THE SALVADORAN CRUCIBLE: AMERICAN COUNTERINSURGENCY IN EL SALVADOR, 1979-1992

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ABSTRACT

Between 1979 and 1992 the United States engaged in its largest counterinsurgency (COIN) and nation-building exercise since the debacle in South Vietnam. For over twelve years, Washington attempted to establish a moderate government in El Salvador and defeat an insurgency by providing American military aid and training, holding elections, initiating development projects, and carrying out socioeconomic reforms. While the U.S. prevented its Salvadoran ally from economic and political collapse, Washington's efforts did not lead to the resolution of the conflict. Arguably, it prolonged the bloodshed and failed address the grievances that fueled the violence. The inability to address the latter continues to plague El Salvador more than two decades after the end of hostilities. Yet, American military strategists and writers hold up the U.S. effort in El Salvador as a successful application of counterinsurgency. Washington's undertaking in this country has also informed its more recent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, a close examination of the U.S. intervention in El Salvador is required to assess the success narrative and whether it offers instructive lessons for future contingencies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I, like many other writers, have received countless help over the years from family and friends. First, without my parents, none of this would have ever been possible. While they may have preferred for me to finish my degree earlier or pursued an entirely different field, they remained steadfast in their support since I first began my graduate studies. My dissertation committee advisor also provided me with excellent criticism and feedback, which greatly enhanced my work. I could not have asked for a better advisor and chair. Various departments and organizations at American University, including the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies, the History Department, and the College of Arts and Sciences provided me with timely funding to ensure that I could continue working on my dissertation. My colleagues and friends, including Josh Jones, Boris Chernaev, and Ben Bennett read and commented on various drafts. Some were even generous enough to read my revisions more than once. And lastly, my wife Claire, provided me with the encouragement and hope that all writers need to finish a lengthy project. Without their valuable help, the finished product would have been infinitely more difficult.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1971, Donald Rumsfeld, a rising member of the Republican party, sought counsel from his boss and mentor President Richard Nixon. They discussed a variety of topics, including Rumsfeld's future job prospects, foreign policy, and even political philosophy. During the meeting, Nixon explained Latin America's importance to the administration and U.S. policymakers. According to the president, "Latin America doesn't matter...people don't give one damn" about that place.[1] For most of the twentieth century, with a few glaring exceptions, President Nixon's words have rung true. When Washington stopped and considered Central America, it was often treated with a mixture of contempt, paternalism and racism. Often, American policymakers' preferred way of operating in the region relied on a variety of pillars, including the deployment of U.S. marines, political subterfuge, and support for right-wing dictatorships. Several countries experienced the United States' power repeatedly. The Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua all suffered the ignominy of coups d'état or military occupation. El Salvador, however, largely escaped the fate of other Central American countries.

Throughout most of its history, El Salvador avoided the power or reach of the "Colossus of the North" as its neighbors had experienced. In contrast to its treatment of much of Central America, the United States did not send Marines to protect "American lives and property," chase

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[1] Quoted in Francis Fukuyama, "A Quiet Revolution: Latin America's Unheralded Progress," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2007). PBS also produced a documentary about Donald Rumsfeld entitled "Rumsfeld's War." Several transcripts from this particular conversation are available online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/pentagon/paths/audio.html. This anecdote is also quoted in Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 1.

"bandits," or occupy the country. El Salvador, a country famously compared in size to Massachusetts, had never been a major concern in either U.S. domestic or foreign policy until 1979. However, this small nation then convulsed relations between the U.S. Congress and the executive branch for eight years. As William LeoGrande inquired, "why did such a small region loom so large in the American psyche during the 1980s?"[2] To fully answer that question, it is imperative to begin several decades earlier.

American Cold War foreign policy in Latin America was designed to prevent communist expansion, maintain U.S. predominance, remove forces thought to be sympathetic to communism or its ideals, and ensure stability and order, especially for American investments.[3] According to historian Stephen Rabe, U.S. presidents from Harry Truman to George H.W. Bush believed that they had to keep the region "secure" so that they could wage the Cold War in other more important parts of the world. The region was the "backyard," and U.S. leaders were determined to keep it tidy and orderly.[4] To accomplish these objectives, American policymakers implemented a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that relied on American aid and military training to combat internal subversion in the western hemisphere.

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[2]The debate over the region was in part an extension of the debate over Vietnam and the struggle of communism vs. democracy. William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998), 6.

[3] During the Cold War, the U.S., including policymakers and some journalists, tended to view the region as part of a larger East-West struggle between the American and Soviet systems. To many American officials, it was simply a black or white issue. Either you were "pro American" or "anti-American." Any challenge to U.S. hegemony or orthodoxy was generally interpreted as emanating from Moscow. The idea that people in Latin America were not simply stooges of Cuba or the Soviet Union was absent from U.S. policymakers' assessments. They tended to view the region through a lens distorted by a paternalism and racism. For an excellent overview of how American policymakers characterized Latin Americans, consult Lars Schoultz,'s *Beneath the United States: a History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Officials in Washington did not seriously attempt to understand Latin American resentment. Instead they resorted to labeling those critical of U.S. policy as "anti-American," "psychopathic" "communists" overly-emotional or irrational or simply jealous or resentful of the United States size or wealth. Max Paul Friedman, *Rethinking Anti-Americanism: The History of an Exceptional Concept in American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[4] Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: the United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxx.

During the Cold War, the United States used Latin America as a testing ground for its counterinsurgency doctrine. The Pentagon deployed Green Berets and other Special Forces operatives and provided funds to help its allies either defeat or prevent the outbreak of insurgency throughout Central and South America. The lessons learned from the various U.S. counterinsurgency operations were not confined to other contingencies in the region. Instead, U.S. strategists applied the knowledge gained from Latin America globally. Of all the various interventions, the most important occurred in tiny El Salvador. When the U.S. government found itself confronted by a growing and intractable insurgency in Iraq in 2003, Pentagon officials leaned heavily on the American effort in El Salvador for solutions.

For almost twenty years after the Cuban Revolution, the United States prevented the emergence of another communist regime in Latin America. The overthrow of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July 1979 forced Washington to reevaluate its Central American strategy. That same year El Salvador tottered on the edge; during the 1960s, the country had been considered relatively stable. The following decade, economic and political stability slowly deteriorated. Several months after the collapse of Somoza's regime, El Salvador was ripe for revolution. Massive political demonstrations and government-sanctioned violence had brought the country to the precipice. To forestall a revolutionary victory and prevent the same fate that befell Somoza's military, a group of reformist Salvadoran military officers overthrew the country's military dictatorship. Beginning with this coup, U.S. interest in El Salvador expanded dramatically, marking the beginning of a massive and sustained intervention in that country's affairs.

In 1981 the newly inaugurated U.S. president, Ronald Reagan, elevated El Salvador from an irrelevant country into one whose fate was supposedly vital to U.S. national security. This

decision not only baffled, but startled contemporary observers. Proximity alone does not explain Washington's interest in El Salvador. The U.S. intervention in El Salvador was also part of a larger plan initiated by Ronald Reagan to restore Americans' confidence in their country by achieving a quick and relatively cost-free victory and ending the post-Vietnam malaise. President Reagan also portrayed the conflict as part of a larger Cold War struggle between the East and West, not an internal civil war fueled by historical, political and socioeconomic grievances. Consequently, El Salvador represented an opportunity for hard-line Cold War warriors to "roll back" the spread of communism.

It was an ambitious effort. For the next twelve years the United States implemented an expensive and thorough COIN effort aimed at preventing a victory by either the extreme right or the insurgents. Instead, American policymakers sought to establish and promote a government and political system that occupied the middle ground between those two forces. These efforts not only aimed at ending the conflict but also at remodeling the country's socioeconomic system more along the lines of that of the United States. Washington's efforts in El Salvador represented the largest nation-building effort undertaken by the United States after South Vietnam until the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

This dissertation focuses on U.S counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador during its civil war, ca. 1979-1992. It investigates the American policies, both political and military, used in the conflict to defeat the spread of "international communism." These include efforts implemented at the macro and micro levels. Rather than a diatribe against misguided U.S. policy formulations, my study analyzes the various COIN policies utilized by American strategists and offers an evaluation of their effectiveness and of the theories that supported them. Besides

assessing U.S. policies, this dissertation also places the intervention in the context of broader American foreign policy toward the region.

Within the fields of U.S. diplomatic history and U.S.-Latin American relations, interest or discussion of COIN has either been absent or negligible. Various aspects of U.S. counterinsurgency policy have been discussed, such as counter-terror, police training, and other closely related topics.[5] Nonetheless, a holistic study has yet to be undertaken that emphasizes the development, military and political efforts underlining U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. This study is intended to fill this gap and begin a process of unifying existing critiques of President Reagan's Salvadoran policy and synthesizing many of the larger issues about U.S. foreign policy toward Central America during the Cold War.

One of the more notable absences in the literature is the omission of the perspectives of Salvadoran insurgents. This is startling because over the course of the conflict, the guerrillas arguably constructed the region's most powerful guerrilla army. Whereas histories of U.S.-Latin American relations have admirably incorporated views from below, military histories and policy studies of COIN have not. To include Salvadoran voices, this study will include an analysis of wartime documents produced by the insurgents as well as interviews with the insurgents themselves.

Most studies of American involvement in the conflict are highly critical. In particular, they have emphasized the human rights abuses committed by the Salvadoran government and

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[5] Martha Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005); Greg Grandin and G. M Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

criticized the misguided nature of the United States policy toward El Salvador.[6] However, former American participants and military writers have portrayed the conflict as a successful application of COIN.[7] Most supporters argue that American aid established democracy, prevented the leftist rebels from overthrowing the Salvadoran government, professionalized the country's military, and curbed human rights abuses. Some have taken it a step further and proposed that the conflict presents a useful case model for suppressing insurgency.

Using El Salvador as a model for future contingencies facing the United States may seem counterintuitive to those familiar with the scale of its violence. The Salvadoran Civil War, which raged between 1979 and1992, killed an estimated 70,000 people. The conflict was characterized by human rights abuses, forced disappearances and political assassinations. Among those killed were four American churchwomen, four off-duty U.S. Marines, two American officials with U.S. AID and U.S. military advisors.[8] American efforts eventually consumed around $4 billion in U.S. taxpayer money, and, at certain times, El Salvador was the second or third leading recipient of U.S. foreign aid.

The "success" claim is mistaken and fails to hold up under careful scrutiny. When viewed from the narrow military perspective that the Salvadoran guerrillas did not take power, or that no

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[6] Mark Peceny and William D. Stanley, "Counterinsurgency in El Salvador," *Politics and Society* 38.1 (2010): 38-67; Tommy Sue Montgomery, "Fighting Guerrillas: The United States and Low-Intensity Conflict in El Salvador," *New Political Science* 9.1 (Fall/Winter 1990): 21-53; Benjamin Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1991); A.J. Bacevich, et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: the Case of El Salvador* (Cambridge and Washington: Pergamon Brassey's, 1988); Richard Alan White, *The Morass: United States' Intervention in Central America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Michael McClintock, *The American Connection*, Volume I (London: Zed Books, 1985)

[7] Kalev Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2005): 8-12.

[8] In 1996, four years after the conflict ended, some of the advisers who were killed in action were publicly honored. As the article noted, the advisers were very similar to active duty combat soldiers- they carried weapons, received combat pay, accompanied government troops in the field and were targeted by guerrillas who had decided U.S. troops were fair game. See Bradley Graham, "Public Honors for Secret Combat: Medals Granted After Acknowledgement of U.S. Role in El Salvador," *Washington Post,* May 6, 1996.

U.S. ground troops were committed, it appears that the American intervention was highly successful. However, when the lens is widened it becomes problematic to argue that the conflict represents a triumphant application of counterinsurgency. It is especially curious to emphasize the positive outcome of the United States' efforts in El Salvador since the war ended in stalemate and a negotiated settlement—which could have possibly been achieved several years earlier had recalcitrant forces, including the U.S. government and Salvadoran military and its right-wing allies, not fiercely resisted.

There is no doubt that massive American funds and training played an important role in preventing an insurgent triumph. U.S. aid greatly enlarged the size of the Salvadoran military and its arsenal, kept El Salvador's economy from collapsing and prevented the overthrow of Washington's preferred statesman, José Napoleon Duarte. In spite all of the United States' advice and funds, as well as the political subterfuge used by the White House to ensure the aid pipeline continued to flow, Washington and its ally never vanquished their enemy. Even more importantly, the various reforms enacted during the war failed to address the underlying issues that had caused the outbreak of war in the first place and continue to plague El Salvador.

In spite of my best efforts, there are still a few important questions and topics that remain unanswered. To begin, how important was Cuban and Nicaraguan assistance to the Salvadoran guerrillas? Throughout the war, American policymakers maintained that it was massive; critics claimed that it was minimal and overstated.[9] The truth probably lies somewhere between the two extremes, but most likely officials from Washington exaggerated the aid received from Cuba and Nicaragua. However, this does not mean that their support to the Salvadoran guerrillas was

[9] Recent research has argued that Cuban aid was extensive and consequential. According to Andrea Oñate-Madrazo, without Cuban support, the Salvadoran insurgents would have been severely compromised as a force capable of challenging the status quo. See "The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-1992," *Cold War History* 11.2 (2011): 133-154.

inconsequential. Both countries provided the insurgents with various forms of support, including sanctuary and weapons. For example, Managua often provided refuge for the insurgent high command to meet and coordinate strategy and policy. On the other hand, the Cuban and Nicaraguan intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War was not nearly as massive as that of the United States. Nonetheless, an important question remains: would the insurgency have continued without outside aid? In order to address this topic, research in Cuba and Nicaragua is necessary to augment the scarce documentary record in El Salvador and the interviews conducted during this research.

During the conflict, the Salvadoran insurgents relied upon their political wing to mobilize international support for their aims, including in Western Europe and the United States. Overall, the literature has not analyzed these efforts. Initially, insurgent diplomacy scored some important victories, such as receiving recognition of belligerent status from Mexico and France. Unfortunately, not much is known about how the insurgents organized their activities in particular countries such as France and West Germany, and arguably even the United States. The importance of international aid in sustaining the insurgency is an issue that also has not been satisfactorily determined.[10] Ultimately, the literature would be strengthened by an exploration of the diplomatic efforts of the Salvadoran insurgents.

[10] Books published by former insurgents have not discussed the importance of aid from the United States or Western Europe in-depth. They have discussed their efforts in the communist bloc and Middle East, but they do not include the various means they used to persuade potential allies to support them financially or militarily. Former U.S. policymakers have offered numerous numbers and figures to emphasize the importance of foreign aid. During an interview with Ambassador Corr, he stated that over 20percent of the insurgents' support came from the United States.

Literature Review

Before delving into the counterinsurgency literature, it is necessary to clarify a few key terms that will be used throughout the dissertation. Current U.S. military joint doctrine defines "insurgency" as an "organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.[11]" However, this broad and vague definition fails to note the political aims of an insurgency. Insurgency can also be classified as a "struggle to control a contested political space, between a state (or a group of states or occupying powers) and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers.[12] Insurgents have historically attempted to accomplish their goals through violence, but they have also relied on political and social and economic components as well.[13] An insurgency can be motivated by a variety of factors, including nationalism, repression, foreign occupation, ideology, or even socio-economic justifications; in fact there may be more than one explanation. Whether radical or conservative, insurgent movements are at their core political.

Conversely, the U.S. military defines "counterinsurgency" as the military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.[14] Expressing the term in this manner makes it very broad and malleable.[15] In fact,

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[11] "Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02*," Joint Chiefs of Staff,* accessed April 22, 2011, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf

[12] David Kilcullen, "Counter-insurgency *Redux*," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48.4 (Winter 2006): 111-130, 2.

[13] Scott Moore, "The Basics of Counterinsurgency," Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Forces Command, J9, Joint Urban Operations Office, nd, 3. A copy is available at smallwarsjournal.com/documents/**moore**coinpaper.pdf.

[14] JP 1-02.

[15] David Kilcullen recently argued that classical counterinsurgencies (ca. 1944-1982) differ from modern insurgencies, and that while understanding classical COIN theory is necessary, it is not sufficient for success against a modern insurgency. They differ in several areas, including at the policy, strategic, operational and tactical levels.

several commentators have noted its ambiguity.[16] As David Fitzgerald noted, counterinsurgency is far from a neatly defined, well-understood phenomenon.[17] Confusing matters even further is a bewildering list of associated terms. According to Andrew Birtle, there are more than fifty phrases to describe the military's many COIN actions, including "Situations Short of War," "Low-Intensity Warfare," "Cold War Operations," "Internal Defense and Development" and "Counter-guerrilla War."[18] In other words, these terms may encompass actions that are part of counterinsurgency, but do not necessarily define it.

While establishing a precise definition eludes even the experts, for this dissertation COIN will describe an integrated set of economic, political, social and security measures intended to end or prevent the recurrence of armed violence, create and maintain stable political, economic and social structures, and resolve the underlying causes of an insurgency.[19] In other words, counterinsurgency is not only designed to defeat an insurgency, but is also meant to address the underlying causes of the outbreak.

One of the more noticeable differences is that modern insurgencies may not necessarily seek to overthrow the state, but to disrupt it. See "Counter-insurgency *Redux*," pp.2-4.

[16] According to David Ucko, the phrase has no inherent form or substance; it is simply a label used to describe *any* operation intended to defeat guerrilla forces. The definition has little utility, except that its use as shorthand for something there is common consensus about. David Ucko, "Is 'Counterinsurgency' an Empty Concept?" *Kings of War,* March 26, 2010, http://kingsofwar.org.uk/2010/03/is-percentE2percent80percent98counterinsurgencypercentE2percent80percent99-an-empty-concept; David Kilcullen also agrees, noting that there is no such thing as a "standard" counterinsurgency. Its nature is not fixed, but constantly shifting. The sole and simple, but difficult requirement is to understand the environment, diagnose it in detail and then build a tailor set of specific techniques to combat it. David Kilcullen, *the Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183.

[17] David Fitzgerald, "Learning to Forget: The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq" (PhD diss., University College Cork, June 2010).

[18] Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2003), 4.

[19] This definition is an amalgamation of several different definitions, including Scott Moore & David Kilcullen. See Moore, "Basics of Counterinsurgency," 14; Kilcullen, *Counter-Insurgency Redux.*

Since the end of the Vietnam War, interest in counterinsurgency has ebbed and flowed. The American defeat in Vietnam, along with the military's subsequent refocus on conventional war in Europe, ensured there would not be much institutional interest in studying COIN. The U.S. Army made no real concerted efforts to learn from its mistakes in Vietnam. Instead, it focused on what it did best: practice waging high-intensity conventional warfare, with an emphasis on stopping a Soviet advance across the Fulda Gap. Despite a lack of official interest, there was a small coterie of officers who continued to study insurgency.[20] By the time of the promulgation of *FM 100-5, Operations*, which codified the military's conventional approach to warfare in the post-Vietnam era, the curriculum for the Army's mid-level officers at the Command and General Staff College had almost been purged. [21] Had it not been for LTC Don Vought, who hid the COIN files under "terrorism," many of the previous records would have been lost.[22]

Between the end of the Vietnam War and 2005, there were periods of heightened interest in counterinsurgency. The insurgencies in Central America during the 1980s generated a renewed interest in the subject, but it was modest. In 1991, the Army published *Field Manual 100-20, Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict,* which was largely a rehash of Vietnam-era counterinsurgency policies.[23] Besides COIN, it also focused on other aspects such as terrorism, peacekeeping and contingency operations. More recently, counterinsurgency has experienced a

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[20] One of these officers was John Waghelstein, who eventually became head of the advisory effort in El Salvador. See, "Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Low-Intensity Conflict in the Post-Vietnam Era," in *American War in Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies and Implications for Future Conflicts,* edited by Lawrence Grinter & Peter Dunn (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 127-38.

[21] U.S. Army, *Field Manual 100-5, Operations* (Washington: U.S. Department of the Army, 1976).

[22] John Fishel and Max Manwaring, "The SWORD Model of Counterinsurgency: A Summary and Update," March 17, 2010, www.smallwarsjournal.com

[23] U.S. Army and Air Force, *Field Manual 100-20: Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1990).

revival, especially since 2005, which coincided with the deteriorating security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The literature in the field varies tremendously, focusing on a variety of different time periods and conflicts, although most of the studies are concerned with the American counterinsurgency experience. Before analyzing some of the current trends within the field, it will be necessary to discuss the methodology employed.

Most studies on counterinsurgency use comparative case studies of conflicts. Authors utilize this methodology for a variety of reasons, including searching for commonalities between the conflicts; explaining why the counter-insurgents were successful; or ascertaining why they failed. Arguably, many case studies are highly selective and tend to select examples that conform to their argument. And perhaps more importantly, the historical analysis is often shallow or poor. It is rare to see monographs focus on one particular conflict, unless it is Vietnam. Generally, authors tend to analyze at least three or more cases. The most popular selections are Vietnam, Malaya and the two Filipino insurgencies after the War of 1898 and World War II. To a lesser extent, writers have discussed the French experiences in Indochina and Algeria as well. However, more recent texts have focused on other conflicts, such as the American intervention in Somalia and Russia's continuing conflict in Chechnya.

Many authors have emphasized that America has a vast amount of experience fighting unconventional wars, however, before 1940 these experiences were not codified into doctrine. Despite this background, they feel that the U.S. is generally unprepared and almost always caught off-guard when insurgencies erupt. In particular, some authors have blamed the U.S. Army for its lack of interest in fighting these conflicts, which it has viewed as an aberration.[24]

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[24] Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); John J. Tierney, *Chasing Ghosts: Unconventional Warfare in American History* (Washington, D.C: Potomac

This perceived disinterest has repeatedly come back to haunt the United States. Prior to Vietnam, the U.S. waged a variety of small wars on the Great Western Plains and interventions in the Caribbean and in the Philippines.[25] Max Boot argues that America failed in Vietnam because the military ignored the lessons from its previous encounters with insurgencies, and, in particular, the Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual.*[26] Authors such as Boot also assume that past interventions are applicable to current and future conflicts. In general they believe that these wars were successful and repeatable—two assumptions that require testing.

Of all the previous COIN campaigns, Vietnam has been the most analyzed. One of the seminal texts for counterinsurgents (CIs) is John Nagl's *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife,* which emphasizes the importance of organizational structure.[27] The book argues that the British had a more flexible military organization, which allowed them to react to threats and change their tactics accordingly. Another central argument is that the Americans lost because they did not apply counterinsurgency soon enough. While bureaucratic inertia can surely compound and frustrate efforts, arguing that organizational culture is the most important element ignores many other crucial factors in an insurgency, including political, social and cultural issues, not to mention the civilians and insurgents. It also deprives the insurgents of agency and initiative.

Books, 2006); James S. Corum, *Fighting the War on Terror: A Counterinsurgency Strategy* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Zenith, 2007).

[25] The U.S. Marine Corps published the Small Wars Manual in 1940, which codified the tactics they used during American interventions in the Philippines and Caribbean in the early twentieth century. For an overview of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine in this era, see Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941* (Washington, D.C: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1998).

