STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE WAR IN EL SALVADOR: A RETROSPECTIVE

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL LUCIANO S. SILVA
United States Marine Corps

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Lieutenant Colonel Luciano S. Silva
United States Marine Corps

Gabriel Marcella, Ph.D.
Project Adviser

U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013

ABSTRACT

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Prior to the Salvadoran war, the U.S. lacked a clearly delineated, long-term, bipartisan strategic vision for Central America. In the absence of this, our policies toward El Salvador were subject to the vagaries of rapidly changing domestic political considerations. History has repeatedly demonstrated that these forces can move, shape, or change a policy for reasons that have nothing to do with national interests and can render impotent any attempt to achieve lasting effects. At the implementation level, an uncertain and frequently changing policy can produce some very unexpected results. El Salvador provides some prime examples of how political and bureaucratic decisions can constrain an army's ability to wage war.

For the U.S., the overriding point is that its involvement in El Salvador did not end when the peace treaty was signed. Events in the Persian Gulf and Eastern Europe notwithstanding, the U.S. must not abandon an ally who, after winning its war, must now grapple with the difficulties of winning the peace. If the U.S. can muster the interest, the time, and the money to stay the course in El Salvador, its performance there will truly have been an unqualified success.

Introduction

In December 1992, a cease fire between the Government of El Salvador (GOES) and the Frente Farabundo Marti Para La Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) went into effect.[1] Today there is peace in El Salvador. The little war that episodically made front page news finally came to an end.

Since 1980, El Salvador was involved in a civil war that by relatively conservative estimates claimed the lives of over 70,000 Salvadorans, ravaged the economy, and psychologically scarred the nation.[2] This was not a conventional war, but rather a conflict between a guerrilla movement, the FMLN, and a traditional Central American army. The United States has characterized this war as a low intensity conflict (LIC), although this did not make it any less violent and destructive for the people of El Salvador.

By 1979, the situation in El Salvador had reached intolerable conditions due to, among other factors, repression of leftist political parties, labor unions and the Roman Catholic Church, and the massacre, kidnapping, and torture of political prisoners and others. These factors, individually and in combination, had the effect of turning El Salvador into an "insurrectional state." On October 15, 1979, a group of young, reform-minded army officers staged a coup d'etat. Their intent was to implement a political agenda that would eventually lead to democracy and a progressive government.

LIC "revolutionary war" was a relatively new phenomenon for the military establishment of the United States. The conflict in Vietnam marked our first modern exposure to this type of warfare, which we were unprepared to fight. Afterward, we developed "military amnesia" and forgot the lessons that we had so painfully learned. Instead, we should have

developed a strategy which could be adapted to the character and situation of future insurgencies.

Much has been written about the roots of the Salvadoran insurgency and which LIC strategy was right.[3] My purpose in this paper is twofold; to address the U.S. strategy from an operational perspective and to provide a retrospective analysis of the war from the bottom up.

With the end of the Cold War and the manifestation of the devastating conventional fire power that was used so successfully in Operation Desert Storm, the world is now as peaceful as it has been this century. In response, our active military forces have been reduced to a level where the two major regional contingencies (MRC) strategy is questionable without a major mobilization of equipment and reserves. In his 1990 Annual Report to Congress, General Alfred M. Gray, Commandant of the Marine Corps, stated:

> "Today, we are encountering many of the same challenges of economic reality and defense concerns our nation faced at the end of World War II. During that period, we allowed the budget rather than strategy to shape our military. We paid dearly (33,629 Americans died over a three year period of conflict) for this flawed approach..."[4]

In Latin America, a concept of "cooperative security" and "preventive diplomacy" is emerging, with greater emphasis on integrated approaches to shared problems. As envisioned by the Miami Summit and Williamsburg Ministerial the new concepts will "undoubtedly benefit our national security strategy of engagement and enlargement as it applies to the region."[5] How we apply this multi-lateral concept and the lessons we learned from El Salvador will be our legacy in future engagements in the region and elsewhere.

U.S. Policy Toward Central America

During the post-World War II era, U.S. policy makers kept Central America at a distance. The region was considered to be:

> "strategically important, but, like Cuba and the Panama Canal, the importance was in terms of east-west balance or context. Except in instances where U.S. businesses or blatant corruption impacted the U.S. image as a supporter of a particular regime, the policy makers were seemingly content with preaching democracy and human rights, giving minimal amounts of economic and military aid, and otherwise adopting the policies of non-intervention in the affairs of their poor neighbors to the south."[6]

Thus, our involvement in Central America was to remain episodic and unilateral, with U.S. military assets reserved for traditional threats to our perceived national interests. Since the end of World War II, the primary U.S. military approach to the region was the Cold War strategy of "containment." In essence, the effort was to deny the Soviets and their Cuban proxies any inroads into the region that would threaten the status quo. In the "United States' Strategic Policy in Latin America in the Post Cold War," Howard J. Wiarda stated, "maintaining the status quo was the motive behind all the major incursions by the United States into the area in previous decades: Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, the Dominican Republic in 1985, Chile in 1970-73, and Central America and Grenada in the 80's."[7] This episodic and unilateral application of military power to situations that threatened the interests of the U.S. often strained relations with other countries in the region. Furthermore, the U.S. was cast in the role of a hegemonic power. Unfortunately, because of its Cold War focus, the U.S. was not adequately prepared to deal with the geopolitical changes that were rapidly sweeping the region.

