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El Salvador in the 1980s: War by Other Means

Donald R. Hamilton

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CENTER ON IRREGULAR WARFARE AND ARMED GROUPS



El Salvador in the 1980's: War by Other Means
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Message from the Editors

In 2008, the Naval War College established the Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Groups (CIWAG). CIWAG's primary mission is twofold: first, to bring cutting-edge research on Irregular Warfare into the Joint Professional Military Educational (JPME) curricula; and second, to bring operators, practitioners, and scholars together to share their knowledge and experiences about a vast array of violent and non-violent irregular challenges. This case study is part of an ongoing effort at CIWAG that includes symposia, lectures by world-renowned academics, case studies, research papers, articles, and books.

It is important to note three critical caveats to this case study. First, the opinions found in this case study are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Naval War College, or CIWAG. Second, while every effort has been made to correct any factual errors in this work, the author is ultimately responsible for the content of this case study. Third, the study questions presented in all CIWAG case studies are written to provoke discussion on a wide variety of topics including strategic, operational, and tactical matters as well as ethical and moral questions confronted by operators in the battlefield. The point is to make these case studies part of an evolving and adaptive curriculum that fulfills the needs of students preparing to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 world and to show them the dilemmas that real people faced in high-pressure situations.

Author Biography

Donald R. Hamilton served as counselor for public affairs at the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador from May of 1982 through June of 1986—longer than any other member of the country team. During a 28-year Foreign Service career, Hamilton also served in Tel Aviv, Lima (twice), Caracas, the Sinai Field Mission, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. In Washington, he served as director of Latin American affairs, public affairs director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and deputy director in the State Department's Counterterrorism office. After retiring he was asked to serve as a senior advisor to the National Commission on Terrorism and as a senior counselor at the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad. He currently consults at the State Department.

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I. Introduction

Through the 1980s, the United States involved itself in a civil war¹ in the smallest country on the mainland of the Americas. With a population roughly the equivalent of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area and no clear geo-strategic benefit, El Salvador became an issue of constant concern at the highest levels of the U.S. government. U.S. President Ronald Reagan made televised addresses about El Salvador and spoke to a joint session of Congress about assistance to the tiny country. For a few years, only Israel and Egypt received more assistance.

However, even with El Salvador prominent in the top tier of U.S. foreign policy concerns, a war going on there, and the United States committed to one side, we never had more than about 200 military personnel in that country on any given day. While the U.S. could have brought overwhelming force to bear, we put few boots on the ground. The U.S. military was nonetheless an indispensable element of U.S. policy.

The other part of the story is that the Salvadoran government was dependent on the performance of a military that was profoundly flawed—murderous, corrupt, and attached to its historical impunity.

Although the Salvadoran conflict was a creation of the Cold War, it is not a historical oddity. Before and since, the United States has committed itself to a flawed ally. From Stalin through Diem and right on through to Karzai, our political leadership has repeatedly declared that one government or one cause is so important that we must find a way reform or tolerate or ignore the flaws of our friends. This is not always a bad thing. Winston Churchill was known for his staunch anti-Soviet views but offered assistance to Stalin's government when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. Asked about this seeming inconsistency, Churchill is said to have

¹ Neither the Government of El Salvador nor the United States referred to the conflict as a "civil war." The Salvadorans did not wish to extend combatant status to the insurgents, and the U.S. has never described itself as participating in anyone else's civil war.

responded, “If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.”

Nor was it the first time that the United States, with no apparent reason, declared a country or piece of territory of great value to national security. Consider Quemoy and Matsu. Given the age of serving military personnel, none of you may remember, but some of you may have read about it in a Cold War history or a study of the Kennedy-Nixon presidential race.² When these conflicts are reviewed in subsequent decades, they can seem silly and wrong-headed.

But while these incidents unfold, factors invisible in later years loom large. Few are possessed of the ability to understand the way the world will look in 40 years. Our national leaders are not specially blessed with foresight. Indeed, temporary political exigencies can narrow any politician’s viewpoint. One example may suffice. Lyndon Johnson mastered partisan politics and had a powerful sense of justice on racial matters.³ Additionally, he foresaw terrible problems in Vietnam. But he also saw that the Republicans would make problems for him if he pulled out.⁴ We know which fear prevailed.

Please note: The viewpoint throughout this study is largely that of the U.S. executive branch.⁵ The viewpoints, aims, and ambitions of other

² These tiny islands in the Strait of Taiwan were heavily fortified by the Nationalist Chinese government in Taiwan, but were within artillery range of the People’s Republic of China. During the 1960 presidential race, Nixon accused Kennedy of being unwilling to commit to the use of nuclear weapons if Quemoy and Matsu were invaded by the People’s Republic of China.

³ He predicted that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would drive the South into Republican hands.

⁴ See “Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Senator Richard Russell, Washington, May 27, 1964, 10:55 p.m.,” U.S., Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Washington, DC, Document Number 52. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/lbjrr.htm>

⁵ Readers may rest assured the author knows that he hasn’t the moral or intellectual authority to speak for America. Even so, he will try to capture the main currents of thought at the time.

branches of government as well as those of other countries and organizations are referred to and assumed, but always from the viewpoint of the U.S. This is unavoidable, but if properly stated and understood, of value. Any use of whatever lessons may be taken from this study will all but certainly be undertaken in the same context.

Discussion Questions

1. Can the U.S. military carry out an extended mission if a vocal minority of the American people oppose it, a quieter minority supports it, and most Americans are indifferent to or unaware of it?
2. Can our military prevail when its advantages in technology, maneuverability, firepower, communications, and mobility are irrelevant?
3. What is the role of a warrior who is forbidden to engage in, or even go near, combat?
4. How does “civilian control of the military” play out when the civilian controlling the military (the U.S. ambassador) is not in the White House, but in the same building?
5. How do you, both as an individual and as part of a military organization, work with counterparts who are not just flawed, but criminal?
6. How candid can you be, should you be, must you be in communicating matters to other agencies, the media, the public, that do not reflect public policy expressions from the highest levels? What about communicating facts that contradict official assertions? How can someone on the ground voice dissent?

II. A Moment in Time

In 1976, Manuel Rodriguez, chief of staff of the Salvadoran Army, made a deal to sell \$30 million in American-supplied arms and aircraft to two individuals he thought were members of the American Mafia. The two “buyers” were cops. Rodriguez was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison—even though the military high command in El Salvador (with the overwhelming approval of the entire officer corps) spent over \$100,000 on his legal expenses.⁶

Not long after taking office in January 1977, the Carter administration, citing egregious human rights abuses, ended military assistance to El Salvador.

Four years later, with Rodriguez out of prison and back in El Salvador, the Carter administration resumed military assistance.

What happened?

In spite of El Salvador’s proximity⁷ to the United States, the U.S. had never taken much interest in the country. With only one coast, El Salvador could not be the site of an interoceanic canal. There was no oil or other extractable mineral. No United Fruit⁸ stood astride the economy. The coffee industry is globally disbursed and has never been vertically integrated, so El Salvador’s largest crop was never owned or dominated by foreign companies. Historically, El Salvador was not an outward-looking country in any but a commercial sense. Even when Farabundo Martí led the Western Hemisphere’s first avowedly communist uprising in 1932,⁹ the broader world paid scant attention.

⁶ Information about the officer corps’ support of official funds for Rodriguez’s defense told to the author by (then) Lt. Col. Carlos Avilés at a social function in 1984.

⁷ As President Reagan often said, San Salvador (the capital) is closer to Houston than Houston is to Washington.

⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Fruit_Company.

⁹ Agustín Farabundo Martí, once an assistant to Nicaragua’s Augusto César Sandino, was a founder of the Communist Party of Central America and a leader in the uprising against Salvadoran dictator Maxmiliano Hernández Martínez. The uprising was crushed with

At the beginning of the Carter administration (1977-1981): the United States had so little interest in El Salvador that, according to press accounts, the Central Intelligence Agency closed its station there and consolidated it into a regional one based elsewhere.

The sudden and surprising collapse of the Somoza regime in neighboring (but not quite contiguous) Nicaragua changed that. For three generations, the Somoza family had run Nicaragua as a dictatorship happy to demonstrate its fealty to the United States.¹⁰ Following a brief armed rebellion, the Sandinista National Liberation Front overthrew Anastasio Somoza Debayle's regime on July 19, 1979. The "Sandinista" part of the name came from Augusto Sandino, who had rebelled against a U.S. occupation of Nicaragua in 1927. Although the Carter administration tried hard to reach an amicable relationship with the new Sandinista government, it was always swimming upstream. The Sandinista anthem contained a line about the "Yankee enemies of humanity."

The Sandinista victory caused many to believe El Salvador would soon fall to the existing leftist insurgency—one closely tied to the Sandinistas. The abrupt collapse of the Somoza regime surprised left as well as right. In mid-1978, many thought the insurgency in El Salvador stronger than the Sandinistas. They were almost certainly richer. By 1978, the FMLN had accumulated a war chest of some \$80 million. That made them rich enough to invest \$10 million in the Nicaraguan revolution. They gave the money to the Sandinistas in Costa Rica—in cash.¹¹

On September 15, 1979, the Carter administration sent Assistant Secretary of State Viron P. Vaky to El Salvador to encourage Salvadoran

about 30,000 people slaughtered. Hernandez had Martí shot after a perfunctory hearing. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farabundo_Mart%C3%AD.

¹⁰ Franklin Roosevelt is supposed to have said of Somoza, "He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he is our son-of-a-bitch." The story may well be invented. He is supposed to have said the same thing of Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo. True or not, the quote endures because it seems to encapsulate U.S. attitudes toward Latin American dictators.

¹¹ James LeMoyne, "The Guerilla Network," *New York Times Magazine*, April 6, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/06/magazine/the-guerrilla-network.html>.

President Carlos Humberto Romero to call early elections as a means of preempting the insurgents. Romero refused. Everyone might have been better off had he followed the path Vaky suggested.

A month later, on October 15, reformist military officers overthrew President Romero in a bloodless coup.¹² They set up a military-civilian junta, the *Revolucionario de Gobierno* (Revolutionary Government Junta, or JRG). Reformist intentions notwithstanding, the various insurgent groups were not mollified and continued their fight. A disparate group of landowners, bankers, industrialists, and many military officers in El Salvador were furious. They believed the Carter administration, working with the JRG, was prepared to do to El Salvador exactly what they had done to Somoza's Nicaragua—abandon it to the communists.

While these events constitute the launching pad for a major conflict in El Salvador and all of Central America, it is not possible to comprehend U.S. involvement outside the context of world events and U.S. politics and U.S. public opinion. Ten years before or after, events in El Salvador and Nicaragua would almost certainly have brought a very different response from any U.S. administration.

In the United States, the national mood was sour. At one point President Jimmy Carter gave what came to be called the “malaise speech.”¹³ The *Boston Globe* prepared an editorial about the speech with a title along the lines of “Let Us All Pull Together.” Someone at the *Globe* inserted a new headline: “Mush from the Wimp.” A swath of the population was delighted with the headline. How did our national mood become so sour? Consider the approximately five years that ended the 1970s:

¹² Some have wondered if the U.S. engineered the October 1979 coup. In a sense, it did not matter if the U.S. reached out to the *golpistas* (Spanish for “coup makers”). The fact of the Vaky visit and knowledge of his message would have been understood as a message: “The U.S. is through with Romero and with 50 years of military presidents.”

¹³ He never used the word “malaise.”

HAMILTON: EL SALVADOR IN THE 1980s

- President Richard M. Nixon had resigned when it became clear that he would be convicted of “high crimes and misdemeanors” if he tried to remain in office.
- We left Vietnam in defeat, panic, and disorder. When our ambassador helicoptered off the U.S. embassy roof with our flag under his arm, he left behind untold thousands of Vietnamese who had trusted us. A few lucky Vietnamese loaded their helicopters with their families and flew offshore to U.S. carriers. The carriers had no place to put the helicopters, so carrier crews pushed the helicopters into the sea. It made for gripping television. Others crowded on to boats and barges and hoped for refuge.
- Oil shocks in 1972 and again in 1979 had run energy prices through the roof. Lining up for gasoline shocked Americans. As an energy-saving measure, the lights on the Capitol Dome and Washington Monument were turned off late at night.
- Following peaceful negotiations, the United States negotiated and signed a treaty that would eventually turn “our canal” over to Panama.
- Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, who described the United States as the “Great Satan,” led mobs that toppled our friend, the Shah. “Student” supporters overran the U.S. embassy in Teheran and held our diplomats hostage.¹⁴
- Just 17 days after our embassy in Teheran was seized, a mob in Islamabad burned our embassy there to the ground and killed a Marine Security Guard and an Army warrant officer.¹⁵

¹⁴ In 1980, a bollixed military rescue ended in blood and flames in the desert. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned in protest at President Carter’s decision to launch the rescue. Vance stayed in office to avoid hinting that something was afoot, but he was careful to make it clear at the time that he would leave regardless of the outcome. His view, roughly stated, was that this was such a bad idea that it did not matter if it succeeded.

¹⁵ The proximate cause of the rioting (to which the Pakistani authorities seemed to be deliberately slow to respond) was the violent occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca.

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- Anti-government forces kidnapped the U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Adolf “Spike” Dubs. At the direction of Soviet advisers and over U.S. objections, the Afghan government launched an assault that killed Ambassador Dubs.
- The Soviets launched a full-scale invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.
- In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas threw out the thuggish but pro-U.S. Somoza family. The Sandinistas were cozy with Havana.
- The prime rate was about 15%; the “misery index” (unemployment rate plus inflation rate) was over 20%.

The United States had emerged from World War II as the richest, most powerful, and most respected nation in history. How had we come to this in one lifetime?

It is commonplace to attribute President Carter’s 1980 electoral loss to the Iran hostage crisis. But the broader sense that many things had gone terribly wrong came well before and then ran parallel to the hostage crisis. The Carter administration had always faced an uphill battle. By the 1970s, the states west of the Mississippi were enough by themselves to win in the Electoral College. In 1976, Gerald Ford carried every state west of the Mississippi except Texas and California.

In light of national and international events, there was no reason to assume any state that went for Ford would vote for Carter. Nor did anyone believe Carter could keep Texas and California out of the hands of Ronald Reagan.

Running on a time-for-a-change platform, Ronald Reagan’s overwhelming victory gave him a mandate for a frankly assertive foreign policy, a policy that turned out to be not so much aggressive as defiant.

The rumor sweeping through Pakistan was that the occupation was the work of the Israelis. Ironically, the Muslim extremists who took over the mosque evolved into al Qaida.

HAMILTON: EL SALVADOR IN THE 1980s

Central America was close to home and there was little doubt of communist involvement. The prospect of something like another Cuba close to our borders was a logical place to show this defiance.

III. The Carter Administration

Before the 1979 coup, the Carter administration had cut off all military assistance to El Salvador¹⁶ because of human rights abuses. But with the coming of land reform¹⁷ in March of 1980 and the advent of a second, completely civilian, junta,¹⁸ the U.S. began a \$6 million program of military assistance.

As these events occurred, Salvador exploded into civil war. The insurgency never stopped and its support from Cuba, overwhelmingly moving through Nicaragua after mid-1979, continued. Many of those whose land had been confiscated for agrarian reform (commonly called *los afectados*—the “affected ones”) became death squad supporters. Some gave only emotional support, sympathy, or tolerance; other *afectados* gave direction, money, and political and public relations support. The right-wing opponents of the junta coalesced around Roberto D’Aubuisson, a former major in the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Short and slender, D’Aubuisson nevertheless brought a vibrant (and violent) speaking style and considerable charisma to the conservative cause.

As the guerrillas pursued more-or-less common urban guerrilla tactics such as kidnappings for ransom, robberies, Molotov cocktail attacks, and selective assassinations, the right responded with death squads.¹⁹

¹⁶ As well as Guatemala and Argentina.

¹⁷ Designed in great part with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the AFL-CIO’s Latin American arm, the American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD).

¹⁸ The first mixed civilian and military junta collapsed with the resignation of all its civilian members. All civilian cabinet members also resigned.

¹⁹ “Death squad” is an elusive term, but usually refers to police or soldiers committing murders while operating with no lawful authority or acknowledged chain of command. In El Salvador, most death squads consisted of soldiers or police operating under the instructions of their officers. The officers may or may not have received instructions from their legitimate chain of command. Selected officers may have been responding to

This put the Carter administration in a bad place.

After having attempted to move Somoza out using “interference without intervention,”²⁰ the administration tried to propitiate the Sandinistas. They gave an immediate \$15 million grant for reconstruction and pushed another \$75 million through Congress. In September 1979, the president invited the nine-member Sandinista directorate to the White House. This pattern of embracing almost any group that replaces a tyranny is a recurrent theme for the U.S. Iraq, Egypt, and Libya come immediately to mind. Fear of doing this again is a major factor in our delicacy in the continuing²¹ Syrian civil war.

Through 1979 and into 1980, relations with the Sandinistas deteriorated. In El Salvador, chaos and bloodshed accelerated.

The Salvadoran Catholic Church became prominent in the war and remained so throughout. In February 1980, Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero wrote to President Carter and asked that the president not increase military aid to the Salvadoran junta. Romero said such aid would “undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the political repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for their most basic human rights.”

On March 23, 1980, the Archbishop’s sermon included a call to Salvadoran soldiers:

I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, National Guardsmen, and policemen: each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words, “thou shalt not kill.” No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of

instructions from former military personnel or wealthy patrons from as far away as Miami.

²⁰ That is the description applied by Mauricio Solaún, President Carter’s final ambassador to Nicaragua, in a conversation with the author in San Salvador in 1986.

