's only hope for democratic progress, many of his Salvadoran counterparts did not share in that vision.

With regard to the rightist opposition, d'Aubuisson was a staunch conservative who had become a well-known figure to the Reagan Administration, with whom they had spoken on multiple occasions. d'Aubuisson's rightist leanings were particularly clear in conversations about the agrarian reform. In those conversations, he portrayed Phase II of the agrarian reform as the "sword of Damocles" hanging over the economy of El Salvador (a position with which many in the Reagan Administration agreed).¹⁷¹ In one conversation with American embassy officials, d'Aubuisson asked, "What is the point of winning the war if what comes out of this struggle are programs that are the same as what the Marxists would have imposed?"¹⁷² d'Aubuisson's sense of Christian Democratic reforms as on par with Marxism clearly demonstrated his staunch conservatism, which led him to resort to violence to undermine the Salvadoran left.

¹⁶⁹ Duarte, *Duarte*, 178.

¹⁷⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador, June 24, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of States, "Discussion with Major d'Aubuisson," November 8, 1982, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 17, National Archives II.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

d'Aubuisson's involvement in the Sheraton murders was clear to many on the Reagan team. So too was his involvement in the murder of Archbishop Romero a well-established fact in the White House. d'Aubuisson also shared with the Salvadoran left a distaste for the U.S., particularly in situations in which he felt the U.S. favored the Christian Democrats. When faced with several drive-by shootings of the U.S. Embassy in 1981, U.S. Charge to El Salvador Frederic Chapin said, "this has all the hallmarks of a d'Aubuisson operation."¹⁷³ Given d'Aubuisson's extreme conservatism and his tendency to resort to violence, the Reagan team anticipated greater trouble winning support for their Salvadoran policy in the event of a d'Aubuisson win.

At the same time, not all in the Administration shared a positive view of Duarte. Several Administration documents echoed popular Salvadoran rightist distaste for Duarte and the Christian Democratic Party. One early discussion between Interim Charge D'affaires in San Salvador, Frederic Chapin, to Secretary Haig exemplified this discomfort. Chapin lamented the Christian Democrats' "philosophical oppo[sition] to conciliation of other democratic elements or economic interests."¹⁷⁴ Ideas such as these, that the PDC sought to monopolize government power emerges in several Administration documents. More problematic than this, however, was the party's economic ideas and its insistence on pushing the economic reforms of 1979. Chapin explains,

Let us be clear on one point. While the USG may have to support Duarte because he is all there is and hence has to support his PDC, the PDC is way to the left in our political system and in supporting Duarte, the USG has endorsed massive social engineering programs...which bear little relation to the prohibition on the

¹⁷³ Report, Mr. Peter F. Romero, Director, Office of Central American Affairs Department of State to Mr. Richard C. Staver, Unit Chief, Foreign Police Cooperation/Interpol, "FBI Participation in Interrogation of Alvaro Saravia," Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 17, National Archives II.

¹⁷⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Broadening the Salvadoran Government – A Quandary," March 30, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

deprivation of property without due process of law in the fifth amendment and which violate article 138 of the Salvadoran constitution.¹⁷⁵

Chapin went on to explain the unconstitutionality of many of Duarte's "much vaunted 'reforms.'"¹⁷⁶ In July of 1981, Norman Bailey, Senior Director of International Economic Affairs for the National Security Council, described the economic reforms as "manifestly in contradiction to the philosophy and principles of this administration."¹⁷⁷ These concerns regarding Duarte's economic reforms, particularly of the agrarian reform which sought to deal with problems of inequality in land distribution, were so troubling to the Administration that Reagan advisors admitted their discomfort to Duarte during his September of 1981 visit to Washington, to the consternation of the Junta leader.¹⁷⁸

What were Duarte's critics in Washington willing to do to affect change in El Salvador? In March of 1981, Chapin asked Secretary of State Haig if the U.S. government was "willing to take the flak for a business/military interim junta" if the U.S. was unable to work out its issues with Duarte.¹⁷⁹ Later, Haig suggested that it might be time to facilitate the incorporation of some private sector representatives into the ruling Junta. Haig, like Chapin, however, shared a common concern regarding the international impact such a U.S.-supported rightward shift would have. "The decibel level of the outcry in Europe and Mexico, to mention just a few countries, would pierce the eardrums."¹⁸⁰ While the Administration resolved to leave well enough alone,

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum, Norman A. Bailey to Richard V. Allen, "Private Sector Opposition to the Salvadorean Government," July 1, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷⁸ Robert Pastor, "Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy: Carter and Reagan on El Salvador," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Volume 3, Issue 2 (1984): 177.

¹⁷⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Broadening the Salvadoran Government – A Quandary," March 30, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

their wariness over the Christian Democrats led Duarte and others in his party to worry about a potential U.S. role in frequently rumored right-wing coups.

d'Aubuisson ran a campaign deeply critical of Duarte and harsh in its appraisal of the civil war. His platform demanded treason trials for Duarte and many other higher-ups in his government. For their part, Duarte and the Christian Democrats criticized the “hate” that represented the basis of ARENA’s campaign.¹⁸¹ “They have joined the democratic process but they don’t believe in democracy,” Duarte later charged.¹⁸² Duarte expressed fear that an ARENA win would only further radicalize the Salvadoran left, explaining that “the retrogrades are fools and are succeeding only in helping the extreme left.”¹⁸³ To Duarte and others, ARENA’s was a vastly different vision for El Salvador. Mario Redaelli, ARENA’s Secretary-General, allegedly argued, “We don’t believe the army needs controlling. We are fighting a war, and civilians will be killed. They always have been. It’s going to be that way.”¹⁸⁴ While some in Washington were uncomfortable with Duarte’s positions, such comments could not have been encouraging to an Administration eager to distance itself from human rights violations in El Salvador.

Thus, one can understand how the sequence of events that led to the ouster from power of José Napoleón Duarte may have been received by Duarte, and El Salvador’s American and international critics. Though the Christian Democrats won 40.2% of the vote, significantly more than the Nationalist Republican Alliance’s 29.3% or the conservative Party of National Conciliation’s (PCN) 18.6%, the Christian Democrats 24 seats in the 60-seat Constituent

¹⁸¹ Article, Raymond Bonner, “Duarte Assails Land Reform Curbs,” June 7, 1982, Box: 1982, A-123 Varios to 124, Folder: Informes Socio-Econom. y Politicos de Embajados, 1982, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁸² Article, Newsweek, “Reagan’s Dilemma: The Fire Next Door,” 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Flyer, Christian Democratic Party, “Lo Dice ARENA: ‘Los Civiles Seran Massacrados,’” 1982, Folder: PDC Comunicados en Periodicos, S.F., 1970-1982, 20, Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDAI), San Salvador, El Salvador.

Assembly were not sufficient to avoid being squeezed from power in significant ways. Duarte was immediately concerned that ARENA and the PCN would combine forces to keep the Christian Democrats utterly devoid of power at the national level. His fears were soon proven right. As the Constituent Assembly put together a new 14-member government in the Spring of 1982, initial reports from ARENA suggested that ARENA leadership desired a new junta with two military members and one civilian with the far-right wing Roberto d'Aubuisson potentially representing the "civilian" member.¹⁸⁵ As for the Christian Democrats, token jobs were all they could fairly expect. In one of several conversations between Ambassador Hinton and Duarte, Duarte lamented the right's "implacable oppos[ition]" to the Christian Democratic Party. "What they are offering is totally unacceptable," Duarte continued.¹⁸⁶

Salvadoran Minister of Defense José Guillermo García García, who once so frustrated Ambassador Hinton with his inability to adopt even basic human rights norms that Hinton pushed for his ouster from government, was offered the Presidency, but declined.¹⁸⁷ Ultimately, a more centrist candidate, and the military's choice, Dr. Alvaro Magaña, was elected interim head of state, though Magaña, too, was ambiguous about the PDC role in government. Of the 14-member government eventually formed, only three posts were granted to the Christian Democrats. Long-time right-wing leader and enemy of José Napoleón Duarte, Major Roberto d'Aubuisson became the President of the Assembly. In this new order, the Christian Democrats, who had long found support as a moderate, democratic alternative in Washington, had a badly diminished role, if it sought a role at all, as Duarte pondered taking the Christian Democratic Party in opposition to the newly-formed government of El Salvador. In the months following the

¹⁸⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Coalition Building," April 1, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

March of 1982 elections, Christian Democratic leaders were murdered, disappeared, and received death threats on a massive scale.¹⁸⁸ The Christian Democratic Party explained these killings as “attributable to the polarization between the Christian Democrats and the Armed Forces which occurred at the time of the election as well as the military’s growing politicization also exacerbated by the elections and their tense aftermath.”¹⁸⁹ From the presidency to the outskirts of government, by the Spring of 1982, the position of the Christian Democrats in the Salvadoran government was in serious doubt.

Conclusion

By 1982, much was not going in the Reagan Administration’s favor. His approval rating hovered around 40% as many Americans remained unhappy with the Administration’s economic reforms.¹⁹⁰ In foreign affairs, tensions between the U.S. and Russia were on the rise. The American commitment of marines to Lebanon later in the year prompted questions about Reagan’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Perhaps most concerning in foreign affairs was the American commitment to the government of El Salvador, which prompted many to wonder in the aftermath of Vietnam whether the U.S. was again fighting for the wrong side. This feeling

¹⁸⁸ Report, Amnesty International Central America Special Action, “Recent Murders in El Salvador of Christian Democrats,” October 18, 1982, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁸⁹ Report, Amnesty International Central America Special Action, “Recent Murders in El Salvador of Christian Democrats,” August 7, 1982, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records, 1966-2003 (1974-1993) HR#0001, RG IV: Membership Mobilization, 1971-1995 Sub-Series 1.3: Robert Maurer Files, 1969, 1975-1983, Folder: Membership Mobilization, Co-Groups – Central America Special Action (CASA), 1982, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

¹⁹⁰ Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad, “Ronald Reagan from the People’s Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review,” Gallup, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11887/ronald-reagan-from-peoples-perspective-gallup-poll-review.aspx>.

was substantially bolstered by the emergence and strengthening of a transnational, oppositional movement to Administration policy in El Salvador.

Upon coming to power, the Reagan Administration faced a crisis situation in El Salvador. The violence and human rights violations of the previous two years continued unabated as the Salvadoran government grappled with a growing insurgency, and a desperate economic and military situation. This growing insurgency called into serious question the Reagan and Salvadoran rightist sense that what they faced in El Salvador was largely propped up by external aggressors. Despite attempts to quell the impact of modest Cuban and Nicaraguan aid, the Salvadoran left continued on, growing in strength in several key areas in the country. By 1982, many within the Reagan Administration seemed to sense that what they faced in El Salvador was more significant than an artificial insurgency facilitated by outside arms. Instead, the sense of Carter and the Christian Democrats seemed more on point: this was an internal insurgency prompted by a deeply troubled economic and political system in which outside arms played a relatively small part. This misjudgment of the Salvadoran situation set back the Reagan Administration in their attempts to bring the crisis in El Salvador to an end on the cheap by confronting the Cuban and Nicaraguan supply of arms and allowing the government of El Salvador to deal with its insurgency. To make matters for these two governments worse, in the context of this broader crisis, the Salvadoran government maintained a poor record of overseeing its security forces and dealing seriously with claims of substantial human rights abuse.

In its effort to win greater support for the government of El Salvador through increased military and economic funding, as well as a boost in U.S. Military Training Teams, the Reagan Administration, along with the government of El Salvador, faced the second front in their war on behalf of anti-communism in El Salvador: the war of public relations. Undertaking a vast public

relations campaign, Reagan and the JRG constantly struggled in their attempts to cast the government of El Salvador as a moderate, democratic government, as news stories of human rights violations continued to grace the pages of newspapers internationally. The Salvadoran rejection of European and Latin American attempts to organize negotiations made the campaign to burnish El Salvador's international image all the more challenging.

For the vast oppositional movement, the election of a new Constituent Assembly in the Spring of 1982 cast doubt onto Reagan Administration aims. Long a favorite in Washington, José Napoleón Duarte had drawn the ire of several members of the Reagan Administration with his ambitious reform agenda. When the elections ended with Duarte removed from power, his Christian Democratic Party in tatters, some questioned the Administration's role. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 led many in Central America to predict a profound shift in U.S. policy in which more traditional Cold War concerns would reign supreme. That election also led many in Washington to foresee a new era of right-wing terror and human rights abuse in El Salvador. By the Spring of 1982, with the Christian Democrat fall from power complete, were Reagan's opponents right?

Chapter 4

Confronting a Dilemma: U.S. Security Interests and the Promotion of Democratic Reform in El Salvador, 1982-1984

Reform and Its Unexpected Champions

By the time the Salvadoran Revolutionary Government Junta announced Decree 43, a measure that sought to make agrarian reform “an instrument to achieve an equal distribution of wealth” in December of 1979, the United States government had a long legacy of rejecting such reforms.¹ In particular, the Guatemalan agrarian reform, enacted in 1952 by President Jacobo Árbenz in an attempt to mitigate stark economic polarization between powerful landowners and landless campesinos, contributed to the American-led ouster of Árbenz in 1954, and his replacement with a conservative military government that quickly undid his work. Sometimes U.S. government officials rejected agrarian reform efforts in Latin America because those efforts harmed American business interests in the region. More often, however, American officials were wary of the communist implications of seizing land from the rich to better provide for the poor.

Like Árbenz’s Guatemala, throughout much of the twentieth century, Salvadoran society was marked by wild disparities in income, land ownership, and power. By the mid-1970s, El Salvador’s was a monocultural economy in steep decline, reliant upon a coffee industry that tied the country’s economic success to the unpredictable coffee market. This decline was particularly difficult for the country’s rural poor, which represented a vast majority of El Salvador’s rural population. According to economist Wim Pelupessy, by the mid-1970s, three-quarters of all rural

¹ Anjali Sundarum, *A Decade of War: El Salvador Confronts the Future*, (New York: Monthly Review Press with the Transnational Institute, 1991), 38.

families owned less than one hectare of land.² Meanwhile, nearly 250,000 rural people were unemployed, many of whom combined with the landless and nearly landless to form what Pelupessy refers to as “a floating mass of people” scouring the countryside for work and food.³ With the rise in prices and the stagnation of wages in the early 1980s, the crisis of the poor in El Salvador only grew worse.

When in 1979, the Salvadoran JRG considered agrarian reform as a potential antidote to El Salvador’s economic disparities, many within the government surely worried about the U.S. reaction. Yet, an ambitious agrarian reform program served as a major part of the JRG’s response to the economic crisis of the late 1970s. Decree 43, announced in December of 1979, pledged to make agrarian reform “an instrument to achieve an equal distribution of wealth, and to increase, at the same time, the Gross National Product.”⁴

After much deliberation over the best means to achieve agrarian reform without disrupting the Salvadoran economy, in March of 1980, the JRG passed Decree 153, a relatively ambitious agrarian reform law that outlined two phases of expropriation. The first phase regarded the expropriation of estates of over 500 hectares, though landowners could retain 150 hectares of land (slightly more depending upon the nature of improvements made to the land). The second phase, the most ambitious, sought to expropriate holdings of between 100 and 500 hectares. As in Guatemala, large landowners were paid in government bonds that matured in 20 to 30 years. Also similar to Guatemala, expropriated land was valued according to the tax-declared value of that land. In El Salvador, as in Guatemala, this stipulation provoked resistance, as large landowners regularly undervalued their land for tax purposes. In April of 1980, the JRG announced a third phase of the agrarian reform, this piece the brainchild of the U.S. government.

² Ibid, 40.

³ Ibid, 41.

⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁵ Roy Prosterman, author of Vietnam's land-to-the-tiller program, adapted that relatively conservative program for El Salvador. The land-to-the-tiller program introduced a rent-to-own system for over 100,000 Salvadoran families. In the end, the three phases of the Salvadoran land reform, if implemented, would represent substantial changes to the face and character of the Salvadoran countryside, and the Salvadoran economy more broadly.

However, as in Guatemala, each phase of the Salvadoran agrarian reform process was accompanied by brutal violence. This violence was often spearheaded by members of the security forces, many of whom enlisted in the country's quasi-private "death squads." By the end of the first year of land reform, 240 agricultural cooperative leaders had been murdered.⁶ This violence did not only touch the countryside, but reached into the higher offices of power in San Salvador. In January of 1981, the chief architect of the Salvadoran agrarian reform, Rodolfo Viera, was murdered, along with his two dinner guests, American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD) leaders Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman. The investigation into these murders, widely believed to have been committed by security force officers, and the reluctant prosecution of those men by the Salvadoran government, represented a dominant theme of U.S.-Salvadoran relations in the 1980s. Over the course of that decade, the agrarian reform process was marked by terror for many of El Salvador's rural poor as well as those in the Salvadoran government who espoused the program.

Thus, the Salvadoran agrarian reform shared many similarities with the Guatemalan agrarian reform that so doomed Jacobo Árbenz in 1954. Each agrarian reform provoked violent resistance in the countryside. This violence was in both cases spearheaded by quasi-private armies of the landed elite, utterly uncomfortable with their unasked for role in mitigating

⁵ Ibid, 54.

⁶ Ibid, 40.

profound issues of disparity. In each case, agrarian reform drew the ire of conservatives inside the government and out, as government opponents rallied against what was perceived as a communistic encroachment on property rights. As in Guatemala, El Salvador's agrarian reform agenda represented an unwelcome example to the country's more conservative neighbors in the region.

Also as in the case of Guatemala, the Reagan Administration, as the Eisenhower Administration, empathized with the angry landed elite. The Administration understood the degree to which the agrarian reform law exacerbated domestic disunity in El Salvador. The Embassy spoke of the adverse effects of the reform in mentioning "the bitterness felt by those who have had their lands taken from them," a bitterness that "will continue to upset the delicate balance required for the land reform to progress and add fuel to the violence."⁷ The agrarian reform was unpopular with many in El Salvador, and the Reagan Administration understood that unpopularity.

However, among the most significant differences between the Guatemalan agrarian reform of the 1950s and the Salvadoran land reform of the 1980s was the response of the United States. There would be no public denunciation of the reform from the Administration, nor any coup attempts. The response of the Carter and Reagan Administrations reflected changes in American attitudes toward such reforms in the aftermath of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. The Reagan Administration, like the Carter Administration, publicly supported the Salvadoran agrarian reform, considering it essential to the stabilization of Salvadoran society and the consolidation of Salvadoran government power. Indeed, both Administrations worried about the narrow political base of the JRG, and later, President Álvaro Magaña, and believed that the

⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to American Embassy Paris, "Assessment of Current Situation in El Salvador," June 4, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

agrarian reform could go a long way in securing his base against the rightist and leftist extremes. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, Lawrence Eagleburger explained that agrarian reform was “necessary to prevent the seizure of power by the far left.”⁸ Eagleburger went on to express concern about the frequent evictions that removed peasants from the land they received through the reform process.

In reality, the Reagan Administration was not without its skeptics of the reform, and its support is explained in part due to Congressional pressures. Many in the Administration expressed concern over the communistic nature of the agrarian reform and worried about the disruption to Salvadoran society that the reform represented. The Administration nevertheless remained mindful of the need for Congressional support. Financing the government of El Salvador and its war meant conceding to Congress on issues of human rights that included meaningful land reform. Land reform would even be made a formal part of the certification process that the Administration would need to go through in order to secure military aid for the Salvadoran Armed Forces. In the end, Reagan Administration support went beyond simple rhetoric, and included a commitment to help back the agrarian reform financially.

This would not be easy. While many Democrats in the American Congress supported the agrarian reform, many in the President’s own party would not. Indeed, the Reagan Administration found itself in opposition to many of its traditional Congressional allies, like conservative Republican Jesse Helms, a long-time friend of the Salvadoran oligarchy, and Republican Representative Jack Kemp, a vociferous opponent of El Salvador’s agrarian reform throughout the 1980s. Helms’ amendment to prohibit American money from being used to support Salvadoran agrarian reform represented a problematic piece of legislation for the

⁸ Memorandum, Lawrence S. Eagleburger to The President, “Visit of Álvaro Magaña, President of El Salvador, June 16-18,” June 10, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box:39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Administration, which sought to overturn it. In June of 1982, one Embassy official wrote “we need to hold to the course we are on; break loose the desperately needed funds now tied up in Congress; and provide meaningful assistance in making agrarian reform work.”⁹ To the Embassy, and the Administration more broadly, agrarian reform would prove a key aspect of a solution to the Salvadoran crisis. While this would prove a struggle, in the end, the Administration would experience some success in backing the reform. In the first seven years of the agrarian reform, the United States Agency for International Development provided almost \$300 million to facilitate the process.¹⁰

As challenging as Administration officials may have found dealing with Senator Helms and his Congressional allies, it would prove even more difficult to bring the Salvadoran right around to support the program. Throughout the 1980s, Roberto d’Aubuisson’s ARENA Party remained largely opposed to the agrarian reform process. Throughout his term, Magaña needed to fight through ARENA opposition to safeguard the agrarian reform. In the Spring of 1983, ARENA led an attempt to kill Decree 207. In response, Magaña removed ARENA appointees at the ministerial level, in what would prove a divisive political move.¹¹ Thanks in part to the demonstration of approximately 10,000 campesinos in front of the Assembly, ARENA’s March 3rd, 1983 attempt to let Decree 207 die was a failure and 36 of 24 members of the Assembly voted to extend the measure.¹² More importantly, the Salvadoran military, cast in the role of referee in the process, wavered in its support. As in the case of human rights more broadly, the

⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to American Embassy Paris, “Assessment of Current Situation in El Salvador,” June 4, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰ Sundarum, *A Decade of War*, 54.

¹¹ Statement, William C. Doherty, Jr., Executive Director American Institute for Free Labor Development before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, March 17, 1983, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America El Salvador 1982-1983, Library of Congress.

¹² Statement, William C. Doherty, Jr., Executive Director American Institute for Free Labor Development before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, March 17, 1983, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America El Salvador 1982-1983, Library of Congress.

Reagan Administration often attempted to push the military to moderate its approach, cognizant of the broader implications in the U.S. Congress. In a moment of breakthrough, one June of 1982 report from the Directorate of Intelligence suggested that the Salvadoran military “[appeared] convinced that reforms—particularly for the moment agrarian reforms—must continue if the government is to receive the domestic and international support necessary to rebuild the economy and win the war against the insurgents.”¹³ The constant narrative coming from the Reagan Administration was resonating with some in El Salvador: the war would be won or lost in Washington and in the international arena. If the Salvadoran government wanted to survive the conflict, it would need to moderate its approach and avoid being viewed as extremist, violent, and undemocratic. The degree to which these figures on the Salvadoran right genuinely subscribed to the ideas of the agrarian reform and saw these reforms as more than simply an ad campaign remained unclear to the Reagan Administration and the world.

The Trouble with Bobby

Agrarian reform was not the only issue about which the Salvadoran center worried about the Reagan Administration’s loyalties. Former Junta leader and presidential candidate, José Napoleón Duarte and his allies in the Christian Democratic Party worried that Reagan officials would cozy up to the Salvadoran right, and assent to a coup. Duarte, and his long-time ally and former Foreign Minister of the JRG, Fidel Chávez Mena, feared one man more than others: Roberto d’Aubuisson, who had long been tied to the Salvadoran oligarchy and Salvadoran death squads and made no secret of his desire for power in San Salvador. d’Aubuisson’s far right

¹³ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: The Politics of Land Reform,” June 10, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party would prove a constant threat to Duarte and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC).

Duarte, in particular distrusted key figures of the Reagan Administration. In his autobiography, *Duarte: My Story*, Duarte recounts his first meeting with some important officials on the Reagan team. In December of 1980, Duarte, as the head of the JRG, was panicked over the rumors of a “Final Offensive” by the Salvadoran left, and knew that without U.S. aid, defeating that offensive would be challenging. The Carter Administration had recently withdrawn minimal military aid from the JRG after the murder of the churchwomen, so Duarte made an impromptu trip to Washington to plead his case. Duarte met briefly with Carter, after which he arranged a meeting with some of the President-elect’s staff, which included eventual National Security Advisor Richard Allen, Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Director of the CIA Constantine Menges. According to Duarte, the meeting did not go well, and he left nervous about Reagan’s new team. In his autobiography, Duarte described the attitude of Allen, Kirkpatrick, and Menges as ranging from “skeptical to rude.”¹⁴ Duarte went on, “They questioned me about agrarian reform, as if only a Communist would ever advocate such a plan.”¹⁵ Reagan’s team went on to ask Duarte if he “admired” Castro.¹⁶ It was an inauspicious start to what Duarte hoped would be a long and important relationship.¹⁷

After the Reagan Administration took office, that relationship would not improve. The Reagan Administration came to office with a well-known commitment to restore military aid to

¹⁴ Duarte, *Duarte*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ While information culled from autobiographies can be unreliable, particularly when written by political figures intent on presenting themselves in a certain light, this anecdote seems plausible. Upon his publication of the autobiography in 1986, Duarte may have wanted to use such an anecdote to demonstrate his independence from Washington. However, at the same time, the allegiance of the Reagan team was among Duarte’s most powerful political assets. That Duarte criticized that team in his autobiography does not seem a matter of misrepresenting the past for his own benefit. Instead, such an anecdote seems more a risk than a potential political boon.

the government of El Salvador and increase that aid substantially. About this, Duarte was certainly relieved. However, Duarte criticized that the Reagan Administration dealt directly with JRG Defense Minister José Guillermo García, thus undermining Duarte's already tenuous leadership of the JRG.¹⁸ It did not help Duarte's outlook that García lacked his commitment to democratic reform and human rights progress. The rumors seemed true: the Reagan Administration was concerned with military victory and not progress in democracy and human rights in El Salvador. Furthermore, Washington's control over such critical military aid caused some to charge that the U.S. Ambassador was the de facto leader of El Salvador, thus further undermining Duarte's leadership.¹⁹

After the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1982, Duarte's outlook would grow worse. The Christian Democrats won a plurality, but the three major conservative parties, ARENA, the Party of National Conciliation (PCN), and Democratic Action, united against the Christian Democrats when choosing a provisional president, selecting Álvaro Magaña of Democratic Action.²⁰ While Duarte was lukewarm on the choice of the conservative business leader, he considered Magaña an "angel" compared to the alternatives, which included d'Aubuisson.²¹ Besides, with no real political base, Magaña would continue to play a tertiary role to García and U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton. When d'Aubuisson became President of the Constituent Assembly, the body that would serve to write a new Salvadoran constitution, Duarte feared more than ever that the Assembly, with the Reagan Administration's approval, would work to undo the JRG's hard fought reforms, including agrarian reform.²²

¹⁸ Ibid, 172.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 179.

²¹ Ibid, 185.

²² Ibid, 186.

Such fears of the U.S. role, and the Reagan Administration's commitment to the Salvadoran right, were not limited to Duarte or his Christian Democratic party. Many government leaders across Latin America and Europe, too, felt that the Reagan Administration was prepared to throw its weight behind Roberto d'Aubuisson or some such rightist leader. When the JRG was still in power, a meeting between then Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena and an American embassy official revealed the level of distrust felt toward the Reagan Administration. During that meeting, Chávez Mena confided that France had conveyed to him that there was "a powerful block of opinion in Washington that believed that Duarte, Chávez Mena, et al. had now served their purpose and could be dispensed with in favor of less reformist-minded leaders."²³ The fact that Chávez Mena revealed this information to a Reagan official underscores his nervousness and the nervousness of his political allies. They were hearing from all over the world that their time was short, and the Reagan Administration was prepared to support their ouster. What might Chávez Mena have meant when he spoke of "less reformist-minded leaders" is unclear, though one wonders if he was not referring to the most well-known of Duarte's detractors, d'Aubuisson.

Despite these widespread concerns about the Reagan Administration's rumored intentions to throw its weight behind d'Aubuisson and the Salvadoran far right, in fact, Reagan Administration officials, as Carter officials, frequently expressed concern about a potential right-wing coup. This is true both during the leadership of the JRG, as well as during the brief interim presidency of Álvaro Magaña. Was the Administration averse to the Salvadoran far right because the far right was so closely associated with violence and human rights violations, a lack of concern for democratic progress, and their opposition to agrarian reform? Or was it simply a

²³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Meeting between Salvadoran and French Foreign Ministers," August 7, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

matter of political expediency? Certainly, a right-wing coup would complicate the Reagan Administration's attempt to secure Congressional and public support for their efforts in El Salvador. Furthermore, such a coup would make it more difficult to obtain critical allies for El Salvador in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. After all, with the Administration constrained in its ability to aid the government of El Salvador, allies in Latin America and Europe could prove essential in the future. Whether the Administration's decision to distance itself from the Salvadoran far right was a matter of principle or expediency is unclear and in many cases depends on the particular official. Nevertheless, the logic that dictated Reagan Administration decision-making was often similar to the logic of the Carter Administration in this regard. A right-wing coup was simply unacceptable.

The Reagan Administration attempted to assure Duarte, Chávez Mena, and others of their opposition to a right-wing coup throughout much of the Administration's first two years in office. In March of 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig expressed the importance of avoiding such a coup to the American Embassy. Haig urged to embassy officials the importance of conveying to Duarte and "appropriate members of the high command" that "any military move to replace the present civilian-military government would seriously undermine [U.S.] efforts to support the GOES."²⁴ Haig went on to express the common concern that the war would be won or lost in Washington more than San Salvador, and Congress and the American public would likely not support U.S. efforts in El Salvador if a military coup were to occur. "A coup," Haig explained, "would seriously impair our so far very promising efforts to mobilize our friends and allies in the world community against outside interference in El Salvador."²⁵ This logic

²⁴ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, "Purported U.S. Support for a Military Regime," March 4, 1981, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁵ Ibid.

would be familiar throughout the early years of the President Reagan's first term: a right-wing coup would completely undermine whatever tenuous coalition that the Administration was able to build in Congress and the world, over the crisis in El Salvador.

Of the right-wing leaders that the Reagan Administration was frequently accused of colluding with, none were more influential in El Salvador than Roberto d'Aubuisson. A staunch conservative and supporter of former president Humberto Romero, d'Aubuisson left the Armed Forces in the aftermath of the October 1979 coup. d'Aubuisson was a follower of Colonel Jose Alberto Medrano, whose death squad ORDEN had long wielded considerable power in the Salvadoran countryside. Speaking of d'Aubuisson's work in the military and intelligence realms in the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA claimed that he and his colleagues had "helped develop civilian and intelligence networks and vigilante organizations controlled by the National Guard," groups that "engaged in illegal detentions, torture, and the killing of prisoners."²⁶ He had a variety of powerful, close associates in the government, namely Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa and Treasury Police Director Francisco Antonio Moran, each of whom came with a long history of human rights abuses.²⁷ After his jailing for coup-plotting in May of 1980, an amnesty program allowed d'Aubuisson to return in 1982 to run for the Constituent Assembly with his newly formed party, ARENA. Within the party, d'Aubuisson reportedly "[maintained] a team that engages in political intimidation, including abduction, torture, and murder," as the CIA claimed.²⁸ The party reportedly had ties to several death squads, namely the Secret Anti-Communist Army and the Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez Brigade, so named after the leader of La Matanza.²⁹ By 1982, it was clear to Reagan officials that d'Aubuisson had led the campaign to kill Archbishop

²⁶ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, National Intelligence Daily, March 3, 1984, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Romero, indeed, “there probably were few so fanatical and daring as d’Aubuisson to do it” the CIA concluded.³⁰ Fortunately for Duarte, upon his election as President of the Constituent Assembly, d’Aubuisson proved a poor politician, and quickly grew frustrated with his inability to affect policy changes, in his case, policy changes that would put a stop to reforms like the agrarian reform. Of d’Aubuisson’s time as President of the Constituent Assembly, Duarte later recalled, d’Aubuisson was “not adept at building coalitions,” little surprise given his reputation as a staunch right-winger loathed by a majority of the country’s political centrists.³¹

d’Aubuisson frequently cultivated rumors that he had U.S. support in the hopes that such rumors might give an air of inevitability to a d’Aubuisson presidency and at the same time instill confidence that d’Aubuisson was best positioned to deal with the insurgency. Reagan Administration officials constantly needed to stave off these rumors. Early in the Administration’s term, d’Aubuisson began spreading rumors that he had U.S. support, citing a conversation that he had with National Security Council member and Latin American expert, Roger Fontaine.³² Fontaine assured Allen that rumors of his support for d’Aubuisson were simply not true. “The statements made by Major d’Aubuisson regarding my views on the Salvadoran Junta are pure fiction,” Fontaine explained.³³ Describing the meeting, Fontaine went on, “[d’Aubuisson] did virtually all of the talking and I don’t recall much of it except general statements about the danger of communism in the region. It was pretty forgettable stuff.”³⁴

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Duarte, *Duarte*, 186.