The war in El Salvador was not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, almost all of Central America was immersed, in one way or another, with some form of internal dissent (Guatemala) or revolutionary war (Nicaragua), though each country faced a unique situation. The events in each country combined to produce a critical mass that affected the entire region. For example, not only was the FMLN encouraged by the successes of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) and provided with safe operational and logistical bases in Nicaragua, but they also had the benefit of learning from geopolitical realities as the U.S. attempted to isolate the Sandinistas through an economic embargo and indirect military action through the Contras.

Given the unequal distribution of income, the highly politicized character of the military and the ruling elite, and the exacerbations that the lack of democratic reforms had caused, it is not unreasonable to postulate that the war in El Salvador started as an authentic revolutionary movement, with popular support and the majority of the people behind it.[8]

The decision by the United States to come to the aid of El Salvador was made in the spring of 1980,[9] "when a public debate on the region emerged in response to a series of events: the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations, the Nicaraguan revolution, the Salvadoran civil war, the Guatemalan insurgency, renewed Cuban activism in revolutionary struggles, and the arrival of a multitude of Central American refugees in the United States."[10] Another "key factor"[11] was President Reagan's willingness to stay the course with El Salvador. To Rafael Menjivar, spokesman for the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), this meant that should the "Junta fail, the U.S. was prepared to intervene." Menjivar further opined that the "United States was using two previous military engagements as models to formulate its

strategy in El Salvador." The first model was the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and the second was the Vietnam War.[12] Nevertheless, this assessment is debatable in light of the initial U.S. response to the events in El Salvador. In this regard, several factors indicate that the U.S. strategy in the region was reactive. Firstly, we initially attempted to disengage from the region. During the 1970's, in the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict, the Carter administration pursued human rights' policies that caused the U.S. presence and capabilities in the region to disappear. Secondly, there was significant friction between the State Department (Country Team) and the cognizant U.S. military apparatus, SOUTHCOM. Each viewed the other as the least capable of running the war.[13] Thirdly, the United States was pre-occupied with the specter of another Vietnam - style conflict.

Vietnam and El Salvador presented totally different problems. The former took place during the escalation of the Cold War; specifically, the "domino" theory gave legitimacy to the strategy of containment. In Central America, the U.S.' perspective had been dwarfed by the post-Vietnam "hangover," the Watergate scandal, and the Panama Canal negotiations.[14] By contrast, serious study of the Guatemalan insurgency of 1972 and the Nicaraguan revolution of 1978 could have greatly benefited our strategic planning for the region.

The following statement by General Rios-Montt best describes the Guatemalan model for dealing with the subversive threat in Guatemala:

> "If we close our eyes, increase the number of soldiers and policemen, and we attack the subversives, we can do it (defeat the Guerrillas). And in three months the Guerrillas will return... Security does not consist of arms, tanks, and airplanes. This is not even five percent of the requirement for a national security policy. Security lies in the relationship between the State and the people...Security lies in the sense of trust between the state and people -- that both will meet their respective obligations... We have given the Communists a flag. If we were, in fact, a democracy, Guatemala would be well today. But we have been corrupt... we (the military) are here to complete a mission: institutionalize the State and channel resources and benefits to those in need.[15]

A better preamble could not have been written for El Salvador. The initial strategy (code name "Victoria 82") depended on three essential elements, and was outlined in a plan that established the strategic objectives, mission, and end state from a civic-military prospective.[16] Victoria 82 provided for:

1) Increasing the number of men under arms and the ability to deploy and maintain a large number of smaller units throughout the "zones of conflict" in the highlands.
2) Expanding and intensifying the efforts to establish civilian defense forces (CDFs) in the highlands.
3) Initiating a socio-economic assistance plan in the zones of conflict.
4) End State: establishing trust between the armed forces and the rural population.[17]

The campaign, while not a total success, broke the back of the guerilla movement in Guatemala.[18] Some of the most impressive achievements of this campaign were:

1) Creating of a CDF that was not just a paramilitary organization; but a political entity at the local level. Eventually, the only organization that could counter the guerrillas' local cadre was the fuerzas irregulares locales (FIL), irregular local forces.
2) Incorporating the National Reconstruction Committee (CRN), which was formed after the 1976 earthquake to coordinate international assistance, to provide food and services and the coordination of small development projects in rural communities affected by the war.
3) Changing Guatemala's foreign policy to include a more active and constructive participation in the Contadora process.

4) Ensuring that the armed forces maintained autonomy as an institution by not siding with special interest groups or specific individuals.[19]

Turning to the Nicaraguan model, the strategic setting that provided the catalyst for the FSLN's rise to power occurred during 1977 and 1978.[20] In "Lessons from Central America's Revolutionary Wars, 1972-1984," Caesar D. Sereseres listed the strategic objectives which the FSLN used to internationalize every aspect of the struggle against Somoza and the National Guard. These were:

1) Creation of separate military and political fronts (the latter involving popular non-Marxist Nicaraguans).
2) Creation of political alliances with "moderates," while the military side of the struggle remained firmly in the hands of FSLN commanders.
3) Creation of a moderately oriented, social-democratic image that was projected domestically and internationally.
4) Establishment of a bond with international celebrities who otherwise might not have involved themselves in the Nicaraguan war.
5) End State: Finally, great effort was expended to subdue Marxist language and to focus attention on the removal of a dictator, while maintaining organizational control of the military apparatus and monopolizing the resources drawn from the international community.[21]

The FSLN's creation of a strategy with a clear and obtainable end state, namely the removal of an unpopular dictator, gave it legitimacy and widespread international support.