²¹ As of spring 2014.

God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression.²²

Archbishop Romero was assassinated the next day while saying mass in a hospital chapel, slain by a single rifle shot. D'Aubuisson was immediately and widely considered to be responsible for his murder.²³ The Archbishop's funeral drew a huge crowd, but it was broken up when government forces fired automatic weapons into the mourners.²⁴ Video of the panicked crowd made an important impression in the U.S.

By May 1980, the disparate bands of armed groups confronting the Salvadoran government came together after Fidel Castro brought them to Havana and insisted they unite. They became the Unified Revolutionary Directorate, but the only thing that really mattered was their military organization, Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front): invariably shortened in English and Spanish to FMLN.

That same month D'Aubuisson was arrested and momentarily jailed in San Salvador. Perhaps to 300 demonstrators blaming the U.S. for the arrest blockaded the residence of U.S. Ambassador Robert White. They shouted slogans and waved placards such as "Down with Human Rights!" "Long Live Reagan!" "Carter is a Commie!" and "White is Red!" Eventually, the embassy's Marine Security Guards dispersed the

²² Romero, Archbishop Oscar, "The Last Sermon," <http://www.haverford.edu/relg/faculty/amcguire/romero.html>

²³ The UN Truth Commission for El Salvador later substantiated this, finding that "Major Roberto D'Aubuisson gave the order to assassinate the Archbishop." See "D. Death Squad Assassinations," *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador*, English p. 127, March 15, 1993, <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html>

²⁴ The Salvadoran Armed Forces said the armed left killed the demonstrators/mourners. The consensus among responsible analysts is that the FMLN set off some leaflet bombs or other demonstration explosions. After the explosions, the government forces opened fire.

demonstrators with tear gas grenades so the ambassador could go to the embassy. Death squad killings continued to grow before reaching a monthly toll of 750 in October 1980.²⁵

Rightist opposition to the (second) junta and U.S. involvement was strong and growing stronger throughout this period. The leftist opposition also opposed the junta and U.S. involvement. The U.S. Embassy in San Salvador was machine-gunned, rocketed, or otherwise attacked about 20 times in 1980. Only one of the attacks on the embassy had the potential for major casualties: One afternoon, an RPG came through the window next to the ambassador's office. Although one must suppose the ambassador was the intended target (he was not in the embassy): the rocket actually penetrated the ambassador's conference room where the country team met several times weekly. The ambassador's conference room was moved to the basement, but his office stayed on the third floor. None of the attackers was definitively identified individually or by organization.

These attacks on the embassy and the picketing at the ambassador's residence are noteworthy only for their frequency and presumed rightist origin. Throughout the Cold War and especially after the U.S. entered Vietnam in force, U.S. embassies were common targets for demonstrations, vandalism, and occasional violent attacks. While American diplomats, especially ambassadors, were and are frequent targets of terrorists, massive violence intended to kill large numbers of people at American embassies really did not start until the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in 1983.²⁶

²⁵ The count of death squad victims was neither accurate nor official. The U.S. embassy's human rights office attempted to compile numbers based on press reports but freely acknowledged the defects of its own system. Most of the "death squad victims" were merely described as having been "found dead." The embassy noted that the method all but certainly undercounted deaths in rural areas and also recorded deaths from ordinary criminality as "death squad killings."

²⁶ "Terrorism" has defied definition in international forums. One of the few and one of the first agreed-upon was that attacks on embassy personnel are terrorism because they are "internationally protected persons." While the United Nations has never achieved a

In this context, neither the American people nor their government became alarmed about the attacks on the embassy. The State Department sent dependents home and made San Salvador an unaccompanied tour for personnel of all agencies. Diplomatic Security changed the iron-barred fence to a concrete wall and placed sandbags and armor plates around and partially covering the windows. Diplomatic Security also instituted aggressive, roving armed patrols around the embassy. Anyone photographing the embassy or loitering was braced and asked to identify himself. Journalists with ID were permitted to photograph, but were asked to call ahead in the future.

Examining the options:

- Did the Carter administration handle the deteriorating security situation properly?
- What were other options were available?
- Why not just walk away? Some countries, including the Israelis and the Japanese, closed their embassies, wished the Salvadoran government well, and went home.
- Alternately, instead of adding a small number of Marine Security Guards, why not bring in several dozen to show resolve?

broad definition of terrorism, UN diplomats quickly reached agreement that attacks on diplomats were forbidden “under all circumstances.” Terrorism itself has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. The State Department’s annual publication “Patterns of Global Terrorism” (now called “Country Reports on Terrorism”) always showed that the greatest number of terrorist attacks on U.S. interests took place in Latin America—but these attacks seldom caused casualties. Indeed, until the 1990s, most terrorist incidents were property crimes such as small bombs placed outside empty buildings. Most of the time, the purpose was to attract attention, to create “propaganda by the deed.” At the end of the 1990s, the number of terrorist attacks was down dramatically but the death count was going up. With the rise of mass-casualty terrorism and devastating attacks on the U.S. embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi and on the UN compound in Iraq, petty attacks and vandalism against embassies seems to have diminished.

HAMILTON: EL SALVADOR IN THE 1980s

- What should the U.S. do today when an administration sends an embassy to a very dangerous place with no U.S. combat forces in country?²⁷

²⁷ It happens more often than you think. Since 1945, more American ambassadors than American generals have been killed by hostile action.

IV. The Interregnum

No one familiar with El Salvador was surprised that Salvadoran conservatives preferred Ronald Reagan in the 1980 U.S. elections. Virtually all well-to-do Salvadorans believed that the troubles afflicting their country should be charged to Jimmy Carter's account. Even so, American diplomats who had been abroad during many U.S. elections did not expect the extensive celebratory gunfire in San Salvador's better neighborhoods when it became clear that Reagan had won.

That gunfire signaled a changed dynamic in El Salvador. Those actively opposing the rebels had feared the Carter administration would leave them to the mercy of the communists. Now they were confident that a Reagan administration would set aside the Carter human rights policy, which they believed prevented progress against the communists. Reagan, they said and believed, would get down to the serious business of stopping communist aggression. Left and right in El Salvador shared one belief: A Reagan administration would stand against the rebels—no matter what.

Death squad killings dropped quickly and never returned to the October 1980 level. But if the number of systematic murders fell, the victims' profile soared. Between the election and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, the following events occurred:

- As soon as it became clear that Reagan would win, Americans claiming to have influence with the new administration began visiting El Salvador. They met with prominent members of the business community, right-wing politicians, and others unknown. These self-proclaimed envoys of the incoming administration promised big changes in U.S. policy, including a house cleaning at the Department of State and the immediate departure of Ambassador White. People serving at the embassy at the time do not recall any of these individuals securing positions in the Reagan administration, but some already were or became staffers on

Capitol Hill. Several people assigned to the embassy at the time told the author that the visitors' Salvadoran contacts came to believe that the Reagan administration would be uninterested in human rights and that the administration would not be curious about how the left was to be defeated.

- On November 28, “heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes”²⁸ kidnapped six leaders of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (generally known by its Spanish initials FDR) from a meeting in San Salvador. The FDR was an organization of socialists who believed in democracy and had not taken up arms. They were tortured and murdered the same day, and their bodies were dumped in the streets of the capital.
- On December 2, two American nuns who were resident in El Salvador but visiting Managua returned to attend a memorial service for the FDR leaders. Another American nun and a female American lay worker went to the airport to pick them up. Shortly after they left the airport, all four were intercepted by a group of Salvadoran National Guardsmen. The Guardsmen murdered them all and burned their van. The Guardsmen probably raped them as well, but the forensic tests necessary to prove this were never run.
- On December 28, American freelance journalist John J. Sullivan arrived in El Salvador and checked into the Sheraton Hotel. About two hours later, he went out for a walk and disappeared. Foul play was assumed from the start, but his body was not discovered for some 18 months. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists later received highly credible and specific information that the Treasury Police had picked Sullivan up off the street, tortured, and murdered him. They chopped off his hands and put a

²⁸ The phrase “heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes” was a euphemism that Salvadoran newspapers and radio used at the time. It really meant “military personnel not in uniform.”

grenade in his mouth to make identification difficult. It seems the Treasury Police had mistaken Sullivan for a rebel collaborator to whom he bore a slight resemblance.²⁹

- On January 3, 1981, two Salvadoran National Guardsmen, operating on orders and under threat, murdered Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, two Americans working for the American Institute of Free Labor Development. They also murdered Rodolfo Viera, the head of the Salvadoran Agrarian Reform Institute. The victims were just finishing dinner in the Sheraton Hotel when the Guardsmen opened fire with Ingram machine pistols. The commanders of the Guardsmen and prominent civilian friends of the officers were present at the hotel at the time.³⁰
- On January 5, a respected Salvadoran lawyer, well and favorably known to the U.S. Embassy, told Chargé d' Affaires, a.i.³¹ Mark Dion that a gang of six Salvadorans living in Miami were behind most death squad activity. As Dion reported in a NODIS cable,³² these six men had bribed military and government officials in El

²⁹ This author worked closely with the Committee to Protect's executive director Anne Nelson when she came to San Salvador in an effort to meet the unnamed author of the letter containing this information. Ms. Nelson and I both thought the letter was authentic, or was at least written by someone who had access to accurate information. The letter described Sullivan very well and stated the approximate amount of money he was carrying, as well as the brand of his camera. I worked with Nelson and the Embassy Regional Security Office to set up a meeting with the letter writer at a location that could be watched and where an armed response would be possible were she to be threatened. No one showed up for the meeting, and I am not aware that the author was ever identified. In the letter, he said he was a corporal in the Treasury Police.

³⁰ This event is discussed in detail below.

³¹ "Chargé d' Affaires, a.i." translates from the French as "In charge of business in the interim." The embassy has only two positions with duties related to all activities of all agencies, the ambassador and his number two, the deputy chief of mission (DCM). When the ambassador is out of the country for any reason, the DCM automatically becomes Chargé.

³² NODIS is an exceptionally narrow diplomatic channel. The cable is dated 1981 San Salvador 0096, 6 January 1981; declassified and released, July 12, 2006.

Salvador. Their aim was to “destabilize the country and overthrow the junta, and using their tactics, bombing factories and offices, kidnaping businessmen ... The object is to terrorize those who are still working for a moderate outcome ... and impose a rightist dictatorship.” According to Dion’s report, the grand plan was to wreck the economy and bring to power a “good military officer who will carry out a total cleansing, killing three or four or five hundred thousand people, whatever it takes to get rid of all the communists and their allies.” Then the country could be reconstructed on a new foundation with property rights secured forever. Dion closed his cable with a plea for Washington to do something about the fact that all this was taking place “in a major American city.” Dion’s cable had no discernable effect. Most of the individuals named continued to live in Miami.

- On January 10, 1981, the FMLN announced its “final offensive.” Their aim most likely was to establish operational control over the Department of Morazán in the far northeast of the country. The FMLN believed they would spark a widespread uprising and, by declaring the northeast a “liberated zone,” secure international recognition. The mass uprising did not materialize and the final offensive fizzled.
- As incontrovertible evidence came in that Nicaragua was supporting the FMLN with arms, and with only days remaining in office, the Carter administration found itself astride a dilemma:
- On the one hand, they faced a Salvadoran government whose forces were involved in wholesale and egregious human rights abuses; these forces had murdered American citizens and were barely pretending to carry out investigations of the murders.
- On the other, it was no longer possible to believe this was a purely internal Salvadoran issue. Arms smuggled from Nicaragua into El Salvador were fueling the “final offensive.”

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Figuratively on his way out the door, President Carter signed the finding that again permitted military assistance to El Salvador.

It was Reagan's problem now.

V. The Reagan Administration

Just as Ronald Reagan took the oath of office, the hostages from the U.S. embassy in Tehran left Iranian airspace. Although it was the Iranians who had timed this to inflict maximum humiliation on President Carter, it almost seemed that the sunny, optimistic President Reagan had made it happen.

The embrace of El Salvador's junta was not an inescapable priority for Congress or the public. The Reagan administration chose to make it so. Yes, El Salvador was nearby, but the purely military case was hard to make. The administration effectively made El Salvador the global symbol of America leading the West, stopping or even rolling back communist totalitarians.

Since the Iron Curtain descended, the right-most elements of the Republican Party had denounced the actions of presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and their administrations as sell-outs to the Soviet Union and communism. To many, the subsequent gains of the communists in China, Cuba, and most recently Vietnam showed communism advancing inexorably. They saw an obvious line from Yalta to San Salvador.

The foreign policy team, headed by National Security Advisor Richard V. Allen, considered Carter's foreign policy a failure on its face and intended to change things quickly. Secretary of State Al Haig spoke of "drawing a line in the sand" and "going to the source" (i.e., Cuba).³³

The overall view of the Reagan administration can be gleaned by the following excerpts from talking points sent by National Security Council staffers Alfonso Sapia-Bosch and Oliver North to National

³³ Haig frequently used this term. The meaning was the Cuba was the source of revolutionary activity in Latin America. See "Why U.S. Has Cuba Jitters," *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 18, 1981, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1981/1118/111835.html/%28page%29/2>.

Security Advisor William P. Clark on April 13, 1983.³⁴ The points were intended for Clark to use in his effort to persuade U.S. Representative Edward P. Boland (D-MA) to revise pending legislation so as to permit funding for the Nicaraguan contras:

We have not added to instability in the region. The Nicaraguans began their activities shortly after assuming power in July 1979. Had the U.S. not become involved, we would have already lost El Salvador; Honduras would be on the way; and Guatemala would be next. ...

If we withdraw our support from the Contras now, we stand to destroy the credibility we have been rebuilding since Vietnam. Not only will we be accused of standing in the way of freedom, liberty, and democracy, but the Soviets and the Cubans will have new opportunities to step up their involvement in the area. This fact will not be missed on [sic] those in the Mideast and NATO, who are watching this situation closely as a measure of U.S. resolve and commitment.

A. Personnel Initiative

The first order of business was to get Carter administration holdovers out of the way. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White was removed almost immediately. All the Latin America staffers on the National Security Council were removed, and no Foreign Service officers were named to replace them.³⁵ Several officers in the Office of Central American Affairs at the State Department were reassigned. The new Latin America team was headed by Assistant Secretary of State for Interamerican Affairs Thomas O. Enders, a career officer who had never

³⁴ Declassified July 25, 2013.

³⁵ Many in the Reagan administration, especially on the National Security Council staff, considered Foreign Service officers to be unreliable liberals until proven otherwise.

served in Latin America and spoke no Spanish. State's new director of Central American Affairs, L. Craig Johnstone, was new to the region, having previously served in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Within days of White's removal, the administration dispatched Fredric L. Chapin (who had been on detail to the Department of Defense) as Chargé d'Affaires in El Salvador.³⁶ Two weeks later, they nominated Senior Foreign Service Officer Deane R. Hinton, who had served on the National Security Council staff during the Nixon administration and who had previously served as ambassador to Zaire and as assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs.

B. Military and Diplomatic Initiatives

Military teams were dispatched to El Salvador almost immediately. Their purpose was to determine the scope and priority for assistance. The Reagan administration understood that military assistance was an urgent necessity; but also knew full well that military assistance alone would be insufficient.

On February 17, 1981, four weeks to the day after the administration took office, Secretary of State Alexander Haig briefed the ambassadors of the NATO countries plus Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Spain.

Following are some excerpts from that briefing:³⁷

A well-orchestrated international Communist campaign designed to transform the Salvadoran crisis from the internal conflict to an increasingly internationalized confrontation is under

³⁶ This was understood to be temporary. White had been relieved and a new ambassador would have to gain Senate concurrence. A Chargé does not require Senate approval.

³⁷ The following material appeared in the *New York Times* on 21 January 1981. The fact that the extended excerpts are verbatim and include off-the-record material indicates that this was almost certainly an "authorized leak."

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way. With Cuban coordination, the Soviet bloc, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and radical Arabs are furnishing at least several hundred tons of military equipment to the Salvadoran leftist insurgents. Most of this equipment, not all but most, has entered via Nicaragua, and this morning we will be briefing you in some detail on the intelligence we have gathered and which we consider irrefutable.

I want to emphasize that the Government in El Salvador is a coalition, headed by a true Christian Democrat, Napoleon Duarte. It includes moderate military and independent civilians.

I also want to emphasize and know you are aware that El Salvador and its Government have been plagued by dissension. Nevertheless, despite terrorist attacks from both left and right, it has proceeded with a reform program and does offer some hope for the future. ...

The extreme left has thus far failed to topple the existing Government in El Salvador. The revolutionaries' recent large military operation has failed. We have also seen the dwindling support in the popular sector for the revolutionaries. The left is increasingly under Marxist domination and Cuban influence, and it has clearly opted for a military solution. The Communist nations intervened in 1980 to provide the insurgents with large amounts of military supplies, and we have evidence outlining this in detail, which we will give you this morning.

During the first weeks of this administration we have taken a number of steps to deal with this situation. After, and only after, the external intervention, we furnished the Salvadoran Government the additional military assistance it urgently needs to meet the threat of the Cuban-supported guerrillas. There were no lethal military supplies before that—none—until large-scale military attacks had been executed. We are also continuing to disburse the \$63 million in fiscal year 1981 economic aid which was already programmed for El Salvador, and we are now conducting an extensive interagency study to determine what additional support

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may be necessary in the near future. We will be consulting further with you from time to time on this. We believe additional help is needed. ...

The Communist countries are orchestrating an intensive international disinformation campaign to cover their intervention while discrediting the Salvadoran Government and American support for that Government.

