THE WAR IN EL SALVADOR -- IS U. S. MILITARY STRATEGY WORKING?

Steven A. Roser, Lt Col, USAF
Military Strategy
Seminar Leader: Captain Tryon
Faculty Advisor: Col Hughes

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2005		**-**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
the War in El Salvador --Is U.S. Military Strategy Working?	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**14**	

Military strategy is a critical element in meeting political objectives during any war. The war in El Salvador is the only conflict in which the United States is currently involved -- a war which the U.S. has been helping to fight for many years. Unfortunately, the United States' military strategy has only been able to meet some of the nation's political objectives. Part of this lack of success can be contributed to a poor correlation of means to ends and part to faulty execution of existing strategy. In their essay, "American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador", LTC A.J. Bacevich, et al, analyze American involvment in this decade-long war. El Salvador is a clear case study of how policy can break down when a comprehensive national security framework is not applied to a complex problem involving U.S. interests.

The first step in any national security framework is to understand the nation's political objectives. A major problem in formulating U.S. strategy towards El Salvador is that the United States and the El Salvadoran government do not share the same political objectives. This is a common problem in any coalition warfare and is especially so in El Salvador. The United States primary political objective is for a democratic, stable government in El Salvador which will provide its people with reasonable economic growth and prosperity. However, if a stable democratic government is not possible, the United States' secondary political objective is to ensure that a communist dictatorship doesn't replace the existing pro-U.S. government in El Salvador. This second objective expands the problem into a regional and global issue. When the United States first formulated its strategy for El Salvador during the early Reagan administration, stopping the spread of world communism was a reasonable objective. The Cold War was raging between Washington and Moscow, Nicaragua was becoming a communist dictatorship, and Cuba was always seeking ways to spread their revolution. In 1990, with the threat of global communism vanishing and the Sandanistas voted out of power in Nicaragua, this objective should have a

reduced influence on U.S. military strategy. The Bush administration should now focus its efforts on the primary political objective of establishing democracy in El Salvador. By reducing the emphasis on fighting world communism in El Salvador, U.S. strategy should be shifted from the military sphere towards the economic and political instruments of national security. It remains to be seen whether or not this will happen.

A third political objective in El Salvador has overshadowed all U.S. actions during this conflict -- "no more Vietnams!" No matter what the United States does, it can not be remotely perceived by the American public or Congress as becoming bogged down in another Vietnam-styled conflict. This political objective has, by far, had the greatest impact on U.S. military strategy. For example, it has limited direct U.S. involvement to 55 military advisors and has even prohibitted U.S. advisors from deploying to the field to observe the effectiveness of the U.S. trained El Salvadoran Army. Although this political objective has limited the effectiveness of U.S. military strategy, it has had several positive results. For starters, it has forced the U.S. to rely on the local armed forces to fight the war. In past third world conflicts, it has been U.S. practice to assume some of the burden of the fighting because of the attitude that "Americans can do it best". This early "Vietnamization" of the El Salvadoran war has reduced the "Yankee" influence and with it, all of its negative cultural and political ramifications. It is also questionable on how long the El Salvadoran people would support their government if it was not involved in the war but instead, like Vietnam, left the bulk of the fighting to U.S. soldiers. Also, with only limited U.S. indirect involvement in the fighting, it keeps the focus of the war in El Salvador where it belongs versus in the halls of Congress or the front pages of the Washington Post. This has allowed the U.S. to remain engaged in the conflict over a long period of time, and for any counterinsurgency to succeed the war usually lasts for years.

Although the U.S. political objectives in El Salvador are clear, they differ in several key ways from the El Salvadoran objectives. The El Salvadoran government does not oppose the U.S. political objective of a democratic, stable government, with a prosperous economy for El Salvador -- as long as the ruling elite stay in power, both politically and economically. This conflict of objectives obviously has long-term impacts on U.S. strategy. Any U.S. policy which threatens the power of the El Salvadoran government is likely to fail, even if it contributes to a more stable, democratic government. Hence, land reform, tax reform, professionalization of the military, etc. will all be resisted because of their perceived threat to the power of the El Salvadoran government.