In addition, this strategy isolated the Somoza regime and effectively blocked assistance from the United States.[22]

The revolutionary wars in Guatemala and Nicaragua were excellent case studies which the United States should have used to formulate a strategy for El Salvador. In Nicaragua, we saw the emergence of a sophisticated strategy by an insurrectionary movement that effectively isolated Anastasio Somoza and his National Guard by gaining international support and appearing as "just a bunch of democrats in fatigues carrying M-16s.[23] Conversely, in Guatemala we witnessed the transformation of a heretofore rigid military establishment that "learned to change their tactics in the face of military and institutional crises,"[24] without U.S. aid.

Conduct of the War: A Retrospective

Prior to the Salvadoran war, the U.S. lacked a clearly delineated, long-term, bipartisan strategic vision for Central America. In the absence of this, our policies toward El Salvador were subject to the vagaries of rapidly changing domestic political considerations. History has repeatedly demonstrated that these forces can move, shape, or change a policy for reasons that have nothing to do with national interests and can render impotent any attempt to achieve lasting improvements. At the implementation level, an uncertain and frequently changing policy can produce some very strange results. El Salvador provides some prime examples of how political and bureaucratic decisions can constrain an army's ability to wage war.[25]

Another major problem in El Salvador was created by our policy makers' poor understanding of revolutionary wars and low intensity conflicts. By its very nature, this type

of warfare makes the civilian population part of the struggle. The term non-combatant becomes more of a cliche than reality, and this was certainly true in FMLN controlled territory. The people became the advance listening posts, they served as surveillance elements, provided reconnaissance of an area before the guerrillas moved in, gave medical support directly and indirectly to the guerrillas, and provided supplies and logistic support in both rear and forward operating areas. To quote one former guerrilla: . "The people who supported us would move around as our advance/rear guard, providing food and other help." Within the context of LIC, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is not clear, and the doctrine does not adequately deal with the presence of a "fifth column" in contested areas. Therefore, when we exhorted the Salvadorans to "fight as the guerrillas fight," we precipitated the same kind of atrocities that the insurgents were committing. For example, one of the Salvadoran Army's most successful efforts during the early stages of the war was its multi-battalion operation in Morazan. Unfortunately, the massacre at El Mozote by the Atlacatl Battalion during this operation has become synonymous with the U.S. Army's incident at My Lai during the Vietnam conflict.

The Advisors

The mission of the U.S. military advisors in El Salvador was to help the armed forces develop the capabilities to win the war. As such, the mission had both training and operational features, though for political reasons the emphasis was on training. However, because the mission was not rigidly defined, an advisor was fairly free to try nearly any responsible method, device, class, or program that might contribute to the betterment of the

Salvadoran military. The advisor had a fairly difficult task in that he was supposed to influence the behavior of others over whom he had no authority, while at the same time attempting to interpret, implement, and respond to criticism of U.S. political decisions over which he had no input or control.[26]

An advisor often faced situations where political, diplomatic, or military restrictions undercut his ability to advise. An example of this was the prohibition against accompanying Salvadoran troops on combat missions. Further, advisors were required to take every conceivable precaution to avoid potentially dangerous situations.

The advisor's personality was probably the single most important factor affecting his individual success or failure. If an advisor's personality clashed with his counterpart's, or if the counterpart simply didn't like Americans, then the advisor was in for a tough time. The advisor was also severely limited by highly restrictive rules of engagement which dictated that he could not fire his weapon unless he was fired upon.

An advisor's travel was largely restricted to a five mile radius of the cuartel (an army post) unless he had received authorization from his superiors in the capital of San Salvador; in the absence of radio contact, this was a time consuming process because of the antiquated telephone system. The result was that the advisor could not travel to the site of an incident unless he had anticipated the event, or unless he violated the rules. In addition to the credibility problems that this created, it was very difficult for an advisor to know what was happening on the battlefield or where his assistance was most needed. Thus the advisor was placed in the unenviable position of trying to influence actions over which he was significantly removed.

A much larger problem involved the personnel limitation of 55 advisors and the tour length of 12 months that the U.S. government imposed on itself. This virtually guaranteed that the individual advisor was not only overwhelmed by the amount of work he had to do, but also that he was transferred just as he was acquiring the expertise which was necessary for success. A 12 month tour in a combat environment adds to the qualifications of a professional soldier; however, that person must be careful not to spend too much time away from mainstream warfighting assignments or he will fail to stay abreast of his contemporaries. Our highly conventional promotion system is clearly detrimental to a warrior who specializes in LIC strategy.

Conversely, the limitation on the number of advisors did serve as a strong reminder to the Salvadoran government that this war was their's to win or lose. Though the U.S. had risked money and prestige in the struggle, the casualty figures showed that it remained a Salvadoran conflict.