As most of you know, we are sending representatives to Europe and Latin America to present the evidence of a Communist involvement and to seek support and understanding for our actions. Over the next few weeks I will be meeting with key foreign leaders, as they visit Washington, to discuss the issue in greater detail.

Our most urgent objective is to stop the large flow of arms through Nicaragua into El Salvador. We consider what is happening is part of the global Communist campaign coordinated by Havana and Moscow to support the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador.

The policy implications are already clear: First, the U.S.G. [United States Government] supports and will continue to support the present Government in El Salvador. We intend to work with that Government with the objective of achieving social justice and stability in that strife-torn country.

Second, the U.S.G. is convinced that neither stability nor social justice in El Salvador is possible as long as Communist subversion continues.

Third, we will not remain passive in the face of this Communist challenge, a systematic, well-financed, sophisticated effort to impose a Communist regime in Central America.

This effort involves close coordination by Moscow, satellite capitals and Havana, with the cooperation of Hanoi and Managua. It is a repetition of the pattern we have already seen in

Angola and Ethiopia, and, I may add, elsewhere. It is a threat, in our view, not just to the United States but to the West at large.

We have not yet decided on the precise steps we will take to deal with the situation; we will, however, in some way have to deal with the immediate source of the problem—and that is Cuba.

Off the record, I wish to assure you we do not intend to have another Vietnam and engage ourselves in another bloody conflict where the source rests outside the target area.

We believe in all sincerity we have no alternative but to act to prevent forces hostile to the U.S. and the West from overthrowing a government on our doorstep, particularly when that government offers the best hope of progress toward moderate democracy.

Q. Will a copy of this briefing be made available to us?

A. Not at the moment. We are in a consulting phase with many of your governments and the bipartisan leadership in Congress. We are faced with a four-legged stool:

One leg is what we should do in manifesting support of and encouraging reform in El Salvador.

The second leg is the problem of Nicaragua and the urgent need to put an end to the illicit arms traffic to El Salvador from Nicaragua—a country which has received millions of dollars in U.S. economic support.

The third leg I would call the external disinformation campaign designed to paint the revolutionary effort as distinctively apart from outside interventionist activity.

The fourth leg is the problem of Cuba. We do not anticipate dealing with that situation in the historic sense of what we did in Vietnam. We are studying a number of alternatives. I have nothing further to add on this except to assure you that we see happening here in El Salvador what happened in Africa and Southwest Asia—

and that is dangerous not only for the U.S. but for all nations that share our values.

Obviously the purpose of this briefing is to share with you the facts we have uncovered. As you know, it has been my strong belief that we cannot hope to consult and coordinate unless we have the same basis of facts. Thus I hope that your governments would consider these facts and that they would not do anything against what the U.S. is trying to do until they had looked at this information.

Q. You said that you would not repeat Vietnam, that you would get at the source of the problem. Could you elaborate?

A. Only to emphasize that we are studying various sources of information. I would not want your reporting to show our position as overly dramatic.

Q. Has Moscow been apprised of your concern?

A. I think you know there have been exchanges. Yes, there have been a number of exchanges with Ambassador Dobrynin. There has also been—I say it because it has been in the press—with Gromyko. There is a growing concern over Soviet risk-taking. There is concern over the situation in Poland.³⁸

Q. You did not mention the adjacent countries.

A. We have, for example, conveyed to the Government of Panama the information conveyed in this briefing, but without the same degree of specificity. I know that these governments are aware of our increasing concern about intervention—above all, Cuban.

Q. Is there a time deadline?

A. No, and I think it most appropriate that there not be. I think you are aware of the provision of the U.S. law, which is relevant to the case of Nicaragua, that countries that engage in external

³⁸ At the time Haig was speaking, the Solidarity movement was beginning to make a serious, concerted challenge to communist rule. —D.H.

intervention must lose U.S. economic assistance and even must pay back what has been already provided. We have brought this to the attention of the Nicaraguans and given them time to consider. They have assured us they would stop infiltration, but given past history we are skeptical.

Q. What is the balance between the guerrillas and the Government?

A. The guerrillas have not achieved public support. There is a hard core of 4,000, about a quarter of the strength of Salvador's security force. The effort to overthrow the regime in January was a failure.

Now the guerrillas are in nodes of resistance around the country, including in selective assassination of Government officials. The situation is under reasonable control, but there is always the possibility of further external intervention along the lines of what happened in Ethiopia.³⁹ And there is also the possibility of Nicaraguan intervention.

C. A Legislative Offensive

Congressional support was essential for the most basic of all reasons. For the executive branch to work on any problem requires that any administration have two things that only Congress can provide. The first is *authorization* to conduct an activity. Authorizations are generally broad, but every activity must be authorized and the authorizing committee(s) can shut down almost any program. The key authorizing committees for El Salvador were the same as for most international activities: foreign affairs/foreign relations, armed services, and intelligence.

The second, and perhaps even more important, is an *appropriation*. The appropriations committees dole out money to the various departments

³⁹ In 1977, Cuba, with Soviet backing, put thousands of Cuban troops in Ethiopia. — D.H.

of government. They can use their constitutional power⁴⁰ to control federal policies and practices in as much detail as they wish. For example, they could say something like “no funds made available under this appropriation shall be used to arm, equip, train, or otherwise assist the police or armed forces of El Salvador.”

D. A Public Affairs Offensive

Understandably, many Reagan administration officials were in the news. They blanketed the (then) three major networks and CNN. Secretary of State Haig was the most prominent, but none left anyone doubting that El Salvador was the administration’s number-one foreign policy priority.

While the Reagan administration moved quickly on the diplomatic, military (assistance): and political/congressional fronts, the political/congressional piece could not be sustained without the support of the American people.⁴¹ Here, the left was way out front. Salvadoran Farid Handal founded the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, better known as CISPES,⁴² while he was touring the U.S. to drum up opposition to Carter administration support for the junta. Farid Handal is the brother of Schafik Handal. Schafik was the head of the Communist Party of El Salvador and led it into armed opposition and participation in the Unified Revolutionary Directorate, which under Castro’s tutelage became the FMLN.

⁴⁰ (art. I. § 9) says: “No money shall be drawn from the treasury, but in consequence of appropriations made by law.”

⁴¹ This is more than junior-high civics. If the American people will not support, or at least acquiesce to, a program, it will lose funding.

⁴² It is hard to document Farid Handal as the founder, but there is no doubt that Handal was in the U.S. at the time CISPES was founded.

Fueled by outrages such as the murder of Archbishop Romero and the American nuns,⁴³ CISPES chapters opened in many cities around the U.S. The CISPES chapters became a potent (but not overwhelming) force. They vociferously opposed support for the Salvadoran government and carried out classic protests, such as occupying the Chicago office of Illinois Senator Charles Percy. CISPES chapters were frequently associated with churches.

Most CISPES supporters were unaware of the organization's links to Salvador's Communist Party and the FMLN. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which was aware of this link, twice investigated CISPES. At first, the FBI wanted to see if CISPES was an "agent of a foreign power" and thus forced to register with the Justice Department. The other investigation looked into possible support for terrorism. In both cases, the FBI found no criminal activity. As an inevitable consequence of these investigations, a lot of perfectly innocent Americans ended up being identified in FBI investigative files.⁴⁴

Inside the National Security Council and in the foreign affairs agencies, "public diplomacy" strategies were being drafted, reviewed, and redrafted. Projects undreamed of for many years, such as adding Voice of America transmitters, were suddenly welcome.

The Administration had no ready mechanism to counterbalance CISPES. But they did have their bully pulpits, as with this March 19, 1981 CNN interview of Secretary of State Al Haig:

What we are watching is a four-phased operation of which phase one has already been completed—the seizure of Nicaragua, next

⁴³ The U.S. Embassy always used the term "churchwomen" because three of the four murdered women were nuns. The fourth, Jean Donovan, was a religious lay worker. For reasons of familiarity and convenience, this paper will henceforward use "nuns."

⁴⁴ Predictably, it came to light that the FBI was taking down the license numbers in the parking lots of Unitarian churches. The FBI got slapped around for this, but they were doing their job.

is El Salvador, to be followed by Honduras and Guatemala. It's clear and explicit. ... I wouldn't call it necessarily a domino theory. I would call it a priority target list—a hit list, if you will—for the ultimate takeover of Central America.⁴⁵

What the administration did not have was a way of using official funds to conduct systematic lower-level outreach, as a political campaign might do—and as the FMLN was already doing via CISPES.

The government agency most capable of doing so was the U.S. Information Agency (USIA).⁴⁶ But USIA was forbidden by law to undertake any activity directed to American citizens.⁴⁷ In 1983, the administration created a special office at the State Department—S/LPD. The “S” indicated that it was a direct bureaucratic dependency of the Secretary of State; the “LPD” stood for Latin American Public Diplomacy. Although the S/LPD was housed at the State Department, it was effectively controlled by Lt. Col. Oliver North's office at the National Security Council. S/LPD worked to persuade the American people of the wisdom of supporting the government of El Salvador and of opposing the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. S/LPD was disbanded after the Iran–Contra affair, when investigators questioned the legal authority for S/LPD's actions.

This public affairs offensive was not window dressing. With broad public outrage in the U.S. over the murder of the American nuns and all the other horror stories coming out of El Salvador, American public and congressional opinion, never far out of sync, were of profound

⁴⁵ For more information, see B. Gwertzman, “Haig Cites ‘Hit List’ for Soviet Control of Central America,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/19/world/haig-cites-hit-list-for-soviet-control-of-central-america.html>

⁴⁶ Later absorbed into the State Department.

⁴⁷ Forbidding programming directed to U.S. citizens was intended to prevent taxpayer funds intended to influence foreigners from being diverted to partisan advantage for any incumbent administration.

importance. The Reagan administration had, with eyes wide open, chosen to make El Salvador an issue. Theodore Roosevelt was right about the presidency being a “bully pulpit”; every president has the power to call attention to a subject. What a president cannot do is determine what the press and public will see and say once they start examining that same subject. The administration had to convince the American people that this was important, that it was the right thing to do, and that it was “winnable.” At no point did public affairs take a back seat to the other elements of Salvador policy.

All the this activity provoked notice and a call for caution. A *New York Times* editorial summed up the situation:

Can it be that there's method in the madness of tying President Reagan's prestige to that of a junta in a coffee-bean republic?

In a flash, the El Salvador junta's struggle against 4,000 guerrillas has been made front-page news. The Kremlin is told that fateful negotiations over nuclear arms depend on that junta's success. Diplomats tour the world warning that whoever does not side with America in this effort invites retribution. Cuba has been threatened with blockade, and Mexico has been thus provoked into a show of sympathy for Cuba. All this for El Salvador?

There can be only one rational explanation. Mr. Reagan foresees a quick win over the guerrillas and wants to advertise American muscle by making an exhibition game look like a World Series triumph ...

The junta may need more economic aid. But to lavish weapons on it now will only strengthen the right-wing extremists in its ranks, the ones who have been frustrating social justice and land reform and turning peasants into rebels ...

That effort requires not bellicosity in Washington but shrewd diplomacy by all the Caribbean democracies, notably Mexico and Venezuela. Without an effective political program,

Mr. Reagan's ostentatious strutting in a place of no strategic moment will indeed impress the world, but not in the way he intends.⁴⁸

Who won the public affairs offensive? The Reagan administration has to be counted as the winner. The administration got what it wanted and needed from Congress to carry out its policies, and the policy was more of a success than a failure. But the costs in damaged credibility and proper understanding of events linger. A cruise through the Internet will turn up thousands of pages of reporting and commentary outlining human rights abuses and war crimes in El Salvador and claims of misdeeds by U.S. officials. There is scant discussion of the misdeeds of the left. The fact of communist countries supplying arms is skipped or treated as paranoid fantasy. Little is said of FMLN rights abuses—including the murder of surrendered soldiers. If El Salvador comes up in popular entertainment, it is invariably cited not as the place where communism stopped, but as a horror story of U.S.-supported death squads, dead priests and nuns, and shorthand for U.S. misdeeds.

Communism has failed and El Salvador is a democracy, but CISPES still exists and has expanded its scope to include solidarity with Venezuela.

⁴⁸ "Psychodrama in El Salvador," *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/27/opinion/psychodrama-in-el-salvador.html>

VI. Policy to Practice

As the Reagan administration set out to reverse the grim situation in El Salvador, abstractions became actionable. How do you put concepts such as “a 55-man limit” or “equipped for combat” or “hostilities are imminent” into practice?

A. The War Powers Act

Of all these vague issues, none was more important or urgent than clarifying the War Powers Act. The Act was enacted in 1973 over President Nixon’s veto. Its purpose was to limit any president’s powers to send U.S. forces into battle without the explicit consent of Congress. To give a president the authority to respond to immediate threats without the entanglement of immediate congressional approval, presidents were permitted to deploy troops for a time without reporting. Many of its provisions were unclear and had never really been tested in court—and still have not. A Congressional Research Service unclassified analysis⁴⁹ in March of 2004 included a section on El Salvador:

El Salvador: When Are Military Advisers in Imminent Hostilities?

One of the first cases to generate substantial controversy because it was never reported under the War Powers Resolution was the dispatch of U.S. military advisers to El Salvador. At the end of February 1981, the Department of State announced the dispatch of 20 additional military advisers to El Salvador to aid its government against guerilla warfare. There were already 19 military advisers in El Salvador sent by the Carter Administration.

⁴⁹ Perkins, Gerald M., ed., “The War Powers Resolution: After Thirty Years” (Hauppauge, NY: Novinka Books, 2005), pp. 11-12, <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RL32267.html>.

The Reagan Administration said the insurgents were organized and armed by Soviet bloc countries, particularly Cuba. By March 14, the Administration had authorized a total of 54 advisers, including experts in combat training.

The President did not report the situation under the War Powers Resolution. A State Department memorandum said a report was not required because the U.S. personnel were not being introduced into hostilities or situations of imminent hostilities. The memorandum asserted that if a change in circumstances occurred that raised the prospect of imminent hostilities, the Resolution would be complied with. A justification for not reporting under section 4(a)(2) was that the military personnel being introduced were not equipped for combat. They would, it was maintained, carry only personal sidearms that they were authorized to use only in their own defense or the defense of other Americans.

The State Department held that section 8(c) of the War Powers Resolution was not intended to require a report when U.S. military personnel might be involved in training foreign military personnel, if there were no imminent involvement of U.S. personnel in hostilities. In the case of El Salvador, the memorandum said, U.S. military personnel “will not act as combat advisers, and will not accompany Salvadoran forces in combat, on operational patrols, or in any other situation where combat is likely.”

On May 1, 1981, 11 members of Congress challenged the president's action by filing suit on the grounds that he had violated the Constitution and the War Powers Resolution by sending the advisers to El Salvador. Eventually there were 29 co-plaintiffs, but by June 18, 1981, an equal number of Members (13 Senators and 16 Representatives) filed a motion to intervene in the suit, contending that a number of legislative measures were then pending before Congress and that Congress had ample opportunity to vote to end military assistance to El Salvador if it wished.

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On October 4, 1982, U.S. District Court Judge Joyce Hens Green dismissed the suit. She ruled that Congress, not the court, must resolve the question of whether the U.S. forces in El Salvador were involved in a hostile or potentially hostile situation. While there might be situations in which a court could conclude that U.S. forces were involved in hostilities, she ruled, the “subtleties of fact-finding in this situation should be left to the political branches.” She noted that Congress had taken no action to show it believed the President's decision was subject to the War Powers Resolution. On November 18, 1983, a Federal circuit court affirmed the dismissal and on June 8, 1984, the Supreme Court declined consideration of an appeal of that decision.

As the involvement continued and casualties occurred among the U.S. military advisers, various legislative proposals relating to the War Powers Resolution and El Salvador were introduced. Some proposals required a specific authorization prior to the introduction of U.S. forces into hostilities or combat in El Salvador. Other proposals declared that the commitment of U.S. Armed Forces in El Salvador necessitated compliance with section 4(a) of the War Powers Resolution, requiring the President to submit a report.

Neither approach was adopted in legislation, but the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported that the President had “a clear obligation under the War Powers Resolution to consult with Congress prior to any future decision to commit combat forces to El Salvador.” On July 26, 1983, the House rejected an amendment to the Defense Authorization bill (H.R. 2969) to limit the number of active duty military advisers in El Salvador to 55, unless the President reported any increase above that level under section 4(a)(1) of the War Powers Resolution. Nevertheless, the Administration in practice kept the number of trainers at 55.

As this *ex post facto* CRS compilation makes clear, the War Powers Act and the Reagan administration's careful avoidance of its triggers guided military action in El Salvador in two critical ways. First, it created the 55-man limit on the size of the MILGRP. Although this limit never had the force of law, it became an informal but honored deal between the administration and Congress: Keep it at 55 and we the leadership will not seek a confrontation over the War Powers Act. The second was the administration's pledge to Congress that U.S. military personnel "will not act as combat advisors, and will not accompany Salvadoran forces in combat, on operational patrols, or in any other situation where combat is likely." This second pledge defined the operational boundaries for U.S. personnel.

B. "The 55-Man Limit"

Congress and the administration had agreed to this limit with little discussion or rancor. This was something like a handshake deal. When some members attempted to write it into law, they failed.

This seems like the way policy and politics ought to work. Honorable individuals of two branches of government and two parties decide what the issue is—we want to avoid creeping from training and advice to full-scale involvement à la Vietnam. How do you do it? You keep the numbers too small to get into real trouble. What size is that?

The 55-man limit, in which so many put so much stock (and many thought was the law of the land) was arbitrary and had been reached in offhand fashion. The exchange, which took place in a public hearing, went something like this:

Congress: *How many men do you plan on sending down there?*

Administration: *Not many.*

Congress: *How many are there right now?*

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Administration (after checking with staff present at the hearing):

About 55.