³² An important political figure in El Salvador, Roberto d’Aubuisson met with an array of Administration officials from 1981-1989. These officials often met with d’Aubuisson to urge that he play a productive role in the country’s budding democracy, and to simply maintain a relationship to one of the most powerful players in this strategically important nation.

³³ Memorandum, Roger Fontaine to Richard V. Allen, “d’Aubuisson’s Statement in March 4, 1981 Washington Post,” March 4, 1981, WHORM: Subject File, CO Countries, CO046 Begin-092499, Folder: CO046 (El Salvador), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

³⁴ Ibid.

Reagan officials would frequently find themselves disavowing themselves of the ambitious d'Aubuisson.

In the immediate aftermath of the March 28th, 1982 Constituent Assembly elections, Reagan officials sought a meeting with d'Aubuisson in which they urged him to moderate his positions. While the Christian Democrats had won a plurality, a block of conservative parties seemed destined to unite against Duarte and divvy power amongst themselves. d'Aubuisson would certainly play a role. In the meeting between U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton and d'Aubuisson that would take place the day after the election, Hinton expressed to d'Aubuisson his public image problem in the U.S. and abroad. Hinton explained that d'Aubuisson's "definition of Marxism on occasion seemed to include people who by no stretch of the imagination would...the American people consider to be Marxist."³⁵ Hinton encouraged him to soften his stance toward Duarte and the Christian Democrats. While the American public and international opinion suggested that Duarte was popular, d'Aubuisson had a terrible reputation. In part that reputation was that of a soldier and not a political leader, something that he would have to work on if he hoped to secure power. Hinton recalled the conclusion of their meeting, at which point d'Aubuisson "snapped to attention and clicked his heels."³⁶ Hinton explained to the military man, "Major, one suggestion, you are now a political leader who should, in my view, be trying to change. Maybe the military mannerisms should go."³⁷ d'Aubuisson laughed and "said he would try." This friendly back-and-forth represented an Administration effort to reel d'Aubuisson in from the fringe before he secured a significant position of power within the Salvadoran government.

³⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Conversation with Major Roberto d'Aubuisson," March 29, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

While Hinton had a playful back-and-forth with d'Aubuisson, the Administration was secretly working to ensure that he not win the interim presidency, which would certainly go to a member of the conservative block in the newly elected Constituent Assembly. After all, the one thing that ARENA, the PCN, and Democratic Action parties could agree on was their distaste for Duarte and his Christian Democrats, who would be kept out of any significant cabinet positions despite winning a plurality. The Reagan team sent General Vernon Walters, long one of the Administration's favored troubleshooters, to ensure that d'Aubuisson was not chosen the interim president. Fortunately for the Administration, the decision to go with Álvaro Magaña had been made by the Salvadorans prior to Walters' arrival, and certainly, the U.S. concern over a d'Aubuisson pick was already well-known.³⁸ Yet, while Walters' trip may have been moot, the fact that it was arranged demonstrates the degree to which the Administration was set against a d'Aubuisson takeover. Despite rumors to the contrary, the Reagan team was not eager for d'Aubuisson to take his turn as leader of El Salvador.

Despite Administration efforts, however, shortly after the choice of Magaña had been made, rumors of right-wing coup-plotting emerged. Just as those rumors would plague the leadership of the Duarte-led JRG, so too did they plague the Magaña Administration. As before, Roberto d'Aubuisson lay behind many of these rumors as some suggested that d'Aubuisson was "calling the cuarteles" to stimulate the coup.³⁹ As before, Washington set itself against this possibility, though such rumors would not soon go away.

The distance between the American Administration and the Salvadoran far right party ARENA was troubling to d'Aubuisson, who hoped to draw power and influence from a close

³⁸ Duarte, *Duarte*, 184.

³⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Coup Plotting," February 4, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

relationship with El Salvador's northern ally. d'Aubuisson, who attended the School of the Americas as a young man, did have some American supporters, namely, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who much preferred d'Aubuisson to the "socialist" Duarte.⁴⁰ However, the general lack of closeness was far from d'Aubuisson's only problem. The man who did win the interim presidency, Magaña, did not share d'Aubuisson's vision for El Salvador and sought to limit the power both of Duarte's PDC, as well as ARENA. As Duarte had hoped and d'Aubuisson had feared, President Magaña subscribed to the agrarian reform process, viewing it as critical "to reduce the predominant power of overly concentrated wealth."⁴¹ Magaña, with U.S. pressure, understood the necessity of such reforms if the Reagan Administration hoped to secure military aid for El Salvador through the certification process. Even as he won leadership as the President of the Constituent Assembly, things appeared to be turning against Roberto d'Aubuisson.

Rumors of d'Aubuisson's negative role persisted throughout Reagan's first term. First, d'Aubuisson sought to manipulate high officials in the military to attain power.⁴² Frustrated with their failures politically, increasingly, d'Aubuisson and his group focused upon the military as the best means by which to secure power.⁴³ This group aimed to take advantage of the "conservative political orientation" of new Defense Minister Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova once Vides replaced García in that role.⁴⁴ Second, d'Aubuisson's group became more active in death squad violence. Noting that "human rights is impossible as long as the war continues,"

⁴⁰ Joel Brinkley, "d'Aubuisson is Finding a Friend on Capitol Hill," June 27, 1984, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/27/world/d-aubuisson-is-finding-a-friend-on-capitol-hil.html>.

⁴¹ This is a paraphrase of Magaña's views from an American Embassy official in San Salvador. Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Magaña Meeting with President Reagan," November 26, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁴² Report, CIA, "El Salvador: Extreme Rightist Activity," CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁴³ Report, CIA, "El Salvador: Threat from the Right," CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

d'Aubuisson suggested privately that the best means by which to win the war was through the elimination of suspected leftists or “anyone not supportive of the traditional status quo.”⁴⁵ In an extensive report on El Salvador’s death squads, described as relatively small (10-20 individuals), impermanent organizations in which members “have other full time professions and coalesce to plan and execute terrorist attacks,” and protect one another’s identities under threat of death, d'Aubuisson and his ARENA party was identified as a key instigator of death squad activity.⁴⁶ “Official protection from prosecution or governmental interference is primarily the result of personal alliances between key government officials and group leaders,” the report continued, elucidating d'Aubuisson’s key role as one such political leader.⁴⁷ Just as d'Aubuisson tormented Duarte and the JRG, so too would he torment the interim government of Magaña. In both cases, the American Administration needed to constantly disavow d'Aubuisson’s attempts to seize power.

Papel Aguanta Todo

Many in the Reagan Administration derived some hope from Magaña’s views on human rights, long an issue that prompted Congressional criticism. With the support of the Reagan Administration, interim President Alvaro Magaña took some steps toward addressing the issue. To start, however, it was important that Magaña recognized the issue, which some in the Salvadoran leadership did not. To some, like d'Aubuisson, human rights violations were unavoidable in the conduct of a successful counterinsurgency. Violence against leftists or

⁴⁵ Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, “El Salvador: The Role of Roberto d'Aubuisson,” March 4, 1981, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁴⁶ Report, CIA, “Briefing Paper on Right-Wing Terrorism in El Salvador,” 1983, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

citizens perceived to have supported the leftists were simply necessary elements of psychological warfare against an elusive enemy. Magaña and members of his Administration seemed to understand that this was not the case. Reflecting on the Congressional pressure that Reagan faced in the United States, Ambassador Ernesto Rivas-Gallont expressed, “It’s fine to pressure the administration so that it puts greater attention towards rights, reforms, and elections.”⁴⁸ He continues, “this administration has needed to be pressured,” a line that suggests that Rivas-Gallont desired American allies in his campaign to improve the Salvadoran human rights situation.⁴⁹ To the American Embassy in San Salvador, Magaña, too, was a man who “has no illusions about military ‘abuses of authority’” and he saw it as one of his central tasks to “control excesses.”⁵⁰ Magaña went on to establish a human rights commission on December 1st of 1982 and include a spot on the commission to the Church. This commission oversaw an amnesty program that would prove unpopular with the Salvadoran far right, but sought to promote peace in a polarized nation.

The amnesty program would quickly prove unpopular with radical rightists in El Salvador. According to the law, a three-member commission would have the power to free political prisoners accused of less serious crimes, those punishable by four years or fewer. Prisoners accused of crimes punishable by more than four years would have an opportunity to be released as well, though only upon proving insufficient evidence. Many on the Salvadoran right continued to see any attempt to work with the leftist insurgents as hypocritical and of minimal value. To them, the laws seemed to protect the insurgents, but not the state and its soldiers. This

⁴⁸ Cable, Ernesto Rivas-Gallont to Foreign Minister Fidel Chavez Mena, January 29, 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Magaña Meeting with President Reagan,” November 26, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

bitterness was widespread. On May 6th, a dead body appeared in a parking lot in San Salvador, which bore a note that said “since Salvadoran law favors only ‘communist criminals’ groups must take their own actions against terrorists.”⁵¹ This particular murder, the embassy explained, was directed at the amnesty program spearheaded by Magaña.⁵² This seemed a common argument among El Salvador’s rightists. Amnesty programs and human rights measures were simply not designed to protect soldiers from insurgent violence, so of what value were they?

While Magaña attempted to mitigate El Salvador’s human rights issues, like the JRG, his government would come under fire from a variety of human rights-oriented opposition groups. When the Reagan Administration went through the certification process of July 1982, certifying that the Salvadoran government had indeed made substantial progress in the realm of human rights, a variety of groups, including Amnesty International quickly jumped in to highlight continuing abuses under interim president Magaña. Amnesty International cited the government’s own numbers: the U.S. Embassy reported that there were roughly 1,762 political murders between January and June of 1982, while the Legal Aid Office of the Archdiocese reported 3,059 civilian political murders during the same period.⁵³ The International Red Cross reported being unable to function in El Salvador, so much so that the group considered leaving the country altogether.⁵⁴ Struggling with the Administration’s continued insistence on certifying the Salvadoran government despite its abuses, Amnesty International concluded, “Maybe that is not dishonest. Maybe it is simply a case of the Administration so wanting to passionately affirm

⁵¹ Report, To William P. Clark, Assistant to the President for National Security, “Central American Working Group Report No. 56,” May 17, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD’s 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Transcript, Inter-American Affairs, “El Salvador Certification Hearings,” July 29, 1982, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Manuscripts, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR# 0001, RG II: Executive Director Files, 1967-1997, Series 5: National Section Memos, Box 4, Folder: Executive Director Files, AMR 29, Americas – El Salvador, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the rightness of its policy, that it simply sees reality, not intentionally distorting reality, but sees reality out of its own preconceptions or terms of what it says are American interests.”⁵⁵

While the Reagan Administration recognized the importance of human rights improvements if the Salvadorans were to gain greater international recognition, there were several within both governments who shared a critical view of such human rights organizations. One issue on which both parties agreed was the bias of human rights organizations, international and domestic, against the government of El Salvador. The government of El Salvador long resisted allowing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) into its detention centers. President Reagan shared the government of El Salvador’s distaste for the group, suggesting that he did not trust their objectivity.⁵⁶ However, the presence and access of the ICRC remained a sticking point for many in the American Congress, who insisted on a third party to watch and prove a regulatory force in El Salvador’s civil conflict.

While the Reagan Administration did not always agree with human rights organizations on the best and fairest ways to deal with human rights abuses, the Administration did continue to press Magaña and his team on improvements. The Administration frequently emphasized that dealing with issues of government violence and democratic reform more broadly were central to the Administration’s attempts to secure further aid, both military and economic, for the government of El Salvador. President Reagan made this emphasis clear upon his first meeting with Magaña after his selection as interim President of El Salvador, which took place in December of 1982. Reagan empathized with the new president, noting that “we are victims of press propaganda” undertaken by a media that has “portrayed Salvador from the guerilla point of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Memorandum, ARA – Tom Enders to The Secretary, “El Salvador Action Paper, March 2, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

view.”⁵⁷ Reagan went on to criticize a “biased” U.S. Congress that made support for the government of El Salvador more difficult.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Reagan pressed that with certification a continued requirement for aid, the government of El Salvador could not risk vital aid with continued abuses and inaction in the face of obvious injustices. Secretary of State George Shultz went on, albeit more forcefully and less apologetically, “We are particularly upset by human rights problems,” he explained.⁵⁹ As did Reagan, Shultz pushed the degree to which the government of El Salvador and the Reagan Administration were in this fight together. Throughout the meeting, Reagan would repeatedly use the word “we” to describe the obstacles they faced in unison. President Reagan emphasized that “We share your goals and identify with you and our neighborhood.” He declared that “you deserve to succeed” as a country whose “victory would have worldwide consequences as an example that subversion does not work.” While Reagan continually spoke in these grandiose terms, Shultz stood close by, continually reminding Magaña of American requirements. If the Salvadoran government could not deal with its problems of state violence, “the rug could be pulled out from under us.” The message was clear: while the United States and El Salvador were in this fight together, it could easily be lost if aggressive steps were not taken to deal with human rights abuses and assuage the concern of the American Congress.

Of course, despite his good intentions, President Magaña was quite constrained in his ability to affect what the Reagan Administration considered positive change in his country. At a time in which the Reagan Administration was pushing particularly hard for enhanced aid to El Salvador, the Administration encouraged President Magaña to pen a letter to the U.S. Congress

⁵⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Draft MemCon on Reagan- Magaña Meeting,” December 7, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

that might prod them to action. In the end, this letter was not written by Magaña alone, but in consultation with much of the Salvadoran leadership. This would not be easy given the widespread belief in the higher echelons of Salvadoran power that human rights concepts did not apply during times of civil war. U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, explained, “thoughtful individuals know that U.S. military and economic assistance is essential and even that the U.S. has good and sufficient reason for what it has done and is doing, all repeat all Salvadorans resent it.”⁶⁰

This resentment came through loud and clear as Magaña and others struggled through writing their letter to Congress. For example, Vice President Pablo Mauricio Alvergue was resistant to the need for a letter from President Magaña in the first place. “If we are this dependent on Congress,” Mauricio Alvergue reportedly stated, “we would do better to negotiate with the FDR-FMLN.”⁶¹ This argument echoed an earlier point made by eventual Minister of Defense Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova. During a November of 1982 conversation in which the Salvadoran high command discussed the possible loss of U.S. aid despite Salvadoran attempts to “cooperate” on “issues of democratic government and reforms,” Vides Casanova suggested that El Salvador should be prepared to “go it alone.”⁶² Perhaps working with the United States was simply not worth the trouble. This resistance came through not simply in the conversation surrounding the letter, but in the letter itself. Centrist Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena was pressured into removing the line, “We intend to treat all concerned in accordance with the

⁶⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Commentary on Magaña’s Letter,” April 8, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Contingency Planning with Garcia,” November 4, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

provisions of the Geneva Conventions to which we subscribe.”⁶³ This seemingly innocuous comment was divisive to a Salvadoran military that saw human rights norms as constraining their ability to fight a war against an insurgency that did not follow the rules.

The exercise of writing this letter also underscored some key differences in how American leaders and Salvadoran leaders viewed the nature of their commitments. Of the letter-writing process, Ambassador Hinton explained, “Throughout this exercise, the key problem has been to reconcile our desire for early specific actions and commitments with a Salvadoran desire to be indirect, vague, and imprecise about timing. Basically, this reflects deep-seated cultural differences.”⁶⁴ While these cultural differences may have been real, this imprecision was strategic too. Those military figures intent on mitigating the country’s human rights crisis likely wanted to avoid making promises that realistically, they could not keep. Those military figures less committed to human rights improvements likely wanted to avoid binding necessary aid to measures with which they did not agree. Hinton went on, “We are condemned to try to work together. There is, however, a Salvadoran expression, ‘papel aguanta todo,’ which roughly translated means, “paper absorbs anything.” Hinton explained that the popular expression often meant that paper commitments meant little, and need not be implemented. Here remained a perpetual issue. American need for quick action would never quite gel with a Salvadoran leadership reluctant to commit to real change in concrete terms.

⁶³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Commentary on Magaña’s Letter,” April 8, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Perdicarias Alive, Raisuli Dead

When the Reagan team railed on issues of government violence and impunity against the security forces, they often did so in the context of violence against American citizens. Few issues divided the governments of the United States and El Salvador like the Sheraton Hotel murders of Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, the two members of the American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD) who had traveled to San Salvador to work with Salvadoran agrarian reform leader Rodolfo Viera on January 3, 1981. Early on in the investigation, it became clear to Salvadoran and American officials alike that the murder had been executed by two National Guardsmen, Valle Acevedo and Gómez González and ordered by two National Guard officers, Captain Eduardo Ernesto Alfonso Avila and Lieutenant Rodolfo Isidro López Sibrián. The U.S. Embassy worked hard to secure convictions for Avila and López Sibrián, but doing so would prove a constant struggle. Avila fled the country for a time in 1982, thus focusing attention on López Sibrián. While López Sibrián was charged with ordering the murders in September of 1982, the case against him was dismissed citing insufficient evidence. This owed in large part to a judge's allowance of López Sibrián to shave off his mustache and dye his red hair black before appearing before witnesses.⁶⁵ Many in Washington were outraged.

In an alleged discussion between Avila and a colleague, Avila discussed his role in the murder. "We were in the Sheraton...I don't remember who said: there are the sons of bitches who took my land," Avila allegedly said.⁶⁶ "Those sons of bitches come into our country and screwed-up the nice arrangement we had."⁶⁷ He then went on to discuss their collective decision to kill Viera and the two AIFLD officials. Reflecting on the government's attempts to prosecute

⁶⁵ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c1998), 177.

⁶⁶ Cable, Thomas Pickering to Department of State, "Activities of Captain Avila," April 17, 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

him, Avila allegedly claimed, “I’m ok. The supreme court is taking care of me—my uncle is there, I have no problems.”⁶⁸

The U.S. Embassy made the prosecution of Lieutenant López Sibrián and Captain Avila a top priority throughout much of the Reagan Administration’s first term. The reasons for this are many. Most importantly, the murder of two Americans and the resulting impunity for the Salvadoran officers that very obviously ordered those murders proved a constant topic of criticism on the Hill. During certification deliberations, progress on the Sheraton murder cases was central. After all, why should the U.S. government fund a foreign government that is shielding its low-level soldiers from prosecution for the murder of American citizens? In the midst of an intense fight with Congress to secure additional aid for El Salvador, Secretary of State Shultz argued bluntly, “We cannot explain to our Congress how [López Sibrián] could still be free.”⁶⁹ Almost as importantly, labor support was critical for the Administration in its fight with Congress over Salvadoran aid. Officials knew that they could not count on AFL-CIO support unless they could secure justice in the Sheraton murder case. Finally, the murders of Hammer and Pearlman hit close to home in the American Embassy, where many embassy officials worked closely with AID officials on the issue of agrarian reform (thus their meeting with President of the Agrarian Reform Institute, Rodolfo Viera).⁷⁰

As before, however, Washington was witnessing a disconnect between American demands for fast action and a Salvadoran reluctance to deal with issues like that of military impunity. Salvadoran law made it difficult to prosecute accomplices when the gunmen had already been prosecuted. Furthermore, it was virtually unheard of that a Salvadoran officer be

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to The President, “Calling Salvadoran President Magaña,” April 5, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁰ Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 175-176.

punished for the murder of a civilian, even if those civilians were American. In one meeting between Embassy officials and high officers in the Salvadoran military, Lieutenant Colonel Cienfuegos, Assistant to Salvadoran army Chief of Staff Rafael Flores Lima, stated “emotionally” that “the U.S. was asking El Salvador to violate its own laws in pressing for the arrest of Salvadoran officers.”⁷¹ Indeed, what the Reagan Administration was asking was not a simple fix for Salvadoran leadership. There existed in El Salvador a long legacy of impunity when it came to violations and overreach by the ultra-powerful Salvadoran military. Almost always, the role of Salvadoran leadership was to protect its underlings from such challenges. Minister of Defense García and other members of the military leadership were concerned that in turning in López Sibrián, they would not only be violating a longstanding tradition of insulating their troops from such scrutiny, but perhaps more importantly, they would be putting themselves at risk and exposing themselves to scrutiny that could lead to their own ouster from power. Salvadoran leadership may have been afraid of what might happen if López Sibrián were convicted, given that Director of Treasury Police Francisco Antonio Moran may have been complicit in the murders as well. The Salvadoran Armed Forces tended to stick together and in fact, Major Roberto d’Aubuisson rushed to the aid of Avila and López Sibrián amid the accusations against them, suggesting to a television audience that he was “honored to be their friend” and assuring the audience that he “[knew] they [were] good soldiers.”⁷² With such powerful figures lining up to support López Sibrián, it would not be an easy fight for the American Embassy.

⁷¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Contingency Planning with Garcia,” November 4, 1982, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador Box 30, Box: 38, Folder: El Salvador (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷² Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 177.

U.S. Embassy pressure to convict López Sibrián was powerful, and as a result, Minister of Defense García appeared for a time to go along. Of course, it was not simply stubbornness that led individuals like García to drag their feet on López Sibrián, but real fear of what other military members might think and do should López Sibrián be convicted. In February of 1983, the Embassy suggested that García was ready to go along with detaining López Sibrián before he “recalculated” the effects of that decision on his “power position” after considering what d’Aubuisson might do if he submitted to U.S. pressure.⁷³ As in the case of junta leader Duarte and interim President Magaña, García feared the reaction from the far right if he were to help the Salvadoran court system to secure a conviction against a Salvadoran officer.

Regardless of this difficulty, this appeared an issue upon which Ambassador Hinton was prepared to stand his ground. Much was at stake. The U.S. Embassy had repeatedly pressured Salvadoran leadership to facilitate the conviction of the Sheraton murderers, but with little success. If they did not carry through on their threats to withhold support to the government of El Salvador, how could they expect Salvadoran leadership to listen to them in the future? Hinton explained,

Our credibility is now at stake... We are a great power; if we back off, we will be taken less seriously on future issues. We will have strengthened the position of those Salvadorans, probably a majority, who believe and assert that no matter what they do or not do the U.S. will support and protect them against a communist takeover.⁷⁴

How could Hinton expect to be taken seriously by the far right in El Salvador if the Administration folded on this issue?

⁷³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Lopez Sibrian and More Military Assistance for El Salvador,” February 23, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

The Reagan Administration, as the Carter Administration, spent a great deal of time warning the Salvadorans of what would happen if they did not follow through on Administration warnings. In contrast, however, the Carter Administration had followed through on some of these threats, particularly early in their term when the Sandinistas had not yet raised the stakes on its Central American policies. At what point did the U.S. government need to send a strong message and withhold military aid as the Carter Administration once did? Hinton went on, “As a great power, I now think our position should track Teddy Roosevelt’s famous ultimatum, ‘we want either Perdicarias alive or Raisuli dead.’ It is unconscionable that an officer of our de-facto ally should be free when we know he ordered the killing of two of our citizens.”⁷⁵ He concluded his message in unequivocal terms. “They’ll not like it, but I repeat, we are a great power. From time to time we should behave like one. We have been highly sensitive, as we should be, to their views most of the time; on this one we are right and therefore right to insist.”⁷⁶ This was an issue upon which Hinton was ready to make his stand.

For Hinton, more was at stake than simply the issue of two murdered Americans, or the issue of Congressional reaction to the López Sibrián affair. If the Reagan Administration hoped to affect democratic progress in El Salvador, making headway on the pervasive issue of impunity was critical. To Hinton, the López Sibrián affair had powerful consequences in El Salvador. “To a significant degree, the agonizing conflict raging in El Salvador has its origins in the past failures of this society to deal with a

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

minimum of justice with such problems,” he explained.⁷⁷ Thus, to Hinton, the problem of impunity demonstrated by the failure to arrest López Sibrián was one of the primary reasons for El Salvador’s crisis in the first place. It was that impunity that emboldened the leftist insurgency, and made those leftists eager to accept the help of outside forces like the Cubans and Sandinistas to help overthrow a corrupt and oppressive government. Perhaps most central to Hinton was the tension that the López Sibrián issue highlighted in U.S. foreign policy. “We seem to confront a dilemma,” Hinton explained. “Our security interests seem to require one answer. Our interest in a just democratic society seems to require another.”⁷⁸ He concluded, “Is it too late to advance both interests?”⁷⁹ Hinton thus understood the draw to simply give the Salvadoran government a pass, but could the United States do that and still profess to be a champion of democracy and human rights in El Salvador, Central America, and the world? Hinton would be without a powerful ally in President Reagan. Reagan did not want to condition U.S. assistance on the detention of López Sibrián, nor did he want to condition continued assistance on the Salvadoran land reform. While the latter represented an aspect of the certification process, the former did not, and so the Administration demurred for the time being on the issue of López Sibrián.

While the López Sibrián prosecution remained a constant theme in U.S.-Salvadoran relations throughout the Reagan team’s first term, so too was the issue of the unresolved murders of the churchwomen, which would present the Reagan Administration with similar problems. In this case, the Administration faced constant Congressional pressures and found that church groups had spearheaded the movement against American action in El Salvador. There remained

⁷⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “AIFLD Murder Case,” March 2, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD’s 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

no trial for those who murdered the churchwomen, something Roberto d'Aubuisson's position of power and the constant threat of his coup-leading likely assured. In the talking points for a phone conversation with President Magaña, Secretary of State George Shultz urged President Reagan to insist that he "fully [appreciated]" the "complex problems" that Magaña and his government faced, but the Reagan Administration needed to be able to demonstrate to Congress and the American people that "progress is being made" on the investigations into the murders of the churchwomen.⁸⁰ Shultz's talking points also suggested that Reagan emphasize the Reagan Administration's loyalty to the Salvadoran cause, again evoking the unity between the two governments, while still insisting that the Administration needed the help of the Salvadoran leadership. "I don't want you to lose; I want you to win;" Shultz urged Reagan to argue, "but you must help me to help you."⁸¹ These empathetic pleas remained a constant theme of Reagan conversations with Magaña and the Salvadoran leadership. As with the case of López Sibrián, these pleas seldom affected real change.

One thing making this investigation difficult was the work of Assembly President d'Aubuisson, who used this issue as a means by which to "maneuver aggressively against" moderates in the government and military.⁸² d'Aubuisson and his political allies charged these individuals with bowing to U.S. pressure and interventionism.⁸³ The CIA cited "high-level government and military officials and US Embassy personnel...[receiving] threats regarding their involvement in the case."⁸⁴ Even García faced such pressure despite his high status in government. If the Reagan team hoped to affect positive change in the Salvadoran justice system,

⁸⁰ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to The President, "Calling Salvadoran President Magaña," April 5, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Report, CIA, "El Salvador: Political Difficulties Persist," October 21, 1982, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

d'Aubuisson represented a powerful block of rightist leaders who would continue to stand in the way.

The Public Relations War Continues

By 1983, national polls continued to suggest widespread American opposition to the U.S. role in El Salvador. In April of that year, 55% of those polls expressed belief that El Salvador represented “another Vietnam situation.”⁸⁵ Only one-fifth of those polled believed that El Salvador would “end in victory for our side,” while only two-fifths of the public polled correctly identified which side that was.⁸⁶ Perhaps most surprising given the Administration emphasis on the external support for the Salvadoran guerillas was that 50% of those polled believed that “poverty and lack of human rights” explained the unrest and not external subversion from Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union (29%).⁸⁷ The labor movement continued to spearhead the opposition, arguing in pamphlets that “what is happening to working people in El Salvador and what is happening to working people in the U.S. are two sides of the same coin.”⁸⁸ It was a war to “save the U.S. empire,” to intervene in Central America once again, and to ensure a profitable business climate in Central America at the expense of American workers.⁸⁹ The Reagan Administration continued to have a long way to go to convince a skeptical public.

As before, the American opposition movement drew upon narratives emerging from El Salvador, and oppositional figures like Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuria remained vital to these narratives.

He remained particularly critical of what he perceived to be deliberate deception on the part of

⁸⁵ Memorandum, Department of State, “Many View El Salvador as Drawn-Out, No-Win Situation,” May 5, 1983, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Bulletin, Labor Committee on El Salvador & Central America, “How, as a worker in the U.S., do you benefit from the U.S. war in El Salvador,” May 1983, Box: PE 036 Orgs, Folder: Of Labor Committee on El Salvador & Central America, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

the Reagan Administration, deception designed to cover up regular Salvadoran human rights violations and put a positive spin on a situation that remained dire. Ellacuria explained that this deception meant that the United States shared culpability for continued Salvadoran human rights violations.⁹⁰ To Ellacuria, the government to which the Reagan Administration had committed itself was not simply oppressive, but it was a terrorist state that waged war on its own people with violence and terror alike.⁹¹ This emphasis was not only morally reprehensible, but wrong-headed. Ellacuria, as the young Christian Democratic Party before him, and the leftist insurgents, saw the causes of the insurgency as principally structural. Genuine, far-reaching reform was the best means by which to deal with this country in crisis. Terrorism only stood to exacerbate the conflict. In its unwillingness to more forcefully disavow this kind of violence, Ellacuria charged the Reagan team as demonstrating its true loyalty to its own selfish interests and not to the good of El Salvador. He explains, referring to the ideas of the Reagan Administration and Jeane Kirkpatrick, “the pretext of human rights cannot put in danger the security of the United States and the resistance to the advance of communist forces.”⁹² To Ellacuria, U.S. behavior toward El Salvador was dictated by Cold War concerns. What was best for El Salvador was simply a non-issue, and as a result, the U.S. played a negative role in El Salvador.