The war in El Salvador was typical of a modern insurgency which is drawn out over an extended period. While the insurgent's main weapon is time, the government is critically dependent on the loyalists' will to win. These two factors were alien to the U.S. strategy in Central America.

The Armed Forces

At the peak of the conflict, the Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF) totaled approximately 56,000. This represented a notable increase from the 1970's when "600 Salvadoran officers controlled 15,000 troops."[27] The ESAF faced all of the problems of a Third World nation at

war, yet with substantial U.S. assistance the army achieved vast progress in some areas of combat effectiveness, but only limited or no progress in other areas.

First the successes. In addition to expanding to approximately 56,000 troops in only 10 years, the ESAF survived some very trying times in the early 1980's when it frequently lost conventional battles with the insurgents. Eventually, the ESAF was able to equip and field a modern army which outnumbered their foes by 8 or 9 to 1.

As a direct result of the army's enhanced capabilities, the Salvadoran government was able to hold free, fair, and internationally observed elections in 1984 and 1988. These elections only occurred after the application of substantial U.S. pressure; nevertheless, they were successful and legitimized the government in both domestic and world opinion. Another success was the dramatic decline in human rights abuses and the Salvadoran government's public acknowledgement that winning the people's support was at least as important as killing enemy combatants. Political murders by both sides averaged some 800 per month in 1980.[28] By the end of the war, these killings had reportedly dropped to some 20-30 per month. Although there continued to be major regressions, as in the case of the Jesuit murders, the overall progress was substantial.

In the brigade where the author served, there was a healthy fear of committing human rights violations in nearly every unit. The human rights message was received and understood to the extent that it may now be persuasively argued that an overriding concern for human rights did, at times, hamper the effective conduct of legitimate combat operations.

Another success involved significant improvements to the army's physical infrastructure. The ESAF now has a new national training center, a national command complex, a modern

central logistics factory, a second modern military hospital complex in San Miguel, and a much improved air base at Ilopango, all built with U.S. funding and other assistance.

However, notwithstanding this progress, numerous difficulties remained up to the end of the war. The first of these, and perhaps the most critical, arose from the traditions of the Salvadoran military officer caste. Historically, the Central American societies have consisted of upper class political and economic elites and lower class compesinos with very little in between. The officers of the military were drawn to, and courted by, the ruling elites who saw control of the army as the best guarantee for the stability of their power structure. For their part, the officers saw opportunity for social, political, and economic advancement through upper echelon military service that was otherwise not generally available to those outside the ruling class.

Thus, over time, the officer corps grew to closely identify its interests with the interests of the elites and, by exercising their considerable power in defense of those interests, came to view itself as a member of that elite and a partner, at the very least, in the government of the country. As a result, today's officers often have a much larger role or position in the governing power structure of the country than a U.S. officer is accustomed to or, in fact, would consider prudent. Further, the historical class distinction between the leaders and the led means that officers tend to have very little in common with their troops and much less of the personal involvement with troops that is traditional by U.S. standards.

The modern Salvadoran officer corps also does not have a system that evaluates performance, or metes out rewards or punishments. An officer is virtually guaranteed employment until retirement, regardless of his conduct, competence, or morality simply by

having graduated from the military school of El Salvador; the Escuela Militar. In "The Massacre at El Mozote," Mark Danner described the process:

> "As the Americans soon realized, however, "reform" meant remaking an officer corps that had developed its own very special criteria for advancement and reward. This had to do not with military competence but with politics: with showing unstinting loyalty to "the institution" and, above all, to ones military-academy class - one's Tanda, as it was called. A hundred teenage boys might enter the Gerardo Barrios Military Academy, and from their number perhaps twenty toughened, hardened men would emerge four years later; throughout the next quarter century, these men would be promoted together, would become rich together, and would gradually gain power together. If among them there proved to be embarrassing incompetents, not to mention murderers, rapists and thieves, then those men were shielded by their classmates, and defended ferociously. Finally perhaps two decades after graduation, one or two from the tanda - those who had stood out early on as Presidenciales, as destined to become leaders of the country - would lobby within the officer corps to become the President of El Salvador.[29]

Under prodding from the U.S., the Salvadorans have begun considering a performance evaluation system but it remains to be seen to what extent it will be adopted or enforced. In effect, the current system produces an officer class that, with a few notable exceptions, feels little empathy for the soldiers it leads, holds positions of authority from which they cannot be removed, and is closely involved with the political rulers exerting a powerful and not always positive influence on the country.[30] In regard to their war fighting capabilities the ramifications were many and debilitating. First, many of the officers viewed their positions primarily as vehicles for social, economic, or political gains and were only concerned with fighting the war to the extent that it did not seriously impact their lifestyles. Petty corruption continued and the opportunity for personal economic gain was often seen as a prerequisite of high command.

Officers seldom provided meaningful supervision to their troops, choosing instead to give orders that they failed to follow up. Because officers in the rank of major or above, rarely,

or never, went to the field, captains and lieutenants were left as the primary prosecutors of the war. Higher ranking officers followed the progress of the war through briefings and reports that were exaggerated and seldom verified.