[26] Boot also seems to imply that if the United States had not fought the "wrong war" or the conventional war, the U.S. could have emerged victorious.

[27] John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport: Praeger, 2002).

Nagl's work, along with Andrew Krepinevich's, is also part of a larger body of literature that attributes American defeat in Vietnam to the failure to adopt COIN tactics. In general, the debate is largely broken down into a simple dichotomy: conventional strategists and counterinsurgents. Colonel Harry Summers's book *On Strategy*, which is an excellent example of the former, fired the first salvo with its publication. He believed the Viet Cong guerrillas were a mere sideshow in the war; what was really important was to go after the main nerve center: Hanoi.[28] Krepinevich's work places the blame for failure on the shoulders of General Westmoreland, who mistakenly continued to pursue conventional tactics in the face of the more important threat emanating from the guerrillas.[29] In a relatively recent article, Dale Andrade continues the debate by arguing that Westmoreland was justified in facing the conventional threat posed by Hanoi.[30] Andrade argued that if the Army had begun pacification earlier, instead of its conventional focus, U.S. soldiers would have been decimated by large numbers of Vietnamese regulars.

Unfortunately for these revisionist historians, there is little evidence to support their claims. As George Herring has famously noted, the U.S. war in Vietnam was unwinnable at a "moral or material cost most Americans deemed acceptable." Then again, even if the United States had invaded North Vietnam or embraced counterinsurgency earlier, would it have brought lasting stability to Vietnam? Or would it have triggered another chapter in the "Vietnam Wars?"

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[28] Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).

[29] Andrew F. Krepinevich, *the Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

[30] Dale Andradé, "Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19.2 (2008): 145-181.

Field Manual 3-24 is the most current United States COIN doctrine.[31] The latest counterinsurgency manual is a combination of tactics used in Vietnam, insights from former counterinsurgents, and observations from officers involved in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, *FM 3-24* highlights the importance and relevance of Vietnam era programs, such as Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS). CORDS was an integrated civilian and military effort established by President Lyndon Johnson in 1967 with Robert Komer as its director. This organization led the "pacification" campaign that aimed at destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure and establishing the credibility of the South Vietnamese government.[32] While retaining some tactics previously used in Vietnam, the manual also disagrees with older doctrine. For instance, it does not give a ratio of soldiers to insurgents needed to ensure stability. During Vietnam, the ratio was thought to be 10:1, or ten soldiers to every insurgent. As the manual states, no predetermined or fixed ratio of friendly troops to enemy combatants ensures success in counterinsurgency.[33]

FM 3-24, like much of the counterinsurgency literature, highlights the necessity of obtaining the allegiance of civilians. As Col. John Waghelstein, who served in El Salvador as the head of the military mission stated, the most important piece of terrain is the "six inches between

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[31] U.S. Army & Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency FM 3-24* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2006).

[32] For an overview of pacification and CORDS, see Thomas L. Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995). For specific programs such as the Phoenix Program, see Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1990); Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997); Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

[33] However, the manual also has a preference a ratio of around 1:20 or one soldier to every twenty insurgents.

the ears of the target audience."[34] According to the manual's authors, counterinsurgents must provide protection to civilians, isolate them from the insurgents, and establish a level of trust between the government and its citizens. Without the support of the majority of the population, counterinsurgents will not defeat the insurgency.[35]

The emphasis on protecting civilians is generally described as population-centric counterinsurgency. This policy is also the cornerstone behind the most recent American efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal were not the first to advocate such practices. David Galula, a former French officer who served in Algeria, argued that protecting the civilian population was the most important aspect of a counterinsurgency campaign. Galula's ideas on COIN have become popular among current American military officers. He organized the civilian population into three groups: a minority of insurgent supporters, a large uncommitted majority, and a minority of active government supporters.[36] Of the three, the most important is the large and uncommitted population. To obtain the support of this group, counterinsurgents must provide security and engage in civic-action projects, which are designed to establish political legitimacy and create support for the central government. Practitioners of this approach argue that civilians, who may otherwise want to help the CIs, withhold information due to fear of retribution from the insurgents. Therefore, if

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[34] See Col. John Waghelstein's contribution in "Comments on 'Principles of War and Low Intensity Conflict'," *Military Review* (June 1985): 80-81.

[35] Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Robert Taber, *the War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (New York: L. Stuart, 1965). One of the first writers to emphasize the importance of civilians was Mao Tse-Tung, who stated that insurgents must move amongst the people as the fish swims in the sea. See Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1961).

[36] See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964); and *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1963); Sir Robert Thompson has also argued along similar lines, stating that the government can count on only around 10percent of the population's support, while the largest and most important is the "neutral" portion. See Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

civilians are protected and feel secure, they will provide intelligence and cooperate with government forces.[37]

Sir Robert Thompson, another renowned expert on counterinsurgency, also emphasized the importance of protecting the population. Thompson, who is British, served in the Malayan conflict. He also briefly advised both the United States and the South Vietnamese during the initial phases of the American involvement in Vietnam.[38] Several of Thompson's ideas are reflected within the pages of *FM 3-24.* He repeatedly stressed that counterinsurgency tactics must be within the bounds of law, because using legal means allows the government to portray itself as the protector of innocents and distinguishes itself from the guerrillas. Even though insurgents will resort to unlawful practices, the CIs cannot. Thompson also recommended the resettling of civilians in Malaya in communities known as the "New Villages," and advocated for the adoption of the Strategic Hamlets program in Vietnam. However, Thompson attributed the program's unsuccessful conclusion to its fast-paced nature and uneven implementation. The hamlets were too spread out and thus presented the Viet Cong with easy and soft targets to attack.

Similar to other counterinsurgency experts, the authors of *FM 3-24* advocate a clear, hold, and build stage. The first stage, a euphemistic term, involves removing insurgents from an area. This is accomplished by either killing or capturing insurgents or driving them out of the targeted zone. Holding requires counterinsurgents to stay in the area and prevent the insurgents

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[37] David Kilcullen, *the Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[38] Some of the other principles he discussed include good governance; having a clear political plan aimed at establishing a free and independent country, which is politically and economically stable and viable; balance between civilian and military forces; and focusing on defeating the insurgents' political subversion, instead of their forces. See Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.

from returning and requires CIs to have sufficient forces. Of all the stages, this is the most critical. Building involves the process of reconstruction and initiating civic-action programs. Recently, a new stage was added: transfer. This phase indicates the process of turning over control to the host nation. Eventually, once the forces are deemed to be capable of securing the country, control will be handed over to the host nation forces and government.[39]

For CIs, the most pressing tasks after the insurgents have been evicted and the population secured is to win the civilians' allegiance. The counterinsurgency literature stresses the importance of initiating civic action programs. Generally, these efforts are conducted by the military, or through grassroots efforts, to win support for the central government through development projects. Some of the examples routinely offered include road paving, constructing health clinics, building water sanitation facilities, and even passing out candy to children. The usage of these programs has been a mainstay of American counterinsurgency doctrine throughout the twentieth century. Washington has used civic action across the globe, including in the Philippines, Haiti, Vietnam, and of course, El Salvador.

Emphasizing the centrality of civilians also places them at greater risk of death or retaliation–from both insurgents and government forces. Their failure to respond positively to requests to provide information, support, and their neutrality, or inaction, has often placed non-combatants in the belligerents' crosshairs. Frequently, they have been physically abused, forced to flee, or murdered for their behavior. Population-centric counterinsurgency also disrupts

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[39] Thompson's stages are slightly different, but their overall aim is the same. He referred to these stages as clearing, holding, "winning" and "won." Recently, President Obama advocated for a new phase: transfer. This stage became a part of Obama's "Af-Pak Strategy." For a brief assessment, see C. Christine Fair, "Obama's new 'Af-Pak' Strategy: Can 'Clear, Hold, Build, Transfer Work?" *The Afghanistan Papers* (Ontario: Centre for International Governance Innovation, July 2010). However, as Anthony Cordesman noted, no clear definition or strategy of how to transfer control over to the host nation's forces has emerged. See Anthony Cordesman, "Shape, Clear, Hold, Build and Transfer: The Full Metrics of the Afghan War," September 23, 2009, http://csis.org/files/publication/100302_afghan_metrics_combined.pdf.

development work by emphasizing quick and short-term projects that do not promote long-term sustainable growth. Even though this strategy has been portrayed in a benign and humane manner, as this dissertation will demonstrate, this strategy causes civilians to suffer more, not less. More importantly, it tends to alienate the very population the counterinsurgents are trying to win over.

Protecting civilians and engaging in civic-action projects are designed with the end goal of creating and securing the legitimacy of the host-nation government. According to the literature, legitimate governments protect their citizens, are not corrupt and are able to make their citizens believe they have a stake in the new society. The battle over this concept explains why CIs seek to protect civilians and engage in civic-action projects and why insurgents attack these projects and assassinate officials linked to them.[40]

Very few nations confronting insurgency can be characterized as legitimate governments. Rampant corruption, closed political systems, repression, violence and the lack of an impartial or neutral security force are factors that have fueled insurgency. As this dissertation will demonstrate, CIs have rarely succeeded in establishing politically viable governments in the midst of a counterinsurgency intervention. In particular, they have failed because they never adequately addressed the root causes of the conflict.

Military writers have spent considerable efforts attempting to define the best strategies or practices to pursue in a counterinsurgency. Generally, some of the better literature does not

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[40] The *Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)* in El Salvador attacked economic infrastructure, transportation networks and local officials affiliated with the government. The primary objective was to convince Salvadoran citizens and the United States that the government was incapable of providing adequate security for the socio-economic development of the country. See Max Manwaring & Courtney Prisk, *A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador*, McNair Papers, Number Eight (Washington, D.C.: The Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1990).

attribute success to one factor.[41] Nonetheless, the literature has insisted that counterinsurgents follow a set of "best practices," which often resembles a checklist. Most of these suggestions are military in nature, including the necessity of obtaining intelligence, carrying out small-unit action, and selecting appropriate leadership. For example, David Kilcullen identifies at least eight different practices, which include population-centric security, continuity of key personnel and policies, and an effective political strategy that builds legitimacy and civilian-military integration (or unity of effort).[42] Intelligence is also critical, especially in the form of Human Intelligence (HUMINT).[43] CIs must also be very patient. Authors lament the American people's lack of patience and their desire for immediate gratification and instant results. However, many insurgencies ultimately last decades—witness the Vietnamese struggle against the French and Americans and the Chinese against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-Shek—and thus it is essential for the United States to recognize the nature of these conflicts before intervening.

Other writers have emphasized that destroying insurgent sanctuaries, or preventing guerrillas from obtaining one, is also very important. Bard O'Neill has argued that if a country has porous borders or neighbors sympathetic to the insurgents' cause, it will make defeating the insurgency much more difficult.[44] However, as the experience of Cambodia demonstrates, attacking cross-border sanctuaries had unintended and destructive consequences, especially for

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[41] For instance, Anthony Joes stresses the importance of protecting the population, and having visible and physical control over territory. See *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

[42] Kilcullen, 265.

[43] Many authors stress the importance of intelligence. See Kalev Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2005): 8-12; Corum, "Fighting the War on Terror," 126.

[44] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2005).

its inhabitants.[45] Invading Cambodia's territory did not defeat the Viet Cong (VC) nor seriously hinder its war-fighting capabilities. While the American bombing may have temporarily disrupted the VC supply system, it did not greatly affect the outcome of the war.

Many military writers have stressed the importance of leadership. Mark Moyar argues that leadership, both military and political, is the most important element in a counter-insurgent campaign.[46] Some authors have argued that leadership must be invested in a single authority and should usually be civilian.[47] In Moyar's opinion, success occurred after ineffective and corrupt leaders were replaced. Effective political leadership is also crucial because the nation's elected officials and decision-makers decide where and when to intervene. It is imperative for them to clearly articulate and justify their actions prior to intervention. Failure to do so can lead to apathy or discontent among the civilians.[48] Without a doubt, leadership is an extremely crucial element in conflict. However, at times it appears that these writers offer a rather simplistic formula for success. As Gian Gentile warns his readers, the "better general" thesis, the idea that a new general will arrive and turn around a sagging war effort cannot compensate for mistaken strategy.[49]

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[45] As some authors have argued, the American intervention destabilized Cambodia, leading to the rise of Pol Pot. See William Shawcross, *Side-Show: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

[46] The author identifies ten attributes of a good leader: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity and organization. See Mark Moyar, *a Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[47] Sepp, "Best Practices," David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

[48] James R. Arnold, *Jungle of Snakes: A Century of Counterinsurgency Warfare from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

[49] Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York & London: The New Press, 2013).

Counterinsurgency studies have also emphasized the importance of reforms, including economic, military, political and social. Of the four, the most important pillar for CIs to address is political reform, since insurgencies are driven by politically-minded agendas. To combat insurgents in this arena, American strategists have conducted elections in the midst of war and pressured their allies to enact political change. The underlying assumption is that it is necessary to persuade the central government to be more responsive to its citizens' needs. In theory, political reforms will isolate the insurgents from the civilians and cement a positive relationship between the government and its population. However, reforms can potentially backfire, especially if they are conducive to a small segment of the population, undermine established customs that have defined relations between the central government and its constituents, or harm local interests.

Even though American COIN doctrine emphasizes the importance of political reform, this topic has received scant attention in the literature. The intellectual and anti-war activist, Eqbal Ahmad, has criticized the field for this striking omission, noting that counterinsurgents have tended to address insurgency "as an administrative problem subject to managerial and technical solutions." This "pathology of bureaucratic perception," is misguided; if counter-revolutionary forces do not understand their enemies or fail to erode the legitimacy of the rebels, none of these cosmetic changes will matter. Even though Ahmad wrote these words in 1971, this flaw still permeates much of the literature.[50]

As most authors point out, insurgency is highly complex. However, these guidelines seem to imply that if counterinsurgents follow them it will greatly enhance their chances of

[50] Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo & Yogesh Chandari, editors, *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 56.

victory. Nevertheless, the clichés underestimate the multifaceted nature of insurgency and reflect a lack of understanding of the motives of the insurgents. The COIN literature also fails to recognize that the insurgents also have a say in the matter. The investigative journalist and fierce critic of government incompetence, I.F. Stone, captured these sentiments several decades before the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq. His words are as valid now as they were then.

> In reading the military literature now so fashionable at the Pentagon, one feels that these writers are like men watching a dance from outside through heavy plate glass windows. They see the motions but they can't hear the music. They put the mechanical gestures down on paper with pedantic fidelity. But what rarely come through to them are the injured racial feelings, the misery, the rankling slights, the hatred, the devotion, the inspiration and the desperation. So they do not really understand what leads men to abandon wife, children, home, career, friends; to take to the bush and live gun in hand like a hunted animal; to challenge overwhelming military odds rather than acquiesce any longer in humiliation, injustice or poverty.[51]

U.S. Counterinsurgency in Latin America

Typically¸ when writers have analyzed American COIN efforts in Latin America, they have discussed two particular conflicts and eras: the *Sandinistas (FSLN)* in Nicaragua during the 1980s and the earlier American interventions in the Caribbean and Latin America, including in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.[52] Military writers have considered the Salvadoran Civil War, but many studies have neither analyzed the conflict in its entirety or the role of Salvadoran actors. Sometimes, the conflict only merits a brief chapter discussion. What the literature is missing, and what this dissertation will contribute, is a historically grounded study of the war, including U.S. COIN policy and the role of Salvadorans. The omission of El Salvador is

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[51] Quoted in Bengelsdorf, Cerullo & Chandari, 47.

[52] Richard Millet, *Searching for Stability: The U.S. Development of Constabulary Forces in Latin America and the Philippines* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2010); Keith B. Bickel, *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

striking since the Reagan administration elevated the Salvadoran civil war into an all-consuming struggle that supposedly threatened U.S. national security.

Latin America's irrelevance in the counterinsurgency literature is notable because U.S. military activity in the region contributed to the development of American COIN doctrine. In the early twentieth century Washington routinely deployed the Marines to suppress unrest and revolution. After U.S. troops had achieved their initial objectives, they turned their attention toward preventing the further outbreak of violence. American officers trained native troops and police (referred to as constabulary forces), launched development projects and carried out political and socioeconomic reforms. As those familiar with American COIN doctrine might recognize, all of these are prominent aspects of U.S. counterinsurgency policy.

Well before Washington's preoccupation with Fidel Castro and the spread of communism in Latin America, the U.S. military had participated in several "small wars" in the region during the early twentieth century. During these conflicts, American soldiers used tactics that became essential features of U.S. COIN doctrine decades later. However, their actions were rarely called counterinsurgency. Instead, they were labeled "constabulary operations," a term that is still commonly used by military historians. This misnomer is used to cover a variety of actions taken by the U.S. military across the Caribbean, including in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Nicaragua. The term constabulary implies that the U.S. was a neutral observer whose primary purpose was simply to restore law and order. As scholars familiar with the region are well aware, the United States actions in the hemisphere exceeded "policing" the neighborhood. In many ways, the activities conducted by the U.S. military in Latin America prior to World War II were similar to the tactics they employed decades later.

Alan McPherson's recent research has added valuable insight into the motivations of the rebels in these countries. For McPherson, nationalism was not the potent recruiter most have assumed. Rather, McPherson views a significant portion of the rebels as being motivated less by ideology and more for personal reasons. In other words, the United States faced resistance not from nationalists opposed to occupation but from locals who feared that U.S. efforts posed a threat to their local autonomy or personal interests.[53] McPherson's findings are significant for the broader COIN literature precisely because U.S. nation-building efforts trampled on localized forms of government.[54] Thus, rather than establishing the government's legitimacy, these reforms undermined the counterinsurgents' goals by triggering further resistance and violence.

In the Dominican Republic and Haiti, American occupation officials launched several large-scale public works projects, which included road building, sanitation, and hygiene. American strategists were most likely motivated by several factors, including improving the health and well-being of the local population, putting unemployed men to work rather than fighting them, and improving the military's ability to crush further outbreaks of violence. While these programs had benign intentions, they often backfired, particularly in Haiti. There, U.S. soldiers used the *corvée*, a system established by the French that coerced men into unpaid physical labor. Haitians also resented U.S. attempts to transform their traditional education curriculum that focused on literature, law, and medicine, into one that prioritized training

[53] Alan McPherson, *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[54] An example of a well-intentioned, but disastrous reform occurred in Afghanistan under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. Under these leaders, the Afghan government implemented a series of reforms including land reform and equal rights for women. These reforms exacerbated distrust between rural society and the government, which helped fuel the insurgency that the Soviet Union invaded to destroy.

Haitians for manual labor.[55] Instead of establishing legitimacy and engendering positive feelings toward the United States, these various nation-building efforts provoked further violence.

The American military's actions in the hemisphere were eventually codified in 1940, with the publication of the *Small Wars Manual*. Even though the strategies contained in this manual were largely abandoned over the following two decades, they became integral elements of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. The United States' occupation policy led not to the promotion of freedom and democracy, but to the installation of military dictatorships throughout the hemisphere. Years later, American COIN policy would repeat the same mistakes it made several decades before, but this time it would lead to arguably even greater chaos.

After the Cuban Revolution and lasting until the demise of the Soviet Union, American policymakers increasingly used counterinsurgency to achieve what they considered were important diplomatic and political goals in Latin America. Chief among them was the prevention of "another Cuba." To combat internal subversion and prevent the region's revolutionaries from exploiting issues such as poverty, U.S. strategists relied on counterinsurgency measures such as political reform, civic action, and the development of elite military units. More often than not, the U.S. prioritized the military aspects of COIN. From Washington's perspective, these strategies were intended to promote development, government reform and democracy, professionalize security forces, and improve human rights. Rather, they achieved quite the opposite. U.S. policy militarized the region, indoctrinated and trained military officers who were among the worst human rights abusers, and arguably through its economic programs underwrote poverty and underdevelopment. In spite of Washington's best attempts, revolutionary

[55] McPherson, 120.

movements continued to survive, and in the 1970s they increasingly made their presence felt throughout the western hemisphere, especially in Central America.

The largest effort undertaken by the U.S. to defeat the conditions in which communists thrive occurred under President John F. Kennedy, through the Alliance for Progress (AFP). As Jeffrey Taffet has demonstrated, the program was developed because of the flawed assumption that foreign aid, or the promise of it, would lead Latin American leaders to change their policies and accept U.S. ideas about development.[56] Modernization theorists, as well as American politicians, believed that if countries were economically prosperous, they would not become communist. According to one author, the *Alliance* presented the U.S. as an advanced and deeply altruistic nation that regenerated its strength by assisting a region desperate to emulate its exemplary innovations and past accomplishments.[57]

The alliance was also part of a two-track process. In addition to improving the economies of the region and building democracy, another important facet was training the area's militaries. Instead of focusing on the threat posed by foreign intervention, the training emphasized countering internal, not external, communist subversion. Beginning in the 1960s, the American military, especially the Green Berets, began training Latin American militaries in the art of counterinsurgency. Some influential social scientists, such as Lucian Pye, believed that military leaders were agents of modernization.[58] Eventually, President Kennedy's moral concerns with social justice and progress were overridden by political and security concerns. As Stephen Rabe

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[56] Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[57] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[58] Lucian Pye, "Armies in the Process of Political Modernization," in *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries,* ed. John J. Johnson, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1962): 69-91.

noted, these security-driven concerns were self-defeating because of a contradiction between aiding right-wing dictatorships and reform. [59] In short, while the *Alliance* and other military programs were supposed to promote stability and democracy, they created conditions that led to revolution.

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, largely distanced his administration from the principles of the AFP and introduced the Mann Doctrine, named after Thomas Mann, Johnson's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs. The Mann Doctrine called for the promotion of economic growth without emphasis on social reform, no preference for forms of government to avoid charges of intervention, opposition to communism and protection of private American investment.[60] Political stability, not economic aid devoted to social programs would spur prosperity.[61] Under the Mann Doctrine, the primary emphasis for preventing the spread of communism rested on right-wing dictators, not economic affluence. This policy largely guided U.S. strategy until events in 1979 dealt the policy a death blow.

Dissertation Layout

The remainder of the dissertation will be broken up into five chapters. The first two establish the groundwork for the U.S. intervention in El Salvador. Chapter one analyzes previous American experiences combating insurgency across the globe in the twentieth century. U.S, strategists studied these contingencies to devise a list of "appropriate" tactics to defeat their enemies. Several of these measures were repeatedly used—including in El Salvador—such as the

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[59] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999).

[60] Kyle Longley, *In the Eagle's Shadow: the United States and Latin America* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 257.

[61] Taffet, 60.

formation of long-range reconnaissance patrols and civic action programs. Equally important were foreign influences, especially British and French, whose efforts defeating insurgency have been routinely analyzed and cited by U.S. counterinsurgency practitioners.