The power and strength of this oppositional message meant that securing sufficient military aid for the government of El Salvador remained a persistent issue for Administration officials throughout the Reagan Administration’s first term in office. Salvadoran attempts to recast their international image continued to prove challenging. A member of the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry noted that while it “[considered] always a priority the problem of information

⁹⁰ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, “Estados Unidos y Los Esquadrones de la Muerte en El Salvador,” 1983, Box: Caja 13, Folder: Carpeta 24, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

abroad...the financial situation has not permitted us to realize that project.”⁹³ The Administration hoped for greater success in securing more substantial military aid for the government of El Salvador, long seen as essential to the government of El Salvador’s success in their counterinsurgency efforts. In 1981, the Reagan Administration secured \$25 million in military aid to the government of El Salvador. However, of that money, 80% came through the Foreign Assistance Act’s 506(a) stipulation, which allowed the President to rush military aid in cases of “unforeseen emergency,” in which the failure to act would have direct consequences for U.S. national security. Only 5% of that aid came with the approval of Congress, through FMS (foreign military sales) credits. In 1982, the Administration had greater luck securing additional military aid, securing \$82 million, though that came despite some tricky negotiations through the certification process, and with a majority of that money again coming through the Foreign Assistance Act stipulation and reprogrammed money from other countries that also circumvented Congressional approval. In 1983, Congress’ insistence on conditioning aid meant that Washington withheld 30% of military aid until the government of El Salvador had obtained a guilty verdict in the churchwomen trial.⁹⁴

During the first half of 1983, the Reagan Administration doubled down on its efforts in El Salvador, seeking additional funding from Congress and more widespread backing from the Congress and public at large. On February 24th, 1983, the Administration released National

⁹³ Letter, Direccion General de Cultura y Comunicacion to Señor Director de la Prensa Grafica, February 3, 1983, Box: Año 1983, A-800 to 804.4, Caja No. 140, Folder: 800, El Salvador Asuntos Politicos, 1983, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁹⁴ One way that the Administration worked around Congress was through working with international banks with Administration ties. As Raymond Bonner, the journalist who broke the El Mozote massacre, reported, between 1949 and 1979, El Salvador received \$632.8 million from the IMF, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Inter-American Development Bank.⁹⁴ Yet, from 1981-1983, the government of El Salvador received \$332.4 million from those same banks, more than half the amount in 10% the time.⁹⁴ This owed largely to Administration efforts to secure help for the war-torn country that did not require a protracted battle with their Congressional opposition.

Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, (New York: Times Books, 1984), 271.

Security Decision Directive 82, which sought additional aid for the government of El Salvador. This Directive expressed a desire to “significantly augment” the U.S. military presence in El Salvador to “permit the U.S. to better influence the prosecution of the war.”⁹⁵ The Directive had an ambitious agenda, seeking “tactical improvements” that would enable the Salvadoran military to “launch a full scale country-wide counterinsurgency effort to include civic action and psychological operation.” Furthermore, the Directive sought additional non-military aid to offset the economic damage being done by the war, and consequently prevent an economic disaster that could further undermine the Salvadoran government and embolden the insurgency. This aid came at a particularly important time given emerging divisions within the Salvadoran military that threatened to destabilize the already tenuous regime, a regime to which the Reagan Administration had firmly tied itself. The Directive also ushered in a new Central American Working Group, which sought to coordinate the actions of the NSC, DOD, State Department, JCS, and CIA and these agencies’ work regarding Central America.

This move was in part a reaction to growing division within the Administration on the issues of El Salvador. Reflecting in his autobiography, Secretary of State George Shultz recalls NSC efforts to Americanize efforts, a maneuver Shultz saw as a mistake. “It played straight in to the argument that El Salvador was the next Vietnam,” Shultz claimed.⁹⁶ In their efforts to make U.S. policy more muscular, the NSC worked to get Thomas Enders, then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, fired from his post for “going soft,” and they ultimately succeeded in June of 1983.⁹⁷ Shultz blames William Clark in particular for this NSC effort to “move Enders out of the picture—and move diplomacy out of the picture—by moving Central

⁹⁵ Directive, Ronald Reagan, “National Security Decision Directive 82,” February 24, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD’s 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁹⁶ George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, (New York: Scribner’s, c1993), 299.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 297.

America out of the State Department.”⁹⁸ While Enders was fired in part to keep the peace, in the ensuing battle to choose a new Ambassador, Shultz won. The battle would be ongoing throughout much of the Reagan team’s first term, though Shultz and the State Department’s voice on Salvadoran policy would be ascendant as the Administration advanced into its second term.

The ambitious agenda of NSDD 82 came with a public relations blitz. In late February, the Administration organized a mission to El Salvador headed by Senator Richard Stone, in which Stone sought to “advance the theme of public diplomacy which will be ‘more democracy for Central America’ as the best solution for the region.”⁹⁹ With the Stone mission, the Administration hoped to cultivate good will in the U.S., El Salvador, and in the international arena alike. Shortly thereafter, on March 10, 1983, President Reagan took his message directly to the American people, giving a speech on El Salvador and Central America more broadly to the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). The media blitz was on.

One month later, President Reagan would call for a joint session of Congress, unique for its emphasis on a topic of foreign relations. In it, Reagan would repeat many of the themes from the NAM speech. On April 27, 1983, President Reagan spoke to the Congress and the American people about the crisis in Central America, and in particular, El Salvador. The talking points were familiar, as Reagan expressed how vital Central America was to American interests with El Salvador, “nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts.”¹⁰⁰ He touted the progress being made in El Salvador, where the “new government is now delivering on its promises of

⁹⁸ Ibid, 305.

⁹⁹ Memorandum, Senator Richard Stone to William P. Clark, “Senator Stone’s Proposed Trip to El Salvador, February 24-28,” February 23, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁰ “Address on Central America (April 27, 1983),” Miller Center, last accessed May 7, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/5858>.

democracy, reform, and free elections.”¹⁰¹ Reagan went on to tout the Salvadoran agrarian reform effort as marking a new era for El Salvador of greater justice and democracy. Finally, he emphasized the critical role that America must play in supporting “free peoples” in El Salvador against the forces of Marxist-Leninism and that ideology’s allies in Nicaragua.¹⁰² He concluded with a call for bipartisan consensus, and more concrete requests for reprogrammed funds for Central America, and a large new aid package.

The speech received high praise and one internal document even suggested that it was the most favorably received speech in over a year.¹⁰³ This same document suggested that “we have gone from overwhelming rejection of our arguments to slim acceptance, laying the groundwork for further discussions with the Congress.”¹⁰⁴ The speech even went over well among Reagan’s Congressional opponents. Clarence “Doc” Long, considered a “thorn in the side” of Administration policy praised the speech as “sound and just.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the Administration was turning the tide of public opinion, after all.

The blitz continued and the talking points remained consistent. Among the talking points that Reagan and his underlings used was the contention that the human rights situation in El Salvador was progressing, as was agrarian reform. They touted El Salvador’s creation of a peace commission and amnesty program. The Administration cited the Salvadoran announcement of

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Overview, “El Salvador Speech,” May 4, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD’s 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ William P. Clark refers to Long as a “thorn in our side” in Memorandum, From William P. Clark & Kenneth M. Duberstein, “Meeting on El Salvador with Selected Bipartisan House/Senate Members,” February 26, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Historian Raymond Bonner quotes Long as calling the speech “sound and just in Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 360.

elections for 1983, which would allow for the participation of the leftist guerillas.¹⁰⁶ The greatest threat to the democratization of El Salvador, in fact, was a guerilla insurgency that sought to disrupt those elections, and terrorize the Salvadoran people, through violence, a point thus justifying further aid including a military “shield” against those who would seek to derail Salvadoran progress. Through it all, the Administration continued to emphasize that U.S. personnel would not take on a combat role in this scenario, in an attempt to allay popular fears amongst opposition leaders that El Salvador was truly “Spanish for Vietnam.”

Administration officials sought this additional funding and a doubling down of American efforts in large part due to what many saw as the worsening conditions in El Salvador. In the aftermath of the Final Offensive, guerilla forces persisted in their campaign of harassment and economic sabotage. Interviewed in 1989, former guerilla commandante, Napoleón Romero Garcia, recalls the post-Final Offensive era as one of guerilla strength. He cited the FMLN’s “sufficient organizational unity, manpower, arms, sanctuaries, and outside support” that enabled the group to “generate a more or less continuous and growing military effort” from 1981 to 1984.¹⁰⁷ In February of 1983, National Security Adviser William P. Clark and Deputy Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs, Kenneth M. Duberstein, cited the “deteriorating military, economic and political situation” in El Salvador when it informed Administration leaders to meet with key Congressional leaders about enhanced funding for the government of El Salvador.¹⁰⁸ Clark spoke highly of guerilla forces. The insurgents were not simply “peasant irregulars,” but guerillas with “military capability,” which owed to the “availability of training, tactical guidance,

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum, From William P. Clark to Secretary of State et. Al., “Central America: Public Affairs Guidance,” March 12, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD 82A, Box: 6, Folder: NSDD 82A [NSDD 82 – File 2], Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁷ Courtney E. Prisk, ed., *The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerilla Leader*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 35.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum, From William P. Clark to Secretary of State et. Al., “Central America: Public Affairs Guidance,” March 12, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD 82A, Box: 6, Folder: NSDD 82A [NSDD 82 – File 2], Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

and military supplies” that came from the Sandinistas.¹⁰⁹ This, of course, was a frequent talking point of those concerned with the Salvadoran insurgency, and made its way into most conversations, white papers, and press releases as the Reagan Administration sought to ensure widespread support for its Salvadoran policy. Clark went on that if El Salvador was lost to the Marxists, then “no government in the isthmus will be safe,” the Panama Canal would be threatened as would Caribbean trade more broadly.¹¹⁰ “If they win in El Salvador, they would also start north, reviving the insurgency in Guatemala, and reaching into the South of a troubled Mexico,” Clark and Duberstein explained. This was nothing less than a “national challenge” that the United States would either meet, or risk losing Central America to the forces of Marxism.

Shortly thereafter, others sounded similar alarms regarding the military situation in El Salvador. In April of 1983, Deputy Director for Political-Military Affairs Oliver North urged the White House to press for urgent security assistance for El Salvador or risk losing that country’s civil conflict. Quite plainly, the Salvadoran Armed Forces were broke. North suggested that a \$30 million supplemental “will not even carry the [El Salvadoran Armed Forces] until the end of next week.”¹¹¹ Since February 29th, the Salvadoran government had been unable to buy ammunition, medical aid, repair necessary parts, nor could the government of El Salvador pay for critical training of members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. North went on to argue that “the reliability of the United States is on the line.”¹¹² How could the United States be trusted as an ally with a genuine interest in staving off a Marxist insurgency in El Salvador if it could not deliver rapid aid in such a dire moment? “Further delays,” North suggested, “will prove very

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Memorandum, Oliver L. North & Christopher Lehman, “Urgent Security Assistance for El Salvador,” April 12, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹¹² Ibid.

costly.”¹¹³ However, there were still other reasons to push for rapid aid. Not only would a lack of U.S. funding at this time undermine the Salvadoran war effort, but it would embolden the Salvadoran far right. As North explained, the meager assistance that El Salvador had received to that point represented the kind of “‘less than half’ measure that d’Aubuisson could seize on to mobilize the far right and stimulate a coup.”¹¹⁴ Thus, North and others remained concerned that tepid American support would lead d’Aubuisson and others to push El Salvador still further rightward and thus make future aid a near impossibility to secure from an already divided Congress.

To deal with this perceived crisis, the Reagan Administration unleashed still more of its allies to promote its position on El Salvador, including U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick who held a press conference on the topic on April 28th, 1983. She expressed the dire nature of the situation, suggesting that “as recently as six months ago, certainly, almost nobody was talking about the establishment of a Marxist state in El Salvador as a likely possibility. Now that’s changed.”¹¹⁵ Kirkpatrick lamented the inability of the U.S. government to aid the government of El Salvador sufficiently, complaining about the very half measures that North noted in his message just a few days prior. “We haven’t tried very hard,” Kirkpatrick argued.¹¹⁶ She explained that the U.S. government simply had not committed the money necessary. Furthermore, the constraint of 55 military trainers proved a challenging one. “You can’t take fifty-five trainers into even a little bitty country like El Salvador and get very far in a year and a half or so, two years, in training people,” Kirkpatrick argued, “You can’t train very many.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Press Briefing, Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, April 28, 1983, Collection: Reilly, Robert
Contents: Series II: Subject File OAs 12418, 12419, 12420, Box: 3 , Folder: El Salvador Briefings – NSC, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Kirkpatrick, as Reagan and others, emphasized the complex nature of human rights in El Salvador, suggesting that the government was not the progenitor of all the violence. She spoke of guerilla violence, and civilians getting caught in the “crossfire.” She ended her discussion with reference to an emerging consensus in Washington about El Salvador that at the time was more hoped for than real, before she finally mentioned that Soviet military power in the Western hemisphere remained the “most ignored, important politico-military question” about which she was aware.¹¹⁸ Reagan officials were out in full force pleading the Administration’s case, emphasizing the critical points of a dire crisis in El Salvador stoked by interests outwardly antagonistic to the United States. It would not prove an easy fight in Congress, but the Administration and its allies were prepared to invest a large amount of political capital in turning the tide of the discussion on El Salvador.

Tipping Point?

This crisis moment in El Salvador and the common idea shared by North, Kirkpatrick, and others that Washington had been embracing half measures in its approach to El Salvador served to prompt a re-evaluation of the Administration’s Central American policies. On May 11th, 1983, Deputy National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane served as chairman of a meeting between an array of foreign policy experts, including Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders, NSC members Oliver North, Alfonso Sapia-Bosch, and Roger Fontaine, UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick as well as additional representatives from the State and Defense Departments, U.S. SouthCom, and still others. The topic was the Administration’s flailing Central American strategy, a topic in the news after Reagan’s speech to a joint session of Congress. While the speech affected a positive change in American attitudes, the sense that the

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Administration was losing in Central America persisted. While this was an overstatement of the relative strength of the guerillas, there is no question that the government of El Salvador remained tenuous, and lacked the necessary funding to lead an effective counter-insurgency effort. At the same time, guerilla economic sabotage exacerbated an already bleak economic situation in El Salvador, a situation that threatened to further polarize the country. In the opening remarks of the meeting, a critique of the U.S.'s Central American policy emerged. "We have fashioned a policy by fits and starts," McFarlane began, continuing "the bits and pieces have often been good, but we need to draw them all together."¹¹⁹ Hitting on the issue of half measures once again, "How many disasters will it take before enough Americans realize that fine-tuned minimum efforts only guarantee failure?"¹²⁰

The agenda was ambitious. El Salvador would be won or lost in the ensuing year and the Administration had to get it right. "Prospects for second chances in Central America are, at best, dim," McFarlane explained.¹²¹ They had 6 to 12 months to accomplish what they had not done in the first two years of Reagan's first term. But what actions was the Administration to take? Policymakers discussed the López Sibrián issue and the murdered churchwomen as being central to securing Congressional support, though the Administration remained reluctant to attach progress on these murders to aid cutoffs. They discussed the importance of further progress on the issue of agrarian reform, and some expressed worry that Defense Minister Vides Casanova planned to withdraw military support for the program, so vitally tied to U.S. support for the government of El Salvador. There was emphasis on securing elections for the end of the year. Of Congress, McFarlane argued, "The program must stress the bi-partisan nature of the President's

¹¹⁹ Agenda, Central America Strategy/Planning Session, May 11, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat: NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD's 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

policy toward the region,” it was added.¹²² It was only this way that the President might secure the consistent, sufficient funding that was vital to the Salvadoran counter-insurgency effort.

Perhaps more than anything, however, Administration officials discussed the necessity of an even more ambitious public relations campaign that might bolster public support for the Administration’s Central American policies. Officials supported the creation of an outreach program led by White House Public Liaison officer Faith Whittlesey that could “develop increased public support for the President’s policies.”¹²³ The group was to include representatives from the NSC, State Department, Defense Department, CIA, OAS, AID, members of the U.S. delegation to the UN, the White House Offices of Public Liaison, Political Affairs, Communications, and Legislative Affairs and was designed to meet regularly each week to oversee the Administration’s public relations efforts. The group was designed to liaison with outside coalitions supporting the President’s policies toward Central America and gather leaders in business, civic groups, farm groups, organized labor, ethnic groups, women’s groups, and media members. This blitz was to be ambitious indeed. “At the outset,” McFarlane explained, “we should schedule so many of these gatherings that our briefing room chairs don’t have time to cool down between briefings.”¹²⁴ As part of this effort, it was also emphasized that they needed a consistent stream of Op-Ed pieces to be written and signed by Administration leaders or their allies. The importance of publicly-useful themes also emerged, like the theme of U.S. credibility, which to many, was on the line in the tiny country of El Salvador. Administration officials also emphasized the necessity of playing on fears of immigrants and refugees. “How many refugees, boat people and feet people, will crowd into the U.S. as freedom dies in Central America?” it

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

was asked.¹²⁵ They suggested advertising the violence and in-fighting of the Salvadoran left, which had been a well-known feature of the Salvadoran left since the murder of Roque Dalton, a famous Salvadoran poet and active member of ERP, during a factional fight in 1975. Finally, President Reagan could no longer be the only point person on El Salvador, the only one provoking the ire of the Administration's political opponents. "Virtually every Administration official, at virtually every speaking opportunity, should work themes relating to Central America into his or her remarks," it was concluded.¹²⁶ Their first priority, as it long had been, was to continue to pressure Congress to approve vital resources for the government of El Salvador. "The Congress must accept its share of responsibility for what happens in El Salvador. Our approach should stress this theme."¹²⁷

Shortly thereafter, Robert McFarlane expressed fear of what might happen if the Administration was unsuccessful in securing additional aid to El Salvador.¹²⁸ To McFarlane, as others, El Salvador's fall to the leftists was a realistic possibility. Somoza and the Shah of Iran had not been defeated militarily. Instead, the persistence of an armed minority showed cracks in the foundation, undermined the morale of supporters, and without sufficient support, the weight simply became too much for those regimes to bear. If El Salvador fell, its neighbors could certainly follow and the results on the United States could be devastating.

Also like many of his colleagues in the Administration, McFarlane expressed fear about both extremes in El Salvador. If American support dries up or continues to be so insufficient, the extreme right, under d'Aubuisson, would likely seize power in the short-term. The democratic

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to Judge Clark, "How to Proceed in Central America," June 14, 1983, WH Staff Member and Office Files, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Head of State File: Records, 1981-1989, El Salvador: Pres Duarte – France: Pres. Mitterrand, Folder: El Salvador: President Duarte, Second Administration, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

middle, McFarlane explained, would be “squeezed out.”¹²⁹ “After the interim phase of brutal repression and rollback of the land reforms,” McFarlane argued, “the communist FMLN is likely to take power within 6 to 18 months.”¹³⁰ He concluded that the “essential strategy” for El Salvador “must be to strengthen the political moderates, the military, and the economy while working actively against both extremes inside the country and internationally.”¹³¹ It would not be cheap, but this was the necessary tact to ensure a non-communist Central America.

One month later, McFarlane and others prompted an important step in acquiring vital bipartisan Congressional support for the Administration’s doubling down on El Salvador. In July of 1983, the President signed an executive order in which he outlined the need for a Bipartisan Commission to review U.S. policy toward the region and make recommendations on next steps. The result was a twelve member committee, which included six Republicans and six Democrats, and chaired by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.¹³²

The report, released in January of 1984 after the Commission had had an opportunity to visit the region, largely served as a vindication of Administration policy. While the report conceded the internal factors that led to revolutionary fervor in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, it emphasized the role of Soviet and Cuban interventionism in the region. As the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Kissinger represented an unlikely candidate for the post, a man whose lack of interest and knowledge of Latin America had already been well-documented by 1983. In fact, Kissinger’s career, thought to be in its twilight, was the subject of biography in Seymour Hersh’s *The Price of Power*, which came out just a few short months before Kissinger was named chair of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, or what would later be called, “the Kissinger Commission.” In Hersh’s book, he described an incident that typified Kissinger’s attitude toward Latin America, an exchange with Chilean foreign minister Gabriel Valdes in which Kissinger explained that “Nothing important can come from the South. History has never been produced in the South.”¹³² Valdes responded harshly suggesting that Kissinger “[knew] nothing” of the region. “No,” Kissinger responded, “and I don’t care.” To Hersh, this exchange typified the Nixon White House’s attitude toward Latin America, “Like a child, Latin America was to be seen and not heard.”¹³² Nevertheless, Kissinger and his former boss’s support for Administration policy (Nixon had penned articles and given speeches in support of that policy, in consultation with the Reagan Administration), likely made him an attractive candidate to lead the commission which was designed to bolster that policy.

Administration, the report espoused the domino theory and emphasized that El Salvador could not be lost to Soviet and Cuban dirty tricks, lest the U.S. risk a Marxist takeover of much of Latin America. Also at risk was U.S. credibility; the American government needed to demonstrate its resolve that it would not lose so close to its own borders.

With this similar analysis, the Commission espoused a similar solution. The U.S. ought to establish a “military shield” to protect these at-risk Central American governments from internal insurgencies, so that those governments could develop in a democratic way. The report recommended an expansion of military aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, in addition to a massive aid program that, it was hoped, would stabilize the economies in the region. In a nod to the Administration’s Congressional opponents, U.S. military aid to El Salvador was conditioned on “demonstrated progress” in the realm of human rights. Even this ambiguous stipulation was opposed by Kissinger and two other Republican Commission members, who in a dissenting note criticized that such conditions only served to undermine Salvadoran counterinsurgency efforts. Whether the report would prove a boon to Administration efforts to secure additional aid for El Salvador remained an open question.

Among Friends

While Administration officials worked hard to win support for El Salvador in the United States, Reagan and others recognized the importance of prodding Salvadoran leaders to make winning the argument in Washington a little easier. The Administration needed to do more to ensure that the government of El Salvador was actively working toward positive democratic reforms that they could tout to the American Congress and public. As before, Embassy officials stressed the importance of these reforms and the importance of human rights improvements. In

the second half of 1983, however, the Administration also called for two significant meetings between U.S. and Salvadoran leadership. The first was a meeting between Reagan, Magaña, new Minister of Defense Vides Casanova, and others in June of 1983. The second was a meeting between Vice President Bush and Salvadoran leaders in San Salvador in December of 1983.

The first of these meetings was necessitated by what Washington officials considered the worsening conditions in El Salvador in the Summer of 1983. These worsening conditions came across in many of the briefing memorandums that the President would receive prior to the critical meeting with Magaña and Vides Casanova. While the Administration had committed itself to the Salvadoran agrarian reform because it was written into the certification process with Congress, the Salvadoran commitment to the process seemed to have waned. This may have been due in part to the change in military leadership. After an extensive battle with rightist forces led by d'Aubuisson, Magaña had replaced Minister of Defense José Guillermo García with Eugenio Vides Casanova. The military had long been the “referee” of the agrarian reform, so the commitment of the Minister of Defense was critical to that program’s success. Officials in the U.S. Embassy and others questioned whether Vides Casanova was as committed to the agrarian reform as his predecessor.¹³³ After all, the recent history of the reform process was not positive, with many peasants being evicted from their recently gained land.

On the issue of human rights, the situation was no better. Little progress had been made after the establishment of the Magaña Administration’s human rights commission. It had simply not received what Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger deemed “sufficient cooperation and support” from higher ups in the Salvadoran government and Armed

¹³³ Memorandum, Lawrence S. Eagleburger to The President, “Visit of Alvaro Magaña, President of El Salvador, June 16-18, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Forces, a continuing problem.¹³⁴ Rumors of abuses by the Treasury Police, long considered the most violent and unscrupulous of the Salvadoran security forces, continued to abound, as they did during the Carter Administration. Eagleburger and others noted an uptick in political violence, a rise in death squad activity, and a continuation of impunity, which of course included violence against American citizens like the churchwomen and AIFLD leaders. Of this impunity, James H. Michael of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs briefed Secretary of State Shultz at length about the degree to which human rights abuses were “largely ignored or winked at.”¹³⁵ Of death squad abuses, Michael noted that much recent evidence had suggested the direct involvement of security force members, a fact that Vides Casanova had ignored.¹³⁶ This seemed a widely held view of the new Minister of Defense and thus when Reagan was set to meet with Magaña and his Defense Minister, Vides Casanova was to be the real target of Reagan’s talking points on human rights, security force abuses, and death squad violence. After all, Vides Casanova had already proven himself a man relatively uninterested in protecting human rights. The CIA suggested, “It has become increasingly evident that General Vides has no intention of pursuing the issue of human rights abuses by the Armed Forces” as was demonstrated by his promotion of Lieutenant Colonel Denis Moran, the man implicated in the Sheraton murders.¹³⁷ Moran’s replacement as head of the Treasury Police in July of 1983, d’Aubuisson ally Colonel Nicolas Carranza, could not have been encouraging either, given Carranza’s long history of human rights violations. “The President needs to know that the message is not wholly for

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Briefing Memorandum, ARA – James H. Michael, Acting, to The Secretary, “Your Briefing of the President for his Meeting with Alvaro Magaña, President of El Salvador, 11:30AM, Friday, June 17, 1983,” June 10, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, “Reluctance of the Salvadoran Minister of Defense to Prosecute Military Officers for Alleged Human Rights Violations,” July 20, 1983, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

Magaña,” NSC members Oliver North and Alfonso Sapia-Bosch explained to NSC Advisor William Clark, “but for Vides, who will in turn pass it on to the extreme right.”¹³⁸ North and Sapia-Bosch understood the order of things in El Salvador. The division between Salvadoran military leadership and the violence of the extreme right was more closely related than Administration officials let on in its press campaign. In addition, despite his title, there were real constraints to what President Magaña was able to do to affect change. The support of Minister of Defense Vides Casanova was needed.

On top of these crises that fed directly into Congressional concerns about El Salvador’s lack of progress in reforming, the war outlook was not improving (thus necessitating the ouster of Defense Minister García to appease the coup-inclined d’Aubuisson). Eagleburger noted a “slow and steady deterioration” in the military situation in El Salvador, a situation that saw the guerillas controlling much of the countryside.¹³⁹ On June 1st, 1983, the FMLN captured a military communications center in what one Milgroup member called the Salvadoran Armed Forces’ “worst military setback” in a long line of such setbacks.¹⁴⁰ Privately, several embassy officials braced themselves for the worst: El Salvador was “on the brink.”¹⁴¹ Certainly, there was much to discuss with Salvadoran leadership.

Magaña arrived with Vides Casanova on June 17th, 1983. Reagan and Magaña officials alike later considered the meeting a success. President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz hammered home key Administration talking points, expressing the importance of improvements

¹³⁸ Memorandum, Oliver North & Alfonso Sapia-Bosch to William P. Clark, “The President’s Meeting with Salvadoran President Alvaro Magaña, June 17, 1983,” June 15, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³⁹ Memorandum, Lawrence S. Eagleburger to The President, “Visit of Alvaro Magaña, President of El Salvador, June 16-18, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁰ Memorandum, Roger W. Fontaine to William P. Clark, “Weekly Report,” June 17, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

in human rights, and the necessity of a real commitment to reform. Of course, expressing these oft-repeated talking points to Magaña and Vides Casanova was one reason to organize a visit to Washington for the Salvadoran leaders. The trip also presented the Administration with an opportunity to put a Salvadoran leader with the shine of legitimacy from the recent constitutional election in the news (though Magaña was not directly elected). For Magaña's part, after the meeting's end, Ambassador Ernesto Rivas-Gallont reflected on an "emotional" meeting between two men utterly invested in solving the complex problems of El Salvador.¹⁴² Problems would remain as Magaña faced "skepticism of U.S. continued assistance" and "impatience for greater U.S. aid" simultaneously and Reagan faced "ideologues convinced that we ought to sell the store to the terrorists or just walk away from the problem."¹⁴³ Nevertheless Rivas-Gallont felt confident that the meeting between the two men had solidified the relationship between their respective nations.

In addition to the talking points of Reagan and Shultz, it was also important to them that they stress the ways in which they shared goals with Salvadoran leadership. Magaña would speak with Congressional leaders in the hopes that he might drum up additional support for Salvadoran aid. Magaña's experience on the Hill would not be a pleasant one, as he faced tough questions from a skeptical Congress. After this visit to Congress, Oliver North explained to Secretary of State Shultz, how important it was that Magaña know that he was "among friends."¹⁴⁴ North suggested that Magaña incurred "rough treatment" at the hands of Congressional leaders. Magaña needed to know that despite this, U.S. policy was unchanging.

¹⁴² Issue Brief, Ambassador Ernesto Rivas-Gallont, December 1982, Box: 1982, 800, Folder: A-800 Asuntos Politicos 1982, No. 2, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Memorandum, Oliver North, "Summary of Discussions During Magaña Visit, June 17, 1983," June 23, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

North, as others, knew that it was critical to maintain the confidence of Salvadoran leadership if the Reagan Administration had any hope of affecting real change. To lose the confidence of San Salvador was to risk a right-wing coup from d'Aubuisson and others, men who grew tired of American wavering and sought to execute the war their own way without the constraints of a distant, literally and figuratively, U.S. Congress. When Reagan and Shultz embraced their Salvadoran allies during their trip to Washington, it was more than simply good hospitality. Magaña was “among friends,” and he needed to know it.

Of course, the conversation between Reagan officials and the President of El Salvador was not one-sided. Magaña and Vides Casanova came with messages of their own. They pleaded for consistent military aid, not the wavering that had long characterized U.S. policy. Magaña then pressed hard on the importance of the Salvadoran conflict to the people of America. “What will it be like with 5-6 million people armed with AK-47s and Communist ideology...spilling out over the borders?” Magaña asked.¹⁴⁵ His message was clear: this is not simply El Salvador’s war. It was a war that deeply impacted the United States. If the government of El Salvador could not get its internal crisis under control with consistent American military aid, the results would be dire for both countries. What Magaña may not have understood is that his audience in the White House did not need convincing.

In the immediate aftermath of the meeting, evidence suggested that the Salvadoran military did not believe the U.S. was serious. To many in the Salvadoran military, threats to U.S. aid were hollow ones. After returning from Washington, Vides said that “no one mentioned human rights to him.”¹⁴⁶ “Their perception is that the Administration speaks with two voices concerning the human rights situation,” with the State Department making it an issue, while the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Memorandum, Langhorne A. Motley to George P. Shultz, “Your Meeting with Salvadoran Defense Minister Vides Casanova,” October 24, 1983, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

Department of Defense and White House, “cognizant that the Salvadorans are fighting our war for us, act forcefully to increase funding levels and to send in the fleet.”¹⁴⁷ This feeling may have owed in part to what had been a divided U.S. policy in the first two years of the Administration. While Haig approached El Salvador as an anti-communist hawk prepared to bomb Cuba if it meant staving off communism in El Salvador, his successor was more politically-oriented. At the same time, Shultz needed to contend with a National Security staff, led by William Clark, that undercut his efforts to emphasize political solutions. Nevertheless, this Salvadoran notion needed to be dispelled if the Salvadoran government continued to need and rely upon U.S. aid. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Langhorne Motley argued, “As the ESAF cannot fight without adequate supplies, the battle for votes in the Congress cannot be fought unless the Salvadorans provide ammunition to counter the arguments of those who say we should walk away.”¹⁴⁸

Shortly thereafter, Vides Casanova did seem to take some positive steps on behalf of human rights and arrested Captain Salvador Figueroa Morales for his alleged participation in the February of 1983 murder of 18 peasants in Sonsonate. However, the reasons behind Vides Casanova reluctance to make such arrests quickly became clear as rumors of his replacement by rightists quickly followed. Members of Figueroa’s graduating class marched on his office, as many claimed that the arrest had been to satisfy the U.S. and represented a betrayal of the Armed Forces.¹⁴⁹ Within the Salvadoran Armed Forces, rightists had long “bitterly opposed” attempts to punish military officers accused of political crimes.¹⁵⁰ Accordingly, the CIA explained, “Vides’

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, “Detention of Armed Forces for Human Rights Violation on Order of the Salvadoran Minister of Defense,” August 15, 1983, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

fear of evoking the active displeasure of these officers appears well-founded.”¹⁵¹ The CIA later concluded that Vides appeared “both personally disinclined and professionally unable to affect a major cleanup with the Armed Forces.”¹⁵²

The situation remained dire as the summer turned to fall and the Administration began gearing up for another potential round of certification debates in January of 1984. The military situation in El Salvador did not much improve, a fact that began wearing on Salvadoran leadership. North and Constantine Menges reported Minister of Defense Vides Casanova feeling “extremely despondent” about the future and taking to heavy drinking.¹⁵³ This while operational capabilities of the security forces remained “extremely limited,” and the guerilla forces began to cooperate at an unprecedented level.¹⁵⁴ The war seemed at a stalemate, one that seemed to bide time for a strengthening insurgency.