A further failing of the ESAF was its refusal to pursue a meaningful counterinsurgent strategy. Having defeated large unit guerrilla forces early in the war, and with their training at U.S. military conventional warfare schools, the Salvadoran officers became wedded to fixed site defenses and large scale company and battalion sweeps. They had little rapid reaction capability and suffered acutely from a lack of small unit leadership.

Salvadoran troops would move in the daylight, down roads and trails. Moreover, they would stick close together, and establish base camps that often had cooking fires and portable radios. Defensive positions were generally not established and most soldiers made only minimal efforts to protect themselves from attack. The ambush patrols didn't ambush, the reconnaissance patrols didn't assess, and the combat patrols didn't make contact except at times and places that were conducive to the guerrillas. The only units which were consistently effective were those with leaders who had taken the combat challenge to heart and would aggressively pursue the enemy.

Finally, the ESAF's maintenance practices remained minimal or nonexistent. Thus, the operational rates for all types of aircrafts, vehicles, and equipment were poor. The lack of sufficiently educated and trained maintenance personnel and a lack of command emphasis compounded the problem.

Operational Perspective

The war in El Salvador was conducted at the strategic and tactical level. However, the nexus between strategy and tactics eluded the ESAF throughout the war, and the U.S. advisors at the National Command level failed to get the Estado Mayor Conjunto (joint staff) to adopt an effective operational concept. The closest that the ESAF came to employing and practicing an operational level of war was during the implementation of the National Campaign Plan (NCP).[31] The NCP "devised by the American military and sold to the ESAF in early 1983, represented a first ambitious effort to move from "chasing guerrillas" to winning popular support. Despite early promises, the plan failed, and subsequent efforts to resurrect it have been largely ineffective."[32]

The lack of an operational headquarters in the ESAF prevented the departmental commander from "transcending the more detailed terrain appreciation of the tactical level."[33] If brigade headquarters could have functioned at the operational level of war the exploitation of "natural resources and major physical features such as mountain ranges, coastal plains, rivers and the ocean"[34] would have greatly enhanced the capabilities of tactical units such as the Batallon de Infanteria de Reaccion Inmediata (BIRI), Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalion, and the Batallon de Infanteria de Marina (BIM), Marine Infantry Battalion, the only combat units with an exploitation and pursuit capability.

An operational headquarters also would have appreciated and used the intelligence which was being provided at the national level by several U.S. intelligence agencies. Because of the existing command and control structure, the Estado Mayor Conjunto de la Fuerza Armada (EMCFA), Joint Staff of the Armed Forces, had to direct any joint operation or had

to take operational control of a particular unit to exploit intelligence that was time sensitive. Not surprisingly, the ability "to march separately but fight jointly"[35] eluded the ESAF because of a lack of command, control, and communication capabilities. The failure to form joint operational task forces to prosecute an aggressive campaign clearly reduced the tactical effectiveness of the ESAF and unnecessarily prolonged the fighting in areas where few insurgents and negligible popular support for the government existed.

On December 9, 1990, the BIRI Arce started operations at Cerro El Tigre (operational area of the 6th brigade) in support of the brigade's operations against guerrilla strongholds in the area. Operational control of the BIRI Arce was retained by the 3rd brigade commander at San Miguel, an adjacent department. This was the only way by which the 3rd brigade commander would allow the BIRI Arce to participate in operations in the 6th military zone, even though the joint departmental operation was being directed by the EMCFA. The BIRI Atonal and Arce ended up conducting separate unsupported operations in the same geographical area. Predictably, the operation was only marginally successful.

The FMLN

On October 12, 1980, the FMLN emerged as the paramilitary wing of 5 guerrilla organizations that were united under Fidel Castro's guidance. They numbered some 5,000-7,000 fighters and operated in all areas of the country throughout the war although they were most active in the capital and in the northern mountainous departments where it was difficult for government troops to maneuver.

Prior to its January 1980 offensive, the FMLN was divided in regard to the strategy that should be pursued in El Salvador. The leadership of the Frente Popular de Liberacion (FPL) wanted to wage a popular war of liberation.[36] The FPL envisioned forming a powerful peoples army of liberation that was capable of challenging and defeating the ESAF in open battle while concomitantly neutralizing the will of the U.S. to intervene. It was this concept that led the FPL to launch large scale attacks on the 4th brigade (1983) and at El Cerron Grande (1984) within a six month period. The Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), however, envisioned a strategy which was based on a revolutionary popular war.[37] The ERP intended to avoid large scale engagements with the army and to gain power through a popular insurrection, defection within the armed forces, and political isolation of the government. In theory, the Communist Party of El Salvador and their armed element, the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion (FAL), followed the ERP's philosophy, yet in practice they tended to follow the FPL's lead.