Chapter two focuses on U.S. efforts to establish a COIN strategy for El Salvador during the Cold War, beginning with the "counterinsurgency ferment" in the 1960s. The election of President John F. Kennedy, who developed a keen interest in combating "Wars of National Liberation," initiated a surge of interest in the subject. Under Kennedy, American operatives used counterinsurgency to combat revolutionary movements across the globe. For the next several decades, albeit with some modifications, the U.S. military relied on a COIN strategy in Latin America that had been developed under President Kennedy. The chapter will conclude with a section focusing on the presidency of Jimmy Carter who laid the groundwork for the escalation of the American intervention under his successor, Ronald Reagan.

Chapter three analyzes the war between 1981 and 1984 when American interest in the conflict and the violence was at its peak. During this phase of the war, the United States and its Salvadoran allies launched several of the more notable COIN campaigns, including an important development program, and the holding of constituent (parliamentary) and presidential elections. While the Salvadoran government's prospects had been initially bleak, the momentum began to slowly shift in its favor beginning in 1984.

The following chapter discusses the "stalemate" phase of the conflict (1984-1988). Beginning in 1984, the Salvadoran government rebounded from its earlier poor showing and slowly regained the initiative. To prevent their own defeat and preserve their forces, the insurgents opted for a classical guerrilla war strategy aimed at prolonging the conflict and

eventually terminating American aid. Slowly but surely, the Salvadoran government's enemy laid the groundwork for launching one last offensive to alter the status of the war.

Chapter five begins in 1989 and continues until the end of the conflict. In early 1989 conventional wisdom in Washington assumed that the war was progressing positively, albeit slower than U.S. policymakers desired, and that eventually the Salvadoran government would overwhelm its adversary. During 1989 several key events challenged prevailing assumptions about the war. In elections held in El Salvador and the United States, new leaders emerged who were not as committed to waging the conflict as their predecessors. Later that year, an insurgent offensive rocked San Salvador and shook existing conceptions about the conflict. The guerrillas' assault also demonstrated that years of massive American funding had not only failed to alter the mentality of the Salvadoran military, but had not decisively weakened the rebels either. Finally, as the Cold War moved toward its denouement, the Salvadoran belligerents realized that they had more to gain from negotiations than constant conflict.

After the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, the United States did not participate in any large-scale counterinsurgency or nation-building efforts until 2003.[62] Shortly after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country rapidly descended into chaos. Pentagon officials analyzed the past for clues or examples on how to deal with insurgency, including the American

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[62] One notable exception was "Plan Colombia" initiated under President Bill Clinton. This initiative aimed at combating the drug war and guerrilla organizations in Colombia through diplomatic and military measures. However, it appears that the vast majority of funds were devoted to the latter. Over the course of a decade, the U.S. spent approximately $8 billion. More recently, supporters of Plan Colombia have argued that Washington should replicate the program in Central America to address the region's pressing immigration and security issues. For example, see Luis Alberto Moreno, "Plan Colombia Worked. Why not try Something Similar in Central America? *Miami Herald,* August 11, 2014; Daniel Runde, "Addressing the U.S. Border Emergency: Building a 'Plan Colombia' for Central America," *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* August 8, 2014. A copy of this article is available on their website at http://csis.org/publication/addressing-us-border-emergency-building-plan-colombia-central-america. Two American military officers also recommended exporting the Salvadoran experience to Colombia, primarily through the deployment of small military training teams. See Alfred Valenzuela & Victor Rosello, "Expanding Roles and Missions in the War on Drugs and Terrorism: El Salvador and Colombia, *Military Review* (March-April 2004): 28-35.

intervention in El Salvador. To counter the raging insurgency in Iraq, Rumsfeld deployed Col. James Steele, former head of the U.S. military advisory mission in El Salvador, to train the fledgling Iraqi Army in the art of counterinsurgency. Many journalists claimed that the Bush administration used strategies derived from the Salvadoran Civil War, known as the "Salvadoran Option," in Iraq to defeat the insurgency. The conclusion will assess these claims and their validity. The chapter will also offer an assessment of the American intervention and argue that its successes have been overstated.

Well before Reagan increased the American commitment to El Salvador, the United States had accumulated considerable experience combating insurgency. Over the course of the twentieth century, the American military established a counterinsurgency doctrine based on its previous interventions across the globe. Thus, when U.S. operatives arrived in El Salvador, they had nearly a century of guidance which they could draw from. Before discussing the history of U.S. counterinsurgency in El Salvador, this study will begin at the end of the War of 1898 when the United States found itself confronted by a nationalist revolution in the Philippines. To defeat this insurgency the U.S. military relied upon its former experiences combating American Indians, as well as devising new strategies. It was a formula Washington repeated many times throughout the remainder of the century.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

Many authors have emphasized that the United States has a vast amount of experience fighting unconventional wars. Despite this background, counterinsurgency enthusiasts, often dubbed "COINdinistas," have argued that the U.S. is generally unprepared and does not wage counterinsurgency campaigns effectively.[1] Nonetheless, it has been involved in many unconventional operations. For example, it was more common for a nineteenth-century U.S. Army officer or soldier to fight indigenous Americans rather than other conventional soldiers.[2] During the twentieth-century, the United States waged a variety of small wars across the globe, including in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia.[3] As Lawrence Yates reminds his readers, the U.S. has fought in more unconventional aspects of war, such as stability operations, than it has conventional conflicts.[4] Max Boot, John Tierney and James Corum are among the authors who have criticized the Army for failing to use past counterinsurgency efforts as blueprints for

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[1] Journalist Thomas Ricks, who was critical of the American Effort in Iraq prior to "the Surge," wrote a fawning piece profiling several of the theorists behind the most recent manifestation of counterinsurgency. In particular, he lauds the efforts of David Petraeus, who was the subject of his second book on the Iraq War. See "The COINdinistas," *Foreign Policy,* December 2009.

[2] With the exceptions of the War of 1812, the U.S.-Mexican War, the Civil War, and the War of 1898, the U.S. Army's operational focus was directed toward the pacification of the various indigenous tribes. Email correspondence with Josh Jones.

[3] Most of the information gleaned from decades of counterinsurgency and occupation was codified in the *Small Wars Manual* produced by the U.S. Marines in 1940.Its publication, a year before U.S. entry in World War II, was soon forgotten. COINdinistas have bemoaned its lack of publicity and influence on military doctrine. Authors such as Max Boot have implied that if the United States had dusted off its cover and applied the various strategies contained within its pages, the U.S. would not have suffered defeat in Vietnam, not only a counterfactual, but dubious proposition. Max Boot, *the Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 1940). Max Boot, *the Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*. (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

[4] Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military's Experience in Stability Operations 1789-2005* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).

current operations. [5] These authors also assume that past interventions are applicable to current and future conflicts. In general they believe that these wars were successful and repeatable—two assumptions that require testing.

This chapter analyzes several of the counterinsurgency operations the United States has participated in during the twentieth century, including in the Philippines after the War of 1898 and during the later Huk Rebellion, the hunt for Augusto Sandino's rebels in Nicaragua, and the fight against the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. There are two other routinely discussed counterinsurgency operations by foreign countries that will be addressed: the British in Malaya and the French in Algeria. Both of these cases are important for understanding U.S. counterinsurgency operations during the twentieth century because of the historical comparisons that are often made between these conflicts and others, whether accurate or not, and the tendency of U.S. COINdinistas to draw lessons from the British and French experiences. In particular, this chapter focuses on change and continuity in U.S. COIN practice. While analyzing these cases, the emphasis focuses on discussing the various strategies the U.S. used to defeat insurgency across the globe. It will also address several closely related questions. Among the most important, has the United States reused or reapplied techniques learned in one conflict to another? Were they successful? And finally, as this chapter and following ones will investigate, were any of these strategies used in El Salvador?

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[5] The Army's primary mission is carrying out conventional ground operations against other professional military organizations. Several of the more recent books criticizing the Army's lack of interest in counterinsurgency include Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*; John J. Tierney, *Chasing Ghosts: Unconventional Warfare in American History* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2006); James S. Corum, *Fighting the War on Terror: a Counterinsurgency Strategy* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Zenith, 2007).

Filipino Insurrection

Prior to the conclusion of the War of 1898, tensions and distrust between American troops and Filipino rebels serving under Emilio Aguinaldo, both who had been fighting against the Spanish empire, intensified. Shortly after the end of the war, they would be irrevocably frayed. Purportedly, Aguinaldo had been promised by Admiral George Dewey that President William McKinley would grant the archipelago its independence soon after Spain was defeated. As Aguinaldo soon learned, the U.S. planned on keeping its newly won possession. In December 1898, President McKinley issued his "benevolent assimilation" proclamation, stating that the "mild sway of justice and right" would be substituted for "arbitrary rule." His speech was not published in the Philippines until January 5, 1899, and the following day Aguinaldo condemned the "violent and aggressive seizure" of the Philippines by the United States.[6] It was in the midst of these tensions, that in February 1899, U.S. and Aguinaldo's troops exchanged fire. This event marked the opening salvo in the U.S.-Filipino Insurrection (1899-1902).[7] Later that month, with substantial dissent, the U.S. Congress ratified the Treaty of Paris, making the Philippines an American colony.

Faced with the outbreak of fresh fighting, the U.S. military relied on its previous experiences battling indigenous Americans to defeat the Filipino insurgents. As Walter Williams has observed, U.S. Indian policy served as a "precedent for imperialist domination over the

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[6] Ronald E. Dolan, editor, *Philippines: a Country Study* (Washington: U.S. GPO), 25-26.

[7] While the U.S. battled Aguinaldo's troops in the Northern portion of the Philippines, it also simultaneously fought Muslim tribesmen, the Moros, in the south. However, this effort did not begin in earnest until after the U.S. had defeated Aguinaldo's forces. This effort lasted significantly longer, requiring almost fourteen years for the U.S. to terminate the insurgency. This campaign has not received nearly as much attention as the pacification effort directed at Emilio Aguinaldo. While the Moros fought against the United States, they continued a separatist movement against the Filipino government. Recently, the two groups agreed to terminate the conflict. Rosemarie Francisco and Stuart Grudgings, "Philippines, Muslim Rebels Agree to Landmark Peace Deal," *Reuters,* October 7, 2012, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/07/us-philippines-rebels-peace-idUSBRE89602320121007.

Philippines and other islands occupied during the Spanish-American War."[8] Out of the thirty generals who served in the Philippines from 1898-1902, twenty-six participated in the various conflicts with American Indians in the late nineteenth-century.[9] Army officers who had first-hand experience fighting on the Western Plains believed that force was the *sine qua non* of American Indian pacification. Before any progress could be made Americanizing them or changing their customs or habits, it was necessary to smash their will to resist.[10] After the War of 1898, the U.S. Army implemented various strategies and insights gained from the American frontier to defeat a festering insurgency on the Filipino archipelago.

The U.S.-Filipino War was not only the first American counterinsurgency operation in the twentieth-century, but it was also a lesson in jungle warfare. As Max Boot noted, this war "was not at all the kind of conflict that soldiers like. This dirty war offered no heroic charges, no brilliant maneuvers, no dazzling victories. Just the daily frustrations of battling an unseen foe in the dense, almost impassible jungle."[11] The U.S. intervention also foreshadowed similar frustrations that American troops experienced in future conflicts. For the next three years, turmoil in the Philippines embroiled the U.S. in a costly counterinsurgency operation that sapped much of the giddiness and school-boy enthusiasm that marked the beginning and the end of the War of 1898.

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[8] Walter L. Williams, "United States Indian Policy and the Debate Over the Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism," *The Journal of American History* 66.4 (March 1980): 810-831, 810.

[9] Many of these officers served in the Civil War as well. Boot, 127.

[10] As Andrew Birtle argues, Army officers believed defeating them would be more humane and facilitate a more seamless transition toward assimilating into white culture.

Andrew Birtle, *Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2004), 79.

[11]Boot, 100.

As the U.S. Army found itself fighting an insurgency on distant shores, it relied on its previous experience for guidance, especially *General Orders 100*, written during the Civil War. This document marked the first time that a government had issued official guidelines regulating how an army should conduct itself in relation to an enemy's army and its population.[12] At the time of the insurrection, no formally ratified international law governing the conduct of conflict existed.[13] *General Orders 100* attempted to strike a balance between moderation and reconciliation on the one hand, and blunt force on the other. Even though it acknowledged that military necessity "allows of all destruction of property" and "withholding of sustenance or any means of life from the enemy," U.S. forces were required to avoid actions that alienated the enemy's population, especially during occupation duty.[14] Any actions which could make "the return to peace unnecessarily difficult" were to be avoided. [15] However, magnanimity was not extended to people who divested "themselves of the character or appearance of soldiers—such men, or squads of men." These combatants, "if captured, are not entitled to the privileges of prisoners of war, but shall be treated summarily as highway robbers or pirates."[16] As the U.S. struggled to pacify the archipelago, *General Orders 100* would be used to justify the use of harsh tactics to terminate the insurrection.

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[12] Birtle, 34.

[13] Prior to *General Orders 100*, there were a few international agreements that addressed various aspects of conflict. These included the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law (1856), which abolished privateering and the First Geneva Convention (1864) which discussed the improvement and care of the wounded and sick during a conflict.

[14] *General Orders 100: The Lieber Code*, Article 15. For a copy, consult the Avalon Law Project, Avalon.law.yale.edy/19th_century/lieber.asp

[15] *General Orders 100*, article 16.

[16] *General Orders 100*, article 82.

Using tactics and a mind-set gained through its previous experiences with a variety of unconventional campaigns, the U.S. battled Aguinaldo and his troops. American soldiers used small unit patrols, featuring the "hike," a combination of what would later be termed "reconnaissance-in-force" and "search and destroy missions" to locate and destroy Aguinaldo's army.[17] The Army also incorporated Filipino civilians into their force structure assisting as guides, interpreters and scouts. Recruiting Filipino troops to fight alongside the Americans was similar to divide and conquer strategies routinely used by European empires.[18] The Macabebe Scouts played an important role in the eventual suppression of the insurrection, especially in terms of local geographic, linguistic and social knowledge.[19] In later American COIN operations, the U.S. also relied on local troops to combat insurgents, expand the number of troops, provide defense for rural areas, and free up troops to fight in other areas.

American policymakers did not solely rely on coercion to end the insurrection. U.S. colonial officials and military commanders attempted to undercut the insurgents' popularity and message by promoting good governance and reforms. The initial commander of U.S. military forces in the Philippines, General Elwell S. Otis, believed that the swiftest way to end the war and pacify the Filipinos was to demonstrate the benefits of American colonial government.[20] To assure the population of the United States' noble intentions, one general declared that the

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[17] Birtle 114.

[18] According to most sources, the Macabebes had long standing grievances against the Tagalogs, which was the tribe most of the insurgents, including Aguinaldo, were from. While they were not the most numerous group supporting the U.S. they played vital roles and were responsible for committing numerous atrocities, including torturing, raping and killing suspected insurgents and their collaborators.

[19] Paul A. Kramer, *the Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, & the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[20] John M. Gates, "Indians and Insurrectos," *Parameters* 13.1 (May 1983): 59-68, 66.

Americans came "not in spirit of ruthless invasion, but in the spirit of peace and good will to all good citizens, and with the object of establishing good government."[21]

During Otis's command, American soldiers participated in road building, sewer construction and vaccination programs—also known as civic action programs. They also acted as educators. Teaching without the benefits of textbooks, soldiers used ponchos as makeshift blackboards and lumps of starch as chalk.[22] According to one historian, U.S. soldiers were "Progressives in uniforms" who established schools, reorganized military governments and improved sanitary conditions to induce the population to join the Americans.[23]

Under the policy of "benevolent assimilation," the United States justified its actions as bringing civilization to the residents of the archipelago and tutoring them in the principles of democracy and other American ideals. Alternatively referred to as the "policies of attraction," they were designed to win the support of Filipinos, especially the *ilustrados,* the wealthiest members of society. This would not be a short-term process. William Howard Taft, as Governor General of the Philippines, was critical of the Filipino's capacity for self-government. Taft reported that "our little brown brothers" would need approximately "fifty or one hundred years" of close supervision to "develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills."[24]

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[21] Quoted in Glenn May, "A Filipino Resistance to American Occupation: Batangas, 1899-1902," *Pacific Historical Review* 48.4 (November 1979): 531-556, 546.

[22] Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (London: Century, 1990), 153.

[23] John Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krags: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898-1902* (Westport: Praeger, 1973).

[24] Karnow, 173.

As part of benevolent assimilation, the United States government entrusted a civilian—Taft—to run the political, economic and social aspects of the COIN effort. While the two spheres of the U.S. effort in the Philippines were separate, it was essential for the civilians and the military to coordinate their actions. It was not always an easy relationship between the two. Soldiers and officers were often critical of Taft and his policies. A ditty composed by a soldier expressed these feelings: "Oh I'm only a common soldier in the blasted Philippines. They say I got brown brothers here but I don't know what it means. I like the word fraternity but still I draw the line. Oh he may be a brother of Big Bill Taft but he ain't no brother of mine."[25] In the future, U.S. policymakers would attempt to unite the civilians and military together to achieve "unity of effort."

In spite of the rhetoric, U.S. officers still believed that force was necessary, and for some, the only way to smash the insurrection. Major General Lloyd Wheaton sneered at the idea of "going with a sword in one hand, a pacifist pamphlet in the other hand and trailing the model of a school house after…You can't put down a rebellion by throwing confetti and sprinkling perfumery."[26] Out in the field, as the rebellion continued, officers began shifting toward employing more forceful tactics. As one commander declared, people were motivated "by fear more than by any other impulse and that I propose to profit by that fact."[27] As the U.S. pacification effort in the Philippines continued, more commanders in the field opted for force instead of the "policies of attraction." These actions would have several consequences, not only for the war effort, but also for U.S. COIN strategy. As the U.S. military discovered in the

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[25] PBS documentary "Crucible of Empire: The Spanish American War."

[26] Boot, 116; Karnow, 179.

[27] Birtle 127.

Philippines, and later in Vietnam, atrocities committed by its soldiers and their allies, could turn American public opinion against the conflict.

Initially, Aguinaldo had chosen to stand and fight against American soldiers. It proved to be a tactical miscalculation; Aguinaldo and his troops were routinely defeated in these confrontations. In November 1899 the rebel leader abandoned fighting conventionally and launched a guerrilla war against the U.S. occupation.[28] Aguinaldo's decision to adopt unconventional warfare annoyed and frustrated American soldiers and commanders. As Richard Welch noted, American hatred for Filipinos clearly accelerated when the war moved into this stage.[29] People justifying U.S. tactics have often placed the blame on the insurgents for violating prevailing concepts of warfare. H.L. Wells, a correspondent for the *New York Evening Post,* succinctly expressed many prevailing themes about non-white peoples in tropical environments when he claimed that

> There is no question that our men do 'shoot niggers' somewhat in the sporting spirit, but that is because war and their environments have rubbed off the thin veneer of civilization…undoubtedly, they do not regard the shooting of Filipinos just as they would the shooting of white troops. This is partly because they are 'only niggers' and partly because they despise them for their treacherous servility…the soldiers feel that they are fighting with savages, not with soldiers.[30]

There is no doubt that American soldiers carried their racial and cultural beliefs into the field with them and viewed their opponents through such lenses. As Paul Kramer has provocatively argued, the conflict was a race war. It was a war whose ends were rationalized in racial terms; one in which American soldiers viewed indigenous combatants and non-combatants in racial

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[28] Aguinaldo did not seek to win a decisive victory. Rather, conscious that many Americans were opposed to the acquisition of the Philippines, Aguinaldo sought to undermine the U.S. will to fight. Birtle, 112; Boot 112; Karnow 177.

[29] Richard E. Welch, "American Atrocities in the Philippines: The Indictment and the Response," *Pacific Historical Review* 43.2 (May 1974): 233–253, 237-238.

[30] Welch, 241.

terms; and one in which race played a key role in justifying violence.[31] As Captain John Leland Jordan complained, the Filipinos "cannot even be said to be half civilized, but must be classed as barbarous." Classifying people as uncivilized served an important purpose: it dehumanized the insurgents and provided a rationalization for the increasingly harsh tactics used by American soldiers. Since the Filipinos allegedly lacked the trappings of civilization, they were not owed the restraints of war offered to civilized opponents. Faced with uncooperative Filipinos and a popular insurgency, in frustration, the military turned toward violence to compel the citizens to cooperate.

After General Otis stepped down, his replacement changed course. His successor, General Arthur MacArthur—father of Douglas MacArthur—approached the insurgency differently than his predecessor. Viewing Otis as overly lenient, MacArthur issued a proclamation in December 1900, based on *General Orders 100*, officially authorizing sterner measures against guerrillas and their civilian supporters.[32] MacArthur's proclamation fostered a climate that led to the excessive use of force and other abuses as well. [33] Under MacArthur, pacification and benevolent assimilation were placed on the back burner while he emphasized punitive measures.[34] In response, the U.S. Army adopted harsher methods, euphemistically labeled the "policies of chastisement," which had been practiced on a small-scale prior to MacArthur assuming command. These measures included burning suspected villagers' houses

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[31] Kramer argues that the shift is reflected in the diaries and letters sent home by U.S. volunteers in the early months of the war. As it continued, many progressively racialized their language for the insurgents specifically, and Filipinos in general. Kramer, 89.

[32] Boot, 114; Birtle, 128.

[33] Brian McAllister Linn, *the U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 144.

[34] Brian McAllister Linn, *the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 214-5.

(occasionally entire villages), forcibly separating villagers and relocating them into concentration centers—a practice used by the Spanish that Americans had abhorred—and aggressive interrogation techniques. The most notorious examples of these tactics were applied in force on the islands of Samar and Luzon.

The American military established concentration centers to separate the civilians from the insurgents and deny them access to foodstuffs, other essential items and intelligence. According to prevailing theory, denying insurgents' access to civilians is crucial. This premise rests on the false assumption that there is a clear separation between insurgents and civilians, which is a curious assertion because insurgents emerge from the people. In conflicts after the Filipino Insurrection, relocation often created more rebels, not fewer.

This policy was employed on a large-scale in Batangas. American military officers were well aware of the analogies between their practices and those employed under the Spanish General Valeriano Weyler.[35] The concentration centers isolated the guerrillas from the population and starved many of them into submission.[36] While relocating Filipinos into concentration centers was arguably an effective counterinsurgency tactic, its cost in human suffering was unquestionably high. Despite efforts to alleviate conditions, people suffered from overcrowding, food shortages and poor sanitation.[37] At least 11,000 perished from a combination of disease, malnutrition and other health problems.[38]

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[35] The Army did not launch any significant concentration campaigns until after the U.S. presidential election of 1900. The issue was so sensitive that when a large-scale center plan was proposed, the leader of American forces told his subordinate to "hand it to the Secretary to read and then destroy it. I don't care to place on file in the Department any paper of the kind, which would be evidence of what may be considered in the United States as harsh measures of treatment of the people." Birtle, 131.

[36] May, 550.

[37] Linn, "The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War," 155.

[38] Boot, 124.