In the United States, several officials pondered ways to circumvent Congressional control of the Administration’s Salvadoran policies, control that seemed to undermine Administration efforts to bolster El Salvador’s flagging Armed Forces. One way in which the Administration elected to circumvent the need for Congressional approval was to withhold approval of a bill that would require further certifications in 1984. This decision had to be sold to the public thoughtfully, however, lest the public perceive the Administration as dismissing the human rights crisis in El Salvador. Through this move, the Administration was not “endorsing a continued decline in the human rights situation in El Salvador,” McFarlane explained, while pondering how

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Memorandum, Central Intelligence Agency to George Bush, “El Salvador: Dealing with Death Squads,” January 20, 1984, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵³ Memorandum, Oliver L. North & Constantine Menges to Robert C. McFarlane, “El Salvador: Undoing the Good That Has Been Done,” November 21, 1983, Collection: North, Oliver L.: Files, Contents: Box 128, 132, 150, Box: 15, Folder: El Salvador: Death Squads, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

the Administration might frame a press release.¹⁵⁵ The Administration simply did not believe the process of certification promoted human rights improvements. Regardless of McFarlane's spin, the bleak and seemingly unchanging human rights crisis in El Salvador likely explains why many in the Administration sought to avoid further Congressional scrutiny. Were the Administration to go back to Congress in January, certifying progress in human rights would be as challenging as ever.

The persistence of brutal violence in the news did little to help the Administration secure Congressional support. Even Ambassador Deane Hinton, who long toed the line of Reagan's quiet diplomacy, spoke out against the burgeoning death squad violence. In October 1983, Hinton spoke to the American Chamber of Commerce in El Salvador. "The mafia must be stopped," Hinton explained, speaking of the death squads, which he claimed often had security force connections.¹⁵⁶ For Hinton to feel emboldened to speak out in public on the issue reveals the degree to which death squad violence had grown worse. It also underscores just how well-publicized that violence would become. This was a big moment for Hinton and a break with his past behavior. Such tough talk by former Carter Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White ultimately cost White his job when the Reagan Administration took over, and seemingly irked some in the Carter Administration before that. While Hinton alluded to support from the White House, the White House expressed support though when questioned by the press noted that they preferred "quiet diplomacy."¹⁵⁷ Shortly after his speech, a White House official, later revealed to be National Security Advisor William Clark, went to the *New York Times* criticizing Hinton's

¹⁵⁵ Memorandum, Robert C. McFarlane to The President, "Enrolled Bill H.R. 4042, Certification of Conditions in El Salvador," November 29, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁵⁶ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, 359.

¹⁵⁷ Memorandum, Direccion de Asuntos Americanos to Director General de Politica Exterior, "Recunto Informativo de las Relaciones Estados Unidos-El Salvador," December 16, 1983, Box: 1982, A-513, Caja No.14, Folder: 513, Org. De Estados Americanos (O.E.A.) Numero: Seis, 1982, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

decision to speak out in public. Clark likely thought, as many in the Administration did, that such public denunciations of the violence in El Salvador only served to publicize what was an already sensitive topic in Washington. In his diaries, Reagan noted, “Our Ambassador Hinton under the direction of the same kind of St. Dept. bureaucrats who made Castro possible are screwing up the situation in El Salvador. I’m really mad...I’m determining heads will roll, beginning with Amb. Hinton.”¹⁵⁸ Hinton would be replaced as Ambassador shortly thereafter. Carter’s Director of Latin American Affairs on the National Security Council, Robert Pastor, would suggest that the firing was directly related to Hinton’s use of a public forum to criticize rightist violence.¹⁵⁹ The Administration replaced Hinton with Thomas Pickering, who was at the time U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, and prior to that, U.S. Ambassador to Jordan. Of Pickering’s selection, Elliott Abrams recently recalled the selection process. He asked William Clark who was the most skilled foreign service officer. He replied with Pickering, a man who shortly thereafter, would serve as Ambassador to Russia. “We were making an investment there,” Abrams said.¹⁶⁰

Against this backdrop of embassy changes, Congressional wrangling, death squad violence, and a Salvadoran government facing stagnation on multiple fronts, Vice President George H.W. Bush made his trip to San Salvador to meet with Salvadoran leadership. James F. Mack, Political Counselor to El Salvador from 1983 to 1986 recalls of this time the struggle of the U.S. Administration in the face of Salvadoran violence. He remembers death squads killing more than 800 people per month.¹⁶¹ While the guerillas were “nimble,” El Salvador’s was a

¹⁵⁸ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, (New York: HarperCollins, c2007), 132

¹⁵⁹ Pastor, “Continuity and Change in U.S. Foreign Policy,” 185.

¹⁶⁰ Elliott Abrams, interview by author, Nashville, TN, October 21, 2011.

¹⁶¹ Interview, Political Counselor James F. Mack, “El Salvador,” 2004, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

“parade army.”¹⁶² The government needed more resources, but could not attain them due to Congressional resistance. Someone needed to make clear to the Salvadorans the importance of affecting positive changes in the violence.¹⁶³ In his meeting with Salvadoran leaders from Magaña to Vides Casanova, Duarte to d’Aubuisson, Vice President Bush was charged with taking Salvadoran leaders to task for the rightist violence so well-publicized in the American press, and at such a critical moment. Duarte described a lunch meeting with Vice President Bush that included d’Aubuisson in his autobiography, “Bush spoke harshly, without any diplomatic cushioning, about the appalling number of killings.”¹⁶⁴ U.S. documents corroborate this description of Bush’s tough talk. d’Aubuisson seemed to go along with Bush’s reasoning and the collective senior leadership would go on to sign a public document outlining their commitment to confront death squad violence.¹⁶⁵ Bush would leave the country confident that a consensus had been reached.

While the meeting largely focused upon rightist violence, Vice President Bush engaged several other pressing issues in U.S.-Salvadoran relations, almost all of which were geared toward helping the Administration in its fight with Congress. Bush pressed for justice in the AIFLD murder case and pressed more broadly on progress in other investigations, of which the churchwomen case was likely most paramount. Bush gained a commitment from the Armed Forces to support and protect the elections scheduled for March of 1984.¹⁶⁶ Finally, Bush suggested a “complete constitutional action” that would protect Phase I and III of the agrarian

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Duarte, *Duarte*, 176.

¹⁶⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Status Report on Salvadoran Compliance with Points Made by Vice President Bush,” January 4, 1984. Collection: North, Oliver L.: Files, Contents: Box 128, 132, 150, Box: 15, Folder: El Salvador: Death Squads, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

reform, and “permit no regression” in those reforms.¹⁶⁷ If the Salvadoran government could make headway in its prosecution of the murderers of Americans, further guarantee the coming elections, and safeguard the agrarian reform, the American Congress would be more inclined to support Administration policy.

Despite their optimism, some Washington officials looked to these Salvadoran commitments as another matter of “papel aguanta todo,” commitments made verbally or on paper by leaders with no intention of following through. This was feared too, by El Salvador’s interim President. Prior to Bush’s trip to El Salvador, Magaña implored Embassy officials to ask Bush to pressure Vides Casanova and others in the Salvadoran military establishment. “Our military will agree to anything if there is no time deadline connected with it,” Magaña explained.¹⁶⁸ Thus, it was critical that the Reagan Administration be strict with its ally to the South and demand meaningful steps on a tight deadline lest the military establishment ignore American requests. Former Junta leader José Napoleón Duarte shared his predecessor’s skepticism. Reflecting on his meeting with Vice President Bush, Duarte noted wryly, “If the problem could have been resolved by words, there would have been no more political assassinations after the Bush visit.”¹⁶⁹ Nor could the Administration have been overly optimistic. They were placing a lot of trust and faith in Minister of Defense Vides Casanova, a man who had burned them before with his inaction in the realm of human rights. Many officials had long been critical of Vides Casanova’s role in undermining the agrarian reform and his insistence upon protecting members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces from criticisms of human rights violations.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Cable, Secretary of State to RUEADWW/White House NIACT, “Presidential Letter and Vice Presidential Visit,” December 11, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁶⁹ Duarte, *Duarte*, 176.

Nevertheless, Vice President Bush and his team that visited El Salvador left feeling confident that the government of El Salvador was prepared to make positive changes. They had to draw optimism from the fact that on December 18th, General Vides Casanova announced a specialized unit that would “investigate and combat the death squads” as part of an “overall effort to enforce respect for human rights.”¹⁷⁰ It was another verbal commitment to a problem that demanded concrete results, but it was a start.

Of course, once Reagan and his team gained such commitments from the government of El Salvador, the pressure and scrutiny turned to his Administration, as they attempted to wrestle greater support for the Salvadoran government from a reluctant Congress.¹⁷¹ Indeed, men like Roberto d’Aubuisson would not long concede to American demands if meaningful support was not forthcoming. A major boost in military aid was required, otherwise the Salvadoran military could be lost to rightist forces long critical of American conditions on aid. Furthermore, not all were convinced of the purity of the Administration’s efforts. Key Salvadoran opposition voice Ignacio Ellacuria correctly charged that the reason for Bush’s visit was not likely a genuine concern for the dire human rights situation. It was, however, an attempt by the Administration to send the message that it was taking Salvadoran government violence seriously despite Reagan’s recent veto of the certification requirement.¹⁷²

What followed was an intense period of horse trading with Congress to try to assure ample Salvadoran funding without the conditionality of certification requirements. Here, again, the centrality of labor support emerged. Without the support of organized labor, one official

¹⁷⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Status Report on Salvadoran Compliance with Points Made by Vice President Bush,” January 4, 1984. Collection: North, Oliver L.: Files, Contents: Box 128, 132, 150, Box: 15, Folder: El Salvador: Death Squads, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, “Estados Unidos y Los Esquadrones de la Muerte en El Salvador,” 1983, Box: Caja 13, Folder: Carpeta 24, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador, El Salvador.

concluded, the Administration would lose 30-40% of the Democratic vote from congressmen who might have otherwise been with the Administration.¹⁷³ This issue was particularly pertinent given that Washington was entering an election year. Further, many Congressmen found themselves unsure of the future of El Salvador given the upcoming presidential election there that many suspected would result in a Roberto d'Aubuisson presidential victory, an unacceptable outcome to many. The Administration remained deeply concerned that the House would approve a new certification bill, one that would not have any money attached, simply the requirements that so frustrated the Administration in its first three years in office. On November 30, 1983, Reagan pocket vetoed a bill that would have extended the conditions, and not a moment too soon. Given a rise in Salvadoran death squad violence at the time, Shultz argued that it would have been "very difficult" to certify human rights improvement.¹⁷⁴ While as of January of 1984, the Reagan Administration no longer needed to go through the certification process, in late 1983, Congress passed a continuing resolution that withheld 30% of military aid until Salvadoran authorities obtained a verdict in the churchwomen trial, and also withheld 10% of the aid until the President certified that the Salvadoran government had not altered, suspended, or terminated the agrarian reform program. In 1984, Congress would pass another continuing resolution requiring consultation and progress in the reduction of death squad violence, elimination of corruption, improvement in the performance of the military, and progress toward peace. While Congressional opposition to Reagan policy was not at the level of the early 1980s, both Congressional bodies still managed to win enough support to constrain Administration policy.

¹⁷³ Memorandum, Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, "Ambassador Motley's Meeting on Central America Legislation," February 3, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷⁴ Report, K. Larry Storrs, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Congressional Research Service, "El Salvador: Policy Issues and Options for the 98th Congress," January 27, 1987, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 118, Library of Congress.

Administration demands for increased aid would continue into March of 1984 when the military situation would again grow worse. Again, the press was on as Robert McFarlane pushed for “a series of coordinated op-ed pieces, speeches, and media appearances from high-level Administration officials which will focus public attention on our cause and the legislation.”¹⁷⁵ Even Thomas Pickering, Ambassador to El Salvador, was called to Washington to push the Administration’s plan. “We need our best team here, now, to help convince the Congress that they should support our Central American programs,” McFarlane argued.¹⁷⁶ In its talking points, the Administration cited improvements in not only the execution of the war, but in the country’s human rights situation. The Administration pointed to promises made following Vice President Bush’s trip to El Salvador. The Salvadorans were forming a Special Investigative Unit to address the problem of death squads. The concern from December returned: the U.S. could not abandon El Salvador now, not after it secured verbal assurances for improvement. U.S. access to Salvadoran leaders was at stake. This was the plea that Administration officials would continually make to the Administration’s opponents for whom human rights was a critical issue. Of course, the issue of being underfunded was not unforeseen. Congress had underfunded the program the previous year pending the results of the Bipartisan Commission. The Administration’s woes in securing the government of El Salvador additional aid continued despite the re-envisioning of Administration policy that took place in the early summer of 1983.

¹⁷⁵ Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to Secretary of State, “Legislative Action on Central American Issues,” March 5, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V. 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷⁶ Memorandum, Robert McFarlane, “Meeting with US Ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Pickering,” March 12, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The Trouble with Bobby, Part II

In the immediate aftermath of the election of the constituent assembly, the Reagan Administration turned its attention to the next election. Magaña, after all, was meant to be a temporary solution as President, not a long-term fix. Furthermore, Magaña's narrow political base proved a constant challenge to Magaña and the Reagan team alike, as he struggled to ward off the far right and win support for his reform initiatives without strong-arming from the U.S. Even with U.S. badgering, such support was slow and inconsistent, as exemplified by the perpetual issues of human rights violations and impunity.

Perhaps more importantly, elections promised to provide positive headlines for an American public unconvinced of El Salvador's democratic credentials. In the public relations war that the Administration waged, few bargaining chips were as meaningful as fair elections. Agrarian reform, human rights progress, and confronting death squad violence was critical, but the image of Salvadorans flocking to the polls to elect their president was a powerful one indeed. It was an image that would prove invaluable to an Administration desperately trying to build consensus on a topic that had long divided Washington, the United States, and the world. Furthermore, it would underscore the Reagan contention that the Salvadoran left represented a fringe group, largely unrepresentative of the Salvadoran people and certainly not popular enough to win a national election.

Many Reagan officials believed that this would take time. In one memo to the President, George Shultz suggested that the Administration could not expect the Salvadoran rebels to discuss free elections "unless we are able to show them that they cannot win the military struggle

and will probably lose it in the long run.”¹⁷⁷ This is why many in the Administration saw military aid to El Salvador as so critical. They did not consider a military solution likely, but turning the tide of war strongly toward the government would be the only way that the left would concede and fold into an electoral system where to the Reagan Administration, they were very unlikely to win power on a national scale.

Furthermore, Administration officials saw elections as particularly important because they stood in stark contrast to the alternative proposed by the Salvadoran left: power-sharing. The Reagan Administration constantly worked toward cultivating a free electoral system in El Salvador because it did not want to allow the Salvadoran left, an “armed minority” to “shoot its way into power.”¹⁷⁸ The Administration advised the Salvadoran government to avoid negotiations that involved power-sharing arrangements. However, not wanting to seem to be against negotiation, the Administration supported negotiations regarding the far left’s involvement in elections. Negotiations toward power-sharing would set a bad precedent and facilitate the takeover of El Salvador by the far left. It would also represent an American abandonment of the region to the communists. “If we move toward negotiations,” Deputy National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane explained, “we would be perceived as seeking what in the Vietnam negotiations was called a ‘decent interval.’”¹⁷⁹ Instead, the Administration needed to fund the government substantially and consistently, weaken the far left military, and push toward inclusive elections, if it hoped to avoid the worst.

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to The President, “Managing our Central American Strategy,” May 25, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: NSDD, Contents: NSDD’s 82, Box: 5, Folder: NSDD 82, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷⁸ Memorandum, L. Paul Bremer III to William P. Clark, “Questions and Answers for Meeting with Congressional Leadership, March 8,” March 7, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁷⁹ Memorandum, Robert McFarlane to Judge Clark, “How to Proceed in Central America,” June 14, 1983, WH Staff Member and Office Files, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Head of State File: Records, 1981-1989, El Salvador: Pres Duarte – France: Pres. Mitterrand, Folder: El Salvador: President Duarte, Second Administration, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Nor were many in the Administration unbiased when it came to the results they preferred. The election again seemed a stark choice between d'Aubuisson of ARENA and Duarte of the Christian Democrats (PDC). Officials had actively worked against d'Aubuisson and his bid for presidential power after the Spring 1982 constitutional elections. This time around, many in the Administration would again find themselves rooting against d'Aubuisson, his propensity for violence, closeness to the Salvadoran death squads, and wretched international reputation. In language common to many on the Reagan team, Ambassador Hinton suggested that a victory by d'Aubuisson's ARENA party would represent a "disaster."¹⁸⁰ Unlike d'Aubuisson, Duarte did not have a reputation for far-right violence and human rights violations that frequently found themselves in the American press. For his part, throughout much of his campaign, d'Aubuisson played on the Salvadoran military's fear of human rights prosecution, going on television on January 26th to warn the military that if Duarte and the PDC were elected, prosecutions would soon follow.¹⁸¹ In contrast, the human rights-conscious Duarte was an alumnus of Notre Dame and a Christian Democrat with strong ties with the U.S. Catholic community.¹⁸² In an election year, Secretary of State Shultz would argue, his was an "important constituency for our Salvador policy."¹⁸³ Hinton went on to concede that the PDC "[lacked] the real authority and power to both govern and resolve the country's problems."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the Administration had already dealt with Duarte as the head of the Revolutionary Government Junta, after which they worked with

¹⁸⁰ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "AD Has Mixed Reaction to Elections Proposal," March 3, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁸¹ Cable, Thomas R. Pickering to Department of State, "d'Aubuisson Tries to Scare Military Here with the Argentine Trials," January 31, 1984, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁸² Memorandum, George P. Shultz, "Visit of José Napoleón Duarte, President-elect of El Salvador, May 19-23-1984," May 18, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V. 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "AD Has Mixed Reaction to Elections Proposal," March 3, 1983, Collection: Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 39, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

another civilian with a tenuous grip on power in Magaña. Nevertheless, to Hinton, as others, it seemed obvious that the Reagan Administration would fare better with a Duarte presidency than a d'Aubuisson presidency. Any hopes for a bipartisan consensus in Washington rested on a non-ARENA victory. The CIA concluded, "The victory of a conservative coalition headed by ARENA leader Roberto d'Aubuisson would probably result in the eventual undoing of reforms and the loss of needed domestic and international support."¹⁸⁵ Beyond his limits as a public face for the government of El Salvador, the CIA also cast doubt on d'Aubuisson's ability to wage the war any better, describing his "simplistic perception for the insurgency."¹⁸⁶ The CIA concluded, "We believe the implication of a victory by a centrist coalition led by Christian Democratic candidate Duarte for the future of El Salvador—and for US regional policy—would be significantly more favorable than would be the case with an ultrarightist victory."¹⁸⁷ Recalling the U.S. view of the contest, Economic/Commercial Counselor of San Salvador, Ward Barmon suggested, "The embassy was accused of supporting Duarte against the ARENA people...It was true. We did. We made no bones about it. We are not supposed to take sides. Actually, we did."¹⁸⁸

This was especially true by the Fall of 1983 given persistent rumors of d'Aubuisson's continued involvement with death squad violence. d'Aubuisson responded to the more active labor movement of 1982 and 1983 by accusing certain labor leaders of being communists who secretly supported the leftists.¹⁸⁹ Five other times, d'Aubuisson had done such a thing and the

¹⁸⁵ Report, CIA to the President, "El Salvador: Election Outlook," March 6, 1984, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Interview, Economic/Commercial Counselor Ward Barmon, "El Salvador," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ Brenton R. Schlender, "El Salvador 'Death Squads' More Active As Rightists Worry About Losing Power," *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, October 7, 1983, as found in The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America

person ended up dead shortly thereafter. One Western diplomat suggested that when d'Aubuisson calls someone a Communist, "it amounts to an invitation to the death squads to go after him."¹⁹⁰ One man he accused, Samuel Maldonado, leader of the Unidad Popular Democratica (UPD), who had recently demonstrated on behalf of the agrarian reform, went into exile to avoid the same fate as d'Aubuisson's other accused communists.¹⁹¹ Yet, the violence toward labor leaders did not stop in the fall of 1983. Death threats abounded and violence against labor leaders continued seemingly unabated.¹⁹²

As the wrangling continued to go on in Congress and the elections were put off from the Spring of 1983 to the Spring of 1984, the Salvadorans held their presidential election. On March 25, 1984, Duarte came in first place with 43.4% of the national vote. On May 5th, he won the second round with 53.6% of the vote, finishing just ahead of the U.S.-feared ARENA candidate. The Administration had avoided disaster, or so it seemed. Yet, the sense of relief that many on the Reagan team likely felt did not last as reports of coup attempts filled embassy correspondence shortly after the second round and throughout the month of May. d'Aubuisson and his allies on the right had long hated Duarte, and hoped to avoid another term of his leadership. On May 10th, 1984, Lt. Colonel Mario Denis Moran, former Director of the Treasury Police was reportedly involved in a coup attempt against Duarte.¹⁹³ While Vides Casanova was not directly involved, the Embassy reported that he was "knowledgeable and currently unwilling

National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, Trip Background Information, 1982-1983 (2 of 2), Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Lydia Chave, "Salvadoran Unions are Under Siege," *The New York Times*, Monday, October 10, 1983, as found in The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, Trip Background Information, 1982-1983 (2 of 2), Library of Congress.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Coup Report," May 10, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V., 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

to move against it.”¹⁹⁴ Embassy officials went on, “ARENA is reported to be buying support among the military and trying to delay returns on elections to cause wide-scale confusion and dissatisfaction among the military,” which it was hoped might lay the groundwork for a successful military coup.¹⁹⁵ With such high-ranking members of the Salvadoran leadership, like Minister of Defense Vides Casanova, complicit in the move against Duarte, the in-fighting that had characterized the JRG and Magaña regimes was likely there to stay, that was if Duarte even made it to the presidency before a coup installed a rightist leader.

The election did not cultivate the kind of unity that might propel the Salvadoran government forward, unified against the leftist insurgency. Administration officials reacted with panic. “A military coup,” McFarlane explained, “would effectively undo all the good that we have been able to accomplish to date.”¹⁹⁶ A coup would undermine the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government, as well as tarnish the work of the United States in attempting to promote positive democratic reform in El Salvador. It would also undermine the Administration’s efforts against the leftist insurgency, which would be emboldened by the right’s undemocratic move to seize power from the popularly elected Duarte.

President-elect José Napoleón Duarte, who tried so desperately to recapture a leadership position in the Salvadoran government, would face an inauspicious beginning upon his election following the second vote in May of 1984. Duarte, as before, would find himself under attack by both violent extremes in his country. Also as before, Duarte’s support for the agrarian reform and his party’s role in initiating that program made Duarte an especially appealing target to the right because it had underscored the degree to which Duarte was a threat to the oligarchy and their

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Memorandum, Bud McFarlane to Caspar W. Weinberger, “Coup in San Salvador,” May 12, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V., 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

interests.¹⁹⁷ An assassination plot against Duarte was set to take place on May 16th, at the same time that American Ambassador Pickering's life was said to be in danger. The Reagan Administration thought the threat was legitimate enough that it scrambled to send Special Envoy General Vernon Walters to San Salvador to talk with d'Aubuisson personally. Aware of the planned timing and location of the coup attempt, Duarte and Pickering were able to avoid the violence against them. How much time would pass before new threats would emerge remained unclear, though Duarte's history as head of the Revolutionary Government Junta likely prepared him for the constant right-wing attempts on his life and power that might follow.

Many on the Reagan team hoped that Duarte's election might prove a tipping point in Salvadoran history, but most were well aware of the challenges. El Salvador was not a country with a long history of democratically-elected leaders. Shultz would explain shortly after Duarte's election, "There are no precedents, no road map, for the whole range of questions surrounding the transition to his Administration."¹⁹⁸ Duarte would head a government with a "dismal" record of human rights, as much as it may have been improving.¹⁹⁹ Duarte faced pressure from both extremes with d'Aubuisson proving the most immediate challenge. "He must consolidate his position with the military and exercise greater control over the violent right before moving seriously on dialogue with the left," Shultz conceded.²⁰⁰ Duarte had their full support. "We want to strengthen [Duarte's] hand," Shultz explained.²⁰¹ The tension of human rights continued. Duarte could not push too hard or too fast on human rights lest he provoke issues with the military and the far right, but if he pushed too little he would not solve what was a "pressing

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Memorandum, George P. Shultz, "Visit of José Napoleón Duarte, President-elect of El Salvador, May 19-23-1984," May 18, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V. 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

problem.”²⁰² Further, death squad killings would likely surge with the reelection of the hated Duarte.

As expected, the election of Duarte went a long way in reassuring Congress that El Salvador might be on the path to peace and reform. So too did progress made in the churchwomen trial, which was in its final phase. The Foreign Aid Authorization bill, which included the Administration’s full economic and military aid requests for 1984 and 1985 passed the formerly contentious House on May 10th. It did, however, require semi-annual determinations by the White House that the government of El Salvador had made “demonstrated progress” on death squads, judicial reform, and other areas of Congressional concerns.

At the onset of Duarte’s term, the agrarian reform remained a divisive issue. The extreme right remained wary of what they considered a “socialist program,” a program with which many in Washington, too, shared concern, as the Embassy and AID sought to make the program “more...compatible with free-market economic principles.”²⁰³ Nevertheless, it remained one thing about which the Duarte and Reagan Administrations could largely agree. The agrarian reform was essential to win the support of the rural poor and further isolate leftist forces in the countryside. The fate of the agrarian reform remained important to the long-term success of the Salvadoran government and economy, especially given reports in March of 1983 that the Salvadoran economy had contracted by 25%, with unemployment at 40% in some areas.²⁰⁴

Thus, in May of 1984, the relationship between Duarte and the United States seemed a relatively strong one, though it was not without its problems. While Duarte recognized the

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Memorandum, Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane, “Background Papers for Duarte Visit,” May 18, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V. 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁰⁴ Testimony, Secretary of State George P. Shultz before the Foreign Operations Subcommittee House Appropriations Committee, March 16, 1983, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 125, Folder: Central America El Salvador 1982-1983, Library of Congress.

degree to which U.S. support was a strength that he had over d'Aubuisson, it was in some ways a liability. "He is very sensitive to the allegation that he has become a U.S. pawn," Shultz explained in a message to President Reagan.²⁰⁵ This was an argument that d'Aubuisson and the far right had used to great effect against Duarte in the recent election. If Duarte hoped to consolidate his limited grip on power in San Salvador, he needed U.S. aid, but not the perception of U.S. dominance. Duarte benefitted from American help, but it remained unclear the degree to which Duarte would simply go along with American wishes.

Conclusion

In a July 20th, 1983 interview, former President Jimmy Carter discussed developments in U.S.-Salvadoran policy and the Reagan Administration's approach to the Central American crisis. Speaking of El Salvador, Reagan, Carter claimed, had aligned himself with a regime that was "the most bloodthirsty in our hemisphere, perhaps in the world."²⁰⁶ Carter's former Ambassador, Robert White, frequently launched similar critiques at the Reagan team. To Carter and White, Reagan had embraced the Salvadoran right, overseen a period of worsening human rights violations, and pulled Carter's policy toward the region violently to the right.

However, whether it was due to Congressional constraints or a genuine desire to affect democratic reform and human rights progress in El Salvador, by the end of Ronald Reagan's first term in office, the Carter and Reagan Administrations had adopted many similar tactics. Each cautiously worked toward agrarian reform despite an American legacy of working against it. Each sought free elections and an improved democratic process in El Salvador. Each fruitlessly

²⁰⁵ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to The President, "Meeting with President-elect Duarte," May 19, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Folder: El Salvador Vol. V. 11/1/83-3/31/84 (6), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁰⁶ Tracy Dahlby, "Carter Attacks Reagan Policy," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1983. Found in Vertical File – El Salvador, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

pushed the Salvadoran government to prosecute members of its security forces in the murder of American citizens and Salvadorans alike. Each clung desperately to what they perceived as the “center” in El Salvador. In both cases, José Napoleón Duarte represented the best choice to bring El Salvador forward in a more democratic way. Carter and White would never concede it, nor would Reagan and his political allies, but Reagan, as Carter, had been dealt a difficult situation in El Salvador, and was responding to a seemingly impossible situation in a besieged country in a very similar way.

Chapter 5

“The Transplant Has Been Made, but Will it Take?”: The Limits of Salvadoran Democratic Progress, 1984-1990¹

The Death of Lt. Col. Monterrosa

For the inhabitants of the tiny village of El Mozote, the night of December 10th, 1981 would be a sleepless one.² Locked in their modest homes, the villagers could hear the celebratory songs of the soldiers just outside their doors, who fired their guns into the night sky, reveling in their most recent victory. The government had sent the Atlacatl Battalion into the northern Morazán region to wipe out perceived enemies of the state, believed to be based in the village of La Guacamaya. The seizure of El Mozote represented an important step in achieving that goal. From the perspective of the villagers, looking back onto the chaotic events of the day, one can understand their terror as they waited in their homes for morning to come. In the late afternoon of December 10th, 1,200 troops from the Atlacatl Battalion marched into the village. Their arrival did not come as a complete surprise. Rumors of such an invading force had long swirled around the Morazán Department.³ Nevertheless, nothing could have prepared the inhabitants of El Mozote for what they were about to experience at the hands of government forces. Soon after their arrival, the security forces began wresting the village's inhabitants from their homes. Men,

¹ This quote represents the title of a July 9th, 1986 cable, written by then American Ambassador in San Salvador, Edwin Corr, and sent to the Secretary of State.

Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Democracy in El Salvador: The Transplant Has Been Made, but Will it Take?” July 9, 1986, Collection: North, Oliver L: Files, Box: 1, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

² Description of the events of December, 1981, based upon the monographs of Leigh Binford and Mark Danner as well as the United Nation's Truth Commission Report. Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights*, (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1996). Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

³ Before the arrival of the troops, many refugees from the surrounding countryside had fled to El Mozote for safety. Clearly, these refugees had the sense that a government campaign into the Morazán countryside was afoot.

women, and children were marched to the town square. There, they were forced to lie face down in the dirt, where the soldiers screamed at them, beat, and robbed them. After an hour of this, the inhabitants of El Mozote were marched back to their homes where they were told that if they set foot outside during the night they would be shot.

Many of the town's villagers likely waited through that night, hopeful that the worst was over, but the Atlacatl Battalion was far from finished freeing the countryside from those that would aid the guerillas. At 5:00am, on the morning of December 11th, the people of the village were again forced from their homes and brought to the town square where the soldiers divided them by gender and age. The soldiers brought the town's men and older boys to the village's church. There, the interrogation, torture, and killing began. Men were decapitated with machetes one at a time, their bodies piled upon one another. Those that attempted to flee were gunned down. Elsewhere, the security forces did not spare the women and children from the horrifying violence then taking place in the church. The invading army took many of the women to the outskirts of town where the soldiers raped the women before killing them. Nor were the children spared. Rufina Amaya, the massacre's lone survivor recounted hearing children screaming out for help, "Mama, they are killing us," "they are strangling us," "Mama, they are sticking us with knives."⁴ The Battalion's goal was clear: no one was to survive. Before continuing on to their next target, the army set fire to much of the town and left the almost 400 unburied bodies of men, women and children to rot in the burning buildings, in the streets and in the hills that surrounded the small town.