Another area where the U.S. and El Salvadoran government objectives contradict is over the length of the U.S. involvement. The U.S. goal is to meet its political objectives as quickly as possible and then leave El Salvador. The El Salvadoran government realizes that the vast majority of U. S. support will drop off dramatically once the communist threat is over. Therefore, the El Salvadoran strategy is to never let the communist threat completely disappear. These opposing political objectives directly impact the formulation and execution of U.S. military strategy.

With the United States political objectives fairly clear: ensure a stable, democratic government with a prosperous economy, stop the spread of communism, and no more Vietnams, the next step in the miltary strategy process is to articulate clearly stated military objectives. This is where the process begins to further break down in El Salvador. No where since the beginning of U. S. involvement has there been a clear statement of U. S. military objectives. There are three documents which have been linked to U.S. military objectives: the Woerner Report (1981), the National Campaign Plan (1983), and the Report of the Kissinger Commission (1984). These reports all touched on various aspects of our military objectives but failed to articulate a sound basis for formulating

miltary strategy. Without definite objectives, a military strategy can easily founder. The success of such a strategy will be difficult to measure and may not produce the desired results for all involved parties. For example, if the U.S. military sees as an objective the expansion of the role of the El Salvadoran Army, while the State Department is trying to get the El Salvadoran government to consolidate civilian control over the armed forces, then the U.S could be working at cross purposes. If a military strategy is to be effective, it requires a concise statement of military objectives which everyone agrees upon.

Since there are no officially stated U.S. military objectives, the military has had to assume what its objectives should be. Five objectives appear to have evolved over the years of American involvement. The first, and most critical military objective, was to prevent the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMNL) from overthrowing the El Salvadoran government. This was the most important objective during the early phase of the war when the FMNL was the strongest compared to the strength of the El Salvadoran armed forces (11,000 FMNL rebels versus 12,000 El Salvadoran armed forces). Although this is still an important military objective in 1990, the threat of a direct military victory by the FMNL is growing remote. With this objective no longer as threatening, the U.S. strategy should move away from relying on conventional forces to emphasize more non-conventional, counterinsurgency forces. Unfortunately, this is not happening. U.S. military strategy is still focussed on El Salvadoran conventional capabilities.

The second U.S. miltary objective is the reform of the El Salvadoran armed forces. Prior to the U.S. involvement, the El Salvadoran Army consisted of 12,000 poorly trained and equipped peasants, commanded by a poorly trained, politically motivated, aristocratic officer corps. This was a garrison army that was barely a match for the 11,000 FMNL guerillas. An improved fighting force would be needed if El Salvador was to survive. Because of the social and cultural

heritage of the El Salvadoran society, this has been a difficult objective to meet.

The third military objective is to militarily defeat the FMNL. This can only be done after the first two objectives: prevent FMNL victory and professionalization of the El Salvadoran armed forces, have been met. This will require a long-term effort, following historic counterinsurgency models.

The final two military objectives are purely U.S. in nature. Stemming from the "no more Vietnams" political objective, American armed forces are not allowed to suffer any battlefield casaulties. Every strategy and tactic pursued in El Salvador must have at its root the near impossiblity of any American coming home in a body bag. This is a hard and fast objective that makes plenty of political but little military sense. The U.S. is tasked to help fight a counterinsurgency war without any Americans getting hurt. This unrealistic but critical objective continues to drive U.S. strategy throughout the conflict.

The final U.S. military objective is that the U.S. armed forces can do nothing in El Salvador which would threaten the U.S. defense budget. Keep U.S. military involvement low key! Any negative military press in El Salvador might threaten the Reagan conventional military build-up, or the tenuous Bush defense budget, so don't take any risks. Although El Salvador is the only war the United States is involved in, it receives only a token amount of money and attention -- and the Department of Defense wants to keep it that way.