The FMLN envisioned launching their "Popular War of Liberation" from strategically controlled territories. The FPL and ERP, however, differed on which strategic zone had to be liberated before the final offensive was initiated. The FPL believed that the northern zone, consisting of part or all of Santa Ana, Chalatenango, Cabanas, San Miguel, Morazan, and La Union, was more strategically situated for a war of liberation. The ERP considered the eastern zone east of the Rio Lempa, with its proximity to Nicaragua and future source of logistical support, as the principal strategic zone.[38]

In January 1981, the FMLN launched their final offensive convinced that the timing, international support, and insurrectional conditions were ripe for exploitation. In the book

"Conversaciones Con El Comandante Miguel Castellanos," Castellanos reflected on the final offensive:

> "Militarily we found out that we lack tactical and technical skills to operate at the unit level, we lacked centralized control, each organization operated independently in their control zones irrespective of what was going on in adjacent areas. Our tactical units were incapable of capturing and holding army posts. We lacked fire support, replacements, reserves, and human resources had been ignored. We lacked the understanding of time and space to synchronize operations. In essence, we lacked command, control and communications. Politically, we failed to analyze the mood of the country. The general strike and popular insurrection on which the final offensive was based failed to materialize."[39]

After they were eventually bloodied in conventional style warfare in the early 1980's, the FMLN reverted to a more classic insurgency in the countryside. For the most part, they were well-armed with RPG-7s, 90mm recoilless rifles, RPK and M-60 machine guns, mortars up to 120mm, Soviet hand-held surface to air missiles (SAM's), and a wide variety of small arms. The guerillas were capable with all types of explosives, and practiced a mine warfare and bombing campaign that caused, by far, the largest number of casualties to the Salvadoran army.

The FMLN fighters usually worked in small groups of 10-15; however, as many as 100 could be brought together for small operations. The FMLN also demonstrated that they could launch large scale, coordinated attacks of as many as 500 combatants in multi-pronged operations.

In the latter stages of the war, FMLN tactics focused on economic disruption that included the targeting of coffee and cotton harvests and a continuing attempt to destroy the country's infrastructure. Attacks against dams, bridges, and the electric power grid were common. The larger battles that took place, including the so-called final offensives of 1989,

reflected an effort to win the war militarily with a spontaneous civil uprising, at best, or to gain leverage at the peace talks, at worst.

The FMLN employed extensive intelligence nets and enjoyed active support of the population in specific areas of El Salvador and were capable of moving fairly freely about the countryside. They had very effective and secure communication capabilities that were often better than what the Salvadoran army had.

The FMLN leadership was strongly motivated and followed a Marxist-Leninist ideology that expounded a class warfare scenario requiring violent revolution by the "workers" to overthrow the existing class order. The leadership was highly educated and emerged from the university system and ferment of the 1960's and '70's. Some members received training in Cuba, Nicaragua, and the former Eastern Bloc countries.

The FMLN received extensive monetary and logistics support from many organizations of a leftist or liberal character. These included various church groups, the Salvadoran branch of the International Red Cross, "concerned" governments, and a variety of domestic and international activists.

The FMLN operated from temporary training camps in the rugged areas of the departmental zones coming down into the local villages for food and medicines which they procured either by paying for them or by force. The training camps were usually near water sources and had some kind of trail system nearby. It was also not uncommon for a guerrilla to live in the field yet return to a relative's home with some regularity to visit or obtain supplies. Family and village friends were often excellent sources of information about local ESAF operations.

The FMLN, however, also suffered its share of problems. The freely elected governments of both Jose Napoleon Duarte and Alfredo Cristiani made progress in addressing the underlying social and political concerns of the people that contributed to the FMLN's strength. Further, at least in principle, the Salvadoran government recognized that it had to respond to the needs of the people or it would lose their support and probably the war.

As Cuba faced increasing economic pressures and the well of Sandinista sympathy and money dried up, international economic and moral support for the FMLN wavered as well.

Following the demise of communism in Eastern Europe and Nicaragua and the radical changes that were underway in the former Soviet Union, the morale of the FMLN fell precipitously. After 10 years of war, and given the increasingly evident failure of the guerrillas to achieve any kind of substantial progress or victory, there was little motivation for new recruits to join the FMLN. Accordingly, on occasion, the FMLN forcibly impressed soldiers. Some of these were very young, sometimes only 12 or 14-years-old. The FMLN also continued to use women and children in support roles and as messengers and intelligence collectors.

The failure of the FMLN's November offensive in 1989 was a crushing blow to its hopes to take control of El Salvador. In a supreme gamble, it had launched an all out conventional offensive that was centered on taking and holding key cities, most notably the capital itself. The FMLN evidently believed that it had substantial support in the cities and that the people would rise up to support the revolution and drive out Cristiani's government. Conceptually, this was reminiscent of the earlier final offensive of January 1981.

The FMLN had clearly overestimated its strength with the Salvadoran people, who, for the most part, supported the government. With a judicious use of airpower, the ESAF was able to defeat the FMLN and drive them back into the hills. An otherwise very successful defense was marred, however, when the ESAF failed to aggressively pursue a retreating enemy that was finally out in the open. Unfortunately, a great many guerrillas who might otherwise have been captured or killed were allowed to escape.

After the offensive, FMLN aims centered on resupplying its combatants and attempting to gain political advantage through negotiations with the government. The war for domestic and international public opinion was also underway.

Although there had been a major change in the character of the Nicaraguan government, many Sandinistas still held powerful positions from which they were able to continue their support of the FMLN. Sandinista resupply efforts included the shipment of small arms and ammunition of all calibers, various military equipment, and lightweight surface to air missile systems.

Nevertheless, faced with waning military power and a largely unsympathetic civilian populace, the FMLN reluctantly committed itself to the peace negotiations.