In the aftermath of the event, members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces conveyed a different narrative regarding the events at El Mozote. As in the case of the Soyapango massacre, and many others, the official story involved guerillas hiding out in civilian homes, and innocents

⁴ Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 21-23.

being caught in the crossfire. Commander of the Atlacatl Battalion, Lieutenant Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, suggested as much when questioned by U.S. Assistant Defense Attaché Major John McKay. In his book *The El Mozote Massacre*, Leigh Binford quotes Monterrosa's response to McKay, "I do not have X-ray vision, and I cannot see inside the house from which someone is shooting at me, nor in those types of circumstances am I very disposed to waste my time trying to find out who else might be in the house."⁵ It was a familiar response to what was likely a similar line of questioning from a U.S. government official. El Mozote was simply a government battle with guerillas overblown by an international media that had been manipulated by a politically savvy far left and further publicized by an international opposition movement. In this sense, the upshot of the event was more about the government of El Salvador losing a propaganda war than any real human rights violations.

The Salvadoran left remained unconvinced. Following the El Mozote massacre, Atlacatl Commander Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa Barrios became a key target for the FMLN. In his work, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, Mark Danner quotes a rebel commander, Licho, "He was well known to all the guerillas as the man who had ordered the massacre."⁶ "Everybody wanted to kill him in combat," Licho explained.⁷ Killing Monterrosa, however, would prove a challenging task. As head of the high profile Atlacatl Battalion from February 1981 to November 1983, Monterrosa would prove hard to access. It would prove even more difficult when the military high command promoted Monterrosa to be the Commander of the Third Infantry Brigade in San Miguel, a promotion that made him the leader of one of only six military districts in the country. San Miguel was also among the more active districts and contained Morazán and other areas considered guerilla hotspots. Monterrosa was thus part of a

⁵ Ibid, 21-23.

⁶ Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, 147.

⁷ Ibid.

small coterie of military leaders shaping the course of the Salvadoran civil war and confidence in him from San Salvador was extremely high. In his new high profile position, Monterrosa would be constantly protected. He was a target to the FMLN, and he knew it.

As Commander of the Third Infantry Brigade in San Miguel, Monterrosa would return to Morazán in October of 1984, a few days after the La Palma peace talks, initiated by Duarte after his election in May of that year. There, Monterrosa would lead a major offensive against the guerillas known as Torola IV.⁸ It would prove to be his last, at least if leader of the People's Revolutionary Army and FMLN military strategist Joaquín Villalobos had his say. Villalobos had made Monterrosa a central target and devised a scheme to overcome the considerable obstacles in the way of getting to Monterrosa. As Danner outlines in *The Massacre at El Mozote*, Villalobos had studied the psychology of his opponent and he had recognized some key patterns. He noted that Monterrosa was obsessed with the rebel radio station, Radio Venceremos, and was fixated on finding and destroying its transmitters, as he did during Operation Rescue. Furthermore, Monterrosa was known to collect war trophies. Danner quotes Villalobos, “[Monterrosa] got personally involved in combat situations when his men captured something—to such an extent that at times he lost the ability to coordinate troop movements.”⁹ The widely respected military leader seemingly had a weakness, and one that caused him to lose focus. Radio Venceremos would later proclaim that Monterrosa would come and get the “radio” personally because “his vanity won't let anyone else do it.”¹⁰

Villalobos would take advantage. On October 23, 1984, he ordered his troops to leave behind a radio transmitter for Monterrosa's men to find. Danner quotes Villalobos, “As soon as

⁸ Ibid, 150.

⁹ Ibid, 149.

¹⁰ Proposal, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, “Radio Venceremos: A Salvadoran War Diary,” Folder: CT016, No. F42, SV/MUPI/H/CE8/001 F19-02, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

they found the transmitter there was a big celebration.”¹¹ “We could hear them talking about all the prizes they would get, and so on,” Villalobos continued.¹² This had happened before.

Monterrosa’s troops knew how much he valued war trophies, and they would be certain that he knew of this one. And value it he would. Monterrosa recognized the degree to which the capture of a Radio Venceremos transmitter would represent a major propaganda victory for government forces, so much so that the transmitter would fly out on Monterrosa’s own helicopter, perhaps his greatest war trophy yet. As the helicopter took off, ERP forces waited nearby prepared to exact their revenge on Monterrosa. The helicopter rose off the ground, a member of the ERP forces pressed a button, and the eight sticks of dynamite hidden within the transmitter exploded.

Monterrosa would not survive.

In the end, Monterrosa’s war trophy would prove a fake, a simple means by which to get the Commander to let down his guard. However, a war trophy would emerge from that day: the tail of Monterrosa’s exploded helicopter. In his book on the El Mozote massacre, anthropologist Leigh Binford describes the helicopter tail’s central place at the Museum of the Salvadoran Revolution, Heroes, and Martyrs in Perquín, where the part is displayed prominently on the museum’s patio. “Such was the symbolic importance (as well as the strategic significance) of this event that the FMLN secured pieces of Monterrosa’s helicopter and guarded them for over nine years,” Binford explains.¹³

Why would these broken helicopter parts prove so significant to the FMLN, the Salvadoran left, and the victims of government violence more broadly? The death of Monterrosa represented retribution. It represented one instance in which the government’s victims were able to exact revenge against a perpetrator of human rights violations. In a country in which such

¹¹ Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, 150-151.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre*, 176-177.

violations were the norm, so too was impunity as the Salvadoran high command resisted prosecutions in human rights cases that involved Salvadoran citizens and American citizens alike. The death of Monterrosa meant justice for the victims of El Mozote and their families, justice that in El Salvador, was too often elusive. After the operation, Radio Venceremos would proclaim that Monterrosa, after finding the radio, would brag to the media that “the myth of Morazán is over forever.”¹⁴ It continued, “Monterrosa was reporting to the world that he had done away with Radio Venceremos. Now our station is back on the air to announce that it is the myth of Domingo Monterrosa that is at an end.”¹⁵

Nor would this be the only instance in which a high profile Salvadoran military leader would be killed in the name of justice. Less than a year later on March 23rd, 1985, retired General José Alberto Medrano would be killed by three gunmen. Medrano, the CIA would explain, was “considered by many to be the originator of rightwing violence in El Salvador.”¹⁶ He had once been director of the Salvadoran National Guard, had played a key role in founding and leading the National Democratic Organization (ORDEN), the most prominent death squad throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s, prior to being banned by the Revolutionary Government Junta. President José Napoleón Duarte, often reluctant to publicly name human rights violators, would refer to Medrano as “the father of the death squads, the chief assassin of them all.”¹⁷ Medrano’s murder would be claimed by members of the FMLN. The murder of

¹⁴ Paper, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, “Radio Venceremos: A Salvadoran War Diary,” Folder: CT016, No. F42, SV/MUPI/H/CE8/001 F19-02, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ CIA Report, May 1985, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁷ Cox News Service, “Gunmen Kill Salvadoran ‘Father of Death Squads,’” *Chicago Tribune*, March 25, 1985, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-03-25/news/8501160799_1_death-squads-salvadoran-countryside-san-salvador.

Duarte’s antipathy could have owed in part to Medrano’s mentorship of Duarte’s chief political enemy, another progenitor of death squads and right wing violence, Roberto d’Aubuisson.

Medrano, as the murderer of Monterrosa, represented a major victory for the left, who touted the assassination as justice being served.

These events in 1984 and 1985 exemplify a key aspect of Salvadoran society during the civil war: the powerful legacy of impunity and the popular feeling that justice could best be served through vigilantism. Indeed, this appeared one thing about which both the far right and far left agreed throughout the course of the Salvadoran civil war. The far right would often justify its violations of human rights on the basis of its lack of confidence in the Salvadoran justice system. Why risk leftists being released or prisoners being amnestied, when they could simply eliminate those leftists outright? The far left, for its part, had no confidence that men like Monterrosa and Medrano would ever be brought to justice for their crimes, and with good reason. Officers never faced punishment for human rights abuses in El Salvador, and for men as high profile as Monterrosa and Medrano to even face a trial was inconceivable. The answer to both extremes was to take justice into their own hands. Such was the nature of extremist violence throughout the course of the Salvadoran civil war.

In her work, *Peace Without Justice*, lawyer Margaret Popkin, who spent much of the 1980s in El Salvador attempting to reform that country's judicial system, discusses the deeply troubled Salvadoran judiciary that facilitated rightist and leftist violence alike throughout the civil war period and beyond. Popkin's narrative depicts a judiciary that lacks independence from the other branches of government, a lack of independence that led it to be dominated by forces that were not particularly interested in the advancement of human rights and justice during El Salvador's twelve-year civil war. The judiciary that emerged from the 1983 constitution written by a Constituent Assembly led by the ultra-conservative Roberto d'Aubuisson remained under the thumb of the Salvadoran military. For example, as Popkin explains, judges throughout much

of the country would often wait to begin a criminal investigation until they obtained the permission of local military commanders.¹⁸ This is perhaps unsurprising given that the judiciary relied upon the three military security forces, the National Guard, National Police, and Treasury Police to conduct all of its investigations.¹⁹ So too is it unsurprising that under such a system, security force members did not prove an impartial force in the process of investigating human rights violations by their colleagues. Such a setup would be problematic anywhere, but in El Salvador, which had a centuries old tradition of Armed Forces solidarity, asking members of those forces to investigate their compatriots was a recipe for inaction, or worse, frequent cover-ups. Such cover-ups would prove a constant theme of the 1980s in El Salvador. Armed Forces investigators' choice to cover-up crimes was not merely a matter of protecting their colleagues. As rumors emerged that members of security force intelligence operations were involved in death squad killings, it became clear that in some cases, the men charged with investigating a crime, had in fact been complicit or had even committed the crime.

Nor was this dominance by the powerful Salvadoran military the only constraint to judicial power. One innovation in the 1983 constitution was the move to allow the legislative assembly to nominate the members of the Supreme Court rather than the executive. While this may have proved a check on executive power, it did little to depoliticize the Salvadoran judiciary or ensure an independent branch motivated to seek justice despite its many costs. The Legislative Assembly frequently chose men from the political system with little to no judicial experience and even less interest in challenging the Salvadoran system of justice. For example, the d'Aubuisson-headed Constituent Assembly selected Chachi Guerrero to be Supreme Court president from 1984 to 1989, shortly after Guerrero had run for president on the Partido de Conciliación

¹⁸ Popkin, *Peace without Justice*, 14-15.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

Nacional ticket, a large conservative party with a legacy of supporting the Salvadoran military.²⁰ As a politician with such a track record as well as a commitment to his friend and known supporter of death squad violence, Roberto d'Aubuisson, it is little wonder why Guerrero did not prove an ambitious, justice-oriented member of the Supreme Court during his term as leader of that body. This politically-oriented, military-dominated body also had the power of selecting and firing lower judges. Thus, the presence of a man like Guerrero at the head of the court meant that lower judges, too, were reluctant to challenge the prevailing pro-military order lest they lose their positions, already tenuous.²¹ It was not a situation that promoted courageous stands by judges at any level.

In addition to these dominant factors, judges were regularly underpaid and unprotected. As a result, corruption was the norm. Indeed, corruption beat the alternative, as the threat of violence against judges from the extreme right and extreme left alike proved a constant theme. Few judges dared to challenge their overseers, be those individual men like Guerrero or the military more broadly. Those who did gather the courage to challenge military claims of innocence in the many human rights cases brought to the courts would not last long in their positions, if they survived at all. Thus, before one takes into account other problematic aspects of the Salvadoran justice system, the regular use of extrajudicial confessions through torture, or the frequent suspensions of habeas corpus during states of emergency, the likelihood of justice in the case of human rights violators was extremely low. The result was a well-worn record of impunity for those members of the security forces who blatantly committed human rights violations, a fact not lost on the victims of Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa Barrios or General José

²⁰ Ibid, 17.

²¹ Ibid, 20.

Alberto Medrano. If Salvadorans on any side of the political spectrum wanted justice, they often felt that it needed to come in the form of vigilantism.

This legacy of impunity and resulting vigilantism would prove a major stumbling block to Salvadoran progress toward peace. Following the election of Duarte, U.S. officials felt greater confidence that they could more easily fund the government of El Salvador, help their security forces to win the war against the violent left, and at the same time advance democratization efforts in the country. While they would experience some success, continued problems with the Salvadoran judicial system would constantly limit Salvadoran and American efforts to mitigate the human rights crisis and recast El Salvador's image in the international community.

High Marks?

This backdrop of vigilantism and judicial weakness hardly tempered the enthusiasm surrounding the inauguration of newly elected Christian Democratic President José Napoleón Duarte, which would take place on June 1st, 1984. Duarte's election met with approval in Washington, where many in the Reagan Administration believed that his moderate leadership would better ensure widespread support in the U.S. and abroad. On inauguration day, the Administration demonstrated its approval for Duarte and his country's recent successful election with an impressive delegation that included U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. In his memoirs, Shultz recalled an exciting day in which he "had a feeling that the country was turning a corner" under the leadership of a "magnificent" man who "exuded a sense of decency and human concern that was apparent to everyone."²² Shultz, as others, recognized the deep-seated problems that Duarte would confront, namely a human rights record that remained bleak, and a judicial branch seemingly unable to handle the crisis, yet Duarte seemed the man for the job. His

²² Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 409.

moderation in the face of extremism on both ends of the political spectrum made him appealing to a wide swath of observers in Washington, as did his status as a devout Catholic with a background in the American university system. An early exchange between Duarte and Reagan proved promising as well. Upon meeting in May of 1984 Reagan recalled, “[Duarte] told me I was his hero—as a freshman he went thru the Notre Dame indoctrination which includes seeing the film in which I played the Gipper.”²³ It seemed a nice start to an important relationship, and one that represented a great relief to the American Administration. The election of the popular Christian Democrat and the strengthened bipartisanship that it prompted in the U.S. rendered El Salvador a relative non-issue in the American presidential election of 1984.

Duarte had made a good impression in Washington, as well as in Europe, where he travelled shortly after his election to garner support for his government, long an international pariah. In stark contrast to previous attempts, the position of the Salvadoran government was well-received. The United States had been trying for years to soften Germany’s position toward the government of El Salvador. The election of Duarte must have had an impact, as the Germans committed money to the government, \$17.8 million in development aid for 1984.²⁴ The French, too, seemed to be taking a “more balanced approach” to Central America.²⁵ Perhaps the U.S. would no longer need to be the sole country supporting the government of El Salvador. While in 1982, the Salvadoran government only received \$1 million in non-U.S. military aid, in 1984, the Salvadoran government received \$20 million.²⁶ Certainly, the U.S. was still providing the majority of aid (in 1984, the U.S. government provided \$223 million in economic aid and \$97

²³ Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 241.

²⁴ The fact that Germany had a Christian Democratic government at the time also helped the PDC cause.

²⁵ Memorandum, Charles Hill to Robert C. McFarlane, “President Duarte’s Western European Trip,” July 26, 1984, Collection: Executive Secretariat NSC: Country File, Latin America, Contents: El Salvador, Box 30, Box: 40, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁶ Report, Department of Defense, “El Salvador,” September 1987, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 118, Folder: Subject File: Central America Trip Briefing Book, 1987 (2 of 2), Library of Congress.

million in economic aid), but the international community was seemingly altering its position on El Salvador in the aftermath of Duarte's election.²⁷

In the beginning, Duarte adopted a range of measures to deal with the country's human rights crisis. Among his first acts as president, Duarte created a commission to investigate major cases of political violence. He dissolved the intelligence section of the Treasury Police, long considered among the most troubled of the country's Armed Forces. In an attempt to exert greater control over the Salvadoran Armed Forces, Duarte also created a new position, the Deputy Minister of Public Security that oversaw the National Guard, National Police, and Treasury Police. Despite widespread concerns about Duarte's ability to handle the Armed Forces, he seemed to cultivate a positive relationship with Defense Minister Vides, as well as Chief of Staff General Adolfo Blandón, and secured their support in transferring suspected abusers of human rights to less important and desirable positions within the Armed Forces, which was often the best El Salvador's executive could manage in securing justice against such violators.²⁸ This relatively warm relationship cultivated by Duarte paid dividends in April of 1985, following the elections of the National Assembly that the right attempted to call into question after sweeping victories by the Christian Democrats.²⁹ The Salvadoran Armed Forces supported Duarte and the electoral process and ensured that no serious attempt on Duarte's power occurred.

Duarte even made a surprise announcement at the UN General Assembly in October of 1984 regarding his willingness to negotiate with guerilla leadership. This was a daring initiative

²⁷ Report, Department of Defense, "El Salvador," September 1987, The Jack Kemp Papers, Box 118, Folder: Subject File: Central America Trip Briefing Book, 1987 (2 of 2), Library of Congress.

²⁸ CIA Report, "Special Analysis," September 14, 1984, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

²⁹ Cable, ARA – Jim Michel to The Secretary of State, "Scope Paper for the Working Visit of Salvadoran President Duarte to the United States," May 15, 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

that risked a right-wing backlash from military members and political leaders like d'Aubuisson for whom such overtures toward the left were unwelcome. Duarte feared a coup and kept his plans to request dialogue a well-guarded secret prior to making the announcement in front of the international community on October 9th.³⁰ While Duarte would avoid a coup, the pressure from the right to not negotiate continued to constrain Duarte throughout the process. Duarte recalls concerns among his allies that he might be accused of “acting unconstitutionally in consorting with criminals.” Some close to him warned that he could be impeached. The pressure to not show weakness or concede anything to the guerillas was powerful, and it made successful negotiations a near impossibility. “The political space in which I could move was very small,” Duarte later admitted.³¹

While this political opening was indeed small, Duarte benefitted from a confluence of events that facilitated negotiations. The left was weakened, as the Salvadoran and U.S. governments had hoped, by successful elections that had ushered in a moderate president. Furthermore, Duarte’s election coincided with a decrease in rightist violence, though considering the extraordinary level of violence by rightist forces from 1981 to 1983, such a modest improvement in reported incidents of torture and political murder seemed inevitable.³² However, this improvement also owed in part to the presence of a civilian president that for the first time in decades seemed to wield a small measure of control over the Armed Forces, in contrast to the JRG and Magaña governments. In explaining the reason for this downward trend in rightist violence, U.S. embassy officials cited the centrality of Vice President Bush’s visit in December of 1983, as well as the actions of Magaña, Duarte, and the Salvadoran government in clamping

³⁰ Duarte, *Duarte*, 210.

³¹ *Ibid*, 228.

³² Intelligence Assessment, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Controlling Rightwing Terrorism,” January 10, 1985, Collection: North, Oliver L.: Files, Contents: Box 128, 132, 150, Box: 15, Folder: El Salvador: Death Squads, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

down, and transferring out members of the security forces with human rights violations credited to them. Of these, Duarte's role seemed especially central. "Duarte deserves high marks," one CIA report concluded.³³

So too did Duarte deserve high marks for his effect on U.S. policy. Throughout the Reagan Administration's first term, the Reagan team struggled to win support for the government of El Salvador amid very real concerns of human rights violations. Many speculated that the election of Duarte, more so than anything else, including the Kissinger Report, turned the tide of Congressional opinion. "Congressional perceptions of Duarte's ability and dedication to democracy," one House Committee on Foreign Affairs report explained, "contributed to an assessment that he could implement policies in El Salvador in a manner consistent with congressional concerns, and thus deserved support from the United States."³⁴ In a recent interview, Elliott Abrams recalled Duarte's impact, explaining that having Duarte, an alumnus of Notre Dame, meant "you had Ted Kennedy and all these Catholics who liked Duarte."³⁵ "That provided a little political space," Abrams explained.³⁶ As a consequence, during the first year of Duarte's term, Congress approved almost all Salvadoran funding requested by the Reagan Administration, and without that aid being conditioned on human rights progress and other reforms. This seemed a welcome change to a presidential administration accustomed to trying to do more with less in El Salvador. In 1983, the Administration requested \$86.3 million, but only secured \$64.8 million, an amount argued insufficient for a military on the brink. Of that \$64.8, even less was delivered pending a verdict in the case of the four American churchwomen. The early results seemed to suggest that Duarte's electoral victory facilitated increased cooperation

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Report, Committee on Foreign Affairs, "Congress and Foreign Policy – 1984," June 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

³⁵ Elliott Abrams, interview by author, Nashville, TN, October 21, 2011.

³⁶ Ibid.

between the White House and Congress. However, Congress remained invested in assuring El Salvador's steady progress. In 1985, a two-year authorization measure required that the Reagan team make non-binding semi-annual reports on Salvadoran progress in the realm of death squad activities, military violence, judicial reform, and agrarian reform. Particularly revealing were the related Congressional measures that would suspend aid if Duarte were deposed in a military coup.

There remained persistent issues, among which, problems with the judicial system were paramount, as were looming threats of enhanced rightist violence in the wake of Duarte's negotiations with the left. In December of 1984, the rightist assembly passed a budget measure that aimed to de-fund Duarte's judicial reform commission. While Duarte was experiencing some success in confronting rightist violence, American officials grew concerned that Duarte's emphasis on dialogue with the far left, when combined with Duarte's strained relationship with the private sector and the stagnant economic situation in El Salvador, could stimulate rightist violence during 1985. Indeed, one rightist death squad publicly sentenced Duarte to death for his decision to negotiate.³⁷ In this, the United States remained an important constraint on the Salvadoran right's behavior, in particular to those rightists in the Salvadoran military. One report concluded that "the present military leadership continues to recognize that U.S. aid levels and the effective prosecution of the war rest in part on the Salvadoran Armed Forces' human rights performance."³⁸ Thus, the Administration's emphasis on mitigating rightist violence seemed to be effective in some regard, at least with El Salvador's government leadership. It was leadership's ability to affect real change that was often the issue.

³⁷ Report, Committee on Foreign Affairs, "Congress and Foreign Policy – 1984," June 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

³⁸ Ibid.

Despite clear signs that rightist violence and human rights violations remained a powerful issue in El Salvador, the narrative that things were growing much better prevailed in the American embassy, and perhaps even led some to shut their eyes to the clearly persisting issues of injustice. Ambassador Edwin G. Corr, who took that post in 1985, saw revolutionary advances in human rights in El Salvador. Calling the progress under Duarte “nearly unbelievable,” Corr suggested that while “judged by an absolute standard of human rights, El Salvador leaves much to be desired,” the situation was vastly improved under the leadership of Duarte, who remained the Administration’s “best hope” for achieving its goals.³⁹ Sounding a familiar narrative, Corr went on to explain that the vast majority of the violence emanated from the left, while there remained but a “residue of cases which display signs of having been perpetrated by isolated Neanderthals.”⁴⁰ Corr concludes, “I continue to believe...that organized rightist violence is a thing of the past.”⁴¹ While this narrative spoke in part to genuine progress, Corr made these conclusions despite clear evidence that human rights issues persisted, as did continuing issues of impunity for past perpetrators that some speculated Duarte had overlooked to maintain peace with the military.⁴² Such messages also underscored the tendency of men like Corr and Abrams to put a positive spin on what was occurring daily in El Salvador.

Naivety was not the only thing at play in these sunny assessments of Salvadoran human rights. The tendency of Reagan Administration officials to downplay Salvadoran human rights abuses continued into the second Reagan term as the first. An inspection of the Salvadoran embassy in late 1987 revealed the Embassy’s tendency to ignore or downplay negative

³⁹ Cable, Ambassador Corr to Assistant Secretary Abrams, “Where We Are no Human Rights in El Salvador,” December 9, 1985, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Progress and Problems on Human Rights,” June 8, 1987, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

developments in El Salvador.⁴³ Inspector General Sherman Funk suggested as much in his analysis of the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, concluding that the Embassy “in effect, allowed few reports to Washington critical of the government.”⁴⁴ Funk continued, “The inspectors were told that such reports, if they were to become public, would only reinforce the unbalanced media coverage of the civil war in El Salvador.”⁴⁵ When the inspectors confronted Elliott Abrams with these facts, Abrams “did not see it as a problem” and claimed that he was kept informed via other channels when there were serious allegations of Salvadoran human rights abuse.⁴⁶ This tendency, the inspector reported, may have kept Abrams privy to Salvadoran developments, but “deprived the Department of the corporate knowledge and documented records essential to policy formulation and Department history.”⁴⁷ One wonders how long this had been going on, but it seems safe to assume that this was a characteristic of Abrams’ leadership and Corr was happy to oblige.

Nevertheless, it also seems obvious that Corr and Abrams were latching on to the popular international narrative that things were getting better, if only slightly. To support this fledgling narrative, many in the Administration focused their attention on the human rights organizations in El Salvador that dared to construct a counter-narrative of continuing problems. One cable from Corr to the Department of State cast serious doubt on the independence of several key human rights groups in El Salvador. These groups included the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Prisoners, the Disappeared, and the Politically Assassinated of El Salvador (CO-MADRES), which was formed with the aid of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the Human Rights

⁴³ Memorandum, OIG Sherman M. Funk to Mr. B. Lynn Pascoe, “Lack of Candor in Reporting in 1987, Embassy San Salvador,” 1988, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 34, National Archives II.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Commission of El Salvador (CDHES), which was among the largest human rights organizations of its kind in El Salvador. Corr spoke approvingly of recent arrests of members of those organizations in the summer of 1986, suggesting that the arrests and allegations against the human rights groups, “[confirmed] our long-held convictions” that such groups were indeed FMLN front groups.⁴⁸ A later report suggested that these groups represented a key part of a broad network of groups that sought to “deliberately distort and manipulate information” by “fabricating stories of human rights abuses and [attributing] them to the government.”⁴⁹ This particular report went on to question the independence of Tutela Legal, the human rights office of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, suggesting that its leaders were involved in channeling funds to guerilla groups. Even if these issues spoke more to particular leaders than the organization as a whole, Tutela Legal’s methodology, the report explained, “is based on presumption, not facts” and “counts victims as civilians even when they often are guerillas.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, the Administration approved an ongoing FBI investigation of the Washington-based Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), a group that had long criticized the government of El Salvador’s human rights record.⁵¹ Such suggestions that El Salvador’s key human rights groups were tied to the guerillas or otherwise incompetent at calculating and reporting upon government abuses were not new, though they seemed to grow in strength in the aftermath of Duarte’s election. Some Washington officials refused to believe that human rights violations could continue under a man so committed to democratization and reform

⁴⁸ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Further Arrests of Infiltrators in ‘Human Rights’ Groups,” June 3, 1986, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁴⁹ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Progress and Problems on Human Rights,” June 8, 1987, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Memorandum, Arthur B. Culvahouse, Jr. to Howard H. Baker, Jr. et al., “FBI Report on CISPES Surveillance,” February 2, 1988, WHORM: Subject File, CO Countries, CO046 440000-END, Folder: CO046 (El Salvador) (450000-463999), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

and others resisted mightily counter-narratives suggesting that El Salvador had not progressed as much as the Administration had claimed.

The Salvadoran government also complained about a Salvadoran left and affiliated human rights groups that seemed to have mastered the art of propaganda. Claiming that the insurgents had brought “a little bit of Madison avenue to the violent business of making revolution,” Salvadoran government leaders conceded their continued problems in winning the propaganda war with its leftist critics.⁵² Indeed, the left was using the latest in technologies, aspiring to integrate computers into their communications, and relying upon help from friends in America and Mexico, producing a sophisticated press campaign to sell their cause.⁵³ In this, the Salvadoran insurgents hoped to replicate the Vietnam media experience in which “the American media was able to turn Americans against the war.”⁵⁴ As part of their propaganda effort, the leftists invited American reporters to select rebel forts, which they hoped would generate articles about the rebels and their close, protective relationship to the Salvadoran people.⁵⁵ As the U.S. Administration, the Salvadoran government remained especially concerned about the work of CISPES, which played a huge role in assuring that the reputation of the Salvadoran government remained a negative one.⁵⁶ “Our country should realize all efforts in its power to counteract this campaign that distorts our reality,” Ambassador Ernesto Rivas Gallont concluded.⁵⁷

⁵² Memorandum, Mision Permanente de El Salvador en Las Naciones Unidas, “Campaña de Los Salvadoreños de Estados Unidos: El Comercio de la Revolucion,” 1984, Box: Año 1984, A-800 Caja No. 22, Caja No. 164, Folder: 800 “El Salvador” No. 3 Deter País, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Memorandum, Director General de Política Exterior to Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores and Vinceministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Campaña de Desinformación Contra Nuestro País en los Estados Unidos de América, December 7, 1988, BoxÑ 1988, 800, Caja #24, Caja No. 279, Folder: 800 Asuntos Politicos Dif Paisés I7, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

In the U.S. too, several transnational organizations continued to torpedo the Salvadoran government and the U.S. policy that supported it. The Peace Lobby, a human rights organization that made frequent trips to El Salvador critiqued the Reagan Administration as one that “[eroded] the credibility” of the United States and “[tarnished] its image as a nation whose actions reflect a genuine commitment to democratic principles.”⁵⁸ This because the United States continued to fund the government of El Salvador despite the considerable violence that took place there, and as the Peace Lobby claimed, hampered the Contadora peace process, a Central American initiative to negotiate a regional peace plan, with its unilateral and bilateral policies.⁵⁹ While the death squad activity may have been decreasing, the Peace Lobby conceded, the Reagan team used the “algebra of death” rationalization, “which accepts a mere decrease in death squad activity as the basis for acclaim of the Duarte government.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, to the Peace Lobby, the methods of government-sponsored violence were simply changing. While there may have been less conventional state violence, there was more of an emphasis on air paraphernalia, gunships, and bombers, which the Peace Lobby claimed, represented a new front of government violence toward the general populace.⁶¹ The Peace Lobby, as other organizations, spoke of rumors of napalm and white phosphorus usage against civilians.⁶² The Peace Lobby continued,

We believe that the government of El Salvador is fatally wounded by its record on human rights: the number of deaths, disappearances, tortures; the failure of its mechanism for investigation and prosecution for death squads; the incarceration of prisoners without trial; and its lack of concern/action with regard to refugees.⁶³

⁵⁸ Report, Faculty for Human Rights in El Salvador and Central America (FACHRES), “United States Policy in Central America,” January 7, 1985, Box: New York Faculty Committee for Non-Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean, Marvin Gettelman Files, Tam 523, Box Number 1, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Report, The Peace Lobby to the Congress of the United States, “Human Rights in El Salvador,” 1985, Box: New York Faculty Committee for Non-Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean, Marvin Gettelman Files, Tam 523, Box Number 1, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Not all were so willing to accept that the election of Duarte had ushered in a new and democratic era in Salvadoran history.

The Peace Lobby was not alone in this critique of the Reagan and Duarte Administrations. CISPES, which by the mid-1980s comprised of 450 local committees in 50 states, resisted Duarte's image as a democratic saint.⁶⁴ In one bulletin, CISPES highlighted that the death of Archbishop Romero had occurred on Duarte's watch.⁶⁵ CISPES also backed up the Peace Lobby's assertions on the transition to more impersonal violence through the air, suggesting that "Duarte has...presided over the development of a new kind of death squad—squadrons of bombers which have dropped an average of 7.5 tons of explosives a day on rural villages."⁶⁶ The parallels to Vietnam clear, CISPES as other such organizations continued to evoke the parallel in its press reports.