One of the more commonly cited practices U.S. soldiers engaged in was the "water cure" to which an unknown amount of Filipinos were subjected. Suspects under interrogation had water forced down their throats to simulate drowning. A soldier sent the following account to a local newspaper:

> Lay them on their backs, a man standing on each hand and each foot, then put a round stick in the mouth and pour a pail of water in the mouth and nose, and if they don't give up pour in another pail. They swell up like toads. I'll tell you it is a horrible torture.[39]

This practice increased during the last twenty months of the war, especially on the island of Samar.[40] Officially, the Army condemned such abuses, nevertheless, unofficially many officers winked at the practice, and military courts proved exceedingly reluctant to punish officers charged with applying coercive methods.[41]

In March 1901, a daring raid led by Frederick Funston resulted in the capture of Aguinaldo. However, his capture did not end the Filipino insurrection, nor did it induce large-scale surrenders of his combatants. American tactics grew increasingly harsh after Aguinaldo's capture. The repression intensified especially after approximately fifty U.S. soldiers were massacred in September 1901 at an American garrison in Balangiga on the island of Samar. Back in the United States, the event was viewed as a military defeat, similar to George Custer's "last stand." In response, the commanding U.S. General in the Philippines, General Adna Chaffee, tasked General Jacob "Hell-Roaring Jake" Smith with pacifying the island. Smith promised swift retaliation. His orders included "kill everyone over the age of ten" and he also promised to make

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[39] Quoted in Oliver Stone & Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* (New York: Gallery Books, 2012), xxvi.

[40] Welch 235.

[41] Birtle 132. The guerrillas were also guilty of committing atrocities as well, including killing government collaborators, supporters and even brigands not affiliated with the guerrillas. Both Birtle and Linn argue that these sorts of atrocities weakened popular support for the rebels.

the island a "howling wilderness."[42] However, his troops' exploits created a tabloid sensation at home, stirring up condemnation both in the Philippines and U.S.

A little over a year after Aguinaldo's capture, the United States government felt the insurrection had been sufficiently pacified that it could end the war and focus on benevolent assimilation. On July 4, 1902, President Roosevelt gave an official speech declaring victory. The same day the president also issued Proclamation 483 granting a "full and complete pardon and amnesty to all persons in the Philippine Archipelago who have participated in the insurrections."[43] When the war was officially declared over in 1902, the response was muted relief and the nation's press mostly treated it perfunctorily.[44] Over the course of four years, the U.S. lost over 4,000 soldiers and approximately 200,000 Filipino civilians perished, a combination of disease, famine and war.

By 1902, the U.S. had mollified or convinced Filipinos that resistance was futile. Undoubtedly, the use of force and political maneuvering were crucial to defeating Aguinaldo.[45] Crucially, the Filipino insurgents did not receive economic, financial or military support from

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[42] Smith delivered these instructions to Major Littleton Walker. PBS documentary "Crucible of Empire: The Spanish American War," 1999. However, no attempt was made to literally kill *every* male over the age of ten.

[43] Theodore Roosevelt, Proclamation 453: Granting Pardon and Amnesty to Participants in Insurrection in the Philippines," July 4, 1902, Available online at the American Presidency Project's website: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=69569.

[44] Karnow, 195.

[45] However, they disagree over why the U.S. was successful. Birtle argues that the carrot and stick were both important, especially military force; politics and force are inextricably linked in a dynamic, symbiotic relationship and both are necessary to win. Andrew Birtle "Persuasion and Coercion in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Military Review* (July-August 2008): 45-53. Brian Linn has suggested that Aguinaldo's tactical incompetence ensured the insurgents' defeat. See "The Philippine War," 325-6. Glenn May believes that Benevolent Assimilation failed to persuade Filipinos to abandon Aguinaldo. As May noted, in the province of Batangas, during the first year of American occupation, there was very little collaboration with U.S. authorities either by members of the elite or the masses. May argued that the reasons for resisting the Americans varied along class and racial lines. For most elites, nationalism or independence provided the motivation. In contrast, the author believes that the masses joined the insurgent ranks for money, a sense of duty, glamour or because they were drafted. May, 543.

international actors or have cross-border sanctuaries like more successful rebels in later conflicts. Ultimately, after the success in pacifying the Filipino Insurrection, the U.S. Army and the Marines relied on similar tactics to quell disorder and revolt across the globe, especially in the Western Hemisphere.

The Hunt for Sandino

In the early twentieth-century the U.S. rapidly made its presence felt within the Western Hemisphere. By the 1920s the U.S. dominated the region, especially economically. Under the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft and Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. repeatedly intervened in Latin America and the Caribbean for a variety of reasons: to restore order, crush "banditry" and promote American interests.[46] Not only did the United States dispatch its troops, it also occupied Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Nicaragua for extended periods of time.[47] Generally, military writers refer to these cases as constabulary operations.[48]

Overall, Washington's priority in the region was to ensure stability, and promote and protect American investments. It relied on several strategies to accomplish these objectives. In countries that the U.S. occupied, such as the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the U.S. launched

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[46] These presidents routinely complained about the behavior of Latin Americans. Roosevelt, referring to Venezuela, said that America had to "teach the Dagoes how to behave decently." Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), 61.Wilson, often cited as an idealist opposed to violence, was exasperated by the Mexican Revolution. Wilson proclaimed that he would "teach the South American republics to elect good men!" Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 244.

[47] The U.S. stayed in Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933; in Haiti from 1914 to1933; Cuba 1916 to1924; and the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924.

[48] For those more familiar with Latin American history, this is a curious term that sounds both legitimate and neutral, as a constable should be. It refers only to military actions while it ignores or downplays the domination of several countries' economies by American interests and the chicanery used to extract better concessions; and makes the inference that all American actions were guided by benign intentions. American actions in the region contributed to growing anti-American and anti-imperialist sentiment. As early as 1905, Secretary of State Elihu Root wrote, "The South Americans now hate us, largely because they think we despise them and try to bully them." Schoultz, 191.

several public works programs that were meant to develop these countries' infrastructure and employ citizens. Some of the more notable projects included sanitation, digging ditches, paving roads and constructing schools. These types of programs were launched in the Philippines during the Filipino insurrection and have become a mainstay of U.S. counterinsurgency policy. In the 1960s, these types of programs were known as civic action programs, a term discussed in more detail in the following chapter. However, the Marines relied on forced labor to construct roads, especially in Haiti. Also known as the *corvée,* it was a form of unpaid labor instituted by the French when Haiti was part of its empire.[49] Another primary method used by American policymakers was establishing and training security forces throughout the region.[50]

The United States created "constabulary forces" in the countries that the U.S. occupied in Latin America (and in the Philippines) before the Great Depression. These forces were designed to maintain security and order within the country, allowing the U.S. to terminate the occupation. Generally, these forces were comprised of military or paramilitary soldiers tasked with carrying out police functions. Constabulary forces were meant to resemble the American military: they were supposed to be non-political. Only later—too late—did these officials understand that in Central America such a force would not remain above politics, but single-handedly determine them.[51] As one study noted, every Latin American country that received U.S. training turned into

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[49] Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC, 2001). Renda offers a vivid description of the programs and the resistance it engendered.

[50] Willard Foster Barber and C. Neale Ronning, *Internal Security and Military Power: Counterinsurgency and Civic Action in Latin America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 58.

[51] Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States and Central America* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1993), 67.

a military dictatorship, or faced intervention by the U.S. or a proxy force.[52] As these forces grew repressive and remained associated with the U.S, in Latin America they fuelled growing anger toward the United States.

In 1926, the United States terminated its occupation of Nicaragua. However, after its departure, tensions between Nicaraguan Liberals and Conservatives led to the outbreak of another civil war. In response, the U.S. government deployed the Marines and tried to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. The man sent to negotiate an agreement between the belligerents was Henry Stimson, a corporate lawyer and statesmen who served under several different presidential administrations. Within a month, Stimson hammered out a putative cease-fire. Beaming with confidence, Stimson told the *New York Times* before leaving Nicaragua that "The civil war in Nicaragua is now definitely ended."[53] It was not the last time an American official prematurely announced the end of a conflict.

Most Nicaraguan politicians and army officers supported the cease-fire and accepted its terms, with one notable exception: Augusto César Sandino. After returning to Nicaragua in 1926 to support the Liberals during the civil war, he eventually renounced his support, claiming that José Maria Moncada, winner of the presidential election in 1928, would "at the very first opportunity sell out to the Americans." Believing himself to be "the one called to protest the betrayal of the Fatherland," Sandino and his followers waged a five year guerrilla campaign

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[52] Richard Millet, *Searching for Stability: The U.S. Development of Constabulary Forces in Latin America and the Philippines* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2010). Two of the more notorious examples were Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Anastasio Somoza García in Nicaragua.

[53] Boot, 235.

against the government.[54] His patriotic anger was also representative of a broader ideological current of Latin American anti-imperialist and leftist nationalism sweeping the region.[55]

For the next several years, U.S. Marines, along with the Nicaraguan *Guardia Nacional*, chased Sandino's band of guerrillas throughout the hills and countryside. Relying on previous practices used by the U.S. Army suppressing American Indian rebellions and foreign revolutions, the Marines recruited the Moskito Indians as allies to combat Sandino.[56] In a departure from previous campaigns, the American counterinsurgency operation in Nicaragua featured the usage of air power to combat insurgency.[57] The Marines believed that air power in the conflict was successful and noted its future potential. While supporters of the aerial campaign have praised it as an act of restraint, it actually fuelled the rebellion it was meant to suppress and became a lightning rod for anti-U.S. protest.[58]

Overall, it was mostly a lackluster performance by the Marines. The effort to suppress Sandino has not been widely heralded in the counterinsurgency literature, if at all.[59] However,

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[54] Kyle Longley, *In the Eagle's Shadow: The United States and Latin America* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 161.

[55] Michael J. Schroeder, "The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism and State Formation Muddied up Together in the Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926-1934," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations,* ed., Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, Ricardo Salvatore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 210.

[56] See David C. Brooks, "U.S. Marines, Miskitos and the Hunt for Sandino: The Río Coco Patrol in 1928," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21.2 (May 1989): 311-342, 314. Brooks is also is careful to note that this strategy often has serious consequences for such groups, especially if they are losers.

[57] Describing one aerial raid, Major Ross "Rusty" Rowell noted that the Nicaraguans "threw away their rifles, jumped over fences, and raced wildly through the streets…I never saw such a wild rout, and probably never will again." Boot, 238.

[58] Michael J. Schroeder, "Social Memory and Tactical Doctrine: The Air War in Nicaragua during the Sandino Rebellion, 1927-1932," *The International History Review* XXIX.3 (September 2007): 508-549, 512.

[59] Max Boot disagrees with this assertion, arguing that several veterans of Nicaragua later served with distinction in the war against Japan including Lewis "Chesty" Puller, Herman Hanneken and "Red Mike" Edson. According to Max Boot, these Marines gained invaluable experiences in small-unit operations, jungle fighting and using close air

the same cannot be said for Sandino. His performance provided a new narrative to Nicaraguan history. The text, memories, songs, stories and legends of Sandino's account provided the inspiration for the Sandinista Revolution.[60] As John Tierney noted, Sandino's combination of guerrilla warfare and political acumen made him into a Latin American "Robin Hood." More importantly, Nicaragua also demonstrated that while defeating the U.S. military was impossible, the strategic "center of gravity" was American political culture and its tendency to grow weary of protracted and unproductive warfare in distant regions.[61] As Tierney laments, American political culture has little patience for drawn-out and inconclusive campaigns. [62] When news reached the U.S. public about reports of dead or wounded Marines, popular support waned. Consequently, U.S. officials began to rely more heavily on the *Guardia Nacional*.[63] Decades later, the U.S. discovered that in Vietnam the longer a conflict continued, the chances for lasting political success decreased.

In 1933, the United States formally ended its occupation of Nicaragua and the last Marines departed. The reasons for the end of Sandino's rebellion had little to do with a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Rather, the Great Depression and Japanese machinations in Manchuria aided Sandino's cause and lessened U.S. interest in continuing the occupation.[64] The intervention was also routinely criticized, both in Latin America and in the

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support. He even makes the preposterous claim that "it might be said with equal justice that the Pacific campaign in World War II was won in the jungles of Nicaragua." Boot. 252.

[60] Schroeder, "Social Memory and Tactical Doctrine," 512.

[61] Tierney, 201-202.

[62] Tierney, 260.

[63] Leslie Bethell, editor, *The Cambridge History of Latin America: Volume VII, 1930 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 326.

[64] Longley 167.

United States.[65] The Marines' poor performance in Nicaragua also had little impact on the formation of COIN doctrine, especially for the U.S. Army.[66]

The Huk Rebellion

In 1946, after the U.S. had granted independence to its former colony, the Philippines erupted in revolt.[67] For a second time in fifty years, the U.S. was once again involved in suppressing an insurrection in the Philippines[68] Almost eight years of war followed before the Filipino government, with American assistance, effectively suppressed it.

The Filipino president Manuel Roxas responded to the Huk revolt with the "iron fist" campaign. As the name implies, violence was a significant aspect of Roxas's effort to defeat the rebels. Villages were mortared, shelled and burned; suspects were rounded up and shot. Undisciplined Filipino troops wreaked havoc across Luzon, creating more enemies in the process. The soldiers also used tactics employed by the Japanese during their occupation of the

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[65] U.S. senators were also opposed as well. See Longley, 161. Some journalists, including Carleton Beals in *The Nation,* glorified Sandino's efforts to end U.S. domination of Nicaragua. See "With Sandino in Nicaragua" in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History,* ed., Robert Holden and Eric Zolov (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Brooks, 315.

[66] Birtle, 246.

[67] There were differences and similarities between the two American interventions. First, unlike the previous revolt in the Philippines, the Huk insurrection was mostly confined to the island of Luzon, including the central and southern regions. More significantly, the U.S. did not deploy troops to the country, nor did it actively control the country. At the time of the second American COIN effort, the Philippines were not a U.S. colony. However, similarly, the Huks operated in remote areas, in the jungles, mountains and inaccessible terrain.

[68] A series of pre-war groups that had fought the Japanese and their collaborators during World War II coalesced around the communist front organization, the Hukbalahaps (Huks), after fraudulent elections and repression pushed them into revolt. The Huks pursued a two-stage strategy: first, a terror campaign against supporters of the government, designed to demonstrate the inability of the government to protect its citizens; and aggressive indoctrination of the peasants to sow dissatisfaction with the American-supported regime and shift their allegiances to the Huks. Major Matthew Phares, *Combating Insurgency: Can Lessons from the Huk Rebellion Apply to Iraq* (master's thesis, U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2008), 6.

country, including the *zona* and the "magic eye" informant.[69] By 1948, the net effect of the Roxas's campaign was to double the size of the Huk movement.[70]

By 1950, the situation was serious enough that the United States became more actively involved. After the death of President Roxas in 1948, his successor Elpidio Quirino made a fateful decision. Quirino, who was under tremendous pressure from the U.S. ambassador, selected Ramon Magsaysay as Minister of Defense. Magsaysay's selection has generally been heralded as the changing point in the conflict.[71] During his tenure, Magsaysay instituted many of the United States' suggestions, including reforming and reorganizing his security forces.[72] While relying on force, Magsaysay also attempted to win people over through kindness and being responsive to their needs.[73]

Magsaysay had a very close working relationship with Lt. Col. Edward Lansdale, a former advertising executive. Lansdale was sent to the Philippines by the Chief of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group to the Philippines (JUSMAG) at the request of Magsaysay to help

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[69] The *zona* was an example of a cordon-and-sweep operation, while the magic eye was a concealed informer who identified suspected Huk informers or supporters. Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington: U.S. Army, 2006), 56-57.

[70] Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counter-Terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 100.

[71] Within the COIN literature, an important requirement for a successful counterinsurgency effort is leadership. According to studies of the conflict, Magsaysay was a credible leader. For an example of the importance of leadership in COIN, see Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[72] Some of the measures U.S. advisers argued were necessary were changing the conventional focus of the Filipino Army, improving troop discipline, outlawing the communist party, and suspending *habeas* corpus for insurgents. Birtle, 61-62. The U.S. advisory group also deployed American officers versed in "guerrilla and anti-guerrilla operations and particularly involving Communist led forces." McClintock, 106.

[73] He also established means for citizens to address their grievances to him and established committees to hear civilians' complaints.

coordinate the COIN effort.[74] In the Philippines and elsewhere, Lansdale used his advertising background to champion the ideas of consumption and "American progress" in South East Asia.[75] Lansdale and Magsaysay were almost inseparable; they ate, bunked and traveled together and spent almost twenty hours each day in each other's company. Supposedly, the only time the two were not together until Magsaysay was indoctrinated was "when he went to bed with his wife."[76]

Besides wielding the stick to smash the Huks, Magsaysay also attempted to address the social and economic grievances underlying the conflict by creating the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR). Originally EDCOR was designed to create rehabilitation colonies for captured insurgents by resettling former insurgents and giving them land.[77] However, the main purpose behind EDCOR was to address the peasants' main grievance, the need for land reform, and undercut the Huk's slogan "land for the landless."[78] As Magsaysay is reported to have said, "They're fighting for a house and land…Okay, they can stop fighting because I'll give it to them."[79] Overall, the assessment of the program is mixed.[80]

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[74] Lawrence M. Greenberg, *the Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines, 1946-1955* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1987), 81-82. Lansdale has often been cited as the model for two characters in books written in the 1960s. Graham Greene's main character, Alden Pyle, in his novel *The Quiet American* is an idealistic, covert CIA agent who aided the Saigon regime. While Greene's portrait of Lansdale was unflattering, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's novel, *The Ugly American,* has a more positive image of the Lieutenant Colonel. In their book, the protagonist Colonel Hillendale was a heroic and resourceful American who could save the world for democracy.

[75] Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War*: *Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 29.

[76] Quoted in McClintock, 110.

[77] Birtle, 64.

[78] McClintock, 113.

[79] Karnow, 351.

A significant feature of the U.S. and Filipino COIN efforts was psychological operations (PSYOPS). Lansdale, who played an integral role, designed the PSYOPS mission with three goals in mind: influence the enemy, the public and the armed forces.[81] His program featured the use of terror and "dirty tricks" to achieve the program's objective. As Lansdale described his tactics later, "dirty tricks beget dirty tricks."[82] The strategies included offering bounties for the arrest of important Huk leaders; rewards for intelligence information; and distributing propaganda in areas where the insurgents routinely patrolled.[83] However, the Filipinos created their own research and development unit "affectionately" known as the "Department of Dirty Tricks." This department developed several other strategies including sabotaging Huk weapons that were secretly replaced in their stockpiles.[84]

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[80] Some authors have argued that EDCOR was successful because it eroded the peasants' support for the Huks. For an example of this argument see Kalev Sepp, introduction to *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience*, by Napoleon Valeriano (New York: Praeger, 1962). The CIA also supported this reasoning, stating that some 400 people were resettled. CIA, Intelligence Memorandum, "Reintegration of Insurgents into National Life," December 20, 1965, CIA FOIA Reading Room. As another writer noted, "the lesson to be derived is in the effect the program had on the population and in the consequent loss of support suffered by the insurgents. This success was realized largely because the people began to trust the government to deliver on its promise and to question the overall message of the insurgency and its leadership." See Phares, 17. On the negative side, the program failed to meet demands or expectations. Simply put, it was more of a propaganda tool than a meaningful experiment in land reform. As the conflict continued, fewer and fewer families were settled. Birtle, 65; as one official involved with the U.S. COIN effort noted, "As a resettlement program, EDCOR did not accomplish a great deal. I doubt if more than perhaps 300 families of Huks were resettled under that program. But I will guarantee you that at least 3,000 Huks surrendered." See McClintock, 114.

[81] McClintock, 112.

[82] McClintock, 115. One of Lansdale's favorite tactics played on the popular fear of vampires, or *asuang*. Government troops would snatch the last man of a Huk patrol, puncture his neck with two holes, drain the body of its blood and then place it back on the same trail. Lansdale credited this tactic with forcing the Huks to move their patrols elsewhere. Lansdale also played on villagers' fears of ghosts, by playing the audio taped voice of a dead rebel which broadcasted the dead Huk's confession to the villagers. Cited in McClintock, 117-118; Marc D. Bernstein, "Ed Lansdale's Black Warfare in 1950s Vietnam, *History Net.Com,* February 1, 2010. The article is available online at http://www.historynet.com/ed-lansdales-black-warfare-in-1950s-vietnam.htm.

[83] Arguably the most successful item was "the Eye" leaflet, a picture with a large eye staring intently at its observers. Greenberg, 117-118.

[84] These weapons were designed to explode upon usage. Greenberg, 118.

The strategy to defeat the Huks also relied upon using "civilian guards," including former guerrillas opposed to the Huks and the "private armies" of landowners and political chieftains.[85] Using local civilians to assist in COIN efforts is commonly referred to as civil defense. As a counterinsurgency tool, it has two objectives: defend communities from attacks and deny civilian support to guerrillas.[86] Although Magsaysay would have liked to abolish many of the private security forces—they routinely were abusive—he could not maintain security in the countryside.[87] These units provided a major manpower tool for the Filipino Army and comprised the majority of armed security personnel in the rural areas.[88] They also freed the Philippine Army for offensive operations elsewhere in the country and kept the rural population separated from the Huks. Despite committing excesses, they played a vital role in the government's COIN effort.[89]

Another important innovation during the conflict was the creation of "hunter-killer" teams: small, mobile units, deployed to aggressively seek out the enemy. They operated in hostile territory and often took a no-holds-barred approach to the conflict. These forces were created by the Filipino Minister of Defense as part of a reorganization of the country's military. Also referred to as "Force X," these units often operated under the guise of being a Huk unit, and

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[85] McClintock, 123.

[86] Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Research Assessment, "Guatemala and El Salvador: Civil Defense as a COIN Tactic," November 1987, El Salvador Online Collections, National Security Archives.

[87] Birtle, 63

[88] McClintock, 123.

[89] Birtle 63.

were often successful at infiltrating their ranks. [90] One of these units, "Nenita," was led by Napoleon Valeriano, an officer who wrote about his experiences later.[91] These forces targeted high profile Huk leaders and terrorized the guerrillas and their supporters.[92] According to one former Filipino army officer "When I was stationed in the Candaba area, almost daily you could find bodies floating in the river, many of them victims of Valeriano's Nenita Unit."[93]

Valeriano, while noting that these forces were accused of excesses, downplayed the number, but also acknowledged that they increased support for the Huks.[94] He later defended these tactics, noting that while these measures created ill-will from certain sectors of the population, they were "undeniably effective means of hitting active guerrillas" and were "essential to make the armed forces more effective in hitting them and this could scarcely be done if techniques of proven utility were summarily abandoned."[95] American advisers, including Lansdale and Charles Bohannan, one of Lansdale's associates, who also co-authored Valeriano's *Counter-Guerrilla Operations,* were aware of the excesses committed by Nenita. In private, Lansdale was critical of the units' tactics, noting that "these Filipinos run around Central Luzon with skull and crossbones flags flying from their jeeps and scout cars…Cruelty and lust for

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[90] Sometimes, former Huks who had been rehabilitated served in these units. They provided government forces with intelligence, information about insurgent strategy and the location of guerrilla bases. Greenberg, 71; McClintock, 119.

[91] Napoleon Valeriano, *Counter-Guerrilla Operations; the Philippine Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1962).