Congress: *Do you think you can live with that?*

Administration (after further checking with staff): *Yes.*

That was it. Rumors that the limit had been inspired by the previous nationwide speed limit of 55 mph were false.

So far, so good.

But which military personnel were to be counted in the 55-man limit?

Surely Congress did not mean to count the Defense Attaché's staff, did they? Marine Security Guards? What about the MILGRP permanent party of six? If you counted all the military personnel in the embassy, you would already be close to the limit.

Rules about who counted were roughed out, mostly at the embassy, and then vetted informally with the administration and Congress. Here is what emerged:

- Defense Attachés and their support staff did not count.
- Marine Security Guards did not count.
- Seabees, who periodically serviced or installed technical security equipment around the embassy, did not count.
- After a few years, permanent party at the MILGRP did not count.
- Brief moments during a single day did not count, but remaining overnight (RON) did.

That meant that the 55 men were TDY military personnel who came to El Salvador to conduct military training, essentially all MTTs.

MILGRP staff took this seriously. The executive officer kept the tally. From time to time, some MTT member (or entire team) would get an urgent instruction: "We are up against the limit. We have got some personnel arriving this afternoon on an urgent mission. Go to Ilopango Air

Base and take the C-130 to Panama. No mistakes, if you miss the flight we are over the limit. Stay at Southcom until we send for you.”

With time, the rules were eased.

The six-man permanent party in the MILGRP was insufficient to support all the movement of all the supplies and MTTs flowing into the country. Congress was notified, did not object, and the staff was increased to 12.

After about 18 months, it became obvious that Salvadoran soldiers injured on the battlefield were dying or becoming permanently disabled because Salvadoran battlefield medics were insufficient in numbers and deficient in training. The U.S. had the capacity to train them, but did not have a means to do so within the 55-man limit. Eventually Congress informally agreed to exclude members of a medical MTT from the count.

All this was possible because it became clear the administration was operating in good faith. MTT members were not being sent on combat missions (and when a few did, they were disciplined and sent home). Similarly neither the MILGRP nor the broader mission⁵⁰ was attempting to sneak in off-the-books personnel.

In time, the 55-man limit ceased to be a topic of anything more than minor administrative interest. Congress became confident that their insistence on this point was respected, and its demands for head-count reports dwindled.

El Salvador specialists at State and Defense came to regard the limit as a blessing. The hard ceiling on personnel effectively and permanently closed off any chance of “Americanizing” the fight. No bureaucratic or political blood was spilled trying to ward off unwelcome

⁵⁰ The “mission” spoken of here and henceforward, unless context makes another meaning clear, follows State Department usage and means the embassy as a whole, the “diplomatic mission.” Understanding that all executive branch personnel were part of the embassy—that is, the diplomatic mission—is essential. Everyone at the mission worked for the ambassador before anyone else. The term of art is “under chief-of-mission authority.”

pressures for American troops to do more. The Green Berets, Rangers, and SEALs who ran the program knew of T.E. Lawrence's dictum about "eating soup with a knife,"⁵¹ and the 55-man limit removed the temptation to ignore Lawrence's rule "just this once."

The limit also brought an even subtler but perhaps more valuable benefit: The military personnel assigned to the MTTs, especially the most senior officers, were generally excellent. With a ceiling of 12 permanent party and 55 with non-medical MTTs, MILGRP commanders were able to request, and often received, the very best our military had to offer. At least in the early going, the caliber of MTT personnel, including Spanish-speakers, was clearly exceptional.⁵²

C. Equipped for Combat?

The New York Times

February 14, 1982

U.S. TELLS OFFICER WHO CARRIED RIFLE TO LEAVE SALVADOR

After CNN aired video of five U.S. military personnel dressed in Hawaiian shirts or guayaberas, carrying M-16 rifles, the fact was briefly in

⁵¹ As the story goes, T.E. Lawrence (a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia) said that it was important to let foreign forces do things themselves. He acknowledged that this might be messy, "like eating soup with a knife."

⁵² This view is not universal. On March 29, 1988, the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard University sponsored the "Small Wars Symposium: The Case of El Salvador." This seminar was based on a paper presented by LTC A.J. Bacevitch, LTC James D. Hallums, LTC Richard H. White, and LTC Thomas F. Young entitled "American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador." The paper (sometimes called "The Four Colonels Report") suggested that the military did not properly recognize those who served in El Salvador. See Bacevitch et al., "American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador" (Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1988).

the fire—and the flames reached the Oval Office. On February 12, 1982, President Reagan ordered an investigation of the incident.

On February 13, Ambassador Deane Hinton, acting on his authority as the president's personal representative in El Salvador, ordered Lt. Colonel Harry Melander to leave El Salvador. Hinton said that Lt. Col. Melander was "a first-class officer who made a mistake." Melander had been in Usulután province with four other officers to visit and perhaps to help Salvadoran soldiers repair a bridge that had been blown up by the FMLN. The other officers were given what Ambassador Hinton described as "firm, oral reprimands."⁵³

While swift public action kept this from becoming a major incident, two ill effects were created: First, the U.S. military's media-averse habits were reinforced, and, second, the idea was established in the press corps and other places that a soldier carrying an M-16 was on a combat mission. It seemed to go right over everyone's head that no professional soldier would voluntarily go into combat wearing khakis and a Hawaiian shirt.

Taped to the inside of MILGRP Commander John Waghelstein's door was an 8"×10" photo of Senator Nancy Kassenbaum (R-Kansas) walking down a Salvadoran street. She was in El Salvador to observe the March 1982 elections. Walking alongside her was a bodyguard from the State Department's Diplomatic Security bureau. He wore a fine pinstriped suit and carried a loaded M-16 with his hand on the pistol grip and the butt cradled in his elbow. Stuck to the photo was a red ribbon impressed with the embassy's official seal (borrowed for the occasion from the consul general). The caption below the photo read: "State Department Award for who gets to carry M-16s in El Salvador."

As things played out in practice, MILGRP personnel were the only members of the mission whose armaments were restricted by anything

⁵³ Bonner, Raymond, "U.S. Tells Officer Who Carried Rifle to Leave Salvador," New York Times Feb. 13, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/14/world/us-tells-officer-who-carried-rifle-to-leave-salvador.html>.

other than common sense. Many, perhaps most, mission members carried handguns with varying degrees of concealment. Long guns at home or in a vehicle were commonplace.

Sometimes participating in a farce is the price you pay for doing your job.

Most military trainers and MILGRP staff carried a pistol in one of the barely big enough “man purses” widely available at the time. The small bags were, at a time when sexual orientation was completely unprotected in the military (and almost everywhere else): called “fag bags.” They were popular not only with the MILGRP but with many Salvadoran civilians. Sitting in a restaurant, one might see conservatively dressed businessmen put their small bag down on the table and hear a resounding *THUNK* from the completely obvious contents.

By early 1983, the question of M-16s or other personal weapons was coming to be recognized for its essential silliness. During one of his regular meetings with the press, MILGRP Commander Waghelstein was asked if he felt a .45 was sufficient protection. He responded by saying, “I carry a gym bag. There is a piece of Israeli steel in the bag. When that steel gets nervous, it stutters in Hebrew.” None of the journalists thought it newsworthy to write that our soldiers did not limit themselves to pistols.

All discussions about how MILGRP members might be permitted protect themselves ended on May 25, 1983. That is when MILGRP Executive Officer Lt. Cmdr. Albert A. Schaufelberger, Jr. was assassinated on the campus of the Central American University. From then on, MILGRP personnel armed themselves as they saw fit.

D. “Where Is the Combat Zone?”

The New York Times

U.S. MILITARY ADVISERS ARE FOUND IN A COMBAT ZONE IN EL SALVADOR

By RAYMOND BONNER

SAN MARCOS LEMPA, El Salvador, June 23—In an apparent violation of restrictions governing their activities in El Salvador, American military advisers were encountered in a combat area on the Lempa River here today.

Salvadoran soldiers said they had seen the Americans carry M-16 automatic rifles. State Department regulations prohibit them from carrying automatic rifles or being in combat zones.

Two Salvadoran soldiers guarding the Lempa River Bridge here, 40 miles southeast of San Salvador, said the armed Americans were seen at the bridge Tuesday and this morning. There was sporadic firing of automatic weapons and the thud of mortars as an O-2 spotter plane circled overhead.

Salvadoran soldiers patrolled in the fields and along the highway where a bus was burning. They said guerrillas had attacked the bus in the morning. The rebel radio said Tuesday that traffic along the highway would be subject to attack beginning today.⁵⁴

The final two paragraphs of the story carried the embassy response:

In San Salvador, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy, Don Hamilton, said on being told by the reporters what he had seen on the Lempa River:

“We are now investigating. If the guidelines have been violated, appropriate action will be taken.” In February, an Army officer, Lieut. Col. Harry Melander, was sent home after he had

⁵⁴ Bonner, Raymond, “U.S. Military Advisers Are Found in a Combat Zone in El Salvador,” New York Times, June 23, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/24/world/us-military-advisers-are-found-in-a-combat-zone-in-el-salvador.html>.

been seen carrying an M-16, and four other Americans received reprimands.⁵⁵

This story raises a number of issues about fair reportage and government honesty:

- **Tendentiousness** (“in apparent violation”): The facts in the story (aside from technical assertions noted below) are narrowly correct, but the article as a whole seems designed to demonstrate that U.S. soldiers were in combat.
- **Questionable assertions** (“encountered in a combat area”): What is a “combat area”? The U.S. Embassy itself had been rocketed and strafed about two dozen times at this point. On the other hand, the bridge on the Rio Lempa was unquestionably more volatile than the capital.
- **Lack of precision**: There was never a “State Department regulation” prohibiting U.S. military personnel from “being in combat zones.” This is a technicality, but technicalities matter. Regulations on these issues came from the U.S. ambassador and amounted to embassy regulations conveyed from the president’s personal representative down through the chain of command. No area of El Salvador was off-limits to military personnel or anyone else. They were under orders to avoid combat. The best test was simple: Were American soldiers going “in harm’s way”? Were they accompanying Salvadorans on combat operations?
- **Sourcing**: One must read the article closely to discover that while reporters saw two U.S. soldiers in fatigues in military camp, accounts of the soldiers firing weapons are secondhand.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

- **Man on a mission:** One element of the story says a “van with reporters” pulled up to the military camp. No other reporters considered the “story” to be worth reporting.

Several weeks later, at the farewell party for the MILGRP exec as he left for onward assignment, he confessed to the PAO that he had lied.⁵⁶ There had been an attack by the guerrillas and the sergeant had participated in repelling the attack.

The PAO did not conceal his anger. His credibility and that of the embassy had been at stake. There had been nothing to hide; the sergeant was defending himself when he came under attack in the course of training Salvadoran military personnel. But now there was something to hide—misleading the *New York Times*.

The lieutenant colonel was apologetic, but defended his action: “I did not know you then ... was not sure I could trust you.” He went on to say that the sergeant had reported the incident, but that he, the lieutenant colonel, had decided to shelve the matter, to say nothing to anyone.

The PAO was hardly assuaged: “If you play straight with me, I can handle just about anything short of criminality. You have put the mission at risk by lying to me. We could have announced self-defense and stood our ground.”

Nothing further happened with regard to the incident, which passed as simply another case of he-said/she-said.

If the PAO had known before Bonner’s call and perhaps after, he could likely have persuaded the ambassador to let him make a preemptive announcement, something like: “While conducting training, a U.S. soldier and his Salvadoran trainees came under fire. He and his trainees returned fire. There were no casualties.” Such an announcement, either preemptively or in response to a question, makes a circumstance seem less secretive and sinister. Were a formal announcement made, it would have

⁵⁶ Source is direct personal experience of the author.

gone to all available media, taking away the *Times* exclusive—an announcement is less interesting than a media “discovery.”

Flare-ups about American military personnel being in “combat zones” notwithstanding, the media, Congress, and everyone else came to understand within about a year that there were no “combat zones” in El Salvador.

There were areas where guerrilla activity was very high or persistent, but the Salvadoran Army could and did go anywhere in the country. When they entered an area of strong guerrilla influence, they might encounter small, improvised land mines, booby traps really, but the FMLN had no intention of letting the Salvadoran army maneuver them in a set piece battle. They knew the army would pin them down with infantry and then hammer them with air and artillery.

When they saw the army out in strength, they did what sensible guerrillas do—they melted away.

As the “combat zone” non-issue faded, the real question began to emerge: What are combat operations? This is a sensible and important distinction. From President Reagan on down, no one wanted our troops involved in operations.

E. What Are Combat Operations?

The War of Stanley's Leg

With perhaps 30,000 dead in El Salvador at the time, it is hard to believe that an E-6 with a leg wound would make news around the United States. But it happened. This story, from the *Spokane Chronicle* of February 5, 1983 is typical:

3 Relieved of Duties in El Salvador Injury

WASHINGTON (AP) – Two U.S. warrant officers and a sergeant have been relieved of their duties in El Salvador because of an incident in which another American military adviser was

wounded during a helicopter mission, a Pentagon spokesman said today.

A statement initially released this morning by the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador also disclosed that another American military trainer went on a separate “operational” flight which took ground fire at about the same time. U.S. military advisers have standing orders not to participate in such operations.

Lt. Col. Richard Rapp provided the text of the embassy statement dealing with Wednesday’s incident, in which Staff Sgt. Jay Thomas Stanley, 25, of Towson, Md., suffered a leg wound from ground fire.

Stanley was the first American soldier wounded in El Salvador since U.S. military advisers were sent to the Central American nation in 1981. The force is limited to 55 personnel, but there were 37 advisers in the country Thursday. ...

The embassy said that “as a result of our findings, two warrant officers and one master sergeant have been relieved of their duties by the USMILGROUP (U.S. military advisory group in El Salvador) commander and will leave the country on the next available military aircraft.”⁵⁷

Issues for Discussion:

- Why were the MILGRP and the embassy so forthcoming about a minor injury and administrative relief of two warrant officers and a master sergeant?
- This was a minor thing; why not keep it secret?

⁵⁷ “3 Relieved of Duties in El Salvador Injury,” *Spokane Chronicle*, Feb. 5, 1983, p. 9, http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1345&dat=19830205&id=5epWAAAIBAJ&sjid=c_kDAAAIBAJ&pg=3937,1869902.

- Why publicize punitive reassignments at this level?
- Wouldn't it have been easier to just give everyone involved a good talking to? They would keep their mouths shut.

The ambassador, the MILGRP commander, and the public affairs counselor instinctively knew and agreed that a one-day splash with plenty of facts was better than a story coming out in dribs and drabs. Were the story to get into the press from a non-government source, or worse yet, an unidentified government source, the embassy and by extension the administration would appear to be covering up combat operations by American soldiers. After having assured the Congress and the public that our military was trying to avoid combat, this could affect the entire policy by embarrassing the ambassador and the State Department, the White House, and supporters in Congress.

Keeping it secret would have been harder than it seems. Dozens of Salvadoran personnel, over whom we had no authority, knew of the incident. Some of them had probably been planted on the Salvadoran military by the FMLN. No one wanted them to announce the incident.

The country was crawling with journalists. For U.S. news media, El Salvador was hottest international story. All major U.S. media maintained offices in El Salvador. Not just CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, but AP, UPI, National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* kept correspondents there. Many other news organizations, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and the *Los Angeles Times* spent weeks at a time staffing El Salvador. The Salvadoran elections in 1982 drew about 1,500 foreign journalists on top of those always present. There were no legal constraints on their movements or contacts. Members of the embassy staff encountered journalists in every part of the country, and many journalists embedded themselves with the insurgents for days on end. Journalists also had wide-ranging contacts in the Salvadoran government

and could count on hearing from fellow correspondents at the State Department, the Pentagon, and other bureaus around the world.

These mostly forgotten incidents raise interesting issues:

- Does any element of the U.S. government owe a straight answer to a reporter who shows evidence of bringing bias to a story?
- What about a friendly reporter?
- What were the options for the MILGRP exec?
- What would have happened had he originally come clean with the PAO?

In the charged atmosphere of the time, critics of the policy might have claimed that shooting back showed the inevitability of U.S. personnel becoming involved in combat and drawn into someone else's war. Panicked bureaucrats in Washington might have demanded even tighter restrictions on where trainers could operate. The lack of flexibility would have reduced the effectiveness of the meeting.

VII. With Friends Like These

Everyone assigned to El Salvador, civilian or military, shook bloodstained hands. Sometimes they knew who was a murderer; sometimes they did not. Knowing just how to react was not easy. Further complicating the matter was that individuals seemed to change their behavior with the passage of time. In 1980 and 1981, things were especially violent and, as noted above, the period between Ronald Reagan's election and inauguration was shockingly violent. From 1981 through the end of 1983, murders⁵⁸ were still absurdly high—about 250 death squad killings monthly.

On December 11, 1983, Vice President George H. Bush visited El Salvador for several hours on his return from a visit to Argentina. He met with the Salvadoran High Command and showed them a letter from President Reagan. The vice president did not leave a copy of the letter, and it has not been published. Even so, it is widely known that the letter specified steps the Salvadoran military and government must take to curb death squad violence. Death squad activity dropped precipitously, as did reports of army massacres. In spite of sporadic outrages, death squad murders never again reached the levels of 1982 and 1983.

A. The Nuns

Colonel Eugenio Vides Casanova was commander of the Salvadoran National Guard when the four American churchwomen were raped and murdered by junior⁵⁹ enlisted Guardsmen. Not long after the investigation began, it became clear that the women had been followed from the airport and murdered well before they got to the city. The

⁵⁸ As distinct from legitimate combat deaths.