For its part, the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, too, remained critical of the Salvadoran government. Its reports and bulletins continually highlighted the failures of agrarian reform, including the fact that the most ambitious part of that reform, Phase II, never started.⁶⁷ Their report also highlighted continued oppression of the trade union movement despite a slight opening. In contrast to the Peace Lobby and CISPES, the labor organization saw Duarte as "limited" in his power to affect genuine change in the continuing violence in which individuals participating in "normal trade union activities

⁶⁴ Bulletin, U.S. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, 1987, Box: PE 036 Orgs, Box number 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.), 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁶⁵ Flyer, CISPES, "Duarte: Stop Bombing Salvadoran Civilians," Box: PE 036 Orgs, Box 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.), 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Report, National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, "The Search for Peace in Central America," Box: PE 036 Orgs, Box 66, Folder: Of National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador 1983-1991, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

routinely risk imprisonment or murder.”⁶⁸ As the U.S. administration, the labor organization saw Duarte as limited in his ability to affect change.

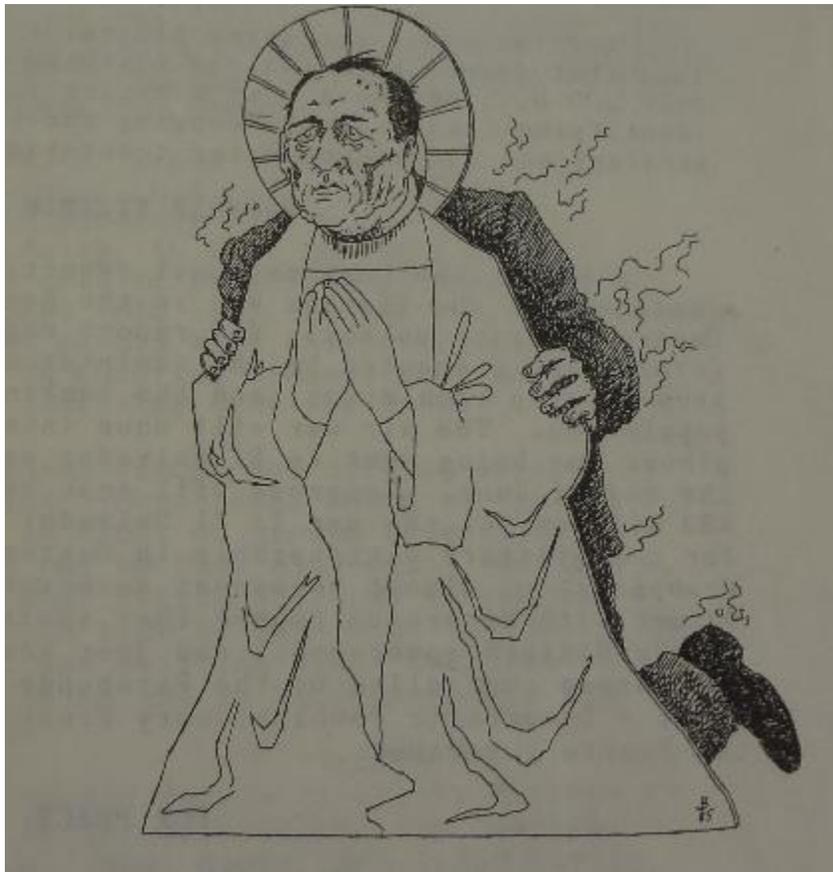


Figure 3 This cartoon was featured in a May 1987 CISPES bulletin, and depicts Duarte in a way sharply contrasting the Reagan Administration. In the image, Duarte is hiding behind the image of a saint.

Flyer, CISPES, “Duarte: Stop Bombing Salvadoran Civilians,” Box: PE 036 Orgs, Box 25, Folder: Of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (U.S.), 1980-1985, 2005, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

It was not only these human rights organizations, often charged with being too close to the Salvadoran left that questioned the “progress” being made under Duarte. In November of 1984, the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights expressed concern over the lack of progress in a wide variety of human rights cases.⁶⁹ While Duarte had made an

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Bulletin, Amnesty International, “Amnesty International’s Current Concerns in El Salvador,” June 1985, Box: Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Amnesty International of the USA, Inc: National Office Records 1966-2003 (1974-1993), HR #0001, RG IX: Communications Department/Media Relations Files, Series 2: Country Files, Box

effort to bring to justice those Salvadorans who had killed American citizens, Salvadoran citizens who were regularly tortured, disappeared, and killed often never got justice without a world power fighting on their behalf. He argued that this was a matter “where cases should not be singled out, regardless of the international pressure exerted in respect of some of them.”⁷⁰ The message was clear. To this UN investigator, while Duarte had made a sincere effort to appease his patrons in the United States, when it came to bringing justice to the perpetrators of violence against Salvadoran citizens, the government of El Salvador continued to flounder.

El Salvador’s left more broadly, too, remained deeply critical of the Salvadoran government despite the improvements that the American Administration perceived and emphasized. One FMLN bulletin suggested that “the regime of Duarte has buried the country in the most profound economic, political, and social crisis of all of our history.”⁷¹ The bulletin cited numbers that suggested that the coffee and cotton industries had decreased to levels unknown for twenty years and six of ten Salvadorans were unemployed or underemployed.⁷² “Poor economic conditions, lack of an economic plan and the amount of money in the war have converged into an insurmountable obstacle to economic success,” the bulletin suggested.⁷³ While the left was simply piling it on Duarte’s Administration with its economic critique, it continued, too, with its political critiques. “The military governs openly,” the bulletin suggested, and the government operated without a base of support.⁷⁴ “Nothing remains of the illusion of civil government, nor of the illusion of democracy that excited some when Duarte was elected,” the FMLN suggested.⁷⁵

359, Folder: El Salvador, 1983, 1985-1988, Center for Human Rights Documentation & Research, Columbia University.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bulletin, FMLN FDR, “El Salvador: Balance Politico Del Año 1986, 1986, Box: Fondo Politico-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The bulletin cites continuing and increasing U.S. intervention and providing more and advanced weapons as demonstrative of the struggle of the Salvadoran government to keep up in its war with the left. The charge that Duarte was simply a “North American project” also continued.⁷⁶ “They built an image to propagate it through the world and within the United States,” the bulletin’s writers charged.⁷⁷ This point likely resonated because it was true. El Salvador’s government and that of the U.S. invested considerable time in cultivating a certain image of a reformed, democratic El Salvador that did not often conflate with reality. This document also correctly points out the U.S. investment in Duarte in particular. “They deployed an enormous campaign of propaganda toward the interior of our country to generate his image as savior, reformist, and pacifist.”⁷⁸ FMLN leaders concluded, “today, Duarte in El Salvador is the most despised and repudiated puppet by the people, the military, the oligarchy, and the bases of his own party.”⁷⁹ While the harshness of this language underscores the group’s continued efforts to undermine the Salvadoran government, such language also highlights the left’s refusal to concede that Duarte’s election in 1984 was legitimate given the prevailing government violence of the time. The left, however, drew hope from the disillusionment of the international community with Reagan and Duarte’s preferred military solution, and the failure of the Republican Party in the U.S. that promised a more difficult time for Reagan’s Central American policies.⁸⁰ Finally, the left continued to lambast the Salvadoran government for its inability to deal with its human rights violations. As human rights organizations, the left cited increased usage of aerial bombardment on entire villages as a new strategy of North American-sponsored

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

war.⁸¹ Duarte's election seemed to satisfy important elements in the U.S. and international community, but few of Duarte's leftist critics relented.

The religious left, too, maintained a critical posture toward the Duarte government. Igancio Ellacuria was again one of the government's more insistent critics, and one who did not perceive a break in leadership between the JRG, Magaña, and Duarte. Among his more constant critiques was the disconnect between Duarte's words and actions. Duarte "has accepted always that the ultimate causes of the conflict are in the secular injustice of the country, and the repression and in the lack of democracy" yet he continued to go along with the Reagan Administration's public narrative of external aggressors stoking the conflict.⁸² Furthermore, while the "verbal accent" was put on political solutions, the "real accent" was put on military solutions.⁸³ Certainly, Duarte was Washington's man, but in the estimation of Ellacuria and many of his followers, that reality had a devastating impact upon El Salvador. As a result, five years into his term, Ellacuria deduced that little had truly changed for his country. Human rights violations continued at a staggering level, and Duarte was either unable or unwilling to mitigate that dire situation.⁸⁴

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Some of Duarte's detractors were unsatisfied with verbal critiques. One such group that did not approve of the Christian Democrat's Presidency was the Urban Pedro Pablo Castillo Commando, a leftist organization with ties to the FMLN which on September 10th, 1985,

⁸¹ Bulletin, FMLN FDR, "A 3 Años de la Declaracion Franco-Mexicana," 1984, Box: Fondo Politico-Militar FMLN, Caja 1, Serie: Propaganda y Estrategias, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

⁸² Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "Tiene Solucion El Salvador con El Presidente Duarte?" 1984, Box: Caja 12, Folder: Carpeta 26.1, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Essay, Ignacio Ellacuria, "Duarte: El Final de una Presidencia," 1988, Box: Caja 12, Folder: Carpeta 27.3, Archivo Ignacio Ellacuria, San Salvador.

kidnapped Duarte's daughter, Inés Guadalupe Duarte Durán and her friend, Ana Cecilia Villeda, and killed Inés' two body guards. The operation, titled "Enough of Terror, Torture, and Disappearances in the Prisons of the Duartist Dictatorship," sought to free thirty-four FMLN political prisoners and highlight continuing injustice in El Salvador. In a Radio Venceremos broadcast shortly after the kidnapping, the kidnappers spoke of the "territorial expansion" of its forces and the "international recognition" of their power, despite evidence to the contrary.⁸⁵ In a radio message that included critiques of the U.S. role in the Salvadoran crisis, the kidnappers argued that their motivation was to send a message that they were not going to "allow the continuation of the policy of kidnappings, tortures, disappearances, indiscriminate bombings, and terror against our people." This was not a group convinced of human rights progress in El Salvador.

The resulting negotiation would prove the greatest test yet to the long tenuous relationship between the civilian leadership of José Napoleón Duarte and the traditional powers in El Salvador, the military and rightist forces. Duarte's initial decision to send family members to the United States in the wake of the kidnapping angered many of those in the military who believed that it represented a lack of confidence in their protection. His negotiation with a group widely considered to be terrorists by the Salvadoran right, angered many. The CIA described Duarte as "between the devil and the deep blue sea, given the pressures exerted by the guerillas and the ultraconservative sectors" in the aftermath of his daughter's kidnapping.⁸⁶ While the kidnappers continually taunted Duarte for his government's ineffectuality and perpetuation of injustices, any attempts made by Duarte to secure the release of his daughter provoked anger on

⁸⁵ Cable, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "El Salvador: FMLN Communique on Kidnapping," October 25, 1985, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

⁸⁶ Cable, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "El Salvador: Venceremos, ARENA on Duarte Kidnapping," October 22, 1985, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

the right. In one press communique, the Nationalist Republican Alliance criticized Duarte, urging that homeland comes first, before personal interests. The communique concluded, “let us save the homeland, no matter what kind of sacrifices must be made.”⁸⁷ As in all of Duarte’s negotiations with the guerillas, Duarte felt compelled to dialogue, but the right pushed him to break off talks at every opportunity. Familiar with the often fragile dynamic that characterized the relationship between the military leadership and the civilian government, Duarte speculated that the guerillas were attempting to drive this wedge between the two and thus undermine the government of El Salvador. In his memoirs, written and published shortly after the kidnapping crisis, Duarte suggests that guerilla demands “were designed to be rejected and to cause friction between me and the Armed Forces.”⁸⁸ Duarte’s negotiation with terrorists tested his relationship with the Reagan Administration as well, given their stated commitment to never negotiate with terrorists.

If this was the kidnappers’ goal, then they would be largely successful. Upon learning of the location of his kidnapped daughter and her friend, Duarte ordered the ultra-rightist Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa to avoid launching any offensives in the mountainous area surrounding their location. Should the guerillas believe that the Salvadoran Armed Forces were attempting a rescue mission, they may kill the prisoners. Ochoa, long antagonistic toward Duarte’s civilian government, resented these restrictions, seeing them as reflecting Duarte’s commitment to his family over the war effort and the good of the nation.⁸⁹ Ochoa, who had previously led a mutiny against Defense Minister José Guillermo García in 1983, would attempt to lead army officers in

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Duarte, *Duarte*, 252.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 250-251.

another by signing a declaration criticizing Duarte and rejecting Duarte's call to cease offensives in the region surrounding the kidnapers.⁹⁰

It was the intervention of Defense Minister Vides that prevented Ochoa's mutiny from utterly undermining the Presidency of José Napoleón Duarte during the kidnapping crisis of 1985. Vides gathered his commanders and pled Duarte's case, arguing as Duarte did that the left's best hope in winning the war was if they managed to divide the popularly-elected civilian government from the military command. As Duarte relays in his memoirs, the meeting culminated in a vote regarding whether or not the Armed Forces had confidence in his "ability to conduct these negotiations in the best interests of the country."⁹¹ After an eight-hour meeting, the commanders voted in Duarte's favor, though the length of the meeting calls into question how easy it was to secure a pro-Duarte consensus, despite intervention from the highest level of the Salvadoran military.

On October 24th, after the release of 22 political prisoners, Duarte successfully secured the release of Inés Guadalupe and Ana Cecilia, but while the crisis had ended happily for the Duarte family, it was not without its political fallout. The Inés Guadalupe kidnapping crisis underscored the fragility of the relationship between Duarte and the military leadership, despite Duarte's careful efforts to cultivate that relationship. Many among the military leadership appeared to reassess their relationship to Duarte and the civilian government in the aftermath of the crisis, goaded in large part by Duarte's political enemies. In a conversation with embassy officials, Roberto d'Aubuisson expressed that "under similar circumstances, he would sacrifice

⁹⁰ Ibid, 257.

⁹¹ Ibid, 258.

his child for the good of the country,” a line he used frequently in the Salvadoran press.⁹² Despite the vote going against Ochoa in the midst of the crisis, many officers came to empathize with his critical point of view, especially in the aftermath of the guerilla offensive against the National Military Training Center in La Union on October 10th, 1985.⁹³ Many officers attributed this bold attack, which cost government forces one-hundred casualties, to the weak-willed negotiating strategies of Duarte and his team, which allegedly emboldened the guerillas. Thus, Duarte and his handling of the negotiation crisis came to be tied up in the Salvadoran Armed Forces’ occasional military failures. For men like Ochoa, for whom the civilian government was often the central problem, Duarte proved an easy scapegoat. Yet, Duarte was not the only one. Defense Minister Vides, who had mediated on Duarte’s behalf, saw his own prestige take a hit among many in the officer corps.⁹⁴ Some rumors even emerged that Vides would be replaced, his commitment to Duarte and the civilian government widely considered a liability.

As before, the alliance between the civilian and military leaders in San Salvador was tenuous. Also as before, U.S. military assistance and its conditionality seemingly proved one thing that kept the two divergent sides together. Duarte had one obvious point in his favor: he was Washington’s man. For a man like Ochoa to undermine Duarte’s power, or even facilitate a coup, would call essential U.S. assistance into question. Some in Washington, however, began to question the degree to which this would continue to be a constraint of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. One Defense Intelligence Agency Appraisal suggested that this argument that U.S. assistance brought these two sides together had “shown signs of weakening,” due to the fact that

⁹² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “d’Aubuisson: ‘I Am Not An Assassin,’” October 9, 1985, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 17, National Archives II.

⁹³ Report, Defense Intelligence Agency Appraisal, “El Salvador: Officer Politics,” December 16, 1985, Collection: North, Oliver L: Files, Box: 1, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

“officers are speaking more frequently of defending the national honor and institutional autonomy they believe may be threatened.”⁹⁵ Thus, Duarte’s greatest strength was in some ways his greatest weakness. Without Duarte, U.S. aid might be in doubt, however, Duarte, with his close relationship to the U.S. and its interests, would frequently be critiqued by individuals on the right for his lack of independence from Washington. These individuals, like d’Aubuisson, possessed a strong sense of nationalism, and were devoted to the institutional integrity of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. If what was perceived as Duarte’s weak-kneed negotiations with the enemy threatened the national interests of El Salvador and compromised the military’s ability to fight the war their way, how much more could these officers take before concluding that U.S. aid was no longer enough to justify military support for Duarte and his government?

Nor was the kidnapping crisis to represent the last significant snag in relations between Duarte and his military leadership. In the fall and early winter of 1987, Duarte would again face strong pressure from the military. On the morning of September 17th, 1987, the Salvadoran commanders scheduled a meeting with Defense Minister Vides to express their deep concerns over the civilian government. One embassy cable characterized the officers as “agitated” and “somewhat menacing.”⁹⁶ This time, their concerns revolved less around Duarte’s insistence on negotiations with the guerillas, though that backdrop did exacerbate existing military concerns, and more with the Duarte Administration’s handling of several key human rights cases. Duarte’s Vice Minister of Public Security, Reynaldo Lopez Nuila, and his tough talk regarding unsolved cases like the Archbishop Romero murder and the 1983 massacre of 74 civilians at Las Hojas had worried the commanders, who feared the upshot of these investigations.⁹⁷ Nuila had recently

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Disquiet in the Salvadoran Armed Forces,” September 18, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

publicized the government of El Salvador's willingness to pay \$80,000 to a witness in the Romero case, and also made public the existence of a witness for the Las Hojas case, which implicated Colonel Elmer Gonzalez Araujo.⁹⁸ Talk of the reopening of these cases swirled around San Salvador to the dismay of the many military men who feared their own implication. These concerns were tied to broader concerns about the amnesty law that Duarte was negotiating as part of the Central American peace negotiations. Many in the military feared that the amnesty law would facilitate the release of detained subversives, while members of the military involved in human rights abuses would still be prosecuted.⁹⁹ As often was the case with the issue of human rights, many in the military feared a double-standard that did not work in their favor. According to the U.S. Embassy, the commanders "demanded" that the high command "make known their views to President Duarte and protect their institution."¹⁰⁰ Undergirding many of these critiques was the idea that Duarte was purposely trying to undermine the military.¹⁰¹ These rumors were stoked in part by two long-time enemies of Duarte, who were "fostering discontent" among the officers, Roberto d'Aubuisson and Sigifredo Ochoa.¹⁰²

Again confronted with a mutinous military, Duarte faced a difficult choice. To ease up on his Administration's human rights initiatives would risk support from his North American patrons. To continue along this trajectory may have meant a coup attempt, and this one with seemingly widespread support from the commanders. In the end, Duarte would arrive at a compromise position. Duarte and Vides agreed to continue to pursue the human rights violators, but Nuila's public pronouncements could not continue. First, human rights abuses needed to be

⁹⁸ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "MOD Vides Voices Commanders' Concerns to Duarte," September 21, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

⁹⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Disquiet in the Salvadoran Armed Forces," September 18, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "MOD Vides Voices Commanders' Concerns to Duarte," September 21, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

investigated more quietly, with no publicizing about how those investigations were unfolding. This was not ideal given the government's need to advertise its progress to the U.S. and the rest of the international community, but the government's vastly improved public image gave them more leeway in this regard. Second, Nuila needed to be replaced. Convinced of his untrustworthiness, the Armed Forces would not support his investigations, and his continued presence risked upheaval against the Duarte Administration. Of these two conclusions, the latter proved more disquieting to Duarte's ally to the North, who saw in Nuila a genuine hope for human rights progress. "Lopez Nuila's departure," U.S. Embassy officials concluded, "would hurt our efforts in human rights."¹⁰³ It was a sacrifice that Duarte would need to make.

In this power struggle between Duarte and the Salvadoran Armed Forces, the Armed Forces would emerge largely victorious. Nuila would be replaced, and Attorney General, Roberto Giron Flores, would soon admit to facing "extreme pressure" from members of the Armed Forces to "ease off" on his investigations into the Archbishop Romero and Las Hojas cases.¹⁰⁴ With regard to the amnesty law that many in the Salvadoran Armed Forces so feared, on November 5th, 1987, Duarte enacted a broadly worded law that ensured that military offenders of human rights, too, would enjoy amnesty, though a few cases were exempted from the law. Six days after the law's passage, a judicial official dropped charges against the three Armed Forces officers reportedly responsible for the Las Hojas massacre. The law came to include military offenders after several rightist members of the Legislative Assembly refused to support it due to its perceived laxity against the guerillas.¹⁰⁵ The result was a law that satisfied almost no one, and

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Cable, DIA Washington to DIACURINTEL, "El Salvador: Concerns about Amnesty Law," October 30, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁰⁵ Cable, DIA, "El Salvador: Human Rights Cases Absolved," November 14, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

while those in the military implicated in human rights abuses could feel relief, that relief was tempered by popular anger that the terrorist guerillas were getting away with murder.

Many in the U.S. and El Salvador alike viewed the law as a loss for Duarte and his efforts to secure justice in many of the high profile human rights cases that had long represented such a big part of his relationship to the United States. A member of DIA effectively captured the tension that Duarte faced, suggesting that “such pardoning” would almost certainly “be interpreted to mean that the government is relenting under military pressure,” but if military crimes were not included in the amnesty, “senior officers may feel threatened, which in turn could lead to renewed civil-military tension.”¹⁰⁶ The Duarte Administration’s commitment to human rights was again seemingly sacrificed in the name of securing manageable relations between civilian and military leadership. Duarte was involved again in a delicate balancing act, and while he had survived another round, his limited victory came in part at the expense of the international image of him and his country. Duarte, his critics argued, had folded again to military pressure in the realm of human rights. Injustice continued to reign in El Salvador. Worse still, Duarte’s compromise assured him of nothing with many of his critics in the Salvadoran military. The amnesty agreement facilitated the highly publicized return of FDR leaders and former Duarte allies Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora to the chagrin of military and ARENA leadership, who saw this move as a sellout to the “communists.”¹⁰⁷ The return of these men provoked d’Aubuisson to issue what one State Department official called “veiled [threats] of renewed death squad activity to counteract the inroads the FMLN might make with its ‘fifth columnists’...who [had] ‘infiltrated’ the political process without severing their ties to the

¹⁰⁶ Cable, DIA Washington to DIACURINTEL, “El Salvador: Concerns about Amnesty Law,” October 30, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁰⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “ARENA Incensed by Allegations Against d’Aubuisson,” November 27, 1987, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 34, National Archives II.

guerillas.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Duarte’s rightist critics, and the ever-present specter of rightist violence, would not soon go away.

Godfather

Despite continuing struggles between the civilian and military leadership and persistent issues of human rights violations and the impunity that had long characterized Salvadoran society, after the first few years of the Duarte Administration, there were many positives upon which the Reagan team could look back. Among the sharpest differences between the Reagan Administration’s first and second terms was the seeming bipartisan consensus that emerged regarding El Salvador in the wake of Duarte’s election. This was something noted by Administration hawk and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Elliott Abrams, in March of 1986. “As little as two years ago,” Abrams commented, “El Salvador was a highly controversial subject, now it is a consensus issue.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, the Administration still faced bitter opposition for many of its Central American policies, however, its critics focused largely upon U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. The Administration faced particular difficulties in the wake of the Nicaraguan harbor mining and Iran-Contra crises, two incidents that made funding for the Contras a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Many in the Administration saw this failure to adequately fund the Contras as having a direct impact upon Salvadoran policy, in that it removed pressure from a Salvadoran guerilla patron. Nevertheless, El Salvador, as never before since 1979, seemed an issue around which many in Washington could agree.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum, INR – Curtis W. Kamman, Acting to The Secretary, “Scorecard on the Arias Plan—El Salvador’s Perspective,” December 18, 1987, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁰⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Visit by Presidential Delegation Headed by Asst. Sec. Abrams,” March 22, 1986, Collection: North, Oliver L.: Files, Contents: Box 46, 47, 48, Box: 9, Folder: El Salvador/Honduras Trip – 3-20-86, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Indeed, by the summer of 1986, there had been many positive developments. There had been three successful elections over a short time period. Duarte had managed to stave off a coup from d'Aubuisson and his allies on the right. His Administration had withstood the pressures from the military that followed the Inés Guadalupe crisis. The tide of war, too, had turned in the government's favor. The left was battered and bruised, thanks in part to healthy, consistent military aid from the United States. This aid was facilitated by the improving international image of El Salvador, an image burnished by the election of Duarte and the improving human rights situation in El Salvador.

Despite these positive developments, however, many U.S. officials continued to wonder if democracy was going to be long-lasting in El Salvador. In a cable from the American Embassy in San Salvador to the Secretary of State, entitled, "Democracy in El Salvador: The Transplant Has Been Made, but Will it Take?" U.S. Ambassador Edwin G. Corr wondered aloud on this issue.¹¹⁰ In this particular cable, Corr typified the attitude of many in the Administration toward El Salvador and the prospects for democratic reform in that country. The cable is characterized by guarded optimism and a sense that Salvadoran democracy was on the march after a long and difficult battle with entrenched forces. To Corr, democracy was a relatively new concept in El Salvador. There was not a long and rich tradition of widespread participation in governance. There certainly was not a long legacy of peaceful transfers of leadership, as exemplified by the incessant coup rumors floating around San Salvador. Corr explained, "Democracy in El Salvador

¹¹⁰ Corr penned this memo shortly after the Administration had earned accolades for its handling of crises in Haiti and the Philippines, crises in which the Administration helped to facilitate the ouster from power of two right wing dictators. With these popular maneuvers, Reagan and his team undercut the popular narrative that they would champion any military strongman so long as that figure was anti-communist. Efforts in El Salvador to further push democratization seem to represent part of that broader Administration initiative.

is an imported idea; there is really no history of democracy in this country.”¹¹¹ Instead, the governance of El Salvador long revolved around elites dominating El Salvador’s political, economic, and social structures. Corr, as others, thus tempered his optimism toward El Salvador and its subtle steps toward democratic progress.

As many in the Administration would later publicly proclaim, Corr considered the U.S. role in the “implantation” of democracy in El Salvador absolutely essential, in particular, he credited the U.S.’s constant pressure on the government of El Salvador to reform. Indeed, Corr described the United States as the “Godfather of Salvadoran Democracy.”¹¹² Corr’s language underscored the popular sense in the American Embassy and the Administration more broadly that what they were attempting to achieve in El Salvador would prove deeply challenging. “Democracy has been grafted to the rootstock of the Salvadoran experience,” Corr explains.¹¹³ Among the things that would make this “grafting” most difficult was a culture that Corr and others felt was ill-suited to democracy. Corr emphasized the degree to which democracy, too, is about attitudes, and “attitudes are tenaciously resistant to change.”¹¹⁴ There was no doubt that these attitudes were widespread and powerful in San Salvador, where men like d’Aubuisson so often held sway. However, the real issue in El Salvador remained as much the continuing structural issues that made impunity the rule, rather than simply intransigent anti-democratic attitudes.

¹¹¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Democracy in El Salvador: The Transplant Has Been Made, but Will it Take?” July 9, 1986, Collection: North, Oliver L: Files, Box: 1, Folder: El Salvador, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹¹² Ibid. This concept of the U.S. as forcing governmental changes upon tiny El Salvador would be a constant theme, too, for the Salvadoran leftist insurgents. Each perspective saw the U.S. role as dominant and determinative, the difference being that while men like Corr perceived these changes as being positive and genuinely democratic, the leftists saw U.S.-prompted changes as artificial manifestations of Yankee imperialism.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Corr spoke of the difficulty that the United States faced, one that his predecessor Deane Hinton had brought up earlier. How can the United States promote the democratic reform of El Salvador while at the same time staving off a successful Marxist-Leninist revolution? Were these two goals necessarily in conflict? Most Reagan officials would seemingly suggest not. Democratization undercut support for the rebels. However, was not a certain amount of brutality toward the rebels justified in a counterinsurgency effort? Did the far right need to flex its muscles to keep Duarte and the centrists leading a robust war effort that weakened the far left? “The issue is how we can accelerate the rate of progress toward self-sustaining democracy while simultaneously assisting the Salvadorans in their battle against the Marxist-Leninist guerillas,” Corr explained.¹¹⁵ To Corr, it was critical that the American government continue to provide political, economic, and military resources until democracy in El Salvador could be self-sustaining and could “perpetuate itself without our assistance and jawboning.”¹¹⁶ However, the circumscribed language of the ambassador suggested that this time was not soon upon them.

There would be much to overcome, however, not the least of which was a problematic group of political parties, all of which seemed unwilling to give up the power position in Salvadoran governance. Sounding a similar note on the Salvadoran far right, Corr explained, “Among the right, there are plenty who say the correct things about democracy in public but think democracy means that they should be running things.”¹¹⁷ Of Duarte and the Christian Democrats, Corr was similarly harsh, suggesting that within the Christian Democrats “there are those who would like a democracy – along the Mexican model – which ensures permanent PDC ascendancy.”¹¹⁸ The right, however, drew especially harsh criticism as Corr described many on

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

the right as being utterly unwilling and unable to see how they could not be running the country. He cited in particular, the conservatives' inability to admit defeat in the previous two elections. In fact, their protest of their defeat in the recent legislative elections did not lead to a greater crisis in Salvadoran governance only due to the intervention of the Armed Forces, who assured the victory of the Christian Democrats in the Legislative elections of 1985. He discussed the stark gulf between the Christian Democrats and the right, which continued to inhibit real bridge-building within the government. Nor would Corr excuse the widely respected Duarte, whose hatred for d'Aubuisson and many of his allies was well known. "The very visage of d'Aubuisson with his slang-ridden, nasal voice is enough to make the adrenaline flow through the veins of each and every Christian Democrat and to send Duarte's blood pressure through the roof," Corr explained.¹¹⁹ After several coup attempts, threats on his life, and activities that resulted in the murder of Christian Democratic officials, Duarte's hatred for d'Aubuisson seemed well-justified. Nevertheless, the upshot of this antipathy was a government that was truly tenuous in nature.

With regard to Salvadoran culture and its resistance to democratic reform, the issue of impunity and the resulting vigilantism often came up in Washington circles as a problem that required confronting. The murder of men like Domingo Monterrosa Barrios and José Alberto Medrano by leftists, and countless Christian Democratic politicians and human rights activists by rightists underscored a culture in which violent justice was secured independently from the courts. The fact that after decades of extrajudicial judgments that resulted in countless incidents of violence conducted by members of the Armed Forces, a Salvadoran officer had never been convicted for violence against civilians further demonstrated the weakness of the Salvadoran judiciary. So too did the Inés Guadalupe saga. Duarte's daughter was part of a much larger tradition of leftist kidnappings utilized to secure the release of El Salvador's large numbers of

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

political prisoners. When kidnapping was not used, bribes often were.¹²⁰ For a judiciary that was undertrained, underpaid, and with limited tenure in the government (even members of the Supreme Court served for only five years), such bribes, whether from the right or left, were often successful.