[92] Valeriano, 79.

[93] Quoted in McClintock, 121.

[94] Valeriano, 79.

[95] Valeriano, 79-80.

murder are commonplace."[96] Later in the twentieth century, in El Salvador, similar units were created and trained by Americans to track, capture or kill insurgents.

The end of the conflict came in 1954, when the Huk leader Luis Taruc was arrested. Despite his surrender, the rebellion continued with dwindling support until 1960. The reasons for the Huks' defeat vary, but most authors argue that a combination of greater American involvement and the reforms carried out by Magsaysay contributed to their defeat.[97]Several of these reforms including instituting an American financed plan aimed at rooting out corruption, improving the discipline of Filipino troops in the field, and EDCOR. Generally, the suppression of the Huk Rebellion has been viewed as a vindication of U.S. aid and tactics, but not all writers agree.[98] Kalev Sepp believes that the insurrection was unfortunately overshadowed by other events in South East Asia and argues that the lessons learned in the conflict remain valid today.[99] The American intervention in the Philippines guided its subsequent COIN operations, including the usage of PSYOPS, civil defense and the adoption of quasi-guerrilla tactics. In hoping to

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[96] Sometimes, former Huks who had been rehabilitated served in these units. They provided government forces with intelligence, information about insurgent strategy and the location of guerrilla bases. Greenberg, 71; McClintock, 119.

[96] Valeriano, 120

[97] Birtle, 64; Greenberg, 144. However, Greenberg also notes that American indifference and short-sighted policies also helped put the Philippine government in jeopardy during the 1945-50 period. Another important element was that the Huks did not have cross-border sanctuaries and there was no large-scale aid from either China or the Soviet Union. Their decision to create a supply network based in Manila was also foolhardy and led to the arrest of senior leaders by an informant. Karnow, 352.

[98] Magsaysay pursued a policy which not only beat back the insurgents but also reincorporated them into the body politic. He did so because both the structure of the government made it possible and the nature of the insurgency required it. D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 239. David Fitzgerald also concurs, noting that the success was the result of a "confluence of luck and skill that would not easily be replicated." Fitzgerald, 11.

[99] Sepp, introduction to *Counter-Guerrilla Operations*

replicate the success of the Huks' defeat, the U.S. struggled to find "another Magsaysay" in its subsequent COIN operations.[100]

The Malayan Emergency

Around the same time that the Huk Rebellion erupted, the British struggled to suppress an insurrection in neighboring Malaya.[101] For approximately twelve years, from 1950 to 1962, the British were engaged in a costly counterinsurgency effort, battling a communist-inspired insurgency. The British response during the "Malayan Emergency" is widely considered the first modern COIN effort and the archetype of a successful operation.[102]

Originally, the British resorted to using conventional tactics to combat the rebels. Despite generally being considered tactically flexible and fast learners, it took the British a full two years to recognize their mistakes.[103] In 1952, under General Sir Harold Briggs, the British adopted the "Briggs plan" which focused on cutting the insurgents off from their supporters among the population. Briggs realized that the guerrillas could get all the support they needed—food, clothing, information and recruits—from the "squatters."[104] His plan to separate the squatters depended on relocating the villagers and resettling them. The selected targets were the ethnic

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[100] After Lansdale's success in the Philippines, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles deployed him to South Vietnam to see if he could reproduce his achievements with Diem.

[101] After the end of WWII, the Malayan economy, as was the case in other British colonies, lay in shambles. Protests and labor strikes criticizing the government's measures, or lack thereof, were dealt with harshly, including mass arrests and deportation. Seeking to rid the country of British influence, in June 1948, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) launched a revolt against British rule. The "Malayan Emergency" was initiated after MNLA insurgents assassinated European plantation managers.

[102] Andrew Mumford, *Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 15.

[103] John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport: Praeger, 2002).The early phases of nearly every British campaign during this era were marred by stagnancy, mismanagement and confusion, including in Northern Ireland. Mumford, 2.

[104] Richard L. Clutterbuck, *the Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

Chinese Malayans, the segment of society from which the insurgents almost entirely drew their strength. The majority of these individuals lived on farms on the edge of the jungle, where the guerrilla bases were located. In Malaya, these settlements were called "New Villages."[105]

The appointment of Sir Gerald Templer as Briggs's successor as commander of the British effort in 1952 is generally credited as the turning point in the conflict. His strategy—as well as certain aspects of the Briggs Plan—was derived from Charles Gwynn's *Imperial Policing* written in 1934. Gwynn stressed the primacy of civil power, the use of minimum force, the need for firm and prompt action, and the centrality of cooperation between civil and military authorities.[106] Under his tenure and his successors, the British used resettlement of civilians, the "Oil Spot" strategy and winning Malayan "hearts and minds" to defeat the insurgents.[107] Over the next few years, insurgent attacks declined from approximately 500 to 100 a year and their numerical strength dwindled. However as Andrew Mumford has noted, Templer has been "credited with too much." This drop coincided with a strategic decision made by the insurgents to alter the focus of the struggle to political education. While this switch did not become public until 1952, it had been approved a year earlier.[108]

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[105] This strategy was previously used by the British during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). In order to defeat the Afrikaner rebels, the commander of British forces, Herbert Kitchener, used similar tactics to separate the insurgents from the population. Besides physically isolating the guerrillas, the establishment of this plan involved the forced relocation of thousands of civilians, leading to starvation and the spread of diseases such as typhoid and dysentery. Other examples of this tactic include General Valeriano Weyler's reconcentration camps in Cuba, which after being exploited by the American news media outraged U.S. public opinion, and the U.S. in the Philippines. Whether or not the British military studied or learned from the American and Spanish examples is not known.

[106] Cited in David Fitzgerald, "Learning to Forget? The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq" (PhD Diss, University College Cork, 2010), 8. The current term for civil-military cooperation is "unity of effort."

[107] Fitzgerald, 9.

[108] Mumford, 17.

The construction of the New Villages was part of a "clear and hold strategy."[109] They served two purposes: deny the insurgents access to food, intelligence, information, shelter and other essential forms of support and protect government supporters from insurgent intimidation.[110] The first stage, a euphemistic term, involves removing insurgents from an area. This is accomplished by either killing or capturing insurgents or driving them out of the area. Holding requires counterinsurgents to stay in the area and prevent the insurgents from returning and requires CIs to have sufficient forces. Of all the stages, this is the most critical. If security forces leave too early, or do not have adequate manpower, the insurgents will return, thus undoing any progress that had been made. And, very often, the government collaborators faced swift and savage retribution.

Ostensibly, the resettlement camps were supposed to be an improvement. While the British may have called them New Villages, to their Chinese inhabitants they "were in fact detention camps with barbed wire and guards at every post…No one was free in a Chinese village."[111] Often, coercion and harsh measures, including restricting food supplies and rations, was required to resettle civilians. These methods can easily backfire, and generally are not conducive to winning hearts and minds, especially if these new dwellings are hastily constructed, poorly secured and lack essential resources. This program was thought to be so successful that

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[109] This strategy has been altered over the past few decades. Subsequent approaches added a new stage: build. Building involves the process of reconstruction and civic-action programs. They try to bind the citizens to the central government. And more recently, the U.S. added another stage, transfer. This is the process when the CIs turn over control to the host nation.

[110] David French, in his study of ten COIN operations the British participated in, notes that coercion was a prominent feature of British COIN policy to sever the link between the insurgents and civilians. In Malaya and other theatres of conflict, British conduct was not governed by its manuals, but by locally enacted emergency regulations. These not only defined when police could use lethal force, but allowed them wide discretion as to when to apply it. French also notes that while the amount of violence employed by the British was less than other colonial powers, it should not be exaggerated. David French, "Nasty not Nice: British Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice, 1945-1967," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23 (October-December 2012): 744-761, 751.

[111] David French, *The British Way in Counterinsurgency, 1945-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011),

one of the architects of the plan, Sir Robert Thompson, was deployed to South Vietnam to assist in drawing up a similar plan in the countryside.

Another commonly used practice by the British was the "oil spot" strategy, modeled on the approach created by the French General Hubert Lyautey. Known in French as the *tache d'huile,* his approach was first employed by the French in the 1890s to subdue rebellion in their colonies.[112] Starting from a strong position, government forces then spread slowly into the periphery. While government forces expanded their reach, they simultaneously provided essential services to the beleaguered civilians and improved local security. As Thompson noted, this was central to the British success, and hence, crucial for future conflicts.[113]

By 1960, the insurgency had largely petered out. The Malayan Emergency has been widely studied and cited as a successful application of counterinsurgency.[114] Andrew Mumford demurs, sarcastically noting, "A counterinsurgency campaign taking twelve years to eradicate an isolated group is not a glowing achievement and is hardly deserving of the academic salutations it has garnered."[115] The insurgents, who were ethnic Chinese, had failed to win much support

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[112] Thomas Rid, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33.5 (October 2010): 727-758, 750. Rid argues that much of the theory behind contemporary COIN doctrine reflects French strategy during the nineteenth- century. David Galula, a heavily cited French author in recent COIN strategy, is the joint that connects the nineteenth to the twenty-first. David Fitzgerald also concurs with Rid's overall argument, noting that the French strategy of a combined politico-military approach in which soldiers would be administrators and educators as well as police is reflected in the *Small Wars Manual.* Fitzgerald, 6.

[113] Thompson, pp. 51-60.

[114]John Nagl's study compares the British operation in Malaya with the American experience in Vietnam. He argues that the British had a more flexible military organization which allowed them to react to threats and change their tactics accordingly. While bureaucratic inertia can surely compound and frustrate efforts, arguing that organizational culture is the most important element ignores many other crucial factors in an insurgency, including political, social and cultural issues, not to mention the civilians and insurgents. It also deprives the insurgents of agency and initiative. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam.*

[115] Mumford, 15.

from the majority of the population yet managed to continue the struggle for over a decade.[116] Even contemporary observers criticized the effort, especially using it as a model for Vietnam.

British counterinsurgency doctrine, especially its emphasis on "minimum force," has received a sympathetic reading and enjoys a privileged position in the American literature.[117] Several recent studies have contrasted the British, French and American approaches to fighting COIN and have found the latter two lacking. The concept of minimum force, along with their tactical flexibility and civil-military cooperation, allowed the British to avoid the excesses of the French in Algeria or the firepower-intensive approach used by the United States in Vietnam.[118]

During the Malayan Emergency the British relied on their previous colonial conflicts for guidelines, and perhaps more importantly, they also implemented strategies developed by the French decades earlier.[119] Thus, there is not anything necessarily quintessentially "British" about them. In some cases, such as the oil spot strategy, they replicated tactics which the French had used to suppress rebellions in their colonies. Moreover, ideas about civil-military cooperation

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[116] Bernard B. Fall, *the Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1967). Another author agreed with Fall's analysis, but also noted that the operational environments were dissimilar. Unlike in the South Vietnamese Mekong Delta, the jungles of Malaya did not provide nearly as much food or sustenance. See Osborne, "Strategic Hamlets."

[117] The most recent U.S. COIN field manual states that the "Malaya insurgency provides lessons applicable to combating any insurgency." *FM 3-24.* Anthony James Joe has identified seven traits of British counterinsurgency, which has enabled them to be successful. They are: 1. Employ conventional military force sparingly and selectively. 2. Emphasize the central role of police and civil administration in COIN. 3. Establish close cooperation among the military, police and civil government, especially in regard to sharing intelligence. 4. Regroup exposed civilian settlements into secure areas. 5. Deny the guerrillas a reliable supply of food. 6. Harass the guerillas with a small, flexible force. 7. Identify and ameliorate major socioeconomic irritants. *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

[118] Douglas Porch, "The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22. 2 (May 2011): 239–257, 247.

[119]British COIN is also similar to existing French and Portuguese doctrines, including the "Oil Spot" strategy, coercing locals and securing the population. It is inaccurate to present a sharp dichotomy between British strategy of winning "hearts and minds" and French and Portuguese tactics based on "terror and coercion." See Bruno C. Reis, "The Myth of British Minimum Force in Counterinsurgency Campaigns during Decolonisation, 1945-1970," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 34.2 (April 2011): 245-277, 272.

also were used by the French. Thus, when authors approvingly cite the British model, they are also drawing from doctrine practiced by France. Coercive force was a mainstay of British tactics in Malaya, and in other British wars of decolonization. As the military historian David French recently noted, British COIN experience was "nasty not nice."[120]

While the British were combating insurgency in Malaya, a rebellion broke out in another British colony in 1952. The Mau Mau Uprising erupted in the British colony of Kenya. One of the distinguishing features of this campaign was the construction of large penal colonies, or Gulags.[121] Mass imprisonment, harsh interrogation practices and relocation were commonplace.[122] Similar tactics were used in both Malaya and Kenya. What differentiated them was that the British employed them with a heavier hand in the latter. Consequently, the British defeated a larger insurgency more quickly than in Malaya.[123] However, the insurgents were less

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[120] This quotation is derived from the title of David French's article, "Nasty not Nice: British Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice."

[121] The British experience in Kenya trying to quell the Mau Mau Rebellion was marked by atrocities. Two of the more commonly cited texts are David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2005) and Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005). However, Elkins' study, especially her statistics regarding the numbers of deaths, has been highly criticized, as was another book written by Daniel Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009). For a variety of criticisms, see David Elstein, "Daniel Goldhagen and Kenya: Recycling Fantasy," *Open Democracy,* April 7, 2011. Available online at http://www.opendemocracy.net/david-elstein/daniel-goldhagen-and-kenya-recycling-fantasy.

[122] In Kenya, the number of those held in detention without trial was 4,575 per 100,000 of a "target" population. In Malaya, the number was 405. French, 750.

[123] Wade Markel, "Draining the Swamp: The British Strategy of Population Control," *Parameters* (Spring 2006): 35-48, 36.

unified, organized and lacked money and an adequate strategy.[124] Within the COIN literature, this operation has been curiously absent.[125]

One of the other most overlooked aspects about British counterinsurgency practice is that they were imperial masters. This allowed the British to exercise complete control of the country, a level of dominance the U.S. never enjoyed, save with the exception of the Philippines. Thus, there were no concerns over leverage of a client regime. In Malaya, the British had decades, even centuries of experience with colonial society and culture. This gave the British a level of familiarity the U.S. lacked in certain cases, especially in Vietnam and even in Iraq.[126] More importantly, they also had developed local elites who ruled the country and that the British could rely on. Of course, this could also be a double-edged sword. Students receiving Western educations often used the principles and their training to eventually overthrow the colonial regimes that taught them.

Le Algérie Française

Unlike the British in Malaya, the French effort to suppress a revolution in Algeria between 1954 and 1962 is viewed negatively in the COIN literature. The reasons for this appraisal vary, but there are several commonalities in all accounts. Not only did the French lose, but their effort was marred by torture and human rights abuses. Further compounding these errors, the French military's actions alienated public support. During a 2005 Pentagon screening

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[124] Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 260.

[125] One of the notable exceptions is Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Branch claims that almost as many Kenyans fought with the British as against it. In contrast to other authors, Branch relies more heavily on interviews with Loyalists (supporters of the British) than those who supported the Mau Mau.

[126] Andrew Rotter noted that this was one of the weaknesses of John Nagl's seminal work. Andrew Rotter, review of *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, by John Nagl, *Pacific Review* 73.1 (February 2004), pp.161-163.

of Gillo Pontecorvo's film, *The Battle of Algiers,* a flyer advertising the event noted "how to win battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas."[127] *FM 3-24,* the most current COIN doctrine for U.S. Armed Forces, notes that the loss of moral legitimacy and the condoning of torture made the French extremely vulnerable to enemy propaganda.[128] Paradoxically, in spite of Algerian independence, many of the French practices in the conflict have influenced U.S. thinking, which is especially reflected in *FM 3-24* including the emphasis on the centrality of the population, politico-military cooperation and PSYOPS.[129]

Similar to its European imperial counterparts, the French empire was in terminal decline after the end of WWII. Shortly after the termination of that conflict, a series of rebellions erupted in France's colonies, including in French Indochina and even in Algeria, a French *département.* In November 1954, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), a nationalist revolutionary movement, launched a rebellion against French rule. While the French-Algerian War (1954-1962) was part of the larger struggle of decolonization, Algeria was different from the previous cases because it was officially part of France, not simply a colony.

The French defeat in Indochina during the First Vietnam War (1946-1954) had profound implications for French strategic thinking and military doctrine.[130] It also exposed divisions

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[127] Jeet Heer, "Counterpunch Revisionists Argue that Counterinsurgency Won the Battle against Guerrillas in Vietnam, but Lost the War. Can it do better in Iraq?" *Boston Globe*, January 4, 2004.

[128] FM 3-24.

[129] One military analyst has complained about the amount of attention that French COIN doctrine received in *FM 3-24.* As the critic noted, "We should study the insurgent war in Algeria, but when it comes to including lessons drawn from it in our (read U.S.) counterinsurgency doctrine—if the choice of lessons to include is so thin, and the best lessons overlooked—we might do better to just to leave it out altogether." Geoff Demarest, "Let's Take the French Experience in Algeria out of U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine," *Military Review* (July-August 2010): 19-23, 23.

[130] France's defeat in Indochina was not the only factor affecting French military doctrine. The creation of the atomic bomb and the advent of nuclear weapons influenced how many military officers approached the conduct of war. And many French military officers believed that there was a communist conspiracy encircling the world,

within France's military forces and generated further distrust of politicians.[131] This period of reflection bore a new approach to defeating insurgency: *guerre révolutionnaire.*[132] This concept was not an official doctrine established in French military textbooks. Instead, it was articulated by influential French officers who used informal channels such as personal association and private and professional writings to disseminate it. When revolt consumed Algeria, the doctrine had not yet reached maturity; nevertheless, out of sheer necessity, elements of the doctrine were applied in the conflict.[133]

The central tenet behind *guerre révolutionnaire* was that the nature of warfare had profoundly changed. Mao's victory over Chiang Kai Shek and Vo Nguyen Giap's triumph in France's former colony provided the evidence that conventional war-fighting doctrine was insufficient. Consequently, French officers who subscribed to this doctrine believed that their country's military needed to revise its strategy to confront this insidious challenge. Proponents believed that the various conflicts consuming the Third World, including in France's colonies, were part of a master strategy of communist encirclement and expansion. In the process this theory downplayed the role of nationalism and elevated the importance of communism.[134] The doctrine stipulated that future conflicts would not involve large-scale conventional forces, let alone the use of nuclear weapons, which "the French regarded as something of an Anglo-Saxon

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especially in France's colonies. Frederick J. Schwarz, "Doctrines of Defeat, La Guerre Révolutionnaire and Counterinsurgency Warfare" (Master's Thesis, Indiana University, 1992), 36.

[131] Anthony Clayton, *the Wars of French Decolonization* (London & New York: Longman, 1994), 75-76.

[132] Several of the texts these officers consulted included Mao, Lenin and even Serge Chakotin's *The Rape of the Masses,* whose theories of the manipulation of popular opinion became the basis of psychological operations in Algeria. Christopher Craddock and M.L.R. Smith, "No Fixed Values:' A Reinterpretation of the Theory of Guerre Révolutionnaire and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.4 (Fall 2007): 68-105, 74.

[133] Schwarz, 29.

[134] Shafer, 150

obsession."[135] Its second major implication was that the center of gravity of the struggle lay in the allegiance of the population. As Colonel Roger Trinquier stated, "we know that the *sine qua non"* of this type of war was "the unconditional support of the population."[136] As one author noted, the doctrine's strength and weakness was its simplicity. It was a combination of two ingredients: a large and ever growing catalogue of guerrilla tactics from current and previous experiences and a universal revolutionary ideology.[137] Or as D. Michael Shafer noted, the doctrine was "naïve, intellectually thin, and oversold by avid proponents seeking higher impact with exaggerated threats and touted miracle solutions. Despite its flaws, it provided a neatly packaged, internally coherent doctrine with the appearance of explanatory and prescriptive power and immense ideological utility."[138]

French military officers who subscribed to *guerre révolutionnaire* saw Algeria as a small part of a larger Communist conspiracy to encircle and destroy Western Europe. The French cast themselves as the defenders of Western Europe and Christendom. As one French officer declared, "We have to halt the decadence of the West and the march of communism. That is our duty, the real duty of the Army."[139]

Guerre révolutionnaire aimed at destroying not only their opponent's will, but its ideology as well. French soldiers who served in Indochina were impressed by the Viet Minh's

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[135] Craddock and Smith, 74.

[136] Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: a French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 8.

[137] George Kelly, *Lost Soldiers; the French Army and Empire in Crisis, 1947-1962* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1965), 111.

[138] Shafer, 140.

[139]Quoted in Lou DiMarco, "Losing the Moral Compass: Torture and Guerre Révolutionnaire in the Algerian War," *Parameters* 36. 2 (Summer 2006): 63–76, 71.

ideological fervor and organizational skill.[140] Many of the theorists who formulated the doctrine had been captured and held as prisoners of war by the Viet Minh. Their experiences and analysis of their captors both amazed and repulsed French soldiers.[141] Defeating a similar opponent required controlling the population, offering effective government and using psychological warfare to combat the ideology of the enemy.[142] In *guerre révolutionnaire,* the war against ideology was as important as the military aspect.

Adherents of *guerre révolutionnaire* viewed this new strategy as a form of total war, justifying the use of harsh and uncompromising methods to defeat the enemy. Under this doctrine, counterinsurgency had to be fought with intelligence and psychological warfare agencies that could operate without restraint.[143] And more ominously, negotiations were viewed as fruitless. Dialogue on "equal terms with a revolutionary enterprise could not be more dangerous."[144]

By categorizing revolutionary war as a form of total warfare, it admits neither compromise nor negotiation, since each side views its struggle as just and the other as wrong.

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[140] For French military strategists, their strength was their adherence to communism, not a desire for independence from colonialism.

[141] For a vivid literary description of life in a Viet Minh POW camp, the novel *Les Centurions* details the monotony, harsh conditions and propaganda captured French soldiers experienced during the French-Indochina war. This novel, written by the journalist and former soldier Jean Lartéguy, was popular in France after its publication. American military officers have also been avid readers of this work, including General David Petraeus.

[142] The French promoted a messianic, conservative strain of Roman Catholicism to inoculate the population, a curious approach since the majority of Algerians are Muslim. Fitzgerald, "Learning to Forget," 10.

[143] Clayton, 129. These psychological operations were not necessarily aimed at the insurgents. They were central to wining the population. Acts of terrorism, intimidation or propaganda are intended to provoke fear or a loss of morale among insurgent supporters. Ximenes (nom de plume), "Revolutionary War," *Military Review* (August 1957), 103.

[144] This rule was based on Commandant Jacque Hogard's Ten Rules. The theory assumes that rebellion in the colonies was communist inspired. And, since many in the French military believed that communists were duplicitous and nefarious, negotiating with them was pointless. See Kelly's *Lost Soldiers* who cited Howard's "Stratégie et tactiques dans la Guerre Révolutionnaire, *Revue militaire d'Information* (June 1958).