Once the political and military objectives have been established, the next step in the military strategy framework is to analyze the capabilities and vulnerabilities of the nation and its allies. The U.S. capabilities and vulnerabilities have to be measured against their political and military objectives. Obviously, the United States has the capability to crush the 11,000 FMNL force in El Salvador. If the U.S. deployed its full military capabilities, however, it would violate most of its objectives. Full use of all of its capabilities would prevent a communist takeover, but over reliance on U.S. forces

could jepordize a stable democratic government and would clearly violate the "no more Vietnams" political objective. Measured against military objectives, full U.S. military capabilities would prevent FMNL victory and defeat their forces; however, there would be little pressure to professionalize the El Salvadoran military, there would obviously be U.S. casaulties, and the U.S defense budget would be radically altered. Hence, measuring U.S. capabilities has to be weighed against the capabilities the U.S. is willing to commit to the conflict.

When measured against this criteria, U.S. capabilities are not particularily strong. As previously mentioned, the U.S. military presence is restricted to 55 personnel. Hardly a sizeable force to have much impact, even in its limited training and advisory role. As described in LTC Bacevich, et al's article, much of what the U.S. armed forces learned in Vietnam has been lost. In the National War College, for example, Vietnam is only mentioned in passing once or twice during the entire year. Vietnam and counterinsurgency is an art with only a very small following within the military. Without a reservoir of trained people, U.S. military strategy is held hostage to amateurism in dealing with counter-insurgencies.

The strongest military capability the U.S. possesses in the conflict in El Salvador is the American capability to fight a conventional war. This was especially helpful during the early stages of the war. American tactics, doctrine, and equipment were ideally suited for this type of war and contributed to the early successes in El Salvador.

U.S. vulnerabilities in fighting a counterinsurgency in El Salvador are many. One major vulnerability is the lack of a clear chain of command. Similar to Vietnam, there is no one person who seems to be running the show. The ambassador is in charge of the country team and has some control over the U.S. military; however, the MILGROUP commander also takes orders from SOUTHCOM. This split loyalties had early consequences over American strategy but appears

to have been ameliorated in past years because the personalities involved have been willing to compromise whenever needed. An organizational structure that allows such questions of chain of command, however, has to be a long-term vulnerability.

Another U.S. vulnerability is the perceived lack of American staying power in any long-term conflict. This, coupled with an erratic congressional funding history, has prevented any effective long-term planning. This was not a problem during the early stages, when the U.S. military objective was to stop the FMNL from taking over, but as the objective focusses on defeating FMNL forces, lack of any credible long-term planning is a major problem.

The U.S. Army personnel system is another vulnerability in this conflict. As the principal land war in which the U.S. is today overtly involved, the Salvadoran insurgency should be getting the most talented and qualified officers the U.S. military can provide. According to LTC Bacevich, et al, this has not been the case. Virtually none of the Army officers assigned to El Salvador have commanded a battalion, a significant career point for competitive Army officers. The Army personnel managers have not made winning in El Salvador a priority -- a fact that has not escaped the notice of the El Salvadorans.

Another major U.S. vulnerability is the continual American reliance on overwelhming resources and technology as a substitute for effective strategy and tactics. The vast amounts of money and technology poured into the El Salvadoran Air Force is an example of the U.S. infatuation with high tech. In a guerrilla counterinsurgency conflict, there is little use for tactical air power, yet this is the type of air force the United States has decided to build for El Salvador. In order to effectively defeat a guerrilla insurgency, armed forces need small, mobile units, not tactical air power.

The El Salvadoran armed forces had little capabilities at the outset of the war. With U.S. equipment and training, they can now offer effective resistance

against conventional attacks. The vulnerabilities of the El Salvadoran armed forces, however, are many. A primary problem is the historical animosity of the El Salvadoran people towards the army. The army traditionally represented oppression and support of the corrupt government. In a war aimed at the hearts and minds of the people, this becomes a major problem. It is difficult to build a democracy when the armed forces have no democratic traditions.

The El Salvadoran military reflect a critical vulnerability throughout the country -- a lack of a trained and educated population. Besides the difficulties this presents in forming democratic traditions, this complicates any military strategy which relies on a skilled fighting force. This problem is exacerbated by the U.S. tradition of relying on high technology. The El Salvadoran Air Force is a case in point where sortie rates are abysmally low because of a lack of trained mechanics. According to LTC Bacevich, et al, if a mechanic shows any kind of aptitude they immediately train him to be a pilot! A definite vulnerability.