Conclusions

Given the large economic investment that the U.S. had made in El Salvador, and the many lives and dislocations that the war had cost, any summary must deal with whether the effort was worthwhile. From my perspective, the answer is a qualified yes.

The Salvadoran government, with U.S. support, was able to thwart a violent attempt to impose the government of a minority which would have been highly inimical to U.S. interests. As a result of this success, Cuba and other revolutionary movements in the area have become increasingly isolated.

Undoubtedly the greatest victory belongs to the Salvadoran people who have rightfully determined the government under which they will live. That they so overwhelmingly chose democracy bodes well for their future.

By virtue of its involvement with the Salvadoran government, the U.S. has caused dramatic changes in a brutal, oligarchic society. In the areas of human rights, democratic institutions, and free and open economic markets, El Salvador has made significant, perhaps even remarkable, progress. The U.S. should be proud of its role in this process.

However, the end of armed hostilities remains only a qualified success because quite clearly, even with a lasting peace, the work in El Salvador is far from finished. The country's democratic institutions are still very new and weak. The government must be successful, that is, responsive, responsible and productive, and must be plainly seen to be so, or it could return to where it was at the start of the war with a disaffected populace looking for a better way. In its effort to establish democracy, the government faces a long history of corruption, malfeasance, ineptitude, and favoritism that must be overcome if it is going to succeed.

Additionally, any real, long-term, solution to the war in El Salvador must address the military officers' place in society. Any meaningful reform must include a reduction of the role and power of the officer class and its incontestable subordination to legitimate civilian

authority. Furthermore, this reform must work to instill professional values that include competence, military aggressiveness (as opposed to civil-political aggressiveness), and a positive leadership style that reflects a concern for the country and its people and acknowledges, at some level, that military service is a sacrifice which is willingly accepted, and it not merely an opportunity for personal political or economic gain.

El Salvador must also address its human rights history in a meaningful way. It must resolve the dilemma of a judicial system that is unjust and doesn't work, and reform the courts, the police, and the military, in a way that ensures their responsibility and utility.

Finally, the government must allow the country to develop economically, while at the same time caring for the concerns of all of its citizens in an overpopulated and all too poor land. It must encourage development and foreign investment, achieve a more equitable distribution of land and wealth, and continue with its early efforts to divest itself of state-owned and operated businesses.

For the U.S., the overriding point is that its involvement in El Salvador did not end when the peace treaty was signed. Events in the Persian Gulf and Eastern Europe notwithstanding, the U.S. must not abandon an ally who, after winning its war, must now grapple with the difficulties of winning the peace. If the U.S. can muster the interest, the time, and the money to stay the course in El Salvador, its performance there will truly have been an unqualified success.

Endnotes

1. The author has drawn heavily from personal notes and experience from two tours in El Salvador, 1985 and 1990. Additionally, a brief on El Salvador prepared by Colonel John Kiser USMC, Major David Shelton, USMC and the author provided extensive background for the operational issues.

2. Pamela Constable, "At War's End in El Salvador," Current History (March 1993): 106.

3. See for example Alistar White, El Salvador, USA Editores, San Salvador, El Salvador; 1987; Tommie Sue Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador, Washington View Press: 1995; Max G. Manwaring and Courtney E. Prisk, A Need for Strategic Perspective: Insights from El Salvador, Booz Allen & Hamilton, Inc., 1989; Benjamin C. Schwarz, American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building, Rand, 1991; John D. Waghelstein, El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency, US Army War College, 1985.

4. Alfred M. Gray, "The Annual Report to Congress," Marine Corps Gazette (April 1990) as quoted in David A. Knott, A Small War Campaign Guide (Latin America) Air War College, 1.

5. Secretary of Defense, United States Security Strategy for the Americas, Washington, D.C., 1995, 1.

6. Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, El Salvador at War: An Oral History, (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1988), 20.

7. Howard J. Wiarda, "U.S. Strategic Policy in Latin America in the Post-Cold War Era," in Evolving U.S. Strategy for Latin America and Caribbean, L. Erik Kjonnerod, ed., (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1992), 23.

8. Mario Gomez-Zimmerman, El Salvador: La Otra Cara de La Guerra, 2nd ed. (Miami: Editorial SIBI, 1986), 73.

9. Manwaring et al, 97.

10. Caesar D. Sereseres, "Lessons from Central America's Revolutionary Wars, 1972-1984," in The Lessons of Recent Wars in the Third World, Volume 1. ed. Robert E. Harkavy and Stephanie G. Neuman (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985), 165.

11. Manwaring et al, 97.

12. ibid.,107

13. John D. Waghelstein, "Perception That Southern Command Wanted to Run the War," interview by Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, El Salvador At War: An Oral History, 1988, 105.

14. Kinloch C. Walpole Jr., The Isolation of El Salvador in the International Arena University of Florida, 1987, 71.

15. Sereseres, 172.

16. ibid.

17. ibid., 173.

18. ibid.

19. ibid., 174.

20. ibid., 167.

21. ibid., 168.

22. The Carter Administration's concern with human rights violations and the U.S. disengagement from the region during the 1970's caught the U.S. government totally unprepared to deal with the fast moving, public relations driven FSLN strategy.

23. Sereseres, 169.

24. ibid., 174.

25. David L. Shelton, The Constraints and Limitations of Advising in Central America; Washington, D.C.: Naval Institute Proceedings, 1991, 10.