These harsh measures were referred to as *la riposte*. For some French officers, the ends, including torture, justified the means.[145] Ultimately, these tactics were self-defeating. As contemporary observer Peter Paret accurately noted, inflicting "Various forms of maltreatment" on civilians can be felt "Far beyond the small, isolated groups of specialists…until they finally infect the entire society in whose name they are employed."[146] As George Kelly wrote, *guerre révolutionnaire* is sometimes a war of terror and torture, but it is also a conflict of persuasion, manipulation and compulsion, with a strong emphasis on psychology.[147]

Two of the more studied French military strategists are David Galula and Roger Trinquier. Both writers emphasized the political nature of revolutionary war, and the centrality of civilians. Of the two, Galula holds a privileged place in the American COIN literature.[148]

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[145] Craddock and Smith believe that torture was not necessarily condoned by the doctrine. Rather, officials justified its usage by preventing the lives of civilians and prevent further atrocities. According to one officer, who explained the use of torture to extract confessions during the Battle of the Casbah: "It was necessary to use it, without hate, without perversity. It was not just a game, nor was there any pleasure; it was simply to obtain a result that enabled people's lives to be saved. That's all!" Craddock and Smith, 100.

[146] Cited in McClintock, 262. U.S. writers have also raised the issue of French torture, and most have noted that it is only marginally effective and has tremendous negative consequences. DiMarco, 74. Not all French officers agreed with this claim. One in particular who penned a memoir of his experiences, openly discussed torturing individuals, saw it as effective and maintained that he would do it again, if he were involved in another conflict. Paul Aussaresses, *the Battle of the Casbah: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Algeria, 1955-1957* (New York: Enigma Books, 2002).

[147] George Kelly, "Revolutionary War and Psychological Action," *Military Review* (October 1960): 4–13.

[148] Interestingly, both writers have books identified as "classical texts" in the latest counterinsurgency manual's bibliography. Galula, a former French officer who served in Algeria, argued that protecting the civilian population was the most important aspect of a counterinsurgency campaign. Galula's ideas on COIN, especially his emphasis on civilian-centric measures have become popular among current American military officers. For example, he organized the civilian population into three groups: a minority of insurgent supporters, a large uncommitted majority, and a minority of active government supporters. Of the three, the most important is the large and uncommitted population. To obtain the support of this group, counterinsurgents must provide security and engage in civic action projects, which are designed to establish political legitimacy and create support for the central government. Many of his theories can be found in the latest counterinsurgency manual, as well as in *Military Review's* "Special Edition: Counterinsurgency Reader," (October 2006) which has numerous quotations from Galula. His most cited text is David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964). Roger Trinquier's book *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* was a bestseller in France and was based on his experiences in China, Indochina and Algeria. It was written after the Algerian conflict ended, and was a summary of the best practices the French used. According to Trinquier, modern warfare (guerrilla warfare) is an interlocking system of actions—political, economic, psychological, and military—that aims at the

However, there are some similarities between the two, including their emphasis on controlling, protecting and isolating the civilians from the insurgents.[149] Despite the infatuation with Galula, he was a relatively unknown junior officer in French military. And more importantly, as Douglas Porch noted, none of the ideas that Galula advocated, which were purely strategic and tactical, would have led to a French victory because Paris put forward no viable policy to convince Muslims to remain part of *l'Algérie Française.*[150]

To defeat the FLN, the French military relied on three strategies. These included revamping their military operations, creating small and mobile forces and designing effective *action psychologique,* or PYSOPS.[151] More specifically, French military efforts consisted of *regroupement,* or concentration, *quadrillage,* and civil-military operations.[152]

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overthrow of the established authority in a country and its replacement by another regime. Trinquier also placed an emphasis on the use of force, not politics. If needed, counterinsurgents should coerce the population into supporting their cause. Trinquier considered torture a legitimate option against terrorists (insurgents) in interrogations, because when the insurgent is captured, "he cannot be treated as an ordinary criminal, or like a prisoner taken on the battlefield." For a fuller expression of Trinquier's views on *Guerre Révolutionnaire,* consult Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: a French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

[149] Galula argued that failure in Algeria was partly attributable to a "lack of firmness" toward the population. As Galula notes, so long as the villagers "fear the rebels more than they fear us, those among them who are favorable to us—and they surely exist—will never dare come out. So long as they avoid a commitment, we shall not succeed in pacifying Algeria." Surprisingly, when discussing current counterinsurgency theory, supporters of Galula have not addressed these claims. Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2006), 268.

[150] Porch, 246.

[151] Jason Norton, "The French-Algerian War and FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency: A Comparison" (master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2007). *L'action psychologique* comprises those elements of propaganda, psychological riposte and demonstration which are directed toward enemy forces and designed to undermine their will to resist. Kelly, "Revolutionary War," 8.

[152] There were other strategies the French relied upon, including the Morice Line described below. The French also used air power to pummel the NLF. However, several missteps in the bombing campaign proved costly, especially the bombing of a village in neighboring Tunisia. As Alistair Horne noted, this event set in motion the chain of events that led directly to the disintegration of France's Fourth Republic. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 250. Beginning in 1958, the French recruited Algerians to serve as auxiliary combat soldiers for a variety of duties, including static defense. Generally referred to as the *Harkas*, these units were trained by the regular army and by the SAS. According to one account, up to 180,000 Muslims served in the conflict. Yoav Gortzak, "Using Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency Operations: The French in Algeria, 1954-1962," *Journal of Strategic Studies,* 32.2 (April 2009): 307-333.

Quadrillage divided a particular theater of war into four sections, or quadrants. Within each area there was a garrison force that provided static security, and a mobile force ready to carry out rapid sweeps and continuous patrolling, known as the *ratissage. Regroupement*, or resettling, relocated entire villages to areas more accessible and controllable to the Army.[153] Between 1957 and 1961, the French Army relocated approximately 2 million civilians.[154] This strategy's ultimate aim, as in other counterinsurgency campaigns such as Malaya, was to control the population and convince them to support the counterinsurgents.

To prevent the infiltration of men and arms across Algeria's borders, the French military constructed a defensive cordon along the border with Tunisia. There was a similar *cordon sanitaire* established along the Moroccan border, but it was not as heavily fortified or important.[155] The Morice Line comprised a 200 mile long system of defenses that included electric fences, rapid deployment forces, minefields and radar systems.[156] In addition to these defensive measures, the barrier combined static defense with mechanized search-and-destroy units supported by artillery and complemented by weapons searches at seaports and airfields.[157]

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[153] *Regroupment* was carried out in three stages: first, remove civilians from vulnerable locations to well-defended positions; secondly, indoctrinate the villagers to establish a degree of self-administration and the active participation of the community in its own defense; and finally, after political and military indoctrination had been completed, have the villagers assume the role of self-defense. Paret, 43-44.

[154] Norton, 45.

[155] Norton, 40.

[156] Horne, 230.

[157] Lieutenant Colonel Philippe Francois, "Waging Counterinsurgency in Algeria: A French Point of View," *Military Review* (September-October 2008): 56- 67, 66.

According to several observers, the Morice Line proved extremely effective in cutting off aid to the FLN.[158]

The French also carried out several civic action measures to maintain control of the countryside. Conducting a census was touted as an effective means of physically isolating the civilians from the insurgents because it allowed the CIs to restrict their movement and control their actions.[159] After establishing security in a particular area, the French deployed members of the *Sections Administratives Spécialisées* (SAS) to maintain security and carry out civic action programs. The activities included reforming local government, setting up medical services and training local police and military forces.[160] Their main task was to reestablish links with the Muslim population, but also to control them. The SAS was not interested in understanding the Algerians, rather they wanted to turn them into docile collaborators and imposed French cultural, historical and medical practices. These paternalistic practices were divisive and caused resentment.[161] Despite the efforts of the SAS, they played a small role in the overall COIN effort, and for some, they were deployed too late in the conflict to have a meaningful impact.[162]

To overcome the overwhelming disparity between France and the rebels, the FLN internationalized the conflict. The FLN's leadership realized that confronting the French

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[158] Norton 40; Horne 230.

[159] Galula, "Pacification in Algeria," xx. Trinquier also agrees as well, because they could also be used to identify their political preferences as well. See *Modern Warfare*, 35. A recently leaked Special Forces manual also discusses the benefits of the census during cordon and search operations and during the second phase of "consolidation operations," which correspond to the "hold" phase of current U.S. COIN doctrine. U.S. Army, *FM 31-20-3: Foreign Internal Defense Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Special Forces* (Washington: U.S. Army, 1994).

[160] DiMarco, 68.

[161] Paret, 51.

[162] Francois, 67.

militarily would have been futile. Instead, they used international organizations such as the United Nations and friendly countries such as Egypt to disseminate their message and publicize French misconduct, including torture. As Matthew Connelly noted, "for weapons the Algerians employed human rights reports, press conferences, and youth congresses, fighting over world opinion and international law more than conventional military objectives." In Connelly's opinion, the most decisive battles in the conflict occurred not in Algeria, but in the international arena. By the end of the conflict, the FLN had rallied majorities against France at the UN, won the accolades of international conferences and 21-gun salutes across the globe.[163] Arguably, the FLN's "diplomatic revolution" was as important, maybe even more so, than French actions in the conflict.

If COIN studies have not discussed the Algerians' diplomatic efforts, they have discussed FLN terror, including the massacre of French civilians at Philippeville and attacks on destinations frequented by Europeans such as cafés or discotheques. Alistair Horne noted that while the FLN's attacks against Europeans dominated the headlines, Muslims in Algeria bore the brunt of terror.[164] These attacks were designed not only to intimidate Algerians into supporting the FLN, but were also geared toward provoking the French into over-reacting. Moreover, this strategy was also meant to drive a wedge further between the two communities, creating even more hostility and suspicion. Algerian terror and reprisals against Europeans also served as a form of revenge, especially in response to summary French executions and "systematic" rapes.[165]

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[163] Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

[164] Horne, 135.

[165] Quoted in Connelly, 87. Connelly also argues that the summary executions and harsh tactics used by the French were used in part to cure the demographic imbalance between French citizens and native Algerians. This according to a French government briefing book, was the "fundamental problem" of Algeria; Horne, 119.

According to most accounts, the French reacted as the Algerian leadership hoped they would.[166] Consequently, the French supposedly lost the battle of legitimacy and struggle for the hearts and minds of millions of Algerians.

The French-Algerian War lasted approximately six years and ended not with a military defeat, but with a negotiated settlement. In March 1962, the French government signed the Evian accords, formally ceasing France's control over Algeria. According to most accounts of the conflict, the French military had defeated the FLN militarily, but lost the political battle both in Algeria and in France. The FLN's strategy of internationalizing the conflict played a prominent role in French withdrawal and Algerian independence. More importantly, the French throughout its colonial rule had not convinced the non-European inhabitants that remaining part of *L'Algérie Française* was better than independence. Despite the French defeat, the lessons from the conflict continue to offer case studies for future conflicts.

Vietnam

Of all the previous COIN campaigns, Vietnam has been the most analyzed. It is also the most contested; as one author noted, Vietnam is the "never-ending war."[167] Ever since the termination of the conflict, authors have debated why the U.S. lost.[168] The growing U.S.

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[166] Paul Aussaresses, *the Battle of the Casbah: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Algeria, 1955-1957* (New York: Enigma Books, 2002). The author, a former intelligence officer who served during the conflict, argued that torture was not only effective and justified, but if faced with the same situation again, he would not hesitate to use the same tactics again.

[167] Nancy Tucker, "Vietnam, the Never-Ending War," in *The Vietnam War as History*, ed. Elizabeth Errington and B. J. C. McKercher (New York: Praeger, 1990).

[168] There are several contours to this debate, but the major dispute breaks down into a simple dichotomy between conventional strategists and counterinsurgents. Colonel Harry Summers's book *On Strategy*, which is an excellent example of the former, fired the first salvo with its publication. He believed the Viet Cong guerrillas were a mere sideshow in the war; what was really important was to go after the main nerve center: Hanoi. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982). Recently, numerous authors

intervention in Vietnam coincided with the ferment of counterinsurgency under President John F. Kennedy. In spite of the U.S. failure, the conflict continues to serve as a model for counterinsurgency strategy, including the most recent U.S. wars. Vietnam represented a testing ground where U.S. policymakers and strategists devised new techniques that they applied elsewhere. General Maxwell Taylor, testifying before a House Subcommittee in 1963, referred to the country in similar terms:

> … We have recognized the importance of the area and have consciously used it as a laboratory. We have had teams out there looking at the equipment requirements of this kind of guerrilla warfare. We have rotated senior officers through there, spending several weeks just to talk to people and get the feel of the operation, so even though not regularly assigned to Vietnam, they are carrying out their experience back to their own organizations.[169]

In the Vietnam War, the United States relied on strategies used during previous conflicts, and in some instances, created new ones. Some of these counterinsurgency initiatives included separating civilians from the insurgents and placing them into newly constructed villages; civic action programs; civil defense; reorganizing the bureaucracy to unify the civilian and military

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have suggested that the U.S. lost in Vietnam because it did not adopt an adequate COIN strategy soon enough. Some of these authors include Max Boot, *Small Wars;* Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam;* Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). Krepinevich's work places the blame for failure on the shoulders of General William Westmoreland, who mistakenly continued to pursue conventional tactics in the face of the more important threat emanating from the guerrillas. However, many authors have contested this idea as well, noting that the problems with pacification were much deeper and that General Westmoreland, U.S. Commander in Vietnam, was justified in pursuing a conventional strategy. Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19.2 (2008): 145-181; Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976*; Richard Hunt, *Pacification: the American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); and Jeffrey Race*, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnam Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Recently one scholar has challenged the existing Vietnam scholarship and tried to present an alternative to these two schools of thought. Jonathan Caverley argues that civilians, not the military, determine strategy in conflict. Contrary to the COIN school, Caverley claims that U.S. strategy was designed by LBJ and the civilians, not Westmoreland. He argues that Westmoreland wanted to pay more attention to pacification, but LBJ denied him the troops necessary. See "The Myth of Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars and Vietnam," *International Security* 34.3 (winter 2009/10):119-157, 121. For a harsh rebuttal of Caverley, consult James McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam: Soldiers, Civilians and U.S. Military Strategy," *International Security* 35.3 (winter 2010/11): 95-123.

[169] Quoted in Barber and Ronning, 77-78.

commands; and creating units of South Vietnamese paramilitaries to target the insurgent leadership.

During the U.S. advisory mission (ca. 1954-1965), the South Vietnamese government implemented two large-scale population resettlement efforts aimed at separating the civilians from the insurgents and placing them in newly constructed and fortified villages. These programs also had another concern in mind: establishing control over the peasants. Ultimately, both of these programs did not fulfill their objectives.

In June 1959, Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of South Vietnam, faced with a growing insurgency in the countryside, launched a new initiative. This strategy attempted to isolate the National Liberation Front (NLF) and deprive them of access to South Vietnamese peasants by grouping them into self-sufficient communes known as the Agrovilles.[170] Diem's plan was designed with security in mind, not economic or social development.[171] Rather than providing security, the Agrovilles served as a recruiting tool for the Viet Cong, due to the concentration of masses of disaffected villagers who were poorly defended.[172] As a study conducted by Michigan State University noted, the peasants were not only forced to leave their ancestral tombs behind, but they also came to a new site that was "barren, without trees to provide shade against the

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[170] Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1990), 35.

[171] The Agrovilles were launched without notifying the United States and were based on French strategic thinking. Joseph Zasloff, *Rural Resettlement in Vietnam: an Agroville in Development* (Lansing: Michigan State University, 1961); Hunt, 20-21; Birtle "U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976," 319.

[172] John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 69.

tropical sun. The new area was a vast, bare checkerboard of crisscrossing canals with square plots of land on which there were only uninviting untended grass and a mud foundation."[173]

In 1962, inspired by British success in Malaya, the Diem regime unveiled the Strategic Hamlets program.[174] Robert Thompson, fresh from his exploits in Malaya, acted as an adviser to Diem. However, the plan eventually carried out was radically different than what Thompson advocated.[175] Diem's brother headed the program, and envisioned it as a means of transforming South Vietnamese society.[176] Similar to its predecessor, Strategic Hamlets aimed at separating the civilians and insurgents and asserting control over the rural population.

The construction of Strategic Hamlets was supposed to be an orderly process, conforming to the oil-spot approach used by the British in Malaya. However, the program did not begin auspiciously. In March 1962, Operation Sunrise began with the first hamlet being established in an enemy stronghold, the reverse of what Thompson advocated. According to the Pentagon Papers:

> The new program got off to a bad start. The government was able to persuade only seventy families to volunteer for resettlement. The 135 other families in the half dozen settlements were herded forcibly from their homes. Little of the $300,000 in local currency provided by USOM (United States Operations Mission, the local branch of U.S. AID) had reached the peasants; the money was being withheld until the resettled families indicated they would not bolt the new hamlet. Some of them came with most of their meagre belongings. Others had little but the clothes on their backs.

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[173] Zasloff, 24.

[174] As one contemporary observer noted, "Many of the problems which later plagued the Strategic Hamlets were experienced during the development of the Agrovilles." Milton E. Osborne, *Strategic Hamlets in South Viet-Nam; a Survey and Comparison* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1965), 23.

[175] Thompson believed that the Strategic Hamlets were implemented too hastily; the program lacked strategic direction; the villages were over-extended; and the government did not establish secure base areas where it could begin expanding the settlements. Thompson, 138.

[176] Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 44.

> Their old dwellings – and many of their possessions – were burned behind them. Only 120 males of an age to bear arms were found among the more than 200 families – indicating very clearly that a large number had gone over to the VC, whether by choice or as a result of intimidation.[177]

The construction of hamlets proceeded rapidly, often without adequate security measures, and many were hastily built. South Vietnamese officials routinely pointed to the sheer number of buildings constructed as evidence of success. U.S. officials were keenly aware of the numerical discrepancies and preferred a more methodical and slow approach. Despite the rapid expansion of the program, the numbers belied the results. In the process, rather than controlling or protecting the population, the Diem regime succeeded in further alienating rural South Vietnamese civilians.

For the program to be successful, it also depended on the active participation of the peasants. However, the Diem regime's actions alienated the countryside. To cite an example, in a lecture to American civilian advisers departing to South Vietnam, the respected Franco-American journalist Bernard Fall discussed how Diem ruptured the fabric of the rural society. Successive rulers, including the French, had allowed semi-autonomous local government to flourish. However, that was abolished by Diem in June 1956. This decree was the "single greatest stupidity committed in Vietnam in 500 years…Even the French colonials were smart enough not to tamper with local government."[178] While separating and relocating civilians worked in previous conflicts, its success was never replicated in South Vietnam.

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[177] Quoted in Fitzgerald, "Learning to Forget," 45.

[178] Quoted in McClintock, 293.

Mark Moyar strongly disagrees. His most recent book challenges some of the more dominant trends in the literature and insists that most of it is wrong. Among them, Moyar contends that the Strategic Program was successful and that it was not until after Diem's overthrow that the program began to falter and ultimately failed.[179] In particular, Moyar argues that the minority groups in the Central Highlands "proved quite receptive to resettlement."[180] However, as George Herring has noted, the U.S had assumed control over this area during this period.[181] After the United States handed over control of this area to Saigon years later, the situation deteriorated.

There were several reasons for the program's failure. The corruption in Saigon and the pilfering of materials for sale in the black market did little to win the people's allegiance. In some cases, peasants were forced to buy barbed wire and pickets out of their own pockets.[182] This had important ramifications for the hamlets' security, because they were also poorly defended and were easily overrun by the NLF. In a village that former Kennedy administration official Roger Hilsman visited, he recalled seeing "defenders" that consisted of a "few old men, armed with swords, a flintlock and a half dozen American carbines."[183] Removing peasants from their land and their ancestors' burial grounds and marching them forcefully to unproductive land did not help either. More importantly, the program embodied the central contradictions of the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam: the population was being protected from an insurgency that

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[179] Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[180] Moyar, 183.

[181] George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Third Edition (New York et al: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 99.

[182] Race, *War Comes to Long An,* 133.

[183] Hilsman, 456.

many supported. Moreover, the government protecting them was the same one whose corruption and contempt for rural villagers had fueled unrest in the first place.[184] Unlike in Malaya or Kenya, the NLF enjoyed more popular support than their fellow revolutionaries. Whereas the Mau Mau and Malayan insurgents represented one small ethnic group, the National Liberation Front had broader representation from society. In other words, the NLF was inseparable from the people.

Perhaps the term most commonly associated with the conflict was the effort to "win hearts and minds." This was part of a campaign directed toward South Vietnamese civilians to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Saigon government and win their loyalty and popular support. Several U.S. strategies used to woo South Vietnamese civilians included civic action programs and civil defense. However, the United States faced an uphill battle because of an increasingly apathetic South Vietnamese population, the ongoing fighting, a growing domestic protest movement, and war-weariness in the U.S. Compounding these issues was Saigon's endemic corruption and economic malaise.

Civic action programs in Vietnam aimed at winning the civilians' allegiance. Civilian agencies, especially the U.S. Agency for International Development, played the dominant role in implementing these socioeconomic reforms. During the conflict, these efforts included road building, constructing medical centers, and providing health and dental care. One of the more novel programs was village festivals, where cultural groups performed songs to woo villagers and demonstrate that a supposedly remote and indifferent central government was now committed to ameliorating their condition. However, the main method to attract villagers relied

[184] Hannah Gurman, "Vietnam—Uprooting Revolution: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam," in *Hearts and Minds: A People's History of Counterinsurgency*, ed. by Hannah Gurman (New York & London: The New Press, 2013), 86.

on PSYOPS and civil action.[185] These programs were implemented after enemy forces had been removed from a particular district or village. Ultimately, the U.S. and Saigon never attracted a substantial portion of South Vietnam to their side.

One of the enduring legacies of the Vietnam War, and especially for many American infantrymen, was the frustrating experience of differentiating friend from foe. During the day, villagers often appeared friendly to U.S. patrols, but at night these same villagers often fought with the Viet Cong. Unlike the North Vietnamese Army, the National Liberation Front rarely donned military uniforms and wore the same attire as peasants. U.S. troops who served during Vietnam could have understood the experience of a soldier who fought in the Philippines at the turn of the century. As one soldier noted:

> …several times when a small force stops in a village to rest the people all greet you with kindly expressions, while the same ones slip away, go out into [the] bushes, get their guns and waylay you further down the road. You rout them & scatter them; they hide their guns and take to the house & claim to be amigos.[186]

The inability of soldiers to distinguish allies from enemies has been cited as a reason why U.S. forces perpetrated acts of violence against civilians, not only in Vietnam, but in the Philippines and Iraq as well. These types of actions not only destroyed any credibility that existed between American troops and the population, but acted as recruiting and propaganda devices. Perhaps more importantly, atrocities also weakened, and in some cases, eroded domestic support for these conflicts.