An external vulnerability impacting both the U.S. and El Salvadoran forces is the existence of foreign sanctuaries in Honduras and Nicaragua. These sanctuaries provide relatively secure logistics, training, and base camps for the FMNL. Any strategy would have to take into consideration the vulnerability of not being able to attack the enemy's infrastructure.

With the political and military objectives spelled out and the capabilities and vulnerabilities understood, the next step in the military security framework process is to develop a strategic plan. Because of all the limitations and vulnerabilities previously discussed, developing a strategic plan for El Salvador is not easy. The first step in the strategic plan is to modernize and expand the El Salvadoran armed forces. If the United States could accomplish this, than many of the political and military objectives could be fullfilled. The El Salvadoran government strongly supported this part of the plan, as long as it doesn't threaten their power base.

The key to modernizing the El Salvadoran armed forces is to reform the officer corps. According to LTC Bacevich, et al, there are three steps to this process. First, the Salvadoran officer corps has to be persuaded to subordinate itself to civilian authority. Second, the armed forces need to gain a greater respect for human rights. And, third, the military needs to change its own internal regulations and control so that talent is nurtured, success is rewarded, incompetents are weeded out, and the officer corps in general became operationally effective. U.S. efforts at this has been only partially successful. Salvadoran institutional resistance to change is too strong in many cases to overcome these glaring weaknesses.

The few times the United States has enjoyed success has been when the U. S. threatened to withhold further military assistance. In 1983, Vice President Bush directly threatened to cut off further assistance if the El Salvadoran armed forces failed to protect the upcoming elections. This threat worked; however, as LTC Bacevich, et al, point out, the threat to cutoff U.S. aid might be a beleivable club, but it is not a club you can use all of the time.

The area of least success in professionalizing the El Salvadoran armed forces is in the area of officer competency. The El Salvadoran officer corps has a system called "tanda" which LTC Bacevich, et al, describe as a "sort of West Point Protection Association gone beserk." this system allows for the automatic promotion of all academy graduates to the rank of colonel, despite any cases of incompetence, cowardice, or other forms of unacceptable behavior. The U.S. has been successful, however, with the junior officers because the Americans have trained them from an early age. Over the long-term, there may be some future success in professionalizing the El Salvadoran officer corps when the U.S. trained junior officers are promoted to field grade ranks.

In addition to trying to professionalize the officer corps, part of the U.S. strategy is to develop an NCO corps. Prior to the U.S. involvement, NCOs did not

exist in the El Salvadoran armed forces. The NCO is a concept alien to the El Salvadoran society which features distinct divisions between the classes. There are aristocratic officers and peasant soldiers. Although NCOs are critical to any effective combat force, the U.S. has not been able to overcome the institutional and cultural bias against NCOs. This part of the program has not been successful.

Although changes to the officer and NCO corps have met limited success, the U.S. strategy of expanding the fighting capabilities of the El Salvadoran armed forces has paid off. American military assistance and training programs focusing on organization, hardware, and tactics have transformed the El Salvadoran armed forces. The El Salvadoran armed forces are now bigger, better equipped, and hardened by years of combat. They have been successful in fighting the conventional style conflict against the FMNL and thus have helped meet the early objectives of preventing the overthrow of the government. As previously discussed, however, the armed forces lack a credible counterinsurgency capability. The El Salvadoran armed forces are now modeled against a U.S. styled force, which have historically proved less than successful in fighting counterinsurgency wars. U.S. strategy needs to be modified to focus on training and equipping the El Salvadoran armed forces to fight the next phase of the war against the FMNL. It remains to be seen whether or not this will happen.

Coupled with the strategy of modernizing and expanding the capabilities of the El Salvadoran armed forces is the U.S. strategy to court the media in order to present a more favorable image of the U.S. efforts in El Salvador. Americans serving in El Salvador from the start accepted the fact that public opinion is intergral to the conflict. A war-winning strategy must vie successfully with the guerrillas to affect the media's depiction of the struggle. In the early days of the conflict this strategy was not very successful. The media had the second string in El Salvador who appeared more interested in sensationalism and making a name for themselves than providing a balanced report. This has dramatically

changed, however, as the media has sent more first team players, and as the U.S. strategy of working with, versus against, the media has paid off. This aspect of the U.S. strategy has been a success.