26. David L. Shelton, "Some Advice for the Prospective Advisor," Marine Corps Gazette October 1991, 55.

27. Joel Millman, "El Salvador's Army, A Force Unto Itself," NY Times Magazine December 1989, 95.

28. Douglas Farah, "Can Benign Neglect Solve El Salvador's Problems?," US News & World Report, November 1989: 60.

29. Mark Danner, The Massacre at El Mozote, New York:Random House, 1993, 23.

30. ibid.

31. Victor Manuel Rosello, Jr., A Assessment of the National Campaign Plan for El Salvador: Planning for Success or Failure? Alexandria: Defense Technical Information Center Defense Logistics Agency, 1982, 3.

32. A. J. Bacevich, James D. Hallums, Richard H. White, and Thomas F. Young, American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador, Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988, 6.

33. William J. Bolt et al, "Fighting the MAGTF Readings. AY 1989-90, Tactics and the Operational Level of War," Military Review (February 1987): 254.

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36. Marco Antonio Grande, Dialectica Del Desarrollo Del FMLN, Readecuacion Estrategica de 1984, 32.

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APPENDIX A

El Salvador
Organizations: Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front

Prior to the 1992 peace accord, El Salvador's most violent opposition was centered in the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional-FMLN). Active since 1980, the FMLN was the paramilitary wing of an umbrella group known as the Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democratico Revolucionario-FDR), which represented about 20 left-wing parties. Most of the group's operations were carried out against the Salvadoran government and military, but U.S. personnel were targeted at times. The FMLN's broadest appeal was among the rural population. The group takes its name from Augustin de Farabundo Marti, a communist rebel who was active in the 1930's.

Peace talks began in 1984 under than-President Jose Napoleon Duarte of the Christian Democratic Party, but his government was unable to control the military offensive in 1989 following the election as president of Nationalist Republican Alliance party leader Alfredo Cristiani. The peace talks resumed in 1990. On September 25, 1991, the government and FMLN leaders signed an accord in New York City that set the stage for final negotiations in late December 1991. The talks resulted in a formal cease-fire that came into effect on February 1, 1992. The pact's success so far has been attributed to the government's implementation, as the guerrillas had demanded, of reforms to the judiciary and the electoral system; guarantees of territorial and human rights; the participation of the FMLN in the nation's civil defense affairs; and the ongoing purge from the military of officers charged with human rights abuses. On its side, the FMLN agreed to disarm its members. Further, the National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace was formally installed on January 16, 1992 to monitor the guaranteed political integration of the FMLN. It comprises two representatives each from the government and the FMLN who are authorized to initiate legislation necessary to ensure the 1992 peach accord's continued success.

The FMLN was legalized at the end of December 1992 after it demobilized its 8,000 troops. It became a civilian political party and won 21 out of 84 legislative seats in April 1994 elections. However, since then, the party has experienced some splintering. In December 1994, Joaquin Villalobos, one of the party's founding leaders, withdrew his faction--the People's Expression of Renewal (Expresion Renovadora del Pueblo-ERP)--from the coalition. Villalobos claimed the FMLN would "pass into history" because of its Marxist-Leninist orientation and its refusal to move away from the political left.

Principal member groups of the FMLN include:
- Bloque Popular Revolucionario
- Frente de Accion Popular Unificado
- Frente Pedro Pablo Castillo
- Ligas Populares del 28 del Febrero

- Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario
- Movimiento Obrero Revolucionario Salvador Cayetano Carpio
- Movimiento Popular Social Cristiano
- Partido Comunista Salvadorena
- Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos
- Union Democratica Nacionalista

Leader: Ruben Zamora

APPENDIX B

The armed forces consisted of an army of 6 brigades. Each brigade had from 3-5 battalions (Batallon de Infanteria Antiterrorista, BIAT, each of 280-300 men), a Batallon de Infanteria de Reaccion Inmediata (BIRI), an immediate reaction battalion of from 500-700 men and a variety of special operations and support units. Thus, each brigade numbered between 1,900 and 2,200 officers and men.

There is a separate artillery battalion in the ESAF that provided artillery detachments, usually four, 105mm howitzers to each of the infantry brigade for operational support. There is also a separate cavalry battalion, as well as several other types of engineering and support units.

The ESAF has a small navy numbering some 1,200 men that is equipped with 21 coastal patrol craft and 3 landing craft. Its primary base is at Punta Ruca in the La Union Department of El Salvador in the Gulf of Fonseca. A marine battalion under the control of the naval commander worked the coastal regions of Usulutan, San Miguel, and La Union departments.

The Salvadoran air force was equipped with approximately 100 aircraft, about half of which were rotary wing and half fixed wing. Aircraft types are a mix of old and new that included 0-2 observation craft, AC-47 aerial gunships, C-123 cargo planes, ARAVA cargo STOL craft and AEROMACCHI and A-37 dragonfly ground attack platforms. The helo assets included MH-1H's and M's. French Alouette's and Hughes 500's. The air force controlled an airborne battalion and the national level special operations unit known as the PRAL, Patrulla de Reconocimiento de Alcance Largo, or long range reconnaissance patrol. The air force was the most expensive part of the Salvadoran war effort.