Terrorism committed by the NLF was not indiscriminate. It served to intimidate people into submission or create a climate of insecurity. Mostly, it was selective and designed to suit

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[185] U.S. Army, *FM 31-20-3.*

[186] May, 546.

their political and psychological goals. Often, those targeted included unpopular or corrupt government officials. Sometimes popular officials were also assassinated. Less frequently, the NLF killed nonpolitical villagers to demonstrate that nobody was safe unless they cooperated.[187] As one intelligence official noted, "a bloody terror act in a populated area would immobilize the population nearby, make the local inhabitants responsive to the Vietcong, and in return, unresponsive to the government element requests for cooperation."[188] Later in the conflict, terror was used to nullify American pacification efforts such as Revolutionary Development.[189] In post-Tet Vietnam, the NLF had to resort to forceful tactics to recruit people and rebuild its infrastructure. As several commentators have noted, these tactics alienated people.[190] Despite a drop in the NLF's popularity, Saigon could not capitalize on it.

The United States relied on several incarnations of civil defense to assist its goals of sustaining an anti-communist government in Saigon and defeating the NLF and its supporters. These units were also intended to provide village security, allowing the U.S. to implement its various civic action programs to reclaim momentum in the countryside. These forces could be used after either South Vietnamese or American troops secured an area, which corresponds to the "holding" phase in military parlance. Vietnamese self-defense units were also created to incorporate civilians into the pacification effort and act as a force multiplier, allowing U.S. troops to avoid static defense duty, so they could concentrate on fighting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

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[187] W.P Davison, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1968), X.

[188] Quoted in Valentine, 59.

[189] Douglas Pike, *the Viet-Cong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: U.S. Mission Vietnam, 1970).

[190] Moyar, "Phoenix," 308; Davison, *Some Observations;* Andrew Birtle, email message to the author, July 13, 2013; Herring 234.

One of the more notable examples was the Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF). These groups were comprised of South Vietnamese civilians tasked with defending the villages, including the Strategic Hamlets, from Viet Cong attacks. They served anywhere in the province in which they were recruited. Regional and Popular Forces were built from the remains of the decayed Self-Defense Corps and the Civil Guard, which Marilyn Young described as paramilitary forces composed of refugee Catholics.[191] Like many other civil defense forces in other conflicts, these groups were not well compensated and their armaments were second-rate and sometimes obsolete. While these forces initially proved ineffective, they received more assistance after the U.S. assumed the overall direction of the war effort. Their numbers grew exponentially, but the funding they received was minimal.[192] It was not until after 1967 that these programs began assuming a more offensive and aggressive disposition, coinciding with President Richard Nixon's policy of "Vietnamization."

Another civil defense experiment was the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), run by the CIA and later the Special Forces. Eventually, CIDG was absorbed by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the American organization responsible for conducting the war. The Green Berets worked primarily with the Montagnards, a minority group located in Vietnam's highlands. These civil defense groups were created with two motives in mind: develop and broaden the government's counterinsurgency effort and prevent minority groups and

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[191] Marilyn B. Young, *the Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper, 1991), 61. Another similar program was the Combat Youth, sponsored by the CIA and Taiwanese government, which trained Catholic paramilitaries in the art of self–defense. Ahern, 72-73. Birtle strongly disagrees with Young's portrayal of the recruits, arguing that they mirrored the population at large. Andrew Birtle, email message to the author, July 11, 2013.

[192] Krepinevich makes the case that these units were effective, and estimated that they caused between 12-30percent of the Viet Cong and North Vietnam Army casualties, depending on the year. He complains that these forces received paltry funds and implies that had they received more they would have had even more of an impact. Krepinevich, 221.

villagers from becoming recipients of communist propaganda.[193] Another goal could also be added as well—secure the countryside and eventually turn it over to the South Vietnamese government.

Despite the infusion of U.S. ground troops in 1965, the overall situation—economic, military and political—in Vietnam remained tenuous. In May 1967, President Lyndon Johnson signed National Security Action Memorandum 362, officially creating a new organization, Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), headed by Robert Komer, a civilian.[194] Under CORDS, there was a single manager for the pacification effort in Vietnam. As Dale Andrade noted, this concept may sound obvious, but it rarely occurs because the military focuses on fighting while civilians dedicate their energy toward reconstruction efforts.[195]Johnson's decision was in full accord with the Army's long established view that unity of command and politico-military coordination were essential in COIN.[196]

CORDS was an integrated civilian and military effort aimed at reducing bureaucratic wrangling and streamlining the decision-making process in South Vietnam. The development of CORDS was a temporary expedient to solve the rapidly deteriorating security situation. As Richard Hunt claimed, CORDS' unique feature was incorporating civilians into the military

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[193] Colonel Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004), 19.

[194] The "other war" refers to pacification. The "main war" was the conventional operation headed by General Westmoreland directed against the North Vietnamese Army. The move toward developing a single manager was fiercely resisted by civilians, especially in the CIA and State Department who viewed this as an unwarranted erosion of their institutional autonomy. Birtle, "US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976," 325.

[195] The unity of effort achieved under CORDS in Vietnam was not replicated in Afghanistan under the Provincial Reconstruction Teams or the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq led by J. Paul Bremer. Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review Special Edition: Counterinsurgency Reader* (October 2006): 77-91.

[196] Birtle, "U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1945-1976," 325.

command. It also consolidated most of the programs in Vietnam under its chain of command including civic action, education and public health.[197] However, as one CIA historian noted, the program was hardly innovative.[198] Nevertheless, CORDS has been touted as an excellent model for civil-military coordination in counterinsurgency.[199]

CORDS orchestrated the pacification campaign, especially efforts aimed at destroying the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) and establishing the credibility of South Vietnam's government. The vast majority of its resources were devoted to improving security through civil defense, police and various paramilitary organizations.

As part of its security measures, CORDS developed an organization known as Infrastructure Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX). The program aimed at gathering intelligence and destroying the VCI agents' control of the hamlets and the peasants within them. The VCI cadres were the building blocks of the revolution, the mechanism by which the Viet Cong spread their influence.[200]In December 1967, ICEX was renamed Phoenix; on the Vietnamese side the program was called *Phung Hoang,* after the mythical Vietnamese bird. Phoenix built on the work of the CIA-created network of over 100 provincial and district intelligence operations committees in South Vietnam that collected and disseminated information on the VCI to police and paramilitary units.[201]

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[197] Hunt, 112

[198] Ahern, 241.

[199] *FM 3-24* uses CORDS as a positive example for the integration of civilian-military structures.

[200] Andrade and Willbanks, 85.

[201] Andrew Finlayson, "The Tay Ninh Provincial Reconnaissance Unit and its Role in the Phoenix Program, 1969-1970," *Central Intelligence Agency,* https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol51no2/a-retrospective-on-counterinsurgency-operations.html.

The Phoenix program produced lists of known and suspected VCI operatives. Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), originally known as "counter-terror teams," were paramilitary forces responsible for identifying, locating and targeting suspected insurgents. Often, these were local individuals recruited from the civil defense forces such as the RF/PF units. Vietnamese paramilitary squads were responsible for fulfilling the quotas determined by their CIA managers. As an intelligence and police program, it was designed to apprehend and interrogate suspected NLF supporters. If suspects were apprehended, they were taken back to the regional interrogation centers for questioning. However, if the suspects resisted, they were assassinated.

Debate over Phoenix continues to rage within the Vietnam literature. Its detractors have viewed it as a massive assassination program and instrument of torture. One of the more critical accounts of the program is Douglas Valentine's, *The Phoenix Program*.[202] Using interviews with several participants and second-hand material, Valentine calls Phoenix an "instrument of counter-terror."[203] Former soldiers who were disturbed by their actions, such as Ed Murphy, divulged their involvement in various nefarious activities. The interest generated by their disclosures led the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to convene hearings in 1970. Testimony from former participants not only produced domestic outrage and revulsion, but it also provided evidence that critics have used to attack the program and American conduct in the war. One of the key sources for information about the program is Kenneth Barton Osborn, a former soldier involved with Phoenix. During his testimony, Osborn claimed that "…there was never any reasonable establishment of the fact that any of these individuals, was in fact, cooperating with

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[202] Douglas Valentine, *the Phoenix Program* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

[203] Valentine, 13.

the Viet Cong, but they all died and the majority were either tortured to death or things like thrown from helicopters."[204]

Other critics have contested supporters' views of the program's success. In particular, they have alleged that the number of executions is not only misleading and incorrect, but more importantly, the assassinations did not decimate the VCI. John Prados has argued that Phoenix affected very little of the NLF and VC leadership and that few of the "neutralizations" could be attributed to the program.[205] As a more recent RAND study noted, there was a far-reaching consequence, especially from the view of COIN theory: the persistent political fall-out from Phoenix had negative consequences for "information operations."[206] Simply put, criticism over the program harmed the battle for public opinion and support.

Supporters of Phoenix have claimed that it was highly effective. While noting that abuses did occur, they attributed most of them to the poorly trained South Vietnam police force, not American planning. Others claim that critics' allegations are exaggerated. Mark Moyar disputes detractors' claims that assassination was part of the program. He asserted that during the interviews he conducted for his book he never heard of any pacification unit receiving orders "to kill a certain number of people a month."[207] Despite the unsavory aspects of the campaign, its proponents have argued that it was effective in decimating the VCI leadership. As one supporter noted though, ultimately the program failed. This was not due to unsound strategy, but rather the

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[204] Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 94. Moyar is highly critical of Osborn's testimony, arguing that the killings that occurred were not committed under the Phoenix program.

[205] John Prados, *the Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1995), 219-200.

[206] William Rosenau & Austin Long, *The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2009), vii.

[207] Moyar, 216.

insufficient and uneven implementation of the Phoenix program nationwide. [208] Several commentators have referred to remarks made by North Vietnamese leaders as evidence of its success. One of the more routinely cited quotations was General Tran Do, Communist deputy commander in the South, who admitted that Phoenix was "extremely destructive." [209]

As a result of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, direct U.S. military involvement in Vietnam came to an end. Reductions in the level of American troops had started years before, under President Richard Nixon's policies of Vietnamization and the Nixon Doctrine. Less than two years after the ink in Paris had dried, Saigon officially ceased to exist. While counterinsurgency's star may have dimmed as a result of failure in the Vietnam War, it retained a small coterie of adherents determined to implement the lessons they had learned from the conflict.

Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth century the United States used counterinsurgency to achieve important foreign policy goals, especially in the Third World. All of these interventions were unique in their own regard, and the approach to combating the insurgencies differed in each case, from relying on proxy forces to subdue the Huk Rebellion to the introduction of American ground troops in Vietnam. Some of the common denominators included civic action, civil defense, civilian and military cooperation, separating civilians from the insurgents and training security forces.

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[208] Andrade, 279.

[209] Andrade, "Ashes to Ashes," 279; Boot, 310; Richard Hunt's study of pacification also concurs, noting that "The program's results do little to support the charge that Phoenix was primarily an assassination campaign. Of the 10,444 members of the VCI killed between 1970-March 1971, over 9,000 died incidentally in firefights with military forces and were identified only posthumously as members of the underground. In other cases, party members, especially those of higher rank who were unlikely to surrender without a fight, were killed during police raids." Hunt, 241.

Of all the conflicts discussed above, arguably Vietnam has had the most profound and continuing impact on U.S. COIN strategy, especially the most recent variant. This may seem striking since the conflict ended in American defeat. However, these policies are enduring. Current U.S. doctrine has relied on several of the measures and lessons drawn from the pacification effort in the Vietnam War; however, they were fluid, contested and changeable.[210]

The major insight from an analysis of the conflicts discussed above is that counterinsurgency strategy, whether it is American, British or French, contains variations within an overall common set of principles. Many of the tactics used by foreign armies have been utilized by the United States and vice versa. Another commonality is that when confronted with insurgency, all of these countries originally underestimated their opponents and responded conventionally. The U.S., British and French also viewed revolution through a similar lens, believing that unrest in the Third World was communist-inspired. Despite some analysts' championing of the British use of "minimum force" and their approach to unconventional war in the recent American-produced studies of counterinsurgency, official U.S. doctrine also reflects theories elaborated in *guerre révolutionnaire.*

Essentially, studies of COIN are reductive. Often, they present a series of clichés or simplified strategies to combat insurgencies. The recommendations appear as a checklist of "best practices" that if followed will result in victory. Ultimate counterinsurgency is a set of tactics used to defeat insurgency, not strategy. Douglas Porch, a prominent critic of COIN, argues that COINdinistas make the incorrect assumption that if their tactics are correct, victory will follow. In Porch's opinion, they have it backwards; tactics are not a suitable replacement for

[210] Fitzgerald, 3

a sound strategy.[211] As Andrew Birtle commented, "all too often, people reduce counterinsurgency's complex nature to slogans, declaring that political considerations are primary, that nation-building is a viable war-winning strategy, and that the only road to victory is to win the 'hearts and minds' of a population. As with many clichés, these promote one truth at the expense of another."[212]

Civic action programs are an essential component of COIN strategy, especially the American brand. These programs are touted as a method of generating good will among civilians and improving the legitimacy of the government. According to the most recent COIN doctrine this is an essential aspect of defeating insurgency. Even if CIs are militarily successful, they can lose the battle if the government they are supporting lacks legitimacy. In theory, legitimate governments protect their citizens, are not corrupt and are able to make their citizens believe they have a stake in the new society. Yet practically none of the governments threatened by insurgency reviewed here can be characterized as a liberal democracy. Indeed, the lack of political space available under a closed system often bred resentment which led people toward solving their grievances through violence.[213] Arguably, many of the nations the U.S. has intervened in had little, if any legitimacy with their citizens. However, Washington has typically viewed insurgent movements—including the NLF in Vietnam and the insurgents in El

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[211] Porch, 322.

[212] Birtle, "Persuasion and Coercion in Counterinsurgency Warfare,"51.

[213] Social scientists have debated what ultimately prompts people to take up arms against the state. There are several theories including clandestine revolutionary parties foment revolution; certain structurally weak governments are susceptible to revolution; and a lack of political space leaves revolution the only apparent outlet for change. Two of the seminal works are Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (New York: Cambridge, 1979).

Salvador—as illegitimate actors, despite being popular movements. Instead, the U.S. sought to engineer or construct a government more palatable to its citizens.

Unfortunately, constructing legitimacy is not a task that can be completed in a short time frame. Anthropologists such as David Price have criticized COINdinistas for believing that they can manufacture legitimacy quickly and sell it to the public.[214] Historically, constructing legitimacy has been a problem for foreign occupiers. In his study of insurgencies, William Polk has argued that foreign occupiers can never be viewed as legitimate. Thus, "the single absolutely necessary ingredient in counterinsurgency is extremely unlikely ever to be available to foreigners."[215]

One of the more important maxims within current U.S. strategy argues that protecting the population is paramount. Civilians are reduced into three groups: a minority of insurgent supporters, a large uncommitted majority, and a minority of active government supporters. In Galula's estimation, the latter group will rally the majority and neutralize or eliminate the hostile minority. [216] Practitioners of this approach argue that civilians who may otherwise want to help the CIs withhold information due to fear of retribution from the insurgents. Therefore, if civilians

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[214] David H. Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State* (Petrolia & Oakland: Counterpunch & AK Press, 2011).

[215] William R. Polk, *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism & Guerrilla War, from the American Revolution to Iraq* (New York, NY: Harper, 2007), 187.

[216] Of the three, the most important is the large and uncommitted population. To obtain the support of this group, counter-insurgents must provide security and engage in civic-action projects, which are designed to establish political legitimacy and create support for the central government. See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964); and *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1963); Sir Robert Thompson has also argued along similar lines, stating that the government can count on only around 10percent of the population's support, while the largest and most important is the "neutral" portion. See Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

are protected and feel secure, they will theoretically provide intelligence and cooperate with government forces.[217]

The phrase population-centric seems innocuous. In spite of its pleasant sounding nature the reality is very different. What supporters of COIN often overlook is that when military force is used to provide security, it often results in killing innocent civilians and more devastation.[218] Consequently, it makes civilians an object of competition between the belligerents and places them closer to danger and the threat of retribution. As French and Gentile argue, the hearts and mind approach is not only misinformed, but is dangerous to civilians and troops. Thus, it accomplishes the opposite of what CIs intend: it creates more rebels. Whether it is the British experience in resettling people during the Anglo-Boer War, General Weyler's reconcentration of Cuban insurgents or the Strategic Hamlets program in Vietnam, the population has often suffered more, not less. In the cases where it has been successfully used, especially in Kenya and Malaya, the insurgents represented a small ethnic group that could be easily isolated. Population-centric policy is based on the questionable assumption that the people are separable from insurgents.

Most of the literature advocates a mixture of coercion and political reforms to defeat insurgency. One of the chief assumptions is that force is necessary, but must be applied judiciously and selectively. Critics of COIN including David French and Gian Gentile disagree, arguing that coercion has played a significant role in defeating insurgencies, especially establishing physical control over civilians. However, this approach can ultimately backfire; the historical record is replete with examples of failed attempts to suppress insurgencies by using

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[217] Kilcullen, *the Accidental Guerrilla*.

[218] Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York & London: The New Press, 2013), 8.

overwhelming force and counter-terror, including the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the Russians in Chechnya and the French in Algeria.

In the cases analyzed above, political reforms played a very minor role in successful counterinsurgency operations. When authors have discussed reforms, they have discussed military reforms, such as the introduction of COIN doctrine, not the establishment of good governance. Even if political reforms are discussed it is a very minor aspect of the overall argument. CIs succeeded in part because their opponents were isolated from internal and external support. There were several factors that contributed to their isolation, including their size, lack of broad representation from society and in some cases poor strategy. Consequently, the government-backed forces exploited their weaknesses and crushed them. In cases where insurgents had significant international backing or support from the people, the results were much different.

Most COIN narratives omit a crucial factor: insurgent strategy.[219] As currently configured, the literature reflects the view of the CIs and implies that their decisions and actions mattered more. This is a rather curious approach, because insurgent actions are fundamental to the outcome of the struggle. By ignoring the role of the insurgents, commentators have deprived them of historical agency, placed them at the margins of the story and downplayed how they may have affected the outcome of a COIN operation. Viewing conflicts from the opposing side not only broadens the scope, but also adds depth and nuance, which are solely lacking in the extant literature.

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[219] Eliot Cohen attempted to rationalize this issue by declaring that insurgents rarely keep archives and most people usually lack the time or inclination to master the languages of their opponents. While guerrillas do not have a large bureaucracy that produces mounds of paperwork and leaves a paper trail, they do have documents and some hard drives that have been captured. See Eliot A. Cohen, "The President gave us his Plan. But does he have the Right Strategy?" *Washington Post,* December 6, 2009.

Studies of insurgency and counterinsurgency also tend to ignore the larger geostrategic context. International events have often affected the outcome of various insurgencies. As the following pages will discuss, the end of the Salvadoran conflict—which is generally viewed as a successful application of COIN strategy—can be attributed in part to regional and international events, including the Contadora peace process and the end of the Cold War, not U.S. counterinsurgency strategy.

It is often believed that the experiences of past contingencies are applicable to future ones. In particular, this reasoning assumes that previous strategies can and should be reused. While comparing and contrasting case studies is a useful method of analysis, generally they suffer from a policy-driven approach and shallow analysis. COINdinistas do not blindly advocate a policy of adopting tactics used from previous conflicts. Nevertheless, their recommendations often reflect a poor grasp of history. Or, as one fierce critic noted, most of the COIN literature is not only historically inaccurate and mistaken, but relies on a narrow and selective reading. [220]

The odds are generally stacked against insurgents, especially in terms of military resources or manpower. For a variety of reasons, insurgencies have generally been defeated. Sometimes CIs have succeeded because of their overwhelming material, political or technological advantages. Political, tactical and strategic mistakes committed by insurgents have often doomed their struggles. Insurgencies that lack either cross-border sanctuaries or outside support, including financial, political, military or moral, have contributed to their defeat.[221] As

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[220] Gentile, 8.

[221] Bard O'Neill has argued that if a country has porous borders or neighbors sympathetic to the insurgents' cause, it will make defeating the insurgency much more difficult. See Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2005). However, as the experience of Cambodia demonstrates, attacking cross-border sanctuaries had unintended and destructive consequences, especially for its inhabitants. Invading Cambodia's territory did not defeat the Viet Cong (VC) nor seriously hinder its war-

Edward Luttwak has observed, "insurgents do not always win, actually they usually lose. But their defeats can rarely be attributed to counterinsurgency."[222]Simply put, when the insurgents lose, their defeat cannot always be attributed to a brilliantly executed COIN strategy.

After the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, American COIN practitioners who wanted another opportunity to wage a counterinsurgency campaign did not have to wait long. This time the battlefield was no longer in South East Asia, but in America's "Own Backyard." El Salvador presented the U.S. Army with its first counterinsurgency campaign in the post-Vietnam era. It was the largest irregular conflict the American military participated in between the end of Vietnam and the second U.S-Iraq War. As will be demonstrated over the course of the dissertation, U.S. counterinsurgency strategists looked to the past to devise policies to defeat revolution during the Salvadoran civil war. In Greg Grandin's words, Latin America—including El Salvador—was a laboratory where U.S. policymakers tested policies they would later implement in Iraq and Afghanistan.[223] Before discussing the Salvadoran conflict, it will be necessary to briefly analyze the ferment of COIN during President John F. Kennedy's presidency and how he and his successors used prevailing theories about the subject to prevent the outbreak of communist subversion and the establishment of "another Cuba" in El Salvador prior to 1979.

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fighting capabilities. While the American bombing may have temporarily disrupted the VC supply system, it did not greatly affect the outcome of the war. As some authors have argued, the American intervention destabilized Cambodia, leading to the rise of Pol Pot. See William Shawcross, *Side-Show: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

[222] Edward Luttwak, "Dead End: Counterinsurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice," *Harper's,* February 2007.

[223] Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY IN EL SALVADOR AND LATIN AMERICA, CA. 1961-1979

In the wake of Fulgencio Batista's overthrow by Fidel Castro and his supporters in Cuba, U.S. policymakers were determined to avoid the establishment of "another Cuba" in the hemisphere. By the end of the Cold War, the United States had spent billions of dollars to prevent this occurrence. Supposedly, further communist expansion in the region would not only threaten the Panama Canal, but jeopardize American national security in general as well. Keeping Latin America stable and orderly was also necessary to allow the U.S. to focus on other vital regions of the world, including Europe. More often than not, the U.S. grossly exaggerated the danger. This red bogeyman was used to justify the militarization of the region, support for right-wing dictators and ensuring the region was safe for American investments. However, U.S. policy, interests and goals in the region were fiercely contested throughout the Cold War, including in El Salvador between 1979 and 1992.

During Kennedy's presidency, the U.S. supplied economic and military aid to El Salvador. Many of the essential features of U.S. military policy initiated under his administration continued until Ronald Reagan. While the amount of American assistance to the country was minimal, and El Salvador's importance equally so in the minds of policy makers, aid and concern both spiked after a coup d'état in October 1979. By the end of President Jimmy Carter's term, the United States had increased the amount of aid and deepened American involvement in El Salvador. Arguably, Carter paved the way for his successor who accelerated the U.S. commitment.