⁵⁹ The most senior was a sub-sergeant.

embassy quickly determined that the National Guard was organizationally responsible for security at the airport and its environs.

Nor was the nuns' case the only black mark on the National Guard while it was under Colonel Vides's command. The intelligence section of the National Guard was known to the U.S. to be, in effect, a death squad⁶⁰ financed by wealthy Salvadorans who bankrolled multiple murders, including the "Sheraton murders," discussed below.

When the individuals were identified and the U.S. asked for their weapons, the National Guard initially tried to play a shell game with their G-3 rifles. The game failed, and Colonel Vides became extraordinarily helpful with the investigation. Eventually, he was promoted to general and became defense minister. As time went on, those Americans who dealt General Vides found him understanding and helpful. Uniquely among the highest levels of the Salvadoran military, General Vides would privately acknowledge that there was significant corruption in the officer corps and that some officers were involved in death squads.

Immediately following the critical 1984 El Salvadoran presidential elections, now Defense Minister Vides, with the rest of the high command lined up behind him, announced that the military stood 100 percent behind the official results—even though it was widely known that winner José Napoleón Duarte stood to the left of most officers. Vides put it this way in a nationally televised address when he said (approximately): This is not a game of cards where, if you do not like your cards, you can ask for a new deal. We in the Army have put up the blood for these elections and they will stand.

⁶⁰ The *Mano Blanco*

Discussion Questions

- Did Defense Minister Vides come to recognize that there was a better way? That continuous, rampant human rights abuses strengthened the rebels?
- At what point does a person, having failed to lead with integrity, become trustworthy?
- Was Vides simply clever enough to tell the Americans what they wanted to hear?
- Did the U.S. have any choice in this matter?
- Could we have demanded a different defense minister?
- Would it have mattered if we had?

B. The El Mozote Massacre

The Atlacatl Battalion, trained and equipped by the United States and stood up as an “Immediate Reaction Battalion,” was a fierce combat unit. But under its first commander, it was responsible for a major war crime.

In late 1981, the Atlacatl Battalion, operating under the command of Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa, murdered about a thousand people, mostly women and children, in the northern town of El Mozote. The massacre has been investigated many times, and there is little doubt of its scope or the battalion’s responsibility.⁶¹

About three years after El Mozote, Monterrosa was promoted to colonel and given command of the eastern third of the country, the area where guerrilla concentrations were highest and where most of the battles took place. It was hard to believe this man was the author of El Mozote.

⁶¹ “The Report of the Truth Commission to the United Nations” of March 15, 1993 cites then Battalion Commander LTC Domingo Monterrosa Barrios as one of those responsible. The Truth Commission puts the number of those murdered as “over 200.”

His troops routinely passed out soccer balls to kids in villages. When he entered a village, he spoke of the guerrillas not as “communist terrorists” as did most of his fellow officers, but as “errant brothers.” He took prisoners and treated them well. He was eventually killed when the FMLN set a very clever trap for him.

Discussion Questions

- How should Americans respond to Monterrosa, the war criminal?
- How should they respond to Monterrosa, the savvy commander who respected the populace?

C. The Las Hojas Massacre

In early 1983, Colonel Elmer Gonzalez Araujo ordered the battalion he commanded to massacre the inhabitants of Las Hojas, an indigenous agricultural commune in a very quiet area of the country. This massacre had nothing to do with the ongoing war. Colonel Gonzalez was paid by a nearby rancher to take revenge on villagers who objected to having cattle driven across their crops. According to U.S. Embassy Human Rights Officer Eduardo Baez,⁶² up to 74 people were murdered with close-range shots to the head. Gonzales, along with all those charged, was cleared of all wrongdoing.

Colonel Gonzalez was removed from troop command and made chief of procurement for the Salvadoran Army. In that position, he conspired with three American businessmen to repackage expired Yugoslav ammunition as U.S.-manufactured in order to make it eligible for purchase as military assistance. The ruse was discovered when some of the ammunition failed in combat. He was never charged for the murders or for corruption.

⁶² Direct conversation with the author on the day of the event.

Discussion Questions

- Should the U.S. have made representations to the Salvadorans demanding that Col. Gonzalez be prosecuted for the murders?
- Would such demands have been honored?
- How do you keep working with Salvadoran officers who worked against the prosecution of Col. Gonzalez—even after his corrupt procurements led directly to the deaths of Salvadoran soldiers?

D. The Sheraton Murders

The Sheraton murders stand as a signal event in El Salvador's war. These murders, of two Americans and one Salvadoran, illuminate much of the country's dark side. This single case involves death squads, military officers directly involved in cold-blooded murder, and the impunity from prosecution of military personnel and their collaborators for even the most dreadful crimes. The case reveals political interference with the judicial process, the intimidation of witnesses, and the refusal of the military, upon whom we were spending about a half-million dollars every day, to yield to U.S. pressure.

Two American military officers played significant roles in solving the murders.

2337 Saturday 3 January 1981
Salon Las Americas, Hotel Sheraton
San Salvador, El Salvador⁶³

Three men sat alone in the dining room in the Sheraton Hotel. Mark Pearlman and Michael Hammer⁶⁴ were American attorneys working for the American Institute of Free Labor Development (AIFLD). They were guests at the Sheraton and were finishing dinner with José Viera, president of the Salvadoran agrarian reform institute. All were involved in implementing the largest agrarian reform in the history of Central America. The first phase of the reform had been implemented, with huge chunks of the largest estates in the small country turned over to the peasants who had worked the land.

At the entrance to the restaurant, a tall, pale, blond man with wavy hair pointed at the three and gestured with his head. Seconds later, two men dressed in windbreakers came in and pulled two Ingram machine pistols, one 9 mm, the other .45 caliber. They opened fire on the three and hit all of them multiple times. Pearlman crawled away from the table. One gunman stood astride him and fired a burst to his head. Amazingly, the bullets missed, but Pearlman died en route to the hospital.

The U.S. government knew a great deal about the Sheraton murders from the beginning. Salvadoran Captain Ernesto Ávila Ávila, who had secured the weapons, got very drunk after the murders and told the whole story to a U.S. military officer assigned to the MILGRP. That

⁶³ Unless otherwise noted, all information about the Sheraton murders is drawn from (but not a quote of) the unclassified “Case Impression Memorandum” prepared by A. Carlos Correa (undated, but prepared in early 1984). Correa was a Justice Department prosecutor detailed to the embassy in San Salvador to follow the judicial processes concerning the death of U.S. citizens there. He provided the author with a copy of the memorandum in May 2013.

⁶⁴ On June 21, 2013, President Barack Obama nominated Michael Hammer’s son, also Michael Hammer, to be U.S. ambassador to Chile.

officer reported the information through channels straightaway. With the basic story understood, things started to clarify very quickly.

By May 1981, a U.S. government agency was reporting details about those at the heart of the conspiracy. In a cable dated 30 May 1981,⁶⁵ the agency reported:

Responsibility of “death squad” run by businessman Ricardo Sol Mesa and National Guard Major Dennis Moran for murders of Rodolfo Viera and U.S. citizens Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman; use of the death squad to conduct bombings in San Salvador. [redacted]

1. A mid-level National Guard Officer [redacted] said on 27 May 1981 that Moran directed a “death squad” payrolled by Salvadoran businessman Ricardo Sol Mesa, and that Sol Mesa and Moran used this death squad to kill Rodolfo Viera, former head of the Salvadoran Agrarian Reform Institute (ISTA) at the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador on 4 January 1981. [redacted] (Comment: U.S. citizens Mike Hammer and Mark Pearlman of the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) were killed along with Viera because they happened to be with Viera at the time and because they supported Viera’s agrarian reform activities. Hammer and Pearlman apparently were not targets in their own right.)

2. Viera was a longstanding target of the Sol Mesa and Moran group, and they took advantage of his lengthy presence in the Sheraton Hotel for dinner on 4 January to assassinate him. The assassination was not preplanned; the decision to murder Viera was made on the spur of the moment.

3. The death squad described above is responsible for the majority of bank bombings that have taken place in recent

⁶⁵ Approved for release with excisions in November 1993.

months in the capital city of San Salvador, as well as for the assassinations of many individuals thought to support leftist causes. The payroll of the death squad is estimated 20,000 colones monthly (U.S. \$8,000): with members normally paid 100 colones daily (U.S. \$40) during the periods they are assigned to work for the squad. [redacted] (Comment: Although not directly stated it is believed that the majority if not all members of the Sol Mesa and Moran death squad are members of the National Guard.)

4. The Sol Mesa and Moran death squad operates on its own but is thought to have connections through former Army Captain Eduardo Alfonso Avila with another rightist group which is involved in similar activities.

The first officer's information was verified through another U.S. military officer and his wife. The chain of events that led to this confirmation began with a phone call from the Contadora Island Resort to the U.S. Embassy in Panama on May 8, 1982. The resort said a U.S. diplomat staying there had attempted to kill himself with an overdose. It turned out that the individual in question was not an American, but a Salvadoran military attaché assigned to Costa Rica—Captain Ávila. By coincidence, the American Defense Attaché (DATT) in Panama had known Ávila since 1977, when the attaché was assigned to San Salvador and Ávila worked at the Salvadoran general staff. The American attaché took Ávila, who was in distress and seemed to be having some kind of nervous breakdown, into his home.

Over May 8 and 9, Ávila told the attaché's wife the story of what had happened at the Sheraton. (He would not discuss this with the DATT present.) The account was rambling and disjointed, but confirmed what Ávila had said right after the murders. Ávila's admissions and statements were quickly reported through interagency channels.

The actual shooters were two enlisted men from the Salvadoran National Guard. Major Mario Denis Morán, chief of Section 2 (intelligence) of the Guard, was present. Lieutenant Rodolfo Isidro López Sibrián gave the orders to the triggermen. Ricardo Sol Meza, an *afectado*, a principal owner of the Sheraton whose land had been confiscated for land reform, was present, as was his brother-in-law, Hans Christ, also an *afectado*.⁶⁶ Christ fingered the three victims. Captain Ernesto Ávila Ávila, who was AWOL from his post in Costa Rica, retrieved the Ingram machine pistols from the National Guard's armory.

American military officers had certainly done their job in passing information along. Even so, the combined efforts of the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, and Justice have never been able to get at any of the intellectual authors of these murders. The peace treaty that ended the war included an amnesty that put them beyond the reach of the legal system.

This case is simple and straightforward. Powerful individuals often operating in the open got away with a very public murder of two American citizens and a prominent official of their own country.

Here is a lesson to write on the palm of your hand: *Military and economic assistance usually buy you cordiality, but often fail to give you leverage.*

There are plenty of examples, but four words will serve for the moment: *Israeli settlements; Hamid Kharzai.*

E. The Jesuit Murders

6 PRIESTS, 2 OTHERS SLAIN IN SAN SALVADOR FIGHTING INTENSIFIES FOR CONTROL OF CAPITAL

⁶⁶ A Salvadoran told that author in the spring of 1984 that Christ, with whom he had gone to the American School, had been expelled from the American School for painting anti-Semitic slogans on the lockers of Jewish students.

By Lee Hockstader and Douglas Farah⁶⁷

SAN SALVADOR, NOV. 16—Six prominent Jesuit priests, including the rector and vice rector of El Salvador's most prestigious university, were killed early today along with two other persons at the house where they slept in the capital.

At least two U.S. Army officers knew who did it and sat on the information before reporting it to their chain of command.⁶⁸

On November 16, 1989, some four days into another a final offensive in El Salvador, six Jesuit priests were murdered, along with their maid and her daughter, at their home on the University of Central America (UCA) campus. The story was front-page news worldwide. The murders led the news on all U.S. broadcast networks and on CNN. People with even passing knowledge of events in San Salvador suspected the right. UCA Rector Ignacio Ellacuría, one of those murdered, had been critical of the Salvadoran government and military and spoken and written of the FMLN and FDR in sympathetic terms. He was known to many foreign journalists and to some present and past officers of the U.S. Embassy. The U.S. government and the Salvadoran government, including President Alfredo Cristiani, feared blame would attach to the Salvadoran military or the government at an unusually sensitive time:

- El Salvador's president was seeking legitimacy for himself and his party.
- Cristiani was the first president from the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Republican Nationalist Alliance, or ARENA).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Lee Hockstader and Douglas Farah, "6 Priest, 2 Others Slain in San Salvador," Washington Post Foreign Service, November 17, 1989, p. A01.

⁶⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all information in this account has been verified by William J. Dieterich, who was Chargé d' Affaires, a.i. at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador at the time of the events.

Many considered ARENA to be a front for the death squads. Party founder Roberto D'Aubuisson, widely considered to be "Mr. Death Squad," had been its first presidential candidate. The party had specifically selected Cristiani as its candidate because he was financially and politically conservative, but not linked to rights abuses. Cristiani wanted to polish his party's and his country's image on human rights.

- The Cold War was ending. The Soviet bloc was crumbling; the Berlin Wall had come down exactly one week before the murders. No one knew what this would mean for El Salvador, which all understood to be, at least in part, a proxy war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Cold War was ending and that could end outside arms support for the government and the rebels.
- Peace talks had begun. The first direct talks between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN had opened in Mexico City in September. There was promise here of a genuine negotiated settlement—but the murder of the Jesuits might well kill the peace talks.

There was nothing solid at first, but the assumption that Salvadoran military or police forces were involved was widespread. The government was reaching out around the world for ideas on how to respond to worldwide outrage.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ In Spanish, *arena* means "sand," which refers back to the original Latin and survives in English as a place where sand is figuratively, and sometimes literally, spread.

⁷⁰ The Salvadoran press attaché in Washington called the author of this paper. The attaché had left El Salvador over three years before and was then press secretary to Drug Czar William J. Bennett. The attaché told the author that he was calling on instructions from President Cristiani, relayed through Salvadoran Ambassador Miguel Salaverría, to ask what the government should say. The author's advice was twofold: (1) Do not deny that your armed forces are responsible. They may be. If they are, the civilian government then looks complicit; and (2) seek (and publicly announce that you are seeking) detailed outside investigation by a foreign country other than the U.S. The U.S. is too close to El

In mid-December, Salvadoran Army Colonel Carlos Avilés, who had been well and favorably known to U.S. embassy officers for many years, privately told a U.S. Army major that the priests were killed by a small group from the Salvadoran Army's Atlacatl Battalion.⁷¹

The major knew, he had to know, that he was holding explosive information—information that could end U.S. assistance to El Salvador and give fresh impetus to the FMLN. There was really no way to gauge what might happen if the Salvadoran Army were found to have committed these murders. Salvador might become a new Cuba. Ten years of battles between two administrations and five Congresses might be rendered moot.

On January 2, 1990, the major reported to his boss, the MILGRP commander, a U.S. Army colonel. Even more than the major, the MILGRP commander had to know the potential impact of this information. The colonel reported directly to the U.S. ambassador and met with him several times weekly. He had one-on-one access to the ambassador whenever he wished.

The MILGRP commander's options included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Report this information immediately to Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. William J. Dieterich—the senior U.S. official in El Salvador. (Ambassador William Walker was not in El Salvador.) As Chargé, Dieterich had extensive authority over every individual in every U.S. executive-branch agency in the country. Dieterich thus was the MILGRP commander's lawful and immediate superior. Reporting this information to Chargé Dieterich would have meant an immediate report to the State Department. Regardless of the

Salvador and if it finds the Government of El Salvador or the military blameless, no one would believe it.

⁷¹ There is another version of events suggesting that the major learned of the murders in October 1989—some weeks *before* they occurred. The major is reported to have given contradictory statements to the FBI about almost everything related to the case.

channel in which Dieterich reported the information to State, the National Security Council staff and quite possibly President George H. Bush would know within hours. With information rocketing around the executive branch, Congress and the media would probably know within 24 hours.

- Immediately report to and seek guidance from the Commander in Chief, U.S. Southern Command. This would have skirted the responsibility of informing the Chargé, but that loop would have closed within the hour.
- Inform an intelligence officer within the embassy. This might permit quiet investigation and a considered response before the whole world knew of this information.
- Make discreet inquiries with the Salvadoran armed forces to gauge the credibility of the major's report.
- Arrange to speak directly with Colonel Avilés to judge his credibility and learn something of his sources.

How did this play out in real life?

The immediate actual steps followed by the MILGRP commander are not clear. It is certain that he did not report the information to the Chargé d'Affaires, to Southcom, or to some intelligence officer in the embassy.⁷² The MILGRP commander did, however, communicate the information to Colonel René Emilio Ponce, chief of staff of the Salvadoran armed forces.

The day after the major informed the MILGRP commander, there was a meeting in Colonel Ponce's office. Those present were Colonel Ponce and Colonel Avilés, the American major and the commander of the MILGRP, and perhaps one fairly junior State Department officer.

What happened at the meeting?

⁷² Telephone interview with Chargé d'Affaires William J. Dieterich, May 14, 2013.

- The essential story was repeated; Avilés told the American major that the Atlacatl Battalion was responsible.
- Avilés flatly denied that he had ever said a word to the American major about the murders of the Jesuits.

Five days later, on Sunday, January 7, 1990, President Cristiani announced that elements of the Salvadoran military were involved in the murder of the Jesuits. He said a “Special Commission of Honor” had been created to expose the truth about the murders in detail.

* * *

We have no idea why the MILGRP commander behaved as he did. His actions put a confidential source’s life at risk. He totally ignored his chain of command. His career could have ended right there. The Chargé considered immediately relieving him of his command and ordering him out of the country—he had the authority to do so. Had there been any question about that authority, a phone call to Southcom would have resolved the matter.