Throughout the Reagan Administration's first term, it had placed frequent pressure upon the government of El Salvador to make progress in many of its pending human rights cases. However, the nature of that pressure led to limited results. The Reagan team tended to emphasize violence against American citizens in its criticisms. For example, the churchwomen murders and AIFLD murders represented frequent talking points between American officials and their Salvadoran counterparts. This uneven pressure led to uneven results, progress was painfully slow, and in each case, the persons who orchestrated the killings went unpunished. This was the case in the churchwomen murders, in which, after nearly five-years of badgering and Congressional conditioning of U.S. aid on a verdict, the U.S. was able to prompt a conviction of five low-level Salvadoran National guardsmen, while those individuals who gave the order and those who subsequently covered up the incident managed to escape any punishment.¹²¹

Washington's optimism for swift justice in an array of cases was tempered by harsh realities. This came across strongly given the problems the U.S. and Salvadoran justice system had in bringing one of the architects of the Romero assassination, Captain Álvaro Saravia, to justice. Corr suggested that d'Aubuisson and the court system were colluding to keep Saravia out of prison, and there were "clearly links" between the Saravia defense team and "an entire realm of coup plotters, death squad chiefs, kidnappers, baby robbers, mad bombers, car thieves, and

¹²⁰ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 39-40.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 50.

other assorted criminals.”¹²² He concluded, “prosecution is unlikely as long as d’Aubuisson and his backers are free to manipulate the Salvadoran justice system,” “the odds are long.”¹²³

Frustration in Washington over the lack of progress in so many key cases in the Salvadoran justice system prompted an Administration of Justice Program for El Salvador that represented the brainchild of AID, the State Department, USIA, and the Justice Department. In his work, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years*, Thomas Carothers describes State Department officials following the high profile cases in El Salvador as “astounded” by the “incompetence and disorganization” of the Salvadoran justice system.¹²⁴ The Administration of Justice Program, originally conceptualized in 1983, and put into action in 1984, represented Washington’s best effort to confront a seemingly broken justice system in a country of great import to U.S. policy, and in so doing, deal with the country’s legacy of impunity and vigilantism that led to Armed Forces massacres and leftist violence alike. Ultimately, the Administration of Justice Program came to be used for countries throughout Central America and the Caribbean, though El Salvador was the country that prompted the initiative and earned most of its money and attention.¹²⁵

The \$9.2 million U.S.-sponsored Salvadoran judicial reform project was multifaceted in nature. It sponsored the creation of a Special Investigative Unit (SIU), an elite group of Salvadoran police to investigate a variety of offenses. Popkin refers to this unit as the “linchpin” of the U.S. reform effort.¹²⁶ This particular innovation highlighted the popular American sense that the failures of the Salvadoran judicial system spoke in many cases to incompetence and not

¹²² Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “The Saravia Extradition and the d’Aubuisson Mafia,” October 3, 1988, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 34, National Archives II.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 210-211.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 52.

systemic problems, like the powerful tendency of members of the Armed Forces to protect their own. The Administration of Justice Program also helped to form a judicial protection unit for high profile cases, a clear reaction to the death threats regularly received by judges presiding over a diverse range of cases. Finally, the reform program included a law reform commission, known as the Revisory Commission on Salvadoran Legislation (CORELSAL), which was designed to deal more with long-term issues of injustice than the other innovations, which many hoped would usher in rapid results in cases like that of the Sheraton murderers.¹²⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the intransigence of El Salvador's weak judicial system, U.S. reform efforts met with limited results. The "linchpin" Special Investigative Unit, while widely considered a vehicle to investigate the divisive human rights trials that so interested American officials, was more often utilized to deal with common crimes.¹²⁸ In a June 29th, 1988 cable to Secretary Shultz, Ambassador Edwin Corr suggested that like the Salvadoran Attorney General, the SIU routinely "backed off" cases involving the military.¹²⁹ This likely speaks to the SIU's makeup of members of the security forces reluctant to see their colleagues prosecuted for human rights violations. "In practice," lawyer Margaret Popkin explains, "military officers controlled all investigations and shielded their colleagues from inquiry."¹³⁰ In June of 1988, Ambassador Edwin Corr expounded upon the difficulties of getting members of the security forces to investigate other members. In part, it was a matter of what Corr referred to as a "skeleton-in-the-closet syndrome" that led officers to be afraid of "tattling on one another for

¹²⁷ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 210-212.

¹²⁸ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 63.

¹²⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "Human Rights in El Salvador," June 29, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

fear that each accused will become an accuser until all the long-buried secrets are unearthed.”¹³¹ Of course, these skeletons were not only human rights violations, but also instances of corruption, which were hardly rare, particularly given the Armed Forces’ key role in agrarian reform, which opened a variety of opportunities for corruption.¹³² Corr went on to explain that even those officers without such skeletons in their closets had been “inculcated with a concept of corporate military honor that does not permit any public admission of military wrongdoing, no matter how grievous the crime, and rejects all scrutiny by civilians.”¹³³ Ultimately, the security forces could not police themselves because of a mentality that made honest investigation a betrayal of a centuries old military tradition.

Civilians could not police the military due to that same tradition, and the popular sense that the military ought not to be controlled by civilian leadership. Civilian leadership, too, was complicit in this problem. Civilian leaders feared pursuing human rights violators in the military lest they be replaced or worse. This dynamic was clearly exemplified by the rift between Duarte and his military leadership. The relationship was tenuous. If Duarte hoped to maintain his position of leadership, he could not risk it by alienating important members of the military. The result was a broken system in which human rights violators, except in rare cases, those at the very bottom of the hierarchy, routinely escaped justice.

The judicial protection unit, vital as it was, also demonstrated its limits shortly after the Administration of Justice Program was implemented in 1984. In the same 1988 memorandum, Corr describes a judiciary more responsive to bribery and threats from the military and guerrillas

¹³¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Post Reporting Plan: Military’s Response to Human Rights Accusations,” June 29, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

alike than “evidence relating to a particular case.”¹³⁴ Indeed, when a 1985 case against a kidnapping ring, widely believed to involve a number of high-powered Salvadoran military figures, ended in the charges being dismissed, many Reagan Administration documents underscored a popular belief that the judge had been threatened. Even the CORELSAL initiative was largely a failure. As Popkin explains, the reform initiative came to be dominated by a Salvadoran Supreme Court which opposed many of the proposed reforms.¹³⁵ Early results for the U.S.-sponsored Administration of Justice Program were not encouraging.

There is no question that U.S. Ambassador Edwin Corr was not alone in considering the U.S. a kind of “Godfather” of Salvadoran democracy. Whether it be the U.S. sponsorship of the Salvadoran war effort, the regular American browbeating of Salvadoran officials, exemplified by Vice President Bush’s visit to El Salvador in 1983, or the U.S. support for democratic elections in El Salvador, many in Washington felt that the United States deserved considerable credit for the democratic reform happening in El Salvador. But to what degree could the U.S. further solidify Salvadoran democracy after that “transplant had been made?” And how might American officials promote that process of enhanced democratization and foster civil institutions like a strong judiciary in El Salvador? This question proved particularly challenging to men like Corr, who like Ambassador Deane Hinton before him, openly speculated about a Salvadoran culture that he believed was ill-suited to Western democracy, given powerful traditions like military domination of civilian institutions and a long legacy of impunity and vigilantism. These questions did not have simple answers, though the answers offered, like the Administration of Justice program, had limited results. Recent elections, a human rights record that had improved

¹³⁴ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Human Rights in El Salvador,” June 29, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁵ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 66.

from the bleak initial years of the 1980s, and the leadership of Duarte seemed to suggest that democracy was ascendant in El Salvador. Would it last?

“Backslide”

As elected President José Napoleón Duarte entered the twilight of his Administration, in the aftermath of sweeping local and legislative victories by ARENA in March of 1988 that saw the party secure 80% of the local vote and 31 seats in Congress, rumors of a worsening human rights situation would plague the government of El Salvador. Rumors of political killings prompted a May 11, 1988 cable from Secretary of State George Shultz, a message to the American Embassy in San Salvador that highlighted both the Reagan Administration’s growing concerns, and its sense that the U.S. simply lacked control to affect positive changes in their allies’ continually bleak human rights record. In the cable, Shultz expressed concern for the “recent killings that involve the army or the security forces in which no effort has been made by the Salvadorans to bring the suspects to justice or hold their commanders accountable.”¹³⁶ Surely tired of the stubbornness of this problem, Shultz complained that continued human rights violations risked the bipartisan consensus in Washington that had been so carefully cultivated by the Reagan team for the previous eight years. Shultz concluded his message with a question to the American Ambassador, “Is there anything Washington can or should do at this point?”¹³⁷ One wonders to what degree this was a genuine question from a concerned Secretary of State and to what degree it underscored the exasperation of a man unable to grasp what else could be done from Washington on a stubborn problem for which so little progress had been made. It is likely that both of these concerns prompted this question.

¹³⁶ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy San Salvador, “Some Human Rights Concerns,” May 11, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

One month later, Ambassador Corr noted a marked deterioration, especially troubling given the progress made since 1983, progress that led Corr and others to speculate that death squad violence was a thing of the past, and El Salvador was emerging out of its long national nightmare. The nature of the violence in 1988, however, suggested death squad involvement. “One thing is clear,” Corr explained, “for the first time in years, blindfolded bodies are again beginning to appear in San Salvador with their hands tied behind their backs.”¹³⁸ This was an obvious indication that death squads were once again active, if they were ever inactive.

Executive Director of the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission, Benjamin Cestoni speculated that the rise in death squad violence owed in part to the ARENA victory, and the fact that President Duarte did not command the attention of his government as he once did.¹³⁹ Duarte’s May 1988 diagnosis of an untreatable liver cancer, too, led the Christian Democratic President to withdraw from governance relative to his earlier activism. Corr, on the other hand, suspected that the rise in death squad violence owed more to the expiration of the State of Emergency, which meant that members of the Salvadoran security forces could only hold prisoners for 72 hours as opposed to 15 days.¹⁴⁰ Frustrated with the corrupt and inefficient judiciary, some members of the Armed Forces turned instead to vigilantism to ensure justice for leftists and their supporters. Furthermore, there was an enhanced sense among those on the far right that the U.S. was simply in too deep to withdraw its assistance on human rights grounds now. The U.S. would not be willing to risk a military coup and what Corr referred to as an “abortion of nine years of progress toward Constitutional democracy.”¹⁴¹ To many on the right, they simply had nothing to lose. The recent electoral victories of the ARENA party had to further embolden those committing rightist

¹³⁸ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Human Rights in El Salvador,” June 29, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

violence, as much as the party may have attempted to distance itself from its history of extremism in the aftermath of the 1984 election. Whatever may have been the cause, right-wing vigilantism was again on the rise, to the chagrin of many in the Reagan Administration.

Given these concerns, Secretary of State Shultz made a trip to San Salvador on June 30, 1988 to speak with El Salvador's military leadership. Perhaps giving credence to the Salvadoran sense that the U.S. was in too deep with the government of El Salvador to withdraw its support and risk almost a decade of democratic progress, Ambassador Corr requested that Shultz not emulate Vice President Bush's meeting with Salvadoran leadership in December of 1983.¹⁴² In that meeting, George Bush criticized Salvadoran leadership harshly and gave military leadership an ultimatum: improve the human rights situation and confront the death squads or risk U.S. aid. Instead, this time Shultz was to emphasize the partnership between the two countries and be sensitive to the tenuous relationship between the Salvadoran military leaders and their civilian counterparts, while subtly pushing the country toward resolving its many pending human rights investigations.

This emphasis on subtly and sensitivity may have stemmed in part from the sense that to further push was to risk access to the government of El Salvador. Many in the Embassy believed that the Salvadoran Armed Forces had grown frustrated with U.S. interventionism, and especially the insistence of the U.S. upon human rights progress. To many in Salvadoran military circles, their occasional failures in the war effort, and the inability of the Salvadoran Armed Forces to secure victory against the leftists owed in large part to U.S. meddling. It was in part the U.S.'s interventionism that ensured that the Salvadoran military needed to wage a "low intensity

¹⁴² Cable, Ambassador Edwin G. Corr to The Secretary, "Your Meeting with the Salvadoran Military Leadership at the Estado Mayor Conjunto, June 30, 1988," June 24, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

conflict” in contrast to the more totalizing war that many military leaders preferred.¹⁴³

Furthermore, human rights criticisms made the Salvadoran Armed Forces’ work more difficult, while no one complained of FMLN violations.¹⁴⁴ Shultz opted for the tact of emphasizing the degree to which human rights violations only emboldened the guerillas and won them support domestically, in the U.S., and internationally. If Administration officials could not browbeat the Salvadoran military into reform, or pressure them with the threat of the withdrawal of U.S. aid, perhaps an appeal to the Salvadoran Armed Forces’ desire to win the war would be more successful.

Shultz’s tact to approach the Salvadoran leadership less critically than Vice President Bush was not the only difference between the two meetings. In contrast to Vice President Bush’s interaction with Salvadoran leadership that coincided with an improvement in the human rights situation, Shultz’s meeting did not have its intended effect. Instead, another high profile massacre on September 21st in the village of La Cebadilla again highlighted the lack of progress made in controlling the Armed Forces. Witnesses relayed that soldiers marched into the town, blindfolded and bound ten men and walked them off, shortly after which witnesses heard gunshots.¹⁴⁵ The men were later found dead, all killed by rifle bullets, and eight of the men were killed by headshots. The town’s women alleged rape and robbery. The U.S. Embassy would later comment that the Armed Forces version of events, that they were ambushed by guerillas, was “suspect,” suspicions reinforced by witness accounts. Duarte, too, would conclude that these were executions. If the Shultz meeting had sought to affect positive change in the Salvadoran Armed Forces, it was off to an inauspicious start.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “San Francisco/La Cebadilla Killings: Witnesses’ Statements and Cause of Death Reports,” October 3, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

However, the La Cebadilla murders also represented an opportunity. Certainly, there were a number of pending human rights cases that begged for resolutions. The Romero assassination and the murder of agrarian reformer Rodolfo Viera and his American AIFLD counterparts remained as yet unsolved. These incidents had occurred well before the ambitious Administration of Justice program had been implemented, a program that sought to bolster Salvadoran efforts to pursue justice in such cases. Four years into the program, Washington could fairly expect results in the case of La Cebadilla, one of the first major, high-profile government-implicated killings since the program had been set in motion in 1984. Part of the American sense that the Salvadoran human rights situation was improving was the idea that the Salvadoran government had been given, as new U.S. Ambassador William Walker would argue, “the technical and human resources to investigate, assign responsibility and prosecute wrongdoers when a violation occurs.”¹⁴⁶

Yet, the government of El Salvador again failed in its handling of La Cebadilla, with Duarte blaming the ascendant ARENA, and others, like Ambassador Walker, blaming Duarte’s reluctance to confront Salvadoran military leadership. These events called into “serious question,” Ambassador Walker would argue, “our claim that the human rights situation in El Salvador continues to move in a positive direction.”¹⁴⁷ Once again, American officials scrambled over what to do. Castigating Duarte was of limited utility given his status as an ill man in the twilight of his Administration (Duarte would end his term in June of 1989). Furthermore, such castigation “[played] best among the very people most culpable of backslide.”¹⁴⁸ Duarte

¹⁴⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “USG Response to Deterioration in Human Rights Situation in El Salvador,” January 7, 1989, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

remained the U.S. government's closest ally and best chance for success. If he was unwilling or unable to affect change, what could be done?

When the new American presidential Administration arrived in office, President Bush and his team made an early effort to affect progress in El Salvador and prevent the backsliding that many had observed over the course of the last few years. The Administration's tactic was a familiar one. The Bush team thus sent Vice President Dan Quayle to San Salvador less than a month after Bush's inauguration. Much like Bush's previous visit to San Salvador and unlike Shultz's subsequent visit in 1988, Quayle sounded a harsh tone with his Salvadoran hosts. State Department officials encouraged Quayle to critique Salvadoran leaders for the unacceptable fact that in nine years, no officers had been held accountable for human rights violations.¹⁴⁹ This could lead to a deterioration in U.S.-Salvadoran relations and could facilitate the end of Congressional aid to El Salvador. The State Department requested that Quayle be particularly critical of Supreme Court President Chachi Guerrero, who they felt had been "unhelpful and misleading" on the Romero, Sheraton, and La Cebadilla cases.¹⁵⁰

When Quayle visited his Salvadoran counterparts on February 3rd, he carried out his orders to take a tough tact. Guerrero pleaded for a chance to prove that the Salvadoran judicial system could secure justice as Quayle requested, but Quayle cut Guerrero off, suggesting that there simply was not time to go in to details.¹⁵¹ The Bush team had been in office for fewer than two weeks, yet was already demonstrating wariness with what was perceived as empty promises and flimsy excuses. Quayle instructed Guerrero that the Ambassador "would expect a report on

¹⁴⁹ Cable, Secretary of State to American Embassy, "Revised Materials for VP Quayle's Meetings in El Salvador," February 3, 1989, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "The Vice President's Meetings in San Salvador – Memoranda of Conversations," February 6, 1989, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

each of the stagnant cases within the next week,” reports that would be sent directly to Quayle’s office.¹⁵² Aware of how such a request might be interpreted, Quayle assured his hosts that he did not want to “appear rude or preachy, but as a friend felt he must be frank.”¹⁵³ “We’re allies,” Quayle went on, “and the issue of human rights is critical to the process of democracy.”¹⁵⁴ Urging as many on the Reagan team often would that the two sides were in this fight together despite such reprimands, Quayle ended the meeting.

The new Bush Administration had set a clear tone with the government of El Salvador. They tired of promises left unfulfilled and filibustering over the several key human rights cases that represented major stories in Washington and internationally. The Bush team required fast action and would accept no less. Salvadoran leadership ensured their American patrons that quick action would be taken to satisfy their demands and ensure a steady, consistent flow of U.S. military and economic aid. Shortly thereafter, rumors would emerge that army officers were unhappy with U.S. demands. Some officers instructed Colonel René Emilio Ponce, a key military figure and eventual Minister of Defense (1990-1993), to ignore U.S. demands.¹⁵⁵ Ponce complained to the U.S. embassy that American criticisms of human rights abuses were “eroding the Armed Forces’ confidence in continued U.S. support.”¹⁵⁶ There was a new presidential Administration in Washington, and as Duarte’s term winded down to its last days, soon there would be a new era of governance in El Salvador with the ARENA party securing control of the presidency, legislature, and local governance. Despite all these changes, much seemingly remained the same.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Report, “El Salvador: Military Unease Growing,” February 27, 1989, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

The More Things Change

In the wake of d'Aubuisson's loss in the presidential election of 1984, d'Aubuisson and the party as a whole came to several key conclusions that facilitated the party's victories in the presidential, legislative, and local elections of 1988 and 1989. While death squad violence was designed and implemented with the idea of concealing its progenitors, Roberto d'Aubuisson's role was far too clear, his reputed inclination toward killing too well known for ARENA to ever sustain power at the national level with him as the party's head. d'Aubuisson needed to step aside and cede control of the party to others. In 1985, he did so. The U.S. Embassy explained the rationale, "ARENA insiders say the move is intended to improve the party's international image and to normalize relations with the American embassy."¹⁵⁷ Second, and related, the party needed to take active steps to distance itself from its own violent image. The harsh rhetoric that had long characterized the party needed to be quieted, if slightly, to promote perceptions of a more moderate party. Another reason to replace d'Aubuisson at the top of the party may have been the poor leadership d'Aubuisson exhibited, as the embassy noted, suggesting that "d'Aubuisson is a notoriously poor administrator, erratic, and unpredictable."¹⁵⁸ This emphasis on moderating the party image, and downplaying d'Aubuisson's role, when combined with widespread disaffection with Duarte's economic leadership facilitated a wildly successful 1988 and 1989 electoral period for ARENA, which won over two-thirds of El Salvador's municipalities, 31 of 60 seats in the Legislative Assembly, and the Presidency, secured by new ARENA head Alfredo Cristiani. It represented a stark change from a few years before, when shortly after Duarte's election to the presidency, the PDC seized control of the Assembly, to the chagrin of El Salvador's right.

¹⁵⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "D'Aubuisson on the Way Out?" September 14, 1985, Box: RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, Special Collection of Records Relating to El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 34, National Archives II.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

When ARENA emerged victorious in the Salvadoran presidential election in the Spring of 1989, it evoked concern from a variety of observers. The Christian Democrats and other Salvadoran moderates saw in ARENA the downfall of El Salvador's short-lived era of democracy and reform. Before the presidential election, Ernesto Claramount, former PDC presidential candidate (1977), suggested that ARENA should not win the election, "if we want to advance in the democratic process, so that we don't see it substituted by a project of exclusion and confrontation even more profound, which would drive us fatally to a situation of generalized war, from which nobody would benefit."¹⁵⁹ To the Christian Democrats as others, the image of the ARENA party was bleak throughout the first half of the Salvadoran civil war, synonymous as it was with known death squad enthusiast and frequent coup ringleader Roberto d'Aubuisson. Internationally, the party's reputation was similarly tarnished, a fact not lost on a presidential administration desperate to win international support for their ally to the south. In El Salvador, the power of ARENA remained a rallying point for a guerilla movement who had had enough of the what they perceived to be the unceasing, unjustified, and unpunished rightist violence that ARENA represented.

While publicly and privately pleased with ARENA's attempts to moderate, some U.S. officials remained skeptical in how genuine those changes to the Party may have been. Many of these concerns surrounding the long-distrusted d'Aubuisson, who despite stepping back from a more public leadership position, continued to be, to many Washington officials, the leader of ARENA. In March of 1989, the CIA, in anticipation of a Cristiani victory, suggested that d'Aubuisson's "public deference" to the ARENA presidential candidate was "largely cosmetic,"

¹⁵⁹ Memorandum, Servicio Informativo Salvadoreño Secretaria Nacional de Información, June 17, 1988, Box 1988, 800, Caja #24, CAJA No 279, Folder: 800 Asuntos Politicos, Dif Paisas I7, Archivo Histórico de Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador.

and “calculated to put a better face on the party.”¹⁶⁰ The CIA went on to speculate that “right-wing extremists” may consider an ARENA victory “a signal that death squad violence would be tolerated” and while ARENA would deny their relationship to such extremist elements, an ARENA-led government would be “less inclined” than the Duarte government to “investigate alleged political crimes by the right or to punish offenders.”¹⁶¹ Despite simmering fears that d’Aubuisson would continue to play a key role in ARENA governance, and would take the country in a radical direction that might make continued U.S. aid to El Salvador more difficult, many American officials continued to hope that ARENA had gotten the message: U.S. aid was conditioned, if not formally, on continued progress on human rights.

If Cristiani had hoped that he would have a grace period with his essential ally to the north, this grace period would prove short-lived. On November 16th, 1989, exactly one week after the fall of the Berlin Wall marked a symbolic end to the Cold War in Europe, uniformed officers murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and their housekeeper’s daughter on the campus of the University of Central America (UCA). One of the Jesuit leaders, the prolific Ignacio Ellacuria, had long-served as an important mediator between the Salvadoran government and the guerillas. It was the most high profile murder since the assassination of Archbishop Romero in March of 1980. As before, the public violence against leftist critics caused many to flee the country, including Guillermo Ungo and Ruben Zamora. The outrage from Washington and the international community was immediate, with clear indications that Salvadoran security forces had been directly involved in the killings.

For the first time, the Cristiani Administration’s commitment to justice would be tested. Cristiani, of course, was particularly sensitive to charges of human rights abuse given his

¹⁶⁰ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, “El Salvador: Rightist ARENA Party Election Frontrunner,” March 14, 1989, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

background and his desire to moderate his own party and shed the image, international and domestic, that it was a party that sponsored rightwing terror. In a bold, but necessary move, Cristiani pledged to “punish the killers of the six Jesuits on 16 November even if they turn out to be members of his party or the Armed Forces.”¹⁶² While Cristiani, as Duarte, said the right things, he too was limited by a broken Salvadoran judicial system seemingly incapable of challenging the power of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Shortly after his ascent to power, Cristiani was running into the structural limits that once constrained Duarte from making real reform and confront issues of human rights abuses. It was more than simply a “culture” of impunity. That impunity was built into the very structures of Salvadoran society. The similar experience of a vastly different Salvadoran political party underscores this fact.



Figure 1 This cartoon was featured in the October 14th, 1991 issue of the *Washington Post*. It features President George H.W. Bush attempting to tame the lion of El Salvador's death squads, implying that Bush was not up to the immense task.¹⁶³

In the U.S., hopes were not high that the Jesuit case would be resolved appropriately, not with so many skeptical of attempts both from the U.S. and El Salvador to reform the Salvadoran

¹⁶² Memorandum, “Government Investigation of Killings in El Salvador,” November 21, 1989, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁶³ Newspaper Article. Joe Moakley, “Justice Disserved in the Jesuit Murders,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 1991, Box: Fondo Violaciones a los DD.HH., Caja 1, Folder: SV/MUPI/CE2/002/H F1, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador, El Salvador.

justice system. In the wake of the Jesuit killings, El Salvador was no more capable of handling such monumental human rights cases as it was at the onset of the civil war. The CIA noted the degree to which U.S. efforts to reform the Salvadoran judicial system had “made no discernible progress.”¹⁶⁴ Its report discusses the degree to which these shortcomings were demonstrated during previous high profile cases. For example, judges in the La Cebadilla trial disallowed evidence from the Special Investigative Unit organized and paid for by the U.S. Administration of Justice program. In a high profile kidnapping case that occurred in 1985, the judge selection process bypassed the “supposedly nonpartisan council it is required by law to consult when transferring or appointing judges.” Subsequently, the judge presiding over the case was threatened and later bribed, not once, but twice.¹⁶⁵ The CIA also concluded, “the Salvadoran criminal justice system remains the weakest and least developed of the country’s democratic institutions,” an institution regularly “circumvented” and “manipulated” by the military, civilian elites, and the extreme left alike.¹⁶⁶ Just as American attempts to reform the system had failed, any attempt by Cristiani to reform the system too would likely end in failure, or so was the opinion of U.S. Ambassador Walker, who suggested that “the problems are so deep that any effort to reform them will require profound change not just of the system but in Salvadoran society.”¹⁶⁷ The hopes were not high for swift justice in the Jesuit case, not with a judicial system languishing despite U.S. and Salvadoran attempts at reform.

The Salvadoran handling of the Jesuit killings thus surprised few. The CIA highlighted this skepticism, noting, “Even if the killers are identified, the limitations of El Salvador’s legal

¹⁶⁴ Report, “El Salvador: The Issue of Military Impunity,” August 14, 1990, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁶⁵ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Human Rights Under Cristiani – The First Year,” August 1, 1990, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

¹⁶⁶ Memorandum, “Assessing the Judicial Process in El Salvador,” December 18, 1989, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁶⁷ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, “Human Rights Under Cristiani – The First Year,” August 1, 1990, Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

system...probably will hamper a successful prosecution.”¹⁶⁸ Many worried about d’Aubuisson’s role. If he was involved, Cristiani “will face great political pressure to protect d’Aubuisson regardless of concerns about continued U.S. aid.” Furthermore, d’Aubuisson had packed the Supreme Court “with justices sympathetic to his ideology and susceptible to his influence.”¹⁶⁹ As if the possible threat of d’Aubuisson was insufficient, the important military leader Colonel Ponce too, seemed implicated in the Jesuit killings, and it became clear early on that even if Ponce was not directly involved in the murders, he had at minimum been involved in a military cover-up. The judge presiding over the case complained that Ponce and the military refused to cooperate.¹⁷⁰ As with d’Aubuisson, however, Colonel Ponce was not a man that the newly elected Cristiani could cross, not with Ponce’s powerful military allies, many of whom were members of his graduating class, an important military relationship in El Salvador.

Fears from Cristiani and other more moderate elements of the ARENA Party of crossing d’Aubuisson proved justified when in June of 1990, d’Aubuisson seemed to resort once again to vigilantism. Rumors emerged that d’Aubuisson was at the head of an effort to murder leftist labor leaders, students, and politicians, the lists of which d’Aubuisson had received from a former Attorney General who fed d’Aubuisson the information in exchange for his helping him get out of corruption charges.¹⁷¹ Nor was Cristiani to be spared d’Aubuisson’s wrath. The CIA suggested that d’Aubuisson had told other members of his Party that he planned to oust Cristiani’s government, compromised as it was by U.S. pressure, particularly in the realm of

¹⁶⁸ Report, “El Salvador: Faced with Human Rights Concerns,” November 21, 1989, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁶⁹ Memorandum, “Assessing the Judicial Process in El Salvador,” December 18, 1989, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁷⁰ Report, “El Salvador: Military Lagging on Human Rights,” CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

¹⁷¹ Report, “El Salvador: New Rightist Plots,” June 28, 1990, CIA Electronic Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>.

human rights.¹⁷² The change in leadership at the top of the Salvadoran government seemed to have little effect on d'Aubuisson's attitude and demeanor, even if the new government was dominated by the rightist party that he had created.

With new rumors of rightist coups, another judicial disaster, and a scandalous violation of human rights again attracting the attention of the international press, the American Congress did something that it had not done since 1983: reinstate the certification requirement for U.S. aid to El Salvador. The certification bill, H.R. 5114, required the Bush Administration to verify progress in two areas before it would approve military aid to the government of El Salvador. The first of those areas regarded progress in the investigation and prosecution of the Jesuit murderers. Secondly, amid rumors of enhanced rightist violence since 1988, Congress could refuse aid if the Salvadoran military partook in "assassinating or abducting civilian noncombatants." After approximately five years of relative consensus on the issues of El Salvador, in sharp contrast to the divisive nature of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, Congress yet again demonstrated its opposition to an Administration deemed too close to a troubled nation, utterly unwilling to confront its demons. Of course, the conclusion of the Cold War elsewhere had likely liberated Administration opponents in Washington, and arguments of intervention of outside forces had less salience in a world in which Soviet power was on the clear decline. The fall of the Sandinistas in the election of February of 1990 further made El Salvador a tangential issue in an increasingly post-Cold War world. These changes in the Cold War made more difficult the position of El Salvador's boosters, and empowered those who saw in El Salvador a wrong-headed waste of American time and resources.

The parallels were striking and almost certainly occurred to many in Washington. In March of 1980, the murder of Archbishop Romero had sent the nation of El Salvador into a

¹⁷² Ibid.

violent tailspin. The assassination, organized and carried out by members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, exacerbated already existing societal tensions and escalated the civil conflict. In December of that same year, the brutal murder of four American churchwomen hardened Congressional opposition to the Salvadoran government. The Salvadoran government's failure to secure justice in these and other cases, when combined with U.S. Presidential insistence upon U.S. aid to the divisive nation, prompted Congressional leaders to threaten to end U.S. aid to El Salvador. Almost ten years later, in October of 1990, Congress was again threatening to end U.S. aid, insisted upon by a new presidential Administration similarly uncomfortable with a Salvadoran government unable to institute justice. Once again, Congressional doubts emerged in the aftermath of the brutal killing of church leaders, killings conducted and covered up by members of the Armed Forces.

In the aftermath of José Napoleón Duarte's election to the Salvadoran presidency in 1984, many in Washington touted the progress of Salvadoran democracy. The human rights situation was improved, if only marginally, from the bleak years of the early 1980s, a fact that was relatively undisputed by the left and right alike. Those human rights organizations that continued in their criticisms of the Salvadoran record on human rights were discredited by an American presidential Administration who viewed them as groups compromised by their ties to the international left. El Salvador had enjoyed several free and fair elections, and a few peaceful transfers of civilian power.

Despite these signs of progress, the latter years of the 1980s demonstrated the degree to which progress in El Salvador had been limited. Political violence remained the norm, as rightist vigilantism represented a standard mode of operation in the Salvadoran civil war. The rule of law seemed as weak as ever, with U.S. and Salvadoran attempts at reform meeting with stiff

resistance and affecting no real change. Civilian leaders remained reluctant to challenge their military counterparts, lest they be overthrown or worse. The “Godfather” of Salvadoran democracy had much to be proud of, yet by 1990, never had the limits of Salvadoran democratic progress been so clear.

Epilogue

Peace at Last?