A third aspect of the U.S. strategic plan is psychological warfare (psyops). Performance in this area, according to LTC Bachevich, et al, has been marked by a succession of false starts, misdirected effort, and too little undertaken too late. As late as December 1983, the El Salvadoran armed forces had no meaningful psyops program and only a very small public affairs office. American advisors were slow in coming and were less than successful, with many not even able to speak Spanish. Since 1986, the United States has poured money and equipment into psyops in traditional American style. However, there has been very little thought on a comprehensive psyops strategy and little coordination with the political apparatus. This potentially strong suit of military strategy needs to be greatly improved before it can contribute to meeting objectives in El Salvador.

Civil defense is a fourth element of the U.S. strategic plan. This element is even more neglected than psyops. Civil defense is a critical element in any counterinsurgency. El Salvadoran history, however, mitigates against using the local population in civil defense. A previous village-based paramilitary organization severed less as a vehicle for protection than as a source of extortion, repression, and intimidation. With this tradition, the success of civil defense has been limited to areas under government control and is almost nonexistant in areas under FMNL domination. The United States has failed to push for an increased role for civil defense, therefore this program, like others, has not been successful.

In summary, the U.S. strategic plan consists of four primary elements: (1) modernize and expand the El Salvadoran armed forces, (2) gain media support for portraying a favorable image in El Salvador, (3) Psychological warfare operations to gain the propoganda initiative, and (4) civil defense to protect the rural

population.

The final stage in the military security framework is to measure the potential results of the strategy. In measuring the potential results of the U.S. military strategy in El Salvador, a comparison has to be made between the costs and benefits. On this balance sheet, U.S. military strategy has to be listed as a limited success. Most of the U.S. political objectives have been partially or totally met. The primary objective, however, of a stable democratic government with economic growth has not been met. When compared with the situation at the beginning of the U.S. involvement the government is much more democratic; however, the economic situation is still poor. Much of this is a result of the war, while some of it is due to the decline in world coffee prices. If the United States pulled out its economic assistance, the El Salvadoran economy would probably collapse. The secondary objective of preventing a communist takeover has been met, and there is little protest in the United States that the war in El Salvador will become another Vietnam.

The military objectives have had similar mixed results. The FMNL is no longer a conventional threat. There have been practically no U.S. casaulties and the U.S. defense budget is rarely mentioned in light of the American involvement in El Salvador. The professionalization of the El Salvadoran armed forces has had only limited success and provides little threat to defeating the FMNL.

The El Salvadoran political objectives appear to be totally met. The ruling powers are still controlling the country, even if under a more democratic form of government. In addition, the American financial invovlement appears to be going strong with little end in sight.

The cost of this strategy appears to be well within reason. The few Americans killed have been extremely isolated and mostly as a result of terriorist attacks. The finacial cost has been modest when compared to the commitments made to other U.S. allies. Politically the cost has been very low.

Domestically there has been little opposition when compared to opposition to U.S. policy towards the Contra, Nicaragua, or especially when compared to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Internationally again when compared to other U.S. ventures, the international political costs are negligible.

On balance, then, it would appear that the U.S. strategy is moderately successful. When looking at what results could be achieved, however, there are several flaws in U.S. strategy. One is an ends/means mismatch. A small force of 55 people is inadequate to provide the training needed to make the changes necessary in the El Salvadoran armed forces. The United States has the means but is not applying them. Maybe now is the time for the U.S. to modestly increase this investment.

The other faults in U.S. military strategy is in its poor execution. The U.S. needs to send the first team into El Salvador. This can be done easily. It also needs to focus training on non-conventional, counterinsurgency tactics. The psyops and civil defense efforts are still second rate and can be improved.

The bottom line, however, is that this conflict is no longer dominated by military issues but is mostly a political and economic problem. The focus needs to be changed to these areas. And until the El Salvadoran government is influenced to make the necessary changes, nothing done militarily will ever solve the problems in the long-term.