Only two individuals were ever convicted of the murders. In 1991, Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, then commandant of El Salvador’s military academy (sited in the same complex as the ministry of defense and high command) was convicted of giving the orders. Lieutenant Yuhssy René Mendoza, an officer in the Atlacatl Battalion, was convicted for his participation. A civilian court sentenced the two to 30 years in prison. The other seven, many of whom had acknowledged their roles, were acquitted. The jury is thought to have freed them because they were “following orders.” Benavides and Mendoza were set free on April 1, 1993 as a result of the amnesty law that was agreed to in the peace agreement. They served less than two years for these mass murders.

What happened with the Jesuit murders? Why did two American officers behave in such an unorthodox fashion?

Consider the following questions:

- Why might the major have delayed reporting, even for a few days, his information about the most notorious murders in the world?
- The MILGRP commander burned a favorably known source to an organization he well knew capable of murder. Why?
- The MILGRP commander was born in El Salvador and knew his way around Salvadoran society better than most Americans.
- Had he come to over-identify with the Salvadoran military?
- If you reach this conclusion, does a policy then have to be set that limits the possible assignments of foreign-born personnel?
- Should the MILGRP commander have been relieved? By the State Department? By U.S. Southern Command?

VIII. Trust and Learning

Collectively and singularly, the actions of these counterpart officers ranged from obstruction of justice to multiple murder to war crimes. But these cases do not represent the first or last time we have faced such issues. From the genocidal Joseph Stalin during World War II to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s to various figures in Afghanistan today, the U.S. government has sent military and civilian personnel out to find a way to work with awful people. Sometimes our unsavory friends move up to a higher standard, sometimes they never get better, and sometimes they improve for a while and then go back to their old ways.

What may make El Salvador a bit more poignant is its relatively small scale. Anyone assigned to the U.S. Embassy, military or civilian, had a fair chance of meeting some or all of the people involved in the above actions. Some of them, like General Vides Casanova and Colonel Monterrosa, were charming and seemed to move in the right direction as we spent more time with them. Others never displayed any redeeming qualities.

How do you learn who is trustworthy? How do you trust someone who has ordered the murder of a thousand people? Covered up a massacre? Helped a fellow officer evade justice?

A. A War in (and Sometimes With) the Media

In popular memory, the American people were united as never before during “Good War,” World War II, the one fought by what reporter Tom Brokaw called “the Greatest Generation.” There had been no question about going to war: Japan had attacked us and then declared war (although the ex post facto declaration arose from error and not malice); Hitler declared war on us. We were in it, and Rosie the Riveter stood side-by-side with John Wayne, big business, and everyone else. And yes, the

media were in it too, and there is no doubt about whose side they were on. War correspondents wore American military uniforms and, when attached to the troops, were subject to military law. The media submitted to military censorship with little complaint. Some scandals were reported and military officials criticized (think of Patton slapping the soldier⁷³). Other disasters were known to the media, but never until much later—as when German E-boats slaughtered U.S. troops training for the invasion at Normandy.⁷⁴

Vietnam changed all that. Even when the U.S. presence was very small, the frictions between the media and first the military and then the broader government started to show. Why? What was different?

- To begin with, there was no real argument about the need to fight World War II. Japan hit us with a sneak attack. Hitler declared war on us. The stakes and the sides were clear.
- Vietnam was fuzzier. Americans were concerned about communist expansion, and Munich had taught us that concession to dictators just made things worse.⁷⁵ Even so, Vietnam was a long way away from the United States. Then, as now, most Americans could not find it on a map.

⁷³ During the last days of the campaign in Sicily in 1943, then-Lt. Gen. George S. Patton slapped a hospitalized soldier. The incident drew national attention and to some extent overshadowed Patton's fine leadership. General Eisenhower reprimanded Patton and ordered him to apologize to 7th Army troops. Richard Sommers (ed.), *Vignettes of Military History*, Vol. III (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army Military History Institute, February 1982).

⁷⁴ In the early morning hours of April 28, 1944, German E-boats operating from France attacked LSTs practicing for D Day (Operation Tiger) and killed 198 Navy and 441 Army personnel. Because the incident could have revealed D Day plans, it was not reported until August 1944. *Stars and Stripes* [European Edition] 4, no. 237 (7 Aug. 1944).

⁷⁵ In 1938, France and Britain reneged on a commitment to Czechoslovakia, permitting Hitler to seize much of that country and its arms works. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin negotiated this agreement in Munich; explaining his cave-in, he told the British people that the Czechs were “a faraway people of whom we know little.”

- Reporters on the ground in Vietnam were speaking to field and company-grade officers. Their journalistic reports were about a different war than the one the generals were briefing in Saigon and Washington. Not only were these young journalists reporting a different war, they were also highlighting the differences between what they saw and heard and what the brass was saying.
- At one point, the national security establishment was so frustrated with the reporting of *New York Times* correspondent David Halberstam that President Kennedy called *Times* publisher Arthur Ochs “Punch” Sulzberger to the White House. The president demanded that Halberstam be pulled from Vietnam. President Kennedy’s demand backfired. Sulzberger instead cancelled Halberstam’s upcoming vacation. He did not want Halberstam’s departure on vacation to be taken by the president as a sign that the *Times* had caved to him.⁷⁶
- In 1966, Harrison E. Salisbury, a distinguished journalist with a solid record of objectivity, went to North Vietnam. The essence of his reports was that bombing in the North caused terrible damage, but did not harm the communist government’s will or ability to fight.⁷⁷ The Johnson administration and President Johnson himself were furious, as were many on the American right.
- As the war progressed, the Nixon administration joined its two predecessors in laying the blame for declining public support on the media. In 1977’s two-volume *The Big Story*, Peter Braestrup argued that media preconceptions and prejudices tainted reporting

⁷⁶ Jones, Alex, “The Best of Times,” blog post, *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/09/the-best-of-times.html>; and Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History*, p. 446 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷⁷ No Americans reported from Berlin during World War I, Berlin, or Tokyo during World War II, or from wherever the North Koreans happened to be during the Korean War.

on the psychologically and politically critical Tet Offensive of 1968.⁷⁸ Braestrup's book argued that the U.S. government was telling the truth when it said that Tet had been a crushing defeat for the communist Viet Cong. As Braestrup explained it, the tainted reporting caused both supporters and opponents of the war in the U.S. to regard it as a defeat and played a major role in reducing support for the war. Braestrup's book remains well respected by all—including many of the correspondents he blamed for alarmist reporting.

- As things went on, the military kept telling the politicians that we were winning, and the media kept telling the American people that we were losing. That the military establishment came to mistrust, even hate, the media was not just unsurprising—it was inevitable.

To put it simplistically, after the war was lost, liberals mused about how Kennedy might have pulled out after the 1964 election and griped that the Johnson administration's false account of the Gulf of Tonkin incident⁷⁹ had led us into a war we could not win. Conservatives spoke of how the media and left-wing politicians kept the United States from prevailing in a war that was completely winnable. After all, we were not defeated on the battlefield.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Braestrup, Peter, *The Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977).

⁷⁹ We now know this was no incident at all. The Navy reported that U.S. ships had been attacked by the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin. This purported attack led President Johnson to ask permission to expand the war in response. Congress gave him that permission with the "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution," which became the legislative basis for the war. Almost all serious historians of the period agree there was no such attack. It is not clear if Johnson knew the report was at best wildly exaggerated.

⁸⁰ This paragraph, like the preceding one, is but a sketch of arguments often more nuanced and thoughtful than put forward here. Nevertheless, I believe that left and right may be fairly described as making their arguments align with these rhetorical stick figures.

By 1981, the U.S. military was again finding its way following the decade-plus of debacle in Vietnam. The military did find its way, but was nearly unanimous in declaring that journalists were prejudiced against it and that nothing good would come from dealing with them.

B. Quivering Before the Camera

The March 10, 1981 *New York Times* story “U.S. Advisers Taking Care in El Salvador” began: “The military advisers here live cautiously, avoiding publicity with almost as much care as they avoid the Marxist guerrillas who might want to shoot them.”⁸¹

The article describes how a group of “several hundred journalists” had been “hounding them for pictures and interviews.” In an effort to satisfy the constant pressure from the media and demystify the U.S. presence, the embassy set up a press conference to expose some of the trainers to the press.

The article described the encounter:

At a news conference arranged by the United States Embassy today, one adviser, a helicopter maintenance instructor, said: “What makes you nervous—and I’ll be honest with you guys—is the press. We have more problems with the press than with these people we are supposed to be aware of.” ...

The two officers who met with the press today at Ilopango Air Force Base on the outskirts of San Salvador declined to give their names, ages, or places of birth or to speak of their families.

The story went on to report:

⁸¹ Schumacher, Edward, “U.S. Advisers Taking Care in El Salvador,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/10/world/us-advisers-taking-care-in-el-salvador.html>.

they always carry a pistol. Their orders are not to get involved in any combat, but they are authorized to shoot in self-defense or to protect a fellow adviser.

This odd little story makes the maintenance instructor look somewhat silly, but the story and his press statements accurately reflect two military preoccupations: (1) No one was to have any reason to believe our personnel were going into combat; and (2) nothing good could come from dealing with the media.

C. Embrace the Hacks⁸²

This apprehension and mistrust of the press continued for the better part of a year. Things finally turned for the better with the arrival of MILGRP Commander Colonel John D. Waghelstein, a Special Forces officer who never served a tour in the Pentagon and had very limited experience in other branches or disciplines. In the following section, Col. Waghelstein, a faculty member of the U.S. Naval War College since his retirement from the Army, describes how he came to grips with the MILGRP's morbid fear of the media.

"Full Contact Media Relations," by Col. John Waghelstein

Prior to my assumption of command of the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador, I spent a month at Monterrey's Presidio (U.S. Army language school). In addition to brushing up on my Spanish, I had an opportunity to

⁸² Eventually, the media and the embassy press officers were on good enough terms with one another to turn normally pejorative terms into ironic terms of endearment. Press office "flaks," slang for a PR person whose job is to keep journalists away from facts (or at least principals), and "hacks" (taken from "hack writer") began openly using the terms in one another's presence in a friendly way.

read the press coverage, both Latino and American. I was struck by just how bad the situation appeared in the press. The embassy traffic was more optimistic, but not by much.

It seemed to me that press relations were not just a matter of making the Salvadoran Army, the U.S. Army, or President Reagan, or anyone look good. This was a substantive issue and had to be addressed as such. The American people, the Congress, and much of the administration took their understanding of El Salvador from the media. With clear skepticism about administration policy afoot, getting a fair shake from the press was of major importance.

My brothers-in-arms did not universally accept my view on this matter. Upon arrival I had a brief exchange with the outgoing MILGRP commander who, when asked about his relations with the press, responded, “I don’t talk to those bastards, they’re all a bunch of communists....”

About a week after taking command, I got a request from the outgoing embassy public affairs officer. Would I consent to an interview by a *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent whom I knew from Vietnam? For the price of lunch, I consented, with the caveat that anything I said was on background and not for attribution.

The word got out that I would talk to the press, and my dance card quickly filled. Because the care and feeding of the Fourth Estate was not my primary function, some management was required. Don Hamilton, the new embassy public affairs officer, solved the problem with a once-a-week session for as many non-Salvadoran media as wished to come.

They could ask anything they wished, but by ground rules, I could be identified as a “foreign military observer” or a “western observer,”⁸³

⁸³ This coyness had its purpose. Of course the Salvadorans knew I was the “observer.” But if they were not confronted with the fact that an American officer was making the comments, they would not have to demand an explanation of us. —J.W.

but not both. While any question could be asked, not all would be answered. I made it very clear that I would not answer questions about intelligence or current Salvadoran operations. These weekly backgrounders continued for the remaining 18 months of my tour and, from what I understand, through the tours of at least the next two MILGRP commanders.

There were a number of concerns that occupied our efforts to support the El Salvadorans. The human rights issue was by far the most vexing. The issues were real and horrifying and there was ample reason to believe that the amorphous blobs referred to as “the right” and “the death squads” were responsible for much of the damage. Beyond that, there were obvious if not specific overlaps between the military and the security forces⁸⁴ and the “death squads.” The military’s 50-year human rights record inspired no confidence. No military officer had ever been convicted of a human rights violation or other serious crime.

There were plenty in Washington in and out of government who believed the whole effort to save the Salvadoran government⁸⁵ was bad policy and immoral to boot. Our security assistance was specifically and generally linked to human rights.

I knew I could not “brief away” the human rights issues. Nor could I “win over” the press. There would have to be palpable improvement for that to happen. At a minimum, the death squad count, which had fallen to about 250 monthly from its October 1980 high of 750, could not rise again.

But even as we waited for further improvement on human rights, I resolutely believed that we could tamp down fears that the U.S. was beginning another Vietnam with a handful of “advisors” who would

⁸⁴ All the different police, paramilitary, and military (National Police, Treasury Police, National Guard, Army, Navy, Air Force, and even the Fire Department) were led from the same pool of military school graduates. –J.W.

⁸⁵ The junta was replaced by an elected Constituent Assembly as I arrived in country in 1982. –J.W.

eventually become combatants. If we could clear that hurdle, we could have a basis for more balanced reporting.

Our first break in the advisor/combatant issue came when the PAO told me that *LIFE* was eager for a story, with photos, on the trainers. At that time, *LIFE* was still a monthly magazine that covered news and had an important audience. The PAO and I talked it over, vetted it with the embassy front office, and set it up.

The conditions were simple. No current or intelligence operations. Access would be limited to coverage of a SEAL Mobile Training Team (MTT) working with the Salvadoran Marine Commandos in Usulután Department and to a Special Forces MTT training the El Salvadoran Airborne unit at the Air Force Base at Ilopango.

My charge to officers and men in the MTTs was straightforward: Tell the truth, but do not discuss current or future ops. Emphasis should be on our mission as trainers, not advisers.

The headline alone justified the effort: “Tutors of War.” The embassy and State Department loved it. My other boss, SOUTHCOM Commanding General Wallace Nutting, viewed the article differently. I received a heavily marked-up copy by courier noting the following sins in red marker: One of the SEAL trainers was reported as saying one of the El Salvadoran troops he was working with was not the smartest; one of the photos showed one of the SEALs carrying a handgun in his belt; one of the Special Forces NCOs was photographed in a T-shirt, not wearing his uniform jacket.

An Army general was not the only one with heartburn. My executive officer, SEAL Lt. Commander Albert A. Schaufelberger, who loved the assignment and had already been approved for an extension, received the following letter from his detailer:

Mar 4 1983

Dear Al,

I’m writing to discuss two subjects. One is personal, the other (albeit related) is professional.

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Let me begin by saying that I felt the article you and Petty Officer [REDACTED] allowed to be written in Life Magazine is the most damaging written item against the community since the Washington Post article in 1978. Even worse, it may result in SEALs being removed from El Salvador and damage our continued presence in Central America. It was exactly the kind of article our liberal public needs to use as ammunition to get us out of that country. It also shows why the SF's should replace us as the sole advisors. At least they wear uniforms, have regulation on military appearance standards, don't degrade their counterparts, and don't parade sidearms openly & dangerously like a Saigon Cowboy. You have both been compromised. IF you were any kind of target before, you are a bigger one now.

This has already resulted in further degradation of our efforts in that a Senator came on the 11:00 Niteline commentary 1 March 1983 to berate SEALs in El Salvador. I'm sure there is more to come.

My second reason for writing is to let you know that I am in the process of attempting to line up a relief for you as quickly as possible. I intend to program the first qualified individual available to come through the training pipeline into your position. Your original PRD is still August 1983, but it will likely slip to a later date. As soon as an individual is identified, we will notify the replacement officer to run through the chain for approval.

Regards,

Signed

[REDACTED]

Lcdr USN
Special Warfare Assignment

When Al came to me with that bit of news, I decided I needed to do what I could to prevent his forced relief. The first consideration was that he was a fine officer making an outsized contribution. He was trusted

by and popular with the Country Team⁸⁶ and with his Salvadoran counterparts. His extension would provide continuity after I rotated out in June. The other part of the equation was that I thought Al was getting a raw deal. He did not dream up this article and certainly did not “allow” it to be published in *LIFE*.

Given a sense that a personal and professional error was in train and that I was absolutely furious, I did what any self-righteous hot head would do. I jumped channels and wrote a letter to someone with the authority to help:

16 March 1983

Admiral [REDACTED]
Chief of Naval Operations
Navy Department
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Admiral [REDACTED]:

LCDR Schauffelberger shared the enclosed March 4 letter with me as it deals with a possible curtailment of his tour. I find the letter erroneous both in fact and conclusion. While all Special Forces troops shown in the *LIFE* magazine are in uniform, it is by no means true that they “wear uniforms having regulation military appearance standards and they don’t parade their sidearms openly...” The only time military personnel under my command wear uniforms is when they are in large numbers working with large groups of Salvadoran trainees. In San Salvador we all wear civilian clothes. When they are in small groups outside the capital it becomes a judgment call depending on training areas, population

⁸⁶ The Country Team consists of the ambassador, DCM, all State Department section chiefs, and the heads of all other agencies at post. The team meets at least weekly.

density, type of training, and the threat. This applies to SEALs as well as soldiers. Nothing would compromise personnel faster than appearing in U.S. uniform in La Union or any other town. The same applies to “regulation military appearance.” It was with some reluctance and at the specific urging of the Regional Security Officer that I gave up my “high and tight,” “airborne” haircut and allowed my hair to grow to a less conspicuous length. As for parading side arms openly, there is nothing conspicuous about that here in the capital, much less in a departmental capital that hosts a military base.