El Salvador's civil war was long in the making. It resulted in large part from an inequitable economic system that became increasingly polarized in the aftermath of the breakup of Salvadoran communal lands in 1880, one century before the civil war began. That process of economic bifurcation continued in the ensuing century, culminating in a country characterized by the dominance of "fourteen families." A violent reaction to this process in 1932 and the resulting government suppression of that reaction, *La Matanza*, represented the first flare up of the violence between intransigent opponents. Fifty years of overwhelmingly undemocratic elections, which kept from power any group that even spoke of re-imagining Salvadoran economic and political structures, further put the country on a path toward war. The fraudulent elections of 1972 and 1977, in particular, which kept the more moderate Christian Democrats out of office, further frustrated the center-left in the country, groups utterly stymied in their attempts to bring about real change. When the war finally began in 1980, it represented the pent-up frustration of generations of Salvadorans tired of a social, economic, and political system stacked against them. The resulting war was shockingly violent and lasted for over twelve years, bolstered and exacerbated by outside interventions on the part of the Americans, Cubans, and Nicaraguans. For those twelve years, the war can best be described as a stalemate, and one that would seemingly never end.

While the war was long in the making, and lasted over a decade, by the end, everything happened quickly. On January 20, 1989, Ronald Reagan, who had made it one of his foremost

foreign policy goals to defeat communism in Central America, left office to be replaced by his Vice President, George H.W. Bush. Roughly one year later, on February 23, 1990, José Napoleón Duarte, who had been battling stomach cancer for his last year in office, passed away. Almost exactly one year after that, Guillermo Ungo, the most central political leader of the leftist opposition, died on February 28, 1991. The new government of ARENA President Alfredo Cristiani oversaw the cease fire that ended the war on February 1, 1992. Three weeks later, Roberto d'Aubuisson, whose role in perpetuating the shocking violence of El Salvador's civil war had been well-established by that point, died of esophageal cancer on February 20, 1992. He passed away before the U.N. Truth Commission blamed him for the murder of Archbishop Romero in its report, *From Madness to Hope: The 12 Year War in El Salvador* on March 15, 1993. Thus, after a twelve-year civil war a century in the making, the four year period from 1989 to 1993 oversaw the exit from the stage of four central figures in the Salvadoran civil war, the end of that war, and its analysis by the United Nations.

What facilitated the conclusion of this long and bloody conflict? A number of factors came into play, but most important was the changing fortunes of both sides of the conflict. The murder of the Jesuits by members of the Salvadoran Armed Forces again put the government of El Salvador in a defensive position internationally. More importantly given the country's central role in funding the Salvadoran war effort, it threatened U.S. aid to the Armed Forces. Furthermore, in a post-Berlin Wall world, U.S. aid would be more difficult to justify with Central America increasingly seeming the backwater that it was prior to the late Cold War period. The new American President, George H.W. Bush, hoped to distance himself from the quagmire in Central America, the quagmire that demanded immense resources, both financial and political. The Iran-Contra scandal that threatened the Reagan legacy in the latter years of his

second term likely cemented in Bush's mind the need to back away from a costly struggle that no longer felt so critical to American national security. Historian Hal Brands captures this sentiment within the Bush Administration with Secretary of State James Baker's quote describing Central America as a "bleeding sore."¹ Thus, with a wavering ally and an international community again critical of its extralegal violence, leaders in the Salvadoran government likely felt pressured to return to the negotiating table. In addition, while many may have viewed the "Final Offensive" of 1989 as a failure, it was also startling enough to ARENA leadership to compel them to move toward ending the war quickly. During that offensive, violence occurred in the wealthier parts of San Salvador, areas that housed the families of President Cristiani and many other important political figures. Despite the relative wealth and security of these neighborhoods, the army was unable to protect its inhabitants from the terror of war.² The "Final Offensive" thus underscored the continuing vulnerability of the Salvadoran government and its Armed Forces. Finally, for President Cristiani, a wealthy businessman and ally to the Salvadoran oligarchy, the disastrous economy of the past decade required desperate attention. His Administration consequently sought to end the war to concentrate on the country's economic woes and staunch the bleeding that seemingly worsened under the leadership of Duarte. While Duarte was defined by the war, Cristiani, like Bush, was prepared to distance himself from it.

At the same time, the FMLN may have felt it even more incumbent upon them to negotiate. While the "Final Offensive" of 1989 may have succeeded in startling San Salvador's wealthy elite, in the end, as the first "Final Offensive" of 1981, the campaign failed to stoke a

¹ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 216

² Tricia Juhn, *Negotiating Peace in El Salvador: Civil-Military Relations and the Conspiracy to End the War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 127.

widespread uprising against the government and consequently, underscored guerilla weakness.³ On February 10, 1992, the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence concluded that the FMLN's second "Final Offensive" in 1989 "was a fundamental setback to FMLN plans to break the military stalemate and regain the strategic momentum."⁴ Indeed, by the late 1980s, guerilla forces had shrunk considerably, representing approximately 5,000 to 7,000 guerillas, down 30 to 50 percent from the mid-1980s.⁵ Despite the Armed Forces' continuing problems with human rights violations, the government of El Salvador and its enhanced democratic legitimacy in the aftermath of two successful presidential elections also undercut support for the guerilla forces. While the twilight of the international conflict between the U.S. and Soviet Union compromised Salvadoran government efforts, so too did it present special challenges to guerilla forces dependent upon outside aid. By 1990, El Salvador's guerilla forces were losing allies quickly. In neighboring Nicaragua, the Sandinistas lost that country's presidential election in 1990 to the center-right Violeta Chamorro, ending its brief flirtation with Marxist-Leninism. With aid from the Sandinistas a thing of the past, Cuban aid too would dry up with the Soviet Union's rejection of supporting wars of national liberation, and Gorbachev's broader policy of engaging the West. The eventual breakup of the USSR ensured that Cuban attention would turn inward without the crutch of Soviet aid. Cuba became the FMLN's last ally in the region, and without Soviet money,

³ In June of 1990, the CIA was reporting a weakening in the armed left, suggesting that, "FMLN manpower—perhaps the most straightforward measure of the insurgency's well-being—[had] remained at 6,000 to 7,000 combatants since 1986, down from a peak of about 12,000 in 1984." This report went on to discuss the left's need to resort to conscription to grow their ranks.

Report, Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador's Insurgents: Key Capabilities and Vulnerabilities," June 1990, CIA Electronic Reading Room,

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000808521.pdf.

⁴ Report, Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: Implications of the FMLN Peace Strategy," February 10, 1992, CIA Electronic Reading Room,

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000530673.pdf.

⁵ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 205.

Cuba simply did not have the means by which to support the FMLN's continuing campaigns against El Salvador's government.

The pressures on the civil war's two principal aggressors and the increasing lack of interest on the part of interventionist powers in the United States, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union culminated in the Chapultepec Peace Accords in early 1992. The Peace was negotiated between the government and FMLN leadership, and facilitated by the United Nations and Roman Catholic Church. The two parties signed the agreement on January 16, 1992, with the cease-fire beginning two weeks later on February 1, 1992. As per the accords, the FMLN won a significant reduction in the Salvadoran Armed Forces, which were prohibited from playing an internal security role, as well as the dissolution of the Treasury Police, National Guard, and National Police, whose reputation for human rights violations had made their continued power and authority unacceptable to the leftist opposition. Furthermore, military intelligence was placed under the President's control, thus undermining the control of El Salvador's traditionally powerful military leaders. As per the Ad Hoc Commission's human rights recommendations, a variety of officers were purged from the Salvadoran Armed Forces ranks for violations. Finally, guerrillas and soldiers alike received land through a land transfer program that took place between 1992 and 1997. In exchange for this array of concessions, the FMLN demobilized its forces, and set a goal to contend in the presidential, legislative, and municipal elections in 1994 as a legitimate political party.

While these changes seemed to weaken the Salvadoran Armed Forces, both in military capability, and as a political power, the ongoing question was how the Salvadoran far right and their leftist counterparts would get along in the aftermath of the peace agreement. However, in the late 1980s, the far right ARENA seemed to alter its message. The changes of the party were

on full display for the tenth anniversary celebration of the founding of the party in September of 1991, which attracted over two thousand people including some leftist leaders, including Democratic Convergence leaders Ruben Zamora and Rene Flores as well as Communist Party members Mario Aguinada Carranza and Aronette Diaz.⁶ The party's theme would be the reentry of the FMLN into the political fold. Perhaps most shocking from the event were the words of Roberto d'Aubuisson, who reportedly expressed, "Farabundos are Salvadorans, too" and "we must welcome them back home."⁷ He went on to explain that in the upcoming elections, "the United Opposition might win, but they would then be a democratically-elected government, and El Salvador would be at peace."⁸ These startling words marked a new era of Salvadoran governance. Of course, these words from d'Aubuisson also underscored a new reality in the aftermath of the deaths of Guillermo Ungo and José Napoleón Duarte: ARENA no longer faced a strong center-left party. Thus, the party felt secure allowing the FMLN to enter the political realm, and likely sought to do what it could to capture centrist votes once cast for Duarte and his Christian Democrats. Despite the transformation that d'Aubuisson attempted to project in his last major speech as a cancer-stricken man on the brink of death, his legacy would still provoke anger among centrists and leftists. Upon his death, National Assembly Vice President Gloria Salguero Gross introduced a resolution declaring three days of official mourning upon d'Aubuisson's passing.⁹ With the PDC refusing to support the measure, it failed by one vote.¹⁰

⁶ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "d'Aubuisson Calls for National Reconciliation at ARENA Tenth Anniversary Celebration," September 30, 1991, Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry #A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador, 1958-1975, DEF 6: Armed Forces El Salvador 1973 Thru POL 17: Diplomatic/Consular Represent. El Salvador, Container #7, ARC# 1750062, Folder: Pol 13.3, El Salvador 1975, National Archives II.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State, "ARENA Founder Roberto d'Aubuisson Dead," February 21, 1992, Box: RG 0059 Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Office of Central American Affairs, Entry #A1 3159: Records Relating to El Salvador, 1958-1975, DEF 6: Armed Forces El Salvador

While d'Aubuisson and ARENA attempted to project a new and different image by the end of the war, not all were eager to accept that image after a decade of violence, coup rumors, and vitriolic rhetoric.

Despite the formal end to the war in 1992, the terrible violence that characterized El Salvador throughout that country's civil war persisted in the aftermath of the peace. Wrapped in a regional crisis of drug traffic, particularly cocaine, from the Andes to the United States, powerful gangs, or *maras*, have emerged throughout El Salvador. In her book, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War*, Diana Villiers Negroponte explains this trend as a reflection of the continuing "inadequacy of education, the low levels of job skills, and the rejection of traditional, poorly paid trades."¹¹ The violence of these gangs and their dominance of many of El Salvador's large cities has resulted in El Salvador being one of the most dangerous countries in the world. According to the UN Global Study on Homicide in 2011, El Salvador's 66 murders per 100,000 people make it the second most dangerous country in the world to its neighbor Honduras and that country's staggering 82 murders per 100,000 people. The prevalence of weapons in the aftermath of a civil war that saw millions in military aid pour in from the United States and others explains in part the high level of violence in contemporary El Salvador.

As this violence persists so too does the economic inequality that justified violence for so long. El Salvador continues to be one of the most unequal nations in the world. Remittances from the U.S. remain a key part of Salvadoran income. According to data from 2012, roughly one-third of El Salvador's population lives outside of the country, while remittances represent almost

1973 Thru POL 17: Diplomatic/Consular Represent. El Salvador, Container #7, ARC# 1750062, Folder: Pol 13.3, El Salvador 1975, National Archives II.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Diana Villiers Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, c2012), 165.

20% of the country's GDP, a testament less to opportunities in the United States than the desperation of the Salvadoran people, in many cases forced to move abroad in search of necessary income.¹² Some improvements had been made in the availability of land, both due to agrarian reform laws, though limited in application, and post-war transfers to the FMLN and their supporters. As Elizabeth Wood reports in her book, *Insurgent Collective Action*, "Landholdings over 100 hectares declined from 38.7 percent of farmland in 1971 to 23.1 percent in 1998," while at the same time the percentage of medium-sized farms rose, land ownership also rose as a whole.¹³ However, at the same time, Wood reports, problems with rural poverty persist with low adult literacy and life expectancy in the Salvadoran countryside, and declining rural wages as well.¹⁴

So too did problems with the justice system continue. This is unsurprising given the problems of impunity that persisted throughout the war. In the major cases that occupied American policymakers throughout the 1980s, this theme of impunity was consistent. Those officers who directed the Romero murder in March of 1980, the churchwomen murders in December of 1980, and the Sheraton murders in January of 1981 all escaped justice. The trial of military officers in the aftermath of the Jesuit murders in November of 1989 seemed to mark progress: Salvadoran courts convicted two officers, Colonel Guillermo Benavides and Lieutenant Yushy René Mendoza, the first officers convicted of political violence in the civil war era. However, the 1993 Amnesty Law that came out shortly after the UN Truth Commission's report lambasted the Salvadoran Armed Forces for its role in these and a variety of other incidents of torture, murder, and massacre, set these two men free in April of 1993. As is often the case in the aftermath of civil war violence, El Salvador's leadership committed to consolidation of power

¹² *Ibid*, 170.

¹³ Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action*, 259

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 260.

rather than punishing perpetrators and seeking justice for victims of violence. The fear on the part of members of the FMLN that they too would be prosecuted further ensured that little would be done for victims and their families in search of justice. Thus, it is little surprise that by 1996, a public opinion survey in El Salvador suggested that nearly 50% of Salvadorans continued to believe that “people have the right to take justice in their own hands because the government does not provide justice and security.”¹⁵

However, El Salvador has demonstrated progress in important ways in the aftermath of the civil war. Perhaps most encouraging in the post-cease fire era is the furthering of democracy in the country in the twenty intervening years. Throughout the crisis, Reagan Administration officials contended that the FMLN spoke only for a tiny and insignificant minority. This feeling fed the intransigence with which the Reagan team and its Salvadoran allies opposed any proposed concessions to the guerillas. In the years between 1992 and 2009, this analysis was proven wrong. In March of 1991, the Salvadoran left gained 17 percent of the national vote for the legislature.¹⁶ In the 1994 elections, the FMLN performed admirably.¹⁷ In 1997, the party won 27 seats in the Legislative Assembly, making it the second largest party in that body to ARENA’s 28.¹⁸ By 2000, the FMLN was the largest party in the Assembly. In 2009, growing FMLN support enabled moderate party member Mauricio Funes to win the presidential election, thus marking the end of twenty years of ARENA’s dominance of that office. Thus, not only was the FMLN given a chance to compete, but they have seized that opportunity to become a power in Salvadoran politics, one that competes in the political world with ARENA peaceably.

¹⁵ Popkin, *Peace Without Justice*, 1.

¹⁶ Sewall H. Menzel, *Bullets versus Ballots: Political Violence and Revolutionary War in El Salvador, 1979-1991*, (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, c1994), 83.

¹⁷ Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action*, 262-264.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In the shadow of this democratic progress, other signs of hope have emerged as well. ARENA's victories in the late 1980s and the greater willingness of the Armed Forces to follow ARENA leadership led to a weakening of El Salvador's formerly all-powerful military institutions. As Tricia Juhn explains in her book, *Negotiating Peace in El Salvador: Civil-Military Relations and the Conspiracy to End the War*, "the Christian Democrats, even with US backing, did not have sufficient domestic political power to extract meaningful concessions from the Armed Forces."¹⁹ Conversely, ARENA had the credibility with the military that the PDC simply lacked, as exemplified by the continued presence of Roberto d'Aubuisson, a figure who while loathed by the country's center-left, remained an influential leader among many in the Armed Forces. Furthermore, by 1989, ARENA controlled each branch of the Salvadoran government and in contrast to the PDC, had the support of the country's economic elite.²⁰ No longer was El Salvador run out of the office of the Ministry of Defense, as it long appeared to be in the initial years of the conflict. The peace agreement in 1992 solidified and furthered these objectives, and today, the Salvadoran military is much less significant as a political power, and cannot bully and ignore political leaders as it once did.

In the end, twenty-two years after the peace agreement that ended the most devastating civil war in El Salvador's history, the results of the peace are mixed. The underlying issues that once prompted desperate violence, issues like economic disparity and poverty, and a justice system that struggles to win the support of the people, continues to lead young Salvadoran men to take up arms, though on behalf of powerful gangs rather than insurgent armies. At the same time, the aftermath of the war has overseen a genuine democratic opening, and the elevation of

¹⁹ Juhn, *Negotiating Peace in El Salvador*, 123.

²⁰ Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 174.

Mauricio Funes to the country's highest post, and one more influential than the once all-powerful Ministry of Defense, signals a country undergoing genuine, if limited, democratization.

Conclusion

Lessons of the U.S. Intervention in El Salvador

The twelve-year Salvadoran civil war that was over a century in the making ended peaceably, though many of the problems that provoked that long and bloody conflict continue. A year after the peace agreement of February of 1992, and perhaps before that, El Salvador returned to its traditional place in U.S. foreign policy. Far away from the headlines, El Salvador was a tiny Central American nation distant in the American mind, a backwater, a distant outpost in the post-Cold War world. As before 1979, El Salvador was a vote in the United Nations to be courted and little else. With the fall of the Soviet Union and its allies in Nicaragua, the weakening of Cuba, and the onset of a new American presidential administration, little was at stake in a country once considered a foremost battleground in an escalating Cold War.

After the loss of tens of thousands of lives and still more destroyed, over a million refugees, the destruction of land and forest throughout El Salvador, and the spending of over 4 billion U.S. dollars, one wonders about the impact of U.S. interventionism. Was that impact largely positive? Negative? Such questions defy simple answers. Certainly, the amount of military aid facilitated mass killing and human rights violations by the Salvadoran Armed Forces. A victory by the left or an electoral system that brought them genuinely into the system may have mitigated economic disparity and social and political injustice in the country. Indeed, the far left drew attention to significant issues of human rights abuses and impunity by the Armed Forces. However, it is just as likely that had the U.S. not played a role, the Salvadoran government would have been sooner lost to the far rightist forces, men like Roberto d'Aubuisson

and his ilk. For these men, the way forward in El Salvador was a scorched earth campaign, a brutal approach to the leftists like that conducted by the Guatemalan government to the north, which limited U.S. aid to that country. Had the carrot of U.S. military aid not played a role, there would have been far less incentive for the conservative military and far right forces to hold back against the civilian government of Cristiani, Duarte, Magaña, or the Revolutionary Government Junta before them.

Nor is this to give too much credit to the Reagan Administration. Ideas put out by Administration officials before Reagan arrived in office suggested a desire for a hardline approach, but this was not the approach that the Administration took. It is possible that this is because political realities found once in office differed from what officials expected on the campaign trail. However, it is more likely that the Administration's efforts to moderate the government of El Salvador were due to Congressional constraints. Congress, spurred on by a transnational opposition movement that included important voting constituencies, like religious and labor organizations, forced the Administration to take issues of human rights, agrarian reform, and democratization very seriously.

Conversely, could the government of El Salvador have sustained a twelve-year civil war without its American benefactors? And what of the results had the government been forced to the negotiating table far earlier than the mid-1980s? The relatively fast ending of the war in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent withdrawal of significant external aid is revealing. It suggests that foreign intervention, not simply on the part of the U.S., but also on the part of Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union, not only exacerbated the violence of the war, but perpetuated that violence, likely adding years to the conflict, years characterized by shocking brutality and misery for millions of Salvadorans. The U.S. may have played a role in keeping the

Salvadoran right from power, but so too did American officials make impossible the quick ending to a terrible war.

Ultimately, the intervention in El Salvador teaches us a variety of realities about the U.S. and its role in the world. First, El Salvador underscores the relative continuities in American policy despite what often seem like the stark differences of its political leaders. Overwhelmingly, the historiography of U.S.-Salvadoran relations cast President Jimmy Carter as well-meaning, if not a little overmatched by the emerging crisis in Central America. While this is not a mischaracterization, and accurately represents the Administration before 1979, seldom does the historiography of Carter's Latin American policies capture the Administration's Cold War posture, the traditional dimensions of its human rights policies, nor do many authors underscore the importance of the Administration's shift to fund the government of El Salvador in 1981. The Carter team saw its human rights policy as another weapon in the Cold War struggle, not an altruistic initiative. Human rights, too, in cases in which it conflicted with more traditional Cold War aims, were considered secondary from the Administration's earliest days. While the onus of El Salvador's brutal civil war is often placed upon the Reagan team, it was the Carter team that, upon examining the bleak situation in 1981, opted to fund the government of El Salvador despite recent evidence of shocking human rights violations. This precedent was set by an Administration often lauded by Latin Americanists for its progressive thinking toward the region.

At the same time, Reagan is overwhelmingly vilified for his role in the exacerbation of Central America's civil conflicts in the 1980s. Historians Greg Grandin and Steven Rabe argue that Reagan utilized Central America to re-assert American dominance and mitigate the effects of the Vietnam Syndrome. While the issue of American credibility was a theme of the

Administration's policy, and concern over the Vietnam War's shadow on public opinion often dictated Administration behavior, Rabe, Grandin, and others discount the ways in which the fear of genuine outside intervention truly drove Carter and Reagan policy. The Administration's funding of anti-communist governments and groups in the region almost certainly exacerbated those countries' conflicts, worsening the violence, and leading to the deaths of millions of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Guatemalans. However, seldom do revisionist narratives of U.S.-Central American relations in the 1980s capture attempts on the part of Administration officials to promote democracy and human rights in the region. Undoubtedly, one could fairly question the degree to which the Administration would have promoted these things had officials not faced frequent, significant criticism from the American Congress. Nor can one question the ways in which these initiatives were prompted by a desire to brandish the image of a country, El Salvador, desperately in need of international allies. Nevertheless, while the Carter emphasis on human rights may have come from a more genuine place, each Administration at various points chose anti-communism over the promotion of human rights. Each Administration also desperately fought to maintain the tenuous Salvadoran center, outwardly supporting Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte against what both administrations perceived as the violent inclinations of two deeply polarized extremes.

Those extremes and the deep social, economic, and political issues of El Salvador are often downplayed by revisionists who overemphasize American dominance and control of the conflict. Prior to the Salvadoran civil war, the United States was overwhelmingly uninterested in the goings-on of its tiny neighbor to the south. El Salvador did not have the strategic importance, nor the resources to make it an important country in U.S. foreign policy. The fact that El Salvador still felt the weight of U.S. power demonstrates the stark inequality in the respective

power of these two nations and the unavoidable dominance of the U.S. in the economies of Central America's diminutive nations. With the onset of the Salvadoran civil war, one sees the U.S., long unfamiliar with El Salvador and uninitiated in its realities, repeatedly fail in its attempts to control it.

While this point is seldom noted in the historiography of the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship, El Salvador represents a key example of the limits of American power. While one can certainly call into question the sincerity of the Reagan Administration effort to affect positive changes in Salvadoran democracy and human rights, there is no question that some demonstrations that El Salvador was progressing were absolutely central to Administration policy. The Reagan team required the support of a challenging Congress, and an international community reluctant to aid the government of El Salvador, an international pariah. Even slight evidence of progress, like the arrest of the murderers of two members of the American Institute of Free Labor and Development in 1980, would have satisfied many in the American labor movement to support Administration policy. Internationally, some progress in the arrest of the murderers of Archbishop Romero could have had a dramatic impact on world opinion. Recognizing this, the Reagan Administration continually worked to facilitate these developments. Repeatedly, they failed. The Reagan team, as the Carter team, struggled to keep up in El Salvador and regularly found itself utterly unable to affect positive developments in the country.

This reality owes in large part to another undervalued aspect of the Salvadoran civil war. While U.S. money undoubtedly exacerbated the crisis, it was in large part deep-seated structural issues that perpetuated the violence of the 1980s. While the post-revisionists like Brands capture this well, the revisionists routinely undervalue the role of El Salvador's structural problems in

perpetuating its civil war. In 1979, the Sandinista revolution brought about a previously unparalleled interest in El Salvador and Central America more broadly among foreign policymakers. These figures, largely ignorant of El Salvador and its history, discovered a country with profound structural problems, structural problems that would not allow for easy solutions. Whereas some on the Reagan team, particularly in the first term, emphasized the role of outside agitators, most in both the Carter and the Reagan Administrations recognized the ways in which a profound economic crisis, highlighted by stunning economic inequality, facilitated the Salvadoran civil war. While this may not have always been clear, certainly, both Administrations, and especially the Reagan Administration, played up the centrality of outside intervention publicly to evoke support, while internally sensing the greater complexities of the problem (though not all in the Reagan Administration would come around to this reality). This understanding of the crisis was widespread in Washington throughout much of the conflict, but more widespread was the knowledge that El Salvador was an utterly polarized country, and one with two extremes that, playing off one another, would ensure a drawn-out and bloody war.

Particularly key to the limits of American power was the presence of a Salvadoran far right that continually foiled bilateral attempts to rectify deep-seated Salvadoran issues. El Salvador's long-powerful military and its associated death squads used every method available to stymie reform efforts. For example, a more ambitious application of the badly needed agrarian reform effort, one supported by both presidential administrations, was constrained by a right for whom such agrarian reform represented communism, and an unjustifiable concession to the "terrorists." In the realm of human rights, the power of the far right ensured that no Salvadoran officer would be brought to justice for human rights violations for over a decade. When men like José Napoleón Duarte aggressively pursued justice in such cases, the omnipresent threat of coup

attempts and even assassination quickly halted progress, this despite the fact that in many of these cases, American policymakers aggressively pushed for prosecution. In the cases of the murderers of the AIFLD workers and the murderers of the North American churchwomen, justice was never truly served to the men who orchestrated this violence. The reason was not the U.S., or the few figures in the Salvadoran government who had bought in to the importance of changing. It was instead the presence of an intransigent right-wing, utterly committed to the status-quo and willing to resort to violence to prevent reform, that ensured that El Salvador's civil war was long, and ultimately failed to address the deep-seated issues that prompted it. In the literature on the Salvadoran civil war, too often scholars undervalue this reality. Scholars, eager to highlight the agency of Latin Americans in their accounts often fail to do so by overemphasizing U.S. dominance in the country. The U.S., as top Salvadoran leaders like Duarte, often struggled to affect change in a society at points utterly dominated by the intransigent right, which held power across a range of diverse institutions.

What little progress was made owed in large part to an occasionally productive relationship between the U.S. presidency, Congress, and public, international and domestic, which served as a useful counterweight and constraint to government leaders who may have sought anti-communist goals over progressive ones. As many on the Salvadoran left both before and after the crisis, revisionist historians regularly undervalue the ways in which the Reagan Administration was constrained, its behavior in some cases dictated by those constraints. The Reagan team reacted harshly to the Carter emphasis of human rights as the "soul" of its foreign policy. This critique was best represented by Reagan's U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick who held that Carter was merely embracing American enemies while hurting its allies, like Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. The Reagan team thus made the confrontation with communist "terrorists"

the center of its policy, a clear emphasis in the Administration's first term. However, by the second term, the Administration was increasingly committed to emphasizing human rights norms in its interactions with Salvadoran leadership. Salvadoran leadership, for its part, was resistant to this emphasis on human rights. The reaction to human rights of both the government of Humberto Romero from 1977 to 1979, and then the more reformist-minded Revolutionary Government Junta from 1979 to 1982, was critical. Salvadoran leaders in both governments loathed American attempts to press them on human rights, considering it undue interventionism. So too did those governments resent those groups on the ground in El Salvador and internationally that reported on government violence. To the vast majority of Salvadoran political leaders, including those in the moderate, civilian-dominated Christian Democratic Party, communists and their sympathizers dominated such groups, and regularly overemphasized government violence while utterly ignoring the violence of the powerful Salvadoran leftist insurgents.

What changed that made human rights an important part of the war between El Salvador's factions? Continual pressure from a variety of figures and organizations forced human rights onto the table. It became something with which both the Reagan government and evolving Salvadoran government needed to deal, despite the reservations of both groups. In the U.S., a committed group of Congressmen continually challenged Reagan attempts to fund the Salvadoran military's efforts. These Congressmen, largely Democratic, challenged the Administration with the War Powers Act, and throughout the majority of the 1980s, limited Salvadoran aid based upon progress on a variety of human rights fronts. While such Congressmen were drawing in part from an era in the mid-1970s of challenging executive power and emphasizing the importance of human rights, in foreign policy, so too were Congressmen

reacting to the emergence of a transnational movement of oppositional groups. These groups ranged from human rights, religious, labor, and peace organizations. Within El Salvador, human rights organizations including Oficina de Tutela Legal del Arzobispado (Office of Legal Guardians of the Archdiocese), Socorro Juridico Arzobispado (Archdiocesan Legal Aid), and Comision de Derechos Humanos en El Salvador (Commission on Human Rights in El Salvador), spearheaded attempts to document that country's human rights crisis. International organizations like Amnesty International quickly followed suit. At the same time, transnational church organizations rallied both governments, citing regular violence against Salvadoran church leaders like Archbishop Romero and Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuria. Even labor organizations in the U.S. grasped on to the Central American issue. Especially in the aftermath of the murder by security forces of two members of the American Institute for Free Labor Development in San Salvador in December of 1980, American labor critiqued Salvadoran treatment of its weak and oppressed labor movement.

The presence of such a wide variety of transnational oppositional organizations had a significant impact upon U.S. and Salvadoran policymakers alike. In the U.S., church and labor opposition in particular ensured continued Congressional opposition to many Reagan Administration policies. This opposition, and the subsequent constraints on Administration policy that followed, ensured that regardless of Administration aims, issues of human rights, democratization, and agrarian reform would by necessity be a part of the Reagan agenda. Indeed, early Administration behavior, and the centrality of figures like Secretary of State Alexander Haig and United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick (and later Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams) called into question the Administration's commitment to such values. With congressional certification requirements in the early 1980s,

and later, limits on U.S. aid pending progress on a number of key issues, the U.S. Congress forced even those reluctant members of the Reagan team to push their Central American ally toward greater respect for human rights. Subsequently, key elements in the government of El Salvador too, saw the need for progress, or at least the appearance of progress, if the government of El Salvador was to emerge from its civil war victorious. Reagan officials regularly pressed the Salvadoran government on the centrality of the “War in Washington,” a conflict emphasized as just as important as the war on the ground. The Salvadoran government needed to help the Administration to promote a positive narrative about Salvadoran progress, lest the Salvadorans risk vital U.S. military and economic funding. At the same time, both governments worked desperately to gain the government of El Salvador friends internationally, which would both serve as a vital source of aid, and an insurance policy in the highly plausible event that U.S. aid would arrive unevenly or abruptly stop. Consequently, as the Reagan team by necessity encouraged human rights promotion in its ally to the south, key figures in the Salvadoran government, mindful of the importance of international support and the presence of a large, transnational opposition movement, attempted to respond to U.S. encouragement.

In the end, the democratic progress of El Salvador in the aftermath of that country’s civil war, as well as the limited nature of that progress, owes in part to the significant U.S. intervention in that country from 1980 to 1992. Prompted by Congress and a transnational opposition movement unified in disgust for a country in crisis and its ineffectual government and violent Armed Forces, U.S. prodding limited the reach of the Salvadoran far right, and ensured continued attention to modest democratic reform. Yet, U.S. intervention also ensured a long and bloody war, and staved off a Salvadoran revolution that may have more thoroughly confronted deep-seated structural issues in the country. The presence of the often intransigent, anti-

revolutionary U.S. ensured the limited application of reform initiatives, and pushed only a conservative agrarian reform, and human rights improvements that frequently emphasized image over reality. The American intervention in El Salvador highlights the limits of American power, as American officials floundered to understand, let alone control the chaos of the 1980s. Nevertheless, despite those limits, the intervention of the United States and the unlikely alliance of two disparate nations fundamentally transformed the nation that El Salvador would become.

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