Then there is the matter of conclusions. While the Navy Military Personnel Command Staff may find the LIFE magazine article “the most damaging written item against the community since 1978,” the consensus of this mission is that it has been helpful to our efforts in El Salvador. The article had its genesis in the contacts between our PAO and the associate editor of LIFE magazine. The idea was then approved by me and had the full knowledge and consent of the Ambassador.

The Ambassador and his deputy and the PAO monitor the coverage of El Salvador in all major U.S. news organs. It is their opinion as well as mine that the LIFE article was positive and helped further public understanding of our policies in El Salvador.

Our PAO, whose judgment I respect since he has served in Public Affairs at six overseas missions, ranging through Kissinger’s Shuttle Diplomacy, three overseas presidential visits, and the Sinai Field Mission, has explained to me that even if you can persuade a reputable publication to print something entirely favorable on a controversial topic, the effect is to make readers somewhat suspicious. Yes, some of our trainers are quoted making remarks that are a bit embarrassing, but that is the price you pay for giving journalists access to individuals. From the point of view of our mission in El Salvador one thing was made very clear: Our trainers do not go on combat missions. Especially in the aftermath

of the wounding of SSGT Stanley⁸⁷ this is a message we are most happy to get across.

As for the Senator's report on the ABC Late Evening News, it concerns us very little. He is no friend of our policy here and those are the licks we have come to expect. Had it not been for the LIFE article it would have been another issue. Our PAO has already taken Chris Whipple⁸⁸ to task for having said that trainers are "much closer to combat" than was generally supposed. When the PAO pointed out to Whipple that everyone, including the PAO, Vice Consuls, and our secretaries are much closer to combat than was generally understood, Whipple readily conceded that he should have said just that and has promised that in any future comment he might make on the subject he will make that clear.

From the general tone of the letter, it sounds like someone is expecting something more like an "All Hands" article. Those of us in daily contact with a vigorous, inquisitive corps of professional journalists know and understand what is possible and what is not. My Ambassador is not upset, the Deputy Chief of Mission is not upset, the PAO is not upset, and most importantly for LCDR Schaufelberger, I am not upset. Given that the individuals most directly concerned with and most closely monitoring press coverage of El Salvador (and the military trainers here) believe the article to have been a plus for U.S. policy, I am a little surprised that the Naval Military Personnel Command is so excited.

I find LCDR Schaufelberger to be a dedicated and capable officer and I maxed his last fitness report to reflect my satisfaction with his performance. In view of his valuable contributions to our mission here, I recommend that he be permitted to stay as long as

⁸⁷ Noted elsewhere

⁸⁸ Author of the story in *LIFE*

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he wishes. He was given a verbal OK by his detailer for a one-year extension prior to the LIFE magazine article. I would appreciate your taking a hand in this matter.

(Signed)

JOHN D. WAGHELSTEIN

COL, Inf Commanding

In due course, I received a nice response:

THE CHIEF OF NAVAL PERSONNEL

25 April 1983

Dear Colonel Waghelstein,

Admiral [REDACTED] asked that I respond to your recent letter to him concerning Lieutenant Commander A.A. Schaufelberger, USN. The letter by Lieutenant Commander [REDACTED] contained his personal views about the contents of the LIFE magazine article. His concerns were made as a member of the Naval Special Warfare community and should more appropriately have been made in a separate personal letter; he has been so counseled.

As previously agreed upon between Lieutenant Commander Schaufelberger and his detailer, his original rotation date of August 1983 has been extended one year until August 1984. He will be kept informed of his future assignment as well as plans for his relief via the normal Navy channels. I appreciate the fine work of you and your men.

With kindest regards.

The letter took five weeks to get back because the vice admiral sent his mail through channels. I was pleased with the letter;

SOUTHCOM's General Nutting was fine with the contents but less pleased with me. I had jumped channels and written a cheeky letter to a four-star in another service. Although incensed, he came to recognize that better-informed journalism advanced our efforts.

There was much more work to be done with the El Salvadoran military's relations with the media. An opening came when an NBC television reporter asked to cover our training. An MTT working in nearby San Juan Opico provided the opportunity. The base commander very reluctantly agreed to allow NBC to cover our work.

His reluctance evaporated when he met correspondent Bonnie Anderson. Bonnie, a former tennis professional on the Virginia Slims tour, was blonde, tall, fit, attractive, and spoke flawless Spanish. The Salvadoran base commander was smitten. He personally gave her the grand tour and as much time and access as she and her crew wanted. In addition to our trainers, Ms. Anderson's crew filmed the commander's new clinic and focused on a locally developed prosthetic leg they were using to outfit maimed soldiers.

The night the piece aired, the Salvadoran embassy in Washington, alerted by the State Department, had their Betamax recorder rolling during the *NBC Nightly News*. When the tape got to San Salvador, the Armed Forces were shocked and pleased. Although they repeated mistakes with the media, we began to see movement toward a more accommodating ESAF. The assistant Chief of Staff was designated as spokesman when they decided to give interviews to important journalists. Media access improved, especially away from the capital.

Author's Comment on Colonel Waghelstein's Account

Colonel Waghelstein did more than accommodate the press. He trained them. Most of them were too young for the draft, for Vietnam, and knew as much about insurgency and irregular warfare as, to use one of his favorite phrases, "a pig knows about Sunday." Patiently, Waghelstein walked the journalists through it:

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- Most wars ended neither with the government delivering a knockout punch to the insurgents nor with a guerrilla takeover. The ends of most wars are negotiated.
- The guerrillas have to be persuaded, almost always militarily, that they cannot shoot their way into power. Only then are meaningful negotiations and a political solution possible.
- How do you know who is winning in a war without front lines?
- Wars like this one are for “sergeants and lieutenants.”
- The Salvadoran military wanted, but had limited use for, ground attack aircraft and almost none for high-speed aircraft, armor, or artillery.

This educational effort helped.

It personalized our military personnel. From these official but informal contacts came invitations to social events, embassy-vs.-journalists softball games, and personal friendships. This was not as hard as it might seem. West Point might not be Yale, but our military and diplomatic officers are not as different from journalists as some suppose. Most came from the broad American middle class and attended the same high schools, played on the same sports teams. If you took family portraits of the military officers and the journalists right before high school graduation, you probably could not tell the future officers from the future correspondents. And both groups are bound by patriotism. Military officers’ patriotism is on constant display, and their duty to country is a sworn obligation. But journalists are patriots, too. Most of the journalists who covered El Salvador have seen the world, seen it and examined it—and they have come home to America. Friendly contacts are actually fairly easy if you define patriotism more broadly and give people the benefit of the doubt.

Yes, a handful of journalists regarded playing shortstop in a softball games as derogation of the First Amendment; but then again,

some official personnel regarded social contact with journalists as akin to fraternizing with the enemy.

D. Shaming the Devil

Most of the foreign correspondents in El Salvador were American citizens. This gave us an extra duty: The U.S. government, especially the State Department, has a positive duty to try to protect American citizens abroad. Most of the journalists rightly believed they knew how to take care of themselves and that if they got in trouble their news organization would help. This was true of the most experienced correspondents working for the big news organizations. But greener correspondents or those working for smaller and poorer media outlets often needed help, especially when they felt threatened by the Salvadoran army. This happened a few times a year. The public affairs officer usually let such journalists stay at his well-guarded house and had his bodyguard and driver take them to the airport so they could leave the country to “cool off” for a few days. In one case, it was not the PAO, but the Naval Attaché, a Marine lieutenant colonel, who took in a threatened journalist.

Cordial or formal, the concept that drove relations with the press missionwide was straightforward: Tell the truth and shame the devil.

There was little chance of deceiving anyone making an effort to inquire about conditions in El Salvador. During the 1982 elections, the Salvadoran government accredited over 1,500 journalists— in a country the size of Massachusetts and with a population of 5 million. The press was everywhere, and collectively they had cultivated sources throughout Central America, including with the FDR and FMLN (with whom they sometimes traveled).

The candor policy meant that when the Salvadoran Armed Forces falsely announced that they repulsed a guerrilla attack and inflicted scores of casualties, we did not back them up. We did not go out of our way to blab it around, but if someone asked us we would tell the truth: “Well, we

know nothing of FMLN casualties, but the Army lost 18 killed and 34 wounded.”

The tone for this unparalleled official candor was set by Ambassador Hinton, who made some of the least diplomatic public statements ever by a senior American diplomat, including the following:⁸⁹

Hinton: “Graduates of the Salvadoran Military Academy get a first-rate high-school education.” (1982)

* * *

Joan Didion⁹⁰: “Did you prevent Roberto D’Aubuisson from becoming interim president after his ticket won a plurality in the elections?”

Hinton: “We stopped that one on the one-yard line.” (1982)

* * *

NBC Producer: “When you were ambassador in Zaire, didn’t Mobutu declare you persona non grata, expel you from Zaire?”

Hinton: “Yes.”

NBC Producer: “Didn’t he say you were planning to assassinate him?”

Hinton: “Yes, he did.”

NBC Producer: “Well, were you?”

Hinton: “If I wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch he would be dead!”

NBC Producer: “Is that on the record?”

⁸⁹ All these statements were made in the presence of the author. In June 2013, Ambassador Hinton confirmed his statements.

⁹⁰ Writing for the *New York Review of Books*

Hinton: “Damned right it is, ‘If I wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch, he’d be dead!’” (1982)

* * *

Christopher Dickey⁹¹: “Why do you spend so much time with the press?”

Hinton: “I want to be sure our story gets told, told to everyone. Do you know how hard it is to get a piece of paper onto the president’s desk? He gets a press briefing before he gets his intelligence briefing.” (1983)

Gob-smack candor became a hallmark of the entire embassy.

Formal, written mission press guidance was issued by the Public Affairs Officer in the summer of 1983. The guidance began:

Ambassador Hinton’s policy on dealing with the press is quite clear: Any member of the mission may speak to the press, but no member of the mission is obliged to speak to the press.

The benefits of such a policy are manifest—a better understanding of mission activities and policies is in the best interest of the U.S. Government and the U.S. public.

This mission guidance contained caveats about following the instructions of one’s supervisor, how to avoid having words put in one’s mouth, and being careful to confine remarks to one’s own area of knowledge or expertise. It concluded:

The vast majority of journalists with whom we deal are responsible professionals, doing their best to report a difficult and

⁹¹ Then with *The Washington Post*

confusing story at considerable personal risk. Many of these reporters are more knowledgeable about developments in the region than most Foreign Service personnel. We want to help journalists and others understand what is happening here, but we do not owe any journalist a juicy quote or a voyeur's peek at policy formulation.

After Ambassador Hinton left, Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering was similarly candid (though less colorful in his language). Waghelstein's successors as MILGRP commander continued the weekly briefings and the pattern of candor.

In time, this institutional candor paid off.

Truth was not easy to find in El Salvador. For all its improvements, the ESAF never took onboard the idea that candid descriptions of setbacks would help in the long run.⁹² The FMLN had Radio Venceremos, a clandestine station that offered the news with classic communist flamboyance, distortions, exaggerations, and outright lies. The human rights office of the archdiocese was constantly ready to accept FMLN versions over those of the Army. This led to several odd outcomes, but we in the embassy came to know one of them very well.

In a meeting with Ambassador Pickering, Aryeh Neier, then head of the human rights group Americas Watch, recommended that the embassy give more weight to the numbers from the Church's human rights office. According to Neier, all of that Church office's numbers were supported by eyewitness testimony. Ambassador Pickering took Neier up on his suggestion. The embassy human rights officer examined their

⁹² One commander, a lieutenant colonel, in charge of the Armed Forces Press Committee (known by its Spanish acronym COPREFA) told the embassy PAO, who had urged more candor: "We have lied so much for so long that if we suddenly step up and say, 'We suffered 32 casualties today,' people will think it is really 3,200. We have trained them to believe that everything is worse than we say."

records and found several discrepancies in their records and an interesting example.

When the FMLN overran an important Salvadoran Army garrison in Sensuntepeque, the Army lost several killed, wounded, and missing. The Army was not known to have inflicted any casualties. To save face, the ESAF announced that they had killed some 200 attackers. The Church's human rights office records showed that the army had murdered some 200 unarmed civilians at that place and time—so much for eyewitness accounts.⁹³

In a world where no one could count on the government, the guerrillas, or even the Church for facts, the embassy emerged as the most reliable source of information. Skeptics and opponents of U.S. policy knew we did not tell them all we knew. They knew we had a viewpoint, but they could not afford to accept anyone's assertions without checking with us. The cumulative effort was of vast importance. It gave us two things seldom obtained: (1) knowledge of developing stories, and (2) a chance to tell our side of the story.

This trust had huge value over time, and it was not that hard to obtain. We had to set aside preconceptions about the media. We had to accept that a few reporters and news organizations were a lost cause; they hated the policy and were out to demonstrate that it was wrong. We had to work hard to acknowledge the flaws of our Salvadoran counterparts yet not paint the policy goals as hopeless. The very hardest thing to do was to avoid comment on some of the profoundly stupid things U.S. politicians of the left and right sometimes said.

⁹³ On the whole, the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador played a salutatory role during the Civil War. Archbishop Romero had been confrontational, but his successor Archbishop Rivera y Damas was less so. Although the Church's human rights office, Tutela Legal, was regularly manipulated by the FMLN, it was more straightforward than its predecessor, which Archbishop Rivera y Damas abolished for its flagrant bias toward the FMLN.

There was another element to the media piece: All sides were trying to turn the media to their advantage. The FMLN allowed media to join them in their camps and sometimes on their movements. The FMLN treated visiting journalists well, although they were severe with unexpected visitors, fearing penetration attempts. Even then, they did not harm them, but kept them isolated until their bona fides as journalists could be verified.

The embassy tried to use the media, too, making every reasonable effort to get our story told. Once again, Colonel Waghelstein tells the story:

We wanted to highlight the work of Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa, commander in Cabañas. He was by far the most effective Departmental Commander at the time. His counterinsurgency methods were worthy of cloning and included widespread civic action, extensive civilian–military cooperation, and effective intelligence operations. We knew the Salvadoran military followed themselves in the U.S. press. If Ochoa came off well, his colleagues might try to emulate him.

We got a press visit to Cabañas set up. Before they left, I briefed them on things to look for and questions that would demonstrate their grasp of counter-insurgency MOE. They returned from the trip suitably impressed.

At the other end of the spectrum was the Usulután Department Commander, who should have been replaced long ago. We encouraged the press to go to Usulután and (if they could find the commander sober and vertical) they could ask him the same set of questions they had asked Colonel Ochoa. The press came through with some embarrassing coverage and there was a change of command in Usulután.

The worst at dealing with journalists was COPREFA (Comité de Prensa de las Fuersas Armadas, or Press Committee of the Armed Forces).

This official media source for the Salvadoran military was originally staffed by a pair of alcoholic officers. The international press referred to them as “bottle caps”—either on the bottle or on the floor. Their alcohol problems were the least of it.

When a photo in the *New York Times* miscaptioned Salvadoran soldiers as guerrillas, they called the embassy public affairs officer over to give some advice: “What can we do about this disinformation? This makes the guerrillas look as well-equipped as we are. How can we punish the photographer?”

The PAO responded, “It is a mistake, not disinformation. The photographer does not write the caption. I would let it go, but if you want to do something, write a letter to the *New York Times* ridiculing them for their error. The *Times* will hate that. They take themselves very seriously.”

No one wrote a letter to the *Times*. The next night, persons never officially identified broke into the photographer’s apartment while he was not at home. The intruders assaulted his Salvadoran girlfriend and trashed the apartment.

The Salvadoran military and security forces relied almost wholly on intimidation and, on at least one occasion, murder. It is almost certain that the Salvadoran Army tricked four Dutch journalists into thinking they were being led to a rendezvous with the FMLN. They were actually being led into an “ambush” in which they were “accidentally” killed by the Army.⁹⁴ It seems likely this was intended to prevent other journalists from attempting to travel with the FMLN.

⁹⁴ The official version of the journalists’ death was that they had been stuck by rounds from Army machine gun fire from a distance of at least a hundred meters—far enough that it was not possible to determine that their cameras were not weapons and that their appearance was nothing like that of the typical Salvadoran. In 1982, the author discussed the matter with MILGRP officers who had seen the bodies. They said that they, who had all seen combat in Vietnam, did not see how the Salvadoran Army’s version could be true. The dead had been hit too many times in the torso. According to these American officers, someone hit in the torso from a hundred meters or more usually goes down immediately and is hardly ever hit more than twice.

Most of the Salvadoran press was of little moment. There was almost no substantive political or military coverage in Salvadoran press by 1982, and several journalists had been murdered. The last element of what might be described as an opposition paper had been bombed out in 1980. Salvadoran television literally carried no news programs until about 1986, when a new station opened. The two leading papers sent no correspondents to cover the war. Nor did the papers publish hard news items not derived from press releases. The Miami-dwelling publisher of the reactionary *El Diario de Hoy* reviewed every word of the first 12 pages via computer and modem (which was very advanced for the early 1980s). Salvadoran radio was vibrant and active, on the other hand, and was the primary information source for most Salvadorans.

Over the years, embassy relations with the media, even those skeptical of U.S. policy, were handled with great civility. Even when the disagreements became pointed, voices were seldom raised.

E. Crossing Swords

Of course there were exceptions.

Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, famously even-tempered and widely regarded as the most accomplished American diplomat of his generation,⁹⁵ gave an early 1984 interview to *Christian Science Monitor* Central America correspondent Dennis Volman. During the interview,

⁹⁵ Pickering came to El Salvador having already served as executive secretary of the State Department, ambassador to Nigeria, and ambassador to Jordan. He left El Salvador to become ambassador to Israel. Later on, he was ambassador to India, to the United Nations (during the first Gulf War), and to Russia. He ended his State Department career as under secretary for political affairs, the number-three position in the State Department. After retiring, he became senior vice president for international affairs for Boeing, where he was deeply involved in multiple Boeing/Airbus issues. In 2012, he and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen chaired the State Department's Accountability Review Board that examined the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, Libya.

Volman said that the embassy's deputy chief of mission had cavalierly endangered the life of the *Monitor*'s resident correspondent, Christopher Hedges. Ambassador Pickering said that his deputy had done nothing more than send a clipping of a *Monitor* article written by Hedges. Volman said that he believed that neither the ambassador nor the mission as a whole had a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of Salvadoran society to understand that sending a clipping might be seen by the recipient (who was the Salvadoran colonel commanding the National Police) as an "signal" that Hedges should be "taken care of."

Ambassador Pickering did not raise his voice, but interrupted Volman to ask, "Are you speaking for the *Christian Science Monitor* or for yourself?"

Long pause.

"For the *Monitor*," answered Volman.

"I do not believe you. I will be in Boston⁹⁶ next week and I will make a point of seeing Charlotte Sakowski⁹⁷ to verify that you are speaking for the *Monitor*."

That ended the interview.⁹⁸ Volman continued as Central America bureau chief, but never again asked a question or sought an interview with anyone at the embassy in San Salvador.

F. Helping Out

On Saturday, March 26, 1983, Col. Waghelstein and PAO Don Hamilton were having coffee on the back terrace of the PAO's residence when the phone rang.

The caller was Joan Ambrose-Newton, BBC radio correspondent and a legal, permanent U.S. resident. The Treasury Police were at her

⁹⁶ Home of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

⁹⁷ Executive editor of the *Monitor*.

⁹⁸ The author was present during the interview.

home, arresting her and another U.S. reporter, T.J. Western. They would not tell her why but said they were taking them to jail at Treasury Police headquarters. No, neither of them had been hurt or roughed up. Yes, they said they were Treasury Police, but only one showed an ID. It was expired.

“I’m on my way,” said the PAO. The colonel and the PAO took the PAO’s light-armored vehicle and headed for Treasury Police HQ. Both knew the Treasury Police’s reputation.

All uniformed Salvadoran personnel—Army, Navy, Air Forces, National Guard, Police, Treasury Police, even the fire department—were led by graduates of the Salvadoran Military School. They sometimes moved from service to service during the course of a career. All these organizations (except the fire department) had a terrible reputation for human rights abuses, but the Treasury Police had the worst reputation of all. They were said to have “arrested” hundreds, maybe thousands, but to hold few prisoners.

Neither Hamilton nor Waghelstein had ever been to Treasury Police headquarters. Strictly speaking, both were veering outside the scope of their duties by going to the Treasury Police. Protection of U.S. citizens is the work of the consular section of the embassy. Such liaison as the embassy maintained with law enforcement agencies was conducted either by the Defense Attachés or (for matters relating to the protection of the embassy) by the State Department’s Regional Security Office. Thus, the PAO had never had occasion to visit any police headquarters, and U.S. law forbade the MILGRP Commander to offer equipment, training, or counsel to a law enforcement agency.⁹⁹ He had never exchanged more than pleasantries with Treasury Police officers.

They were mindful of their departure from established norms and while en route each radioed the the Marine on Post One in the embassy

⁹⁹ This prohibition originated some years before, when police organizations in several countries had been involved in wretched human rights abuses.

with a request that the Marine notify others. Their choice not to wait make to the calls themselves was deliberate: They did not wait because they did not trust the Treasury Police. Yes, the Treasury Police had acted with unusual deference by permitting Ms. Ambrose-Newton to call an embassy official. That was encouraging, but Salvadoran military and security personnel had acted with brazen brutality in the past. Both men considered it important to put official American eyes on the arrested reporters to establish beyond doubt that both were alive and unharmed before they went into Treasury Police cells.

Delay at Treasury Police headquarters occasioned but a phone call from the gate. A U.S. Embassy first secretary and a colonel in the U.S. Army (out of uniform) had come to visit two reporters who had been arrested.

When their vehicle arrived at the main building, Treasury Police Commander Colonel Nicolás Carranza and two other Salvadoran men were waiting. Carranza, tall, thin, and greying, was immediately recognizable. One of the other men wore the uniform and rank of a Salvadoran major. The third man was in civilian clothes but had a Colt M-1911 A-1 pistol, cocked and locked, stuck in the center of his belt in front. Carranza was polite but aloof. The man in civilian clothes scowled and made no secret of his anger at the presence of the Americans.

Col. Carranza politely but without warmth asked Colonel Waghelstein, "What brings you to our headquarters today?"

The American colonel, mindful of the strictures under which he operated, introduced himself and directed the question to Hamilton.

"We have come to inquire into the matter of the arrested reporters. We want to know the charges and to meet with them to inquire as to their treatment."

The man in civilian clothes was not having a bit of it.

"They are detained on matters related to the internal security of El Salvador. This is not a matter of concern to the embassy."

Hamilton came back levelly, "Almost every nation, including the Republic of El Salvador and the United States of America, have signed a

treaty promising to facilitate inquiries concerning the welfare and whereabouts of their countries' citizens when those citizens are in the territory of another signatory."

He was hoping no one would raise the fact that Ms. Ambrose-Newton was a South African citizen. U.S. consular access rights might not extend to residents who are not citizens. He did not know where the nearest South African consulate might be, but he was confident it was not close. Nor did he believe, in those days of apartheid, that they would be anxious to jump to the defense of a "colored" South African.

Postures and voice tones were getting stiff between Hamilton and the man in civilian attire. Carranza stepped in, keeping his tone even. "Why does the American embassy want to check on these people? Surely you do not believe anything would befall them while they are with us?"

The PAO guessed that Carranza was trying to calm things without appearing to undercut his subordinate.

"Well, my colonel," he replied. "According to one of the reporters, none of the men making the arrest was in uniform, and only one had identification and it was expired. We merely wish to be certain that they are securely in the hands of the Treasury Police. I am sure you know that people pretending to be Treasury Police have committed lamentable acts."

Pointed though the exchange had been, things were now calmer. In the meantime, the Naval Attaché, Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Ray, who was well known to the Treasury Police, and the Vice Consul in charge of U.S. citizen services had arrived.¹⁰⁰

Further introductions were in order and pleasantries of a sort were exchanged. After several minutes, all the parties came to an agreement: Ms. Ambrose-Newton was to be released to the custody of Lt. Col. Ray.

¹⁰⁰ The attachés played an interesting role throughout. By definition, their primary duty was to gather and report information on the host country military. And because they did not offer military assistance, they were not banned from dealing with local law enforcement. The Defense Attaché's office assigned the Treasury Police to the naval attaché, who was always a Marine.

She would live in his house and could leave only to go to the homes or offices of other official Americans. Mr. Western would remain in custody, but consular officials could visit him at any time.

This situation continued for a few weeks. Eventually, Mr. Western was released to the custody of his congressman, James Oberstar of Wisconsin, who escorted him from the country. Cynics within the embassy suggested that the ambassador had asked the Salvadorans to release the prisoner to Oberstar as a means of winning his support for the administration's Salvador policy.¹⁰¹ At the same time, Ms. Ambrose-Newton was released from the benign custody of the Naval Attaché and left the country. She later returned to El Salvador, where she worked without incident for over a year.

This small episode illustrates not just mission efforts to be friendly and helpful to the media, but also the high degree of coordination and cooperation within the embassy family. This kind of deliberate, thoughtful departure from assigned lanes helped make the entire mission function more smoothly.

G. The Guest House

The problems of Western and Ambrose-Newton were far from the only ones faced by American reporters and news agencies. From 1982 to the fall of 1986, the embassy public affairs officer freely offered the protection of his diplomatic status to any journalist who sought it.¹⁰² Because his official residence, purely by coincidence, had a separate guesthouse, this was not a significant sacrifice. The PAO guesthouse provided temporary shelter to journalists from *Newsweek*, Reuters, UPI, AP, the *Guardian*, and several other news organizations.

¹⁰¹ Ambassador Hinton denies he did this.

¹⁰² A 1986 earthquake made the embassy chancery uninhabitable and moved press operations to the residence of the public affairs officer.

H. Graciousness from a Pillar of American Socialism

On the eve of the 1985 municipal and legislative elections in El Salvador, a group of Americans strongly opposed to U.S. support for the (by then) constitutionally elected government got themselves accredited as election observers, with help from the U.S. embassy. They asked the embassy for a briefing, and Ambassador Pickering invited them to his residence to get an informal brief from the principal team members.¹⁰³

The group was emphatically not persuaded by the country team arguments to the effect that the government was legitimate, that the elections were honest, and that human rights abuses were down dramatically from a few years before. Even so, the activists were mostly polite and attentive—mostly.

As Defense Attaché Colonel L.C. “Chan” Duryea was describing the Salvadoran military, a woman of perhaps 50 rose to her feet and began to speak with trembling and almost tear-filled voice: “I am a New England Quaker and I cannot believe what I am hearing here. I do not believe what you people are saying. You are covering up for murder! And when I look at you, Colonel, with your short hair ...”

She stopped for breath.

Almost immediately, 70-year-old Bayard Rustin,¹⁰⁴ who had organized Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous 1963 March on Washington, stood and, leaning on his cane, spoke in a quiet, steady voice, “I am a New York Quaker. In our congregation we do not disparage people. Not for the color of their skin; not for their grooming standards. Colonel, I ask you to believe that Quakers do not condemn anyone for their appearance.”

Rustin went on to thank the embassy staff for efforts to provide them our view of the circumstances. His quiet dignity and gentle rebuke

¹⁰³ The author was present at this briefing.

¹⁰⁴ Rustin was African-American.

deflated the self-righteous among his companions and effectively closed the briefing.

Military or civilian personnel assigned to execute controversial policy should expect at least verbal abuse and negative stereotyping from those opposing the policy. On the bright side, even those clearly on the other side of the issue can be gracious.

IX. Leverage? What Leverage?

By 1984, the U.S. was giving the Salvadoran government \$1.5 million daily, two-thirds as economic assistance; the rest was military.

That should have given the embassy enormous leverage. It sometimes seemed to. Salvadoran politicians and military personnel would devote endless hours talking to U.S. congressmen, administration officials, and so on. They would offer flawless talking points fine-tuned to resonate in American ears. The military renounced any claim to direct political power.

But there was one thing the Salvadoran military would not give up—their impunity from criminal prosecution. Scores of thousands of people were killed through El Salvador's civil war. Most of them were murdered—not killed in combat, but murdered. Although the FMLN and its predecessors did plenty of killing outside combat, there is no real doubt that military and other security forces were responsible for an overwhelming majority of the murders.

Even with constant pressure from the United States to hold individuals accountable for their criminal acts, those who sought judicial process and punishment were terribly disappointed by the results. Even in the highest-profile murders, justice could not be wrung from the officer corps, as the following examples show:

- Charges were never brought in the murders of the FDR (democratic socialist) leaders.
- The murder of the American nuns brought jail for the junior enlisted men involved. These men were pardoned in the general amnesty of 1993. In spite of profound suspicions that the enlisted men would not have done this on their own, no one up the chain was ever seriously investigated.

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- There was never a Salvadoran investigation into the murder of American journalist John Sullivan. One legislator from the far-right ARENA party tried to prevent a forensic examination of the remains.
- The Sheraton case, where many details are known, may be the most frustrating:
 - The Salvadoran Supreme Court justice who appointed the investigating magistrate was the uncle of one of the prime suspects, Captain Ernesto Ávila.
 - Lt. López Sibrián went for a lineup in full dress uniform with his hat on, his very distinctive bright red hair dyed black, and his mustache shaved off. He had not been in uniform the night of the murders.
 - Sheraton Hotel owner Ricardo Sol Mesa told hotel staff members they might “end up under the hotel” if they testified.
 - Hans Christ, who fingered the victims, was arrested but released for lack of evidence.
 - Major Denis Morán, who was with all the other suspects except the triggermen, was never charged.
 - The two triggermen were jailed until released by a general amnesty in 1993.
 - Lt. López Sibrián was never held accountable for the Sheraton murders. The military did permit the criminal justice system to jail him for several years for participating in a kidnapping-for-profit ring. That group, pretending to be FMLN guerrillas, kidnapped wealthy and powerful Salvadorans. The wealth and power of the Salvadoran victims may have brought him down. U.S. power, leverage, and influence certainly did not.
- Only two people, Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides and Lieutenant Yuhssy René Mendoza, were convicted for the Jesuit murders. They were released in the 1993 amnesty after serving two years.

Over the course of more than a decade, hundreds of military and diplomatic officers attempted to bring justice and democracy to El Salvador.

They succeeded in bringing democracy.

But when the war ended, the Salvadoran officer corps had maintained their solidarity and their impunity to punishment. That solidarity in the face of so much pressure is perversely impressive. With the military and security forces responsible for thousands of murders, perhaps a dozen enlisted men and a handful of officers were imprisoned—none for more than 12 years.

X. Final Issues for Discussion

These are the personal thoughts and cautions of the author, who makes no claim of omniscience.

Did the United States “win” in El Salvador?

We aligned with a flawed, beleaguered government and prevented a takeover by forces hostile to the United States. For the first time since the 1950s,¹⁰⁵ we confronted armed forces supported by communists from around the world and denied them a victory. We said we wanted honest elections with participation by all parties, and honest elections took place. For the past 30 years, electoral results have been honored by all parties.

Thus, we can fairly be said to have done our part to help bring about democracy in a country that had never seen it. That must count as a victory.

But it is a victory with an asterisk. Could we have gone the distance had the Soviet Union not collapsed? There is certainly reason to raise the question. Few of the injustices that drove the insurgency were ended. The military’s impunity was merely scratched.

To this day, millions of people in the United States and around the world equate our involvement in El Salvador as a blot on our national copybook. The misdeeds of the Salvadoran military are well known and documented.

The FMLN got away more or less clean. The U.S. government carefully documented and demonstrated that the FMLN was getting its M-16s from Vietnam and not capturing them from the Salvadoran military, as the FMLN claimed. When getting ammunition for M-16s became too hard, the FMLN switched to AK-47s, which the Salvadoran military never had from any source. Even so, any search on Google of the subject of arms smuggling turns up a nearly solid wall of articles all but denying communist arms supplies. No one mentions that the FMLN press-ganged

¹⁰⁵ Except for the invasion of Grenada.

young teens to fill the ranks. No one remembers that the FMLN celebrated the deaths of the “war criminals” aboard the space shuttle *Challenger*¹⁰⁶ or, in at least one little-known case, that the FMLN murdered Salvadoran soldiers after they had surrendered.¹⁰⁷ At the rate things are going, everyone will “know” that the U.S. created and trained the death squads we tried so hard to get rid of.

What can we take from the experience in El Salvador and put to use?

- **When any president repeatedly insists that a particular government must not “fall” because major U.S. national security interests are involved, he casts away leverage.** The Salvadoran military knew that we would not walk away after we linked their success to our security. All the arguments that put us into Iraq and Afghanistan might be keeping us there with more personnel for longer than we would otherwise stay. The U.S. no longer seeks combat in Iraq or Afghanistan, but how many troops remain? How long will they stay there?

- **Once we commit to one side, many will hold us responsible for all that side does.** From murders in El Salvador to opium in Afghanistan, we own it all.

- **Money and arms do not buy loyalty. They rent lip service.** Consider Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, and Egypt.

¹⁰⁶ The author well recalls that Radio Venceremos, the official voice of the FMLN, on the morning after the *Challenger* blew up on launch, described the entire crew as war criminals.

¹⁰⁷ In 1983, an officer from MILGRP photographed the bodies of several Salvadoran soldiers. When I personally showed the 8×10 photos to a physician from Amnesty International, he told me it was clear that they had all been murdered after they had taken off their uniforms. He told me it was easy to determine this because the blood trails on their bodies showed they were not clothed (all were wearing underwear). He noted that almost all were dead from high-velocity rifle wounds to the head and that the severity of the wounds indicated they had been shot from no more than a few feet. We displayed these photos to the U.S. press, and no one doubted they had been murdered. Even so, a two-hour Internet search in 2014 found no record of this event.

- **When people complain about human rights abuses, we should listen carefully.** This does not mean that we should blacklist countries willy-nilly, but we need to pay attention. The Reagan administration spent millions of dollars and wasted significant prestige in El Salvador before recognizing that right-wing violence was feeding the insurgency.

- **We tend to believe people who parrot our talking points—especially if they speak English.** President Karzai speaks beautiful English and 10 years ago spoke glowingly of democracy. Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi exile who had spent most of his life in London and the U.S., was a strong advocate for U.S. intervention. He proved very persuasive in Washington before the war in Iraq started and during the occupation. Iraqis give him significant recognition, but almost no support.

- **T. E. Lawrence was right about eating soup with a knife.** It is sloppy when you force host country personnel to undertake difficult and unfamiliar tasks, but worth it. Such success as we achieved in El Salvador came about because the political situation in the U.S. would not permit us to send hundreds or even thousands of trainers and advisers.

- **Treat training a foreign army with skepticism.** How much training does an army need? We recruited, trained, equipped, deployed, and demobilized roughly 10 million men and women between 1939 and 1945. We have been training Iraqi and Afghan soldiers longer than that.

- **Most importantly, understand that you are unlikely to find a fair, just, and benevolent government beset by an insurgency.**

Annex A: Suggested Reading

El Salvador

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