One of the primary strategies the U.S. utilized to thwart communism in the Western hemisphere was counterinsurgency, which prioritized military training and economic aid. The main assumption behind COIN was that it would not only defeat communist intrigues, but also stabilize, reform, and modernize the target country's infrastructure and institutions. One of the other key ideas behind U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine is that increased levels of American aid and military training would professionalize the region's militaries and improve human rights. In spite of these lofty goals, U.S. aid arguably politicized the very forces that American strategists wanted to de-politicize. As a result, the increased participation by the military beyond the confines of its own sphere and in matters of state, governance and administration also alienated the very people they were supposed to protect and from whom they were supposed to win allegiance.

Recent Salvadoran history is also integral to this story. Internal strife in El Salvador, combined with a rigid socio-economic system, and mobilization among the students, peasants and Catholic Church pushed the country to the brink. One of the significant features of this period was the fragmentation of the Salvadoran left and the creation of radical splinter groups that formed armed wings in the 1970s. While U.S. counterinsurgency policy aimed at preventing formidable challenges to allied regimes, the succession of unsavory and repressive Salvadoran governments and the institutionalized socioeconomic and political systems which granted participatory rights to the El Salvador's elite served to radicalize significant portions of the country's population Eventually, these groups united in 1980, and for approximately twelve years, contested U.S. and Salvadoran initiatives aimed at defeating them.

Kennedy and the "Counterinsurgency Era"

As a presidential candidate in 1960, John F. Kennedy lambasted the Eisenhower administration, arguing that it had allowed the Soviet Union to narrow the missile gap between the two countries. During the campaign, Kennedy criticized President Eisenhower for his "willingness to place fiscal security ahead of national security."[1] Upon his ascension to the presidency of the United States, Kennedy attempted to distance his administration from his predecessor's in several ways.[2] JFK believed that his predecessor's policy of "massive retaliation" was outdated and inflexible. Instead, the president developed the "flexible response" doctrine, which was formulated to be more responsive to aggression at various levels of the warfare spectrum. Despite the rhetoric, Kennedy continued to adhere to established aspects of U.S. national security doctrine.

While critical of the New Look Policy, JFK also maintained several features of Eisenhower's national security policy, especially toward Latin America. In particular, National Security Council Action No. 1290d, written in December 1954, established U.S. internal security assistance strategy. This policy aimed at preventing disorder and communist subversion while employing U.S. advisers to professionalize security forces across the globe. This program was

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[1] Oliver Stone & Peter Kuznick, *the Untold History of the United States* (New York: Gallery Books, 2012), 290.

[2] Not all historians agree that Kennedy marked a serious departure from his predecessors. According to one scholar, Kennedy's national security policy was not as innovative or radical as some have alleged. In fact, it was conservative and similar to his predecessors. See Anna Kasten Nelson, "President Kennedy's National Security Policy: A Reconsideration," *Reviews in American History* 19.1 (March 1991): 1-14, 2; Thomas Paterson, "John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963,* ed., by Thomas Paterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 3-23.

considered vital because "many countries threatened with communist subversion [had] neither the knowledge, training nor means to defend themselves successfully [against communism]."[3]

There were five elements of this plan: assessing the nature and degree of communist threat in target countries; increasing the capability of internal security forces to counter subversion and paramilitary operations; revising legislation and reorganizing judicial systems in order to permit more effective anti-communist action; exchanging information on subversive methodologies; and assisting in the development of public information programs to clarify the nature of the communist threat.[4] Kennedy maintained other essential features of Eisenhower's internal defense strategy, including training police and Latin American military officers and their use in a "constructive role in economic development projects," later referred to as civic action.[5] As William Rosenau noted, Kennedy's eventual COIN program had much in common with his predecessor's approach. [6]

The newly elected President inherited a series of crises including Cuba, Laos and Vietnam. In response to Castro's overthrow of Batista, Kennedy decided to proceed with the CIA's plan, which had been designed and approved under Eisenhower in 1960, to overthrow the new regime. The resulting adventure, the Bay of Pigs, was an unmitigated fiasco. Consequently,

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[3] Martha Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1998), 80.

[4] Dennis M. Rempe, "An American Trojan Horse? Eisenhower, Latin America and the Development of U.S. Internal Security Policy, 1954-1960," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 10.1 (Spring 1999): 34-64, 34.

[5] Rempe, 42.

[6] What differed was the urgency, the global nature of the program and the new role for the Army's Special Forces. William Rosenau, "The Kennedy Administration, U.S. Foreign Internal Security Assistance and the Challenge of 'Subterranean Warfare,' 1961-1963," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14.3 (Autumn 2003): 65-99; Rempe, "An American Trojan Horse," 55.

the president approached the issue in a slightly different manner.[7] Determined to prevent future communist victories, Kennedy decided to address the conditions in which communists seemed to thrive: economic deprivation, political chaos and corruption. His strategy for preventing further communist take-overs therefore rested on three pillars: economic development, political reform and military assistance.[8]

These three aspects would be fused together in counterinsurgency, a rather broad term encompassing a variety of political, economic and military components. Under Kennedy, the United States used COIN to try to accomplish essential American foreign policy goals in the Third World including development and preventing the spread of communism. Some of the initiatives incorporated training internal security forces, carrying out political and agrarian reform and using military power to defeat subversion and insurgency. Kennedy viewed "guerrilla warfare" as a new and different form of warfare.[9] He used both the powers of the executive office and his presidential cabinet to convince others of the seriousness of this threat and for the need to establish new capabilities to confront it.

Along with Counterinsurgency, Modernization Theory was a concept that guided and shaped the Kennedy administration's foreign policy. Several of the leading proponents of Modernization Theory, including Walt Rostow, an economics professor at MIT, received

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[7] In Cuba, Kennedy hired the famed counterinsurgency operator Edward Lansdale, fresh from his exploits in the Philippines to run Operation Mongoose. This operation was a campaign of economic sabotage and included plots to assassinate Castro.

[8] Andrew. Birtle, U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976 (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2003), 223.

[9] Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation; the Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1967).

positions within Kennedy's administration.[10] It was one of the guiding principles behind the *Alianza para el Progreso,* the Alliance for Progress, Strategic Hamlets in Vietnam and even the Peace Corps. Modernization Theory viewed development as a linear progress, that there existed a single optimal form of political economy and that all states were moving toward it.[11] This theory viewed the U.S. as a model of progress and a symbol of modernity. Modernization theorists also believed that the United States' experiences offered universal laws of development that were applicable across the globe. In his study of Modernization Theory, Michael Latham considers it as an ideology; a conceptual framework that articulated a common set of assumptions about the nature of American society and its ability to transform a world perceived as both materially and culturally deficient. Modernization was also a vision of the United States and the nation's mission to transform a world eager to learn the lessons only Americans could teach. [12]

Shortly before his inauguration, the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, gave a speech at a conference of Communist parties held in Moscow. Khrushchev, fearing that local wars could erupt into nuclear conflicts that would lead to Armageddon, declared that the only ones worth

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[10] Rostow has widely been cited as the most influential Modernization Theorist. Rostow's book, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: CUP, 1960) advocated that underdeveloped societies could become modern through five linear stages, of which the most important was the "take off" stage.

[11] Nick Cullather, "Development? Its History," *Diplomatic History* 24.4. (Fall 2000):641-653, 642.

[12] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4; As Nils Gilman noted, the language and practice of modernization, while expressing confidence that the U.S. should be a universal model for the world, arose at a moment when America felt both unsure about how to define themselves and during the Cold War. The author also disputes characterizing Rostow as the primary founder of the school. Rather, Forman believes Talcott Parsons was more instrumental. See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future Modernization Theory in Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 4-5.

supporting were "wars of national liberation" that were both "inevitable" and "sacred." [13] The Soviet premier defined these conflicts as those "which begin as uprisings of colonial peoples against their oppressors [and] develop into guerrilla wars." [14]

The newly elected president viewed the speech as an "authoritative exposition of Soviet intentions" and instructed his subordinates to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it."[15] As one Kennedy aide noted, after hearing Khrushchev's speech, one of the first questions Kennedy asked after being inaugurated was "what are we doing about guerrilla war?"[16]

Khrushchev's speech was not the only factor that heightened the newly elected President's interest in COIN. There were two other important variables: the emergence of nuclear weapons, which supposedly limited the likelihood of the two superpowers going to war and the triumph of Mao Zedong in 1949.[17] The latter event was especially troubling because other revolutionaries throughout the world, including Che Guevara and Vo Nguyen Giap, utilized Mao's theories to help define their strategy.[18]

Behind all of these concerns existed growing apprehensions about increasing nationalism in the Third World. Under Khrushchev, the Soviet Union became increasingly active in its

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[13] Quoted in William Taubman, Khrushchev: The Man and his Era (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 487.

[14] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: JFK in the White House* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 302-303.

[15] Schlesinger, ibid.

[16] Hilsman, "To Move a Nation," 413.

[17] David Fitzgerald, "Learning to Forget? The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq" (PhD Diss, University College Cork, 2010), 6-7.

[18] Mao's theory of warfare posits that there are three inter-related phases of war that do not necessarily proceed in a linear fashion. In fact, one could resort back to a previous stage if the conditions were not yet suitable. These stages were: a pre-revolutionary phase, where insurgents established base areas of support and sought to gain the support of the populace; a second phase focusing on harassing government forces and expanding these base areas; and finally, the strategic offensive, which was a shift toward conventional warfare aimed at inflicting a decisive defeat on the enemy. This is derived from Zedong Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1961).

involvement in the affairs of these developing countries. Yet, many of these nations did not openly identify with the prevailing bipolar world. While many U.S. policymakers preferred for the world to fit a neatly packaged view, many Third World nations refused to identify themselves in either the U.S. or the Soviet camp. Leaders who adopted the Cold War mentality often had to force change on an unwilling society.[19] The process of decolonization, which began in earnest under Eisenhower, continued under Kennedy. While Kennedy may have admired anti-colonial movements and realized they were often driven by legitimate grievances, he believed that they were always vulnerable to manipulation by communist elements.[20] For Kennedy, COIN could be used to contain third world nationalism.[21]

In order to combat "wars of national liberation," Kennedy sought to use the power and prestige of the executive office to persuade the U.S. Army to reconfigure its doctrine and embrace counterinsurgency. The president recognized the limitations of the United States Armed Forces previous experience with "guerrilla warfare" which often amounted to a military preoccupation with guerrilla partisans in conventional war. He noted, "Much of our efforts to create guerrilla and anti-guerrilla capabilities has in the past been aimed at general war. We must be ready now to deal with any size of force, including small externally supported bands of men; and we must help train local forces to be equally effective."[22] However, the president, while wanting to restructure the Army, also demanded that it accomplish this task without jeopardizing

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[19] Odd Arne Westad, "The New International History of the Cold War: Three (Possible) Paradigms," *Diplomatic History* 24.4 (Fall 2000):551-565, 561.

[20] Rosenau, 69.

[21] Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 47.

[22] Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 165.

its other missions, including the defense of Korea and Europe.[23] Indeed, Kennedy would face a difficult challenge trying to persuade the U.S. Army to adopt COIN into its doctrine.[24]

According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the president instructed the U.S. Army to read Mao's *On Guerrilla Warfare.* Kennedy also allegedly entertained his wife on "country weekends by inventing aphorisms in the manner of Mao's 'guerrillas must move among the people as fish swim in the sea.'"[25] In November 1961, President Kennedy held a meeting with the Army's senior leadership. He demanded that the army devise a "wholly new kind of strategy; a wholly different kind of force and therefore a new and different kind of military training" to meet this new threat.[26] As Kennedy said to the Secretary of the Army, Elvis Stahr, "I want you guys to get with it. I know that the Army is not going to develop in this counterinsurgency field and do the things that I think must be done unless the Army itself wants to do it."[27] On February 27, 1961, Kennedy instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to study what the U.S. could do to build anti-guerilla forces around the world, especially in Latin America. He asked his generals to find out 'how

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[23] Birtle, 226.

[24] One of the heavily debated questions within the literature of Vietnam and COIN is there is whether or not the Army carried out the President's orders. Largely, the belief is that the Army ignored the president or dragged its feet. The consequences of this would result in failure in Vietnam. Two prominent examples are Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002). One author who disagrees is Andrew Birtle, who argued that the U.S. Army made a conscious effort to apply COIN into its doctrine, which is reflected in doctrine, time spent discussing the subject in military schools and training exercises specifically devoted to COIN during Kennedy and his successor's administration. See Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2003).

[25] Schlesinger Jr., 341.

[26] Birtle, 225.

[27] Quoted in Krepinevich, 31.

these military Latin Americans feel about Castro; from a military viewpoint, what would they do from their countries to offset his regime; and does Castro represent a threat to their countries?"[28]

In a speech given at West Point in June 1962, Kennedy discussed the concept of guerrilla warfare. The location of the commencement address was important. During his speech, he famously explained to the cadets one of the threats they faced upon graduating:

> This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It is a form of warfare uniquely adapted to what has been strangely called 'wars of liberation,' to undermine the efforts of new and poor countries to maintain the freedom that they have finally achieved. It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kinds of challenges that will be before us in the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.[29]

Shortly after his inauguration, JFK asked Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to examine the means for placing more emphasis on the development of "counter-guerrilla forces."[30] Kennedy also inquired about the various active training programs the U.S. military had with Latin America. Of particular concern were programs aimed at "controlling mobs" and guerrillas. As Kennedy noted, as "the events of the past week have shown in Brazil, the military occupies an extremely important strategic position in Latin America."[31]

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[28] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 127.

[29] John F. Kennedy, "Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy, June 6, 1962. A copy of the speech is available at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8695.

[30] National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 2, February 3, 1961. President Kennedy's NSAMs are available at the Federation of American Scientists website. See http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam2.jpg .

[31] NSAM 88, "Training for Latin American Armed Forces," September 5, 1961, http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam88.htm.

The result was the Special Group (Counter-Insurgency) formed in January 1962 by National Security Action Memorandum 124 (NSAM). One of its primary functions was to "ensure proper recognition throughout the U.S. government that subversive insurgency ('wars of national liberation') is a major form of politico-military conflict equal in importance to conventional warfare."[32] The CI group was headed by General Maxwell Taylor and included representatives from the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S. AID), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of Central Intelligence and the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy. According to one source, Robert Kennedy took it upon himself to make "everyone get gung ho about counterinsurgency."[33] The inclusion of Kennedy's brother (besides acting as the president's eyes and ears) was to remind participants of the high importance JFK attached to the work of the group. He reported directly to the president after each meeting, a fact known to other members.[34]

In COIN theory, security is paramount. Without internal stability, any government reforms aimed at rectifying the sources of discontent among the people, and thus preventing or defeating an insurgency, will be thwarted by the chaos in which the state is engulfed. The main fear of U.S. policymakers was that communists and their allies would seize upon local grievances and use them to overthrow regimes friendly to American interests. Kennedy's strategy to provide internal security rested on four pillars: political and economic appraisals of the country to seek out weak spots; developing measures to attack vulnerabilities—the weak spots which communists would take advantage of; development of political and military

[32] NSAM 124, "Establishment of the Special Group (Counter-Insurgency)," January 18, 1962, Available online from the JFK Presidential Library, http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research.

[33] Quoted in Huggins, 101.

[34] Blaufarb, 69.

capabilities to maintain internal security to protect the population from intimidation and violence; and mobilization of the local government's resources to support the military and internal security capabilities.[35]

The CI group approved a policy for countering subversion known as Overseas Internal Defense Policy (OIDP). Promulgated in NSAM 182, it argued that:

> A most pressing U.S. national security problem now, and for the foreseeable future, is the continuing threat presented by communist inspired, supported, or directed insurgency, defined as subversive insurgency. Many years of experience with the techniques of subversion and insurgency have provided the communists with a comprehensive, tested doctrine for conquest from within. Our task is to fashion on an urgent basis an effective plan of action to combat this critical communist threat.[36]

OID's primary purpose was to eliminate the causes of violence and dissent, which if not contained would lead to civil war. Kennedy's strategy reflected the thinking of Walt Rostow, the Deputy National Security Director. It emphasized the need for development, inter-agency coordination and minimizing the U.S. direct involvement in certain instances.[37]

The language used in NSAM 182 was replete with maxims from the 1960s. As one would expect, references to Modernization Theory abounded, including the belief that the world was experiencing a social and economic revolution brought upon by the developmental process that had altered pre-existing political and social relationships. This pressure along with the revolutionary spirit sweeping the globe contributed to arousing anxieties and "hopes which seem to justify violent action."[38] NSAM 182 also noted that the central focal point of the struggle is

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[35] U. Alexis Johnson, "Internal Defense and the Foreign Service," *Foreign Service Journal* (July 1962), 22.

[36] "NSAM 182, U.S. Overseas Internal Defense Policy" ND, Available online at Archives Unbound. http://gdc.gale.com/archivesunbound/.

[37] Fitzgerald, 42.

[38] Overseas Internal Defense Policy.

the people, a recurring motif in classical counterinsurgency theory. Kennedy's strategy reflected extant doctrine in noting that the essence of insurgency was political. Nevertheless, the strategy, while acknowledging the importance of politics, called for obtaining the full support of local security forces as an extremely important factor in defeating an insurgency.[39]

While NSAM 182 provides information about the various types of assistance the U.S. could provide, it also cautioned that, whatever the form, such efforts should be attributed to elements within the host nation and not from the United States. Put another way, the U.S. role needed to be discreet. American advisers and trainers were expected to limit their public exposure. There were several reasons for this: a large U.S. presence could lead to claims of U.S. agents being labeled as "colonialist;" dilute the national appeal and the acceptability of the national government; and permit the communists to associate themselves with the forces of nationalism and anti-Westernism.[40] Despite supporting various anti-democratic regimes, the Kennedy administration was still sensitive to charges of being associated with colonialism or tolerating tyrannical regimes publicly.

NSAM 182 set out the need to defend four U.S. interests in the developing world: political, military, economic and humanitarian.[41] The strategy also reflected prevailing views in U.S. national security thinking, including that there was no room for neutrals. Addressing revolution, the strategy argued that "the U.S. does not wish to assume a stance against revolution *per se*, as an historical means of change. The right of peoples to change their

[39] Overseas Internal Defense.

[40] Overseas Internal Defense.

[41] Political/ideological developing nations evolve in a way that affords for the growth of international cooperation and the growth of free institutions; Military, assuring that strategic area and the manpower and natural resources don't fall under the sway of communists and maintain their stability; Economic interest in that the resources and markets of the less developed world remain available to the U.S. and other free world countries; and humanitarian: the achievement of the social, economic and educational aspirations of the developing nations.

governments, economic systems and social structures by revolution is recognized in international law." Nevertheless it also argued that "the use of force to overthrow certain types of government is not always contrary to U.S. interests. A change brought about through force by non-communist elements may be preferable to prolonged deterioration of governmental effectiveness or to a continuation of a situation where increasing discontent and repression interact, thus building toward a more dangerous climax."[42] This line of thinking would serve as the rationale for continuing U.S. support of right-wing dictatorships across the globe.

In October 1961, President Kennedy visited the Army's Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. During the visit, he was given a series of military demonstrations, including a soldier demonstrating the use of a jet pack. Kennedy was infatuated with the Special Forces, the Green Berets, who he viewed as playing an important role in combating communism and subversion. Theodore Sorensen described the level of the president's personal interest as having extended to every aspect of the Special Forces.[43] Their primary role would be training indigenous forces across the globe to combat internal subversion by a variety of means, including setting up intelligence networks, reconnaissance and civil defense.

After the visit, Kennedy sent a message to the commander of the Special Forces, Brigadier General William P. Yarborough, noting the challenges ahead, but was confident "that you and the members of your command will carry on for us and the free world in a manner which is both worthy and inspiring. I am sure that the Green Beret will be a mark of distinction

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[42] Overseas Internal Defense; McClintock, 171.

[43] Kennedy "personally supervised the selection of new equipment—the replacement of heavy, noisy combat boots with sneakers" and "when the sneakers proved vulnerable to bamboo spikes, their reinforcement with flexible steel inner soles."It also extended to the type of headwear worn. Kennedy prevailed over the Army, authorizing the official headgear as the Green Beret, a move had been resisted by the American military. Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 632.

in the trying times ahead."[44] As Michael McClintock noted, it is significant that the army's Special Forces—elite practitioners of violence, not diplomatic civil affairs officers—were the crux of the counterinsurgency realignment.[45]

Within Kennedy's administration, two of the more vocal supporters of counterinsurgency were Rostow and Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. [46] These two individuals played a key role in the development of the administration's COIN strategy.

Rostow, a proponent of Modernization Theory, believed that insurgencies were part of the pains of the transition from traditional societies to modern ones. He viewed communists as the "scavengers" of the modernization process. As Rostow noted, "they [the communists], believe that they can effectively exploit the resentment built up in many of these areas against colonial rule and that they can associate themselves effectively with the desire of the emerging nations for independence, for status on the world scene, and for material progress."[47] Addressing the graduates at the Army's new Special Warfare School, Rostow reminded the soldiers that the U.S. could not win a guerrilla war by themselves: "A guerrilla war is an intimate affair, fought not merely with weapons, but in the minds of the men who live in the villages and in the hills…an outsider by himself cannot win a guerrilla war. He can help create the conditions in which it can be won, and he can directly assist those who are prepared to fight for their

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[44] John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. "Green Berets," accessed March 1, 2013, http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Green-Berets.aspx.

[45] McClintock, 181.

[46] Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998).

[47] Walt Rostow, Guerrilla Warfare in Underdeveloped Areas," *Marine Corps Gazette* 46.1 (January 1962): 46-49, 47.

independence."[48] COIN was also required to "protect the developmental process in strategically important client-states, especially during periods of their maximum vulnerability to communist takeover, which were supposed to coincide with the transition from one stage to another."[49]

Hilsman believed that the Soviets had taken advantage of the "nuclear stalemate" to "adventure with internal war."[50] In a clear reference to critics of Kennedy's infatuation with COIN, Hilsman considered it "nonsense to think that regular forces trained for conventional war can handle guerrillas effectively."[51] Hilsman, similar to JFK, considered guerrilla warfare to be a new type of war different from any other type of war. It was not a sentiment that the U.S. Army's top leadership held.

Despite Kennedy's enthusiasm, the Army's top brass was largely resistant to Kennedy's pressure to revamp Army doctrine. Schlesinger noted the reticence of military officers toward Kennedy's proposals. They were "professionals infatuated with the newest technology and eager to strike major blows," and "deeply disliked the thought of reversion to the rude weapons, amateur tactics, hard life and marginal effects of guerrilla warfare."[52] For many, the problem was the emphasis on the *political* element. They believed, especially in Vietnam, that it was a *military* problem. As General Earle Wheeler expressed in November 1962, "It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic

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[48] Walt Rostow, "Guerrilla Warfare in the Underdeveloped Areas [original speech delivered to graduating class, U.S. Army Special Warfare School, Fort Bragg, N.C., June 28, 1961]," *Department of State Bulletin* 45.1154 (7), 233-238.

[49] McClintock, "Instruments," 172.

[50] Roger Hilsman, "Internal War: The New Communist Tactic," *Marine Corps Gazette* 47.1 (January 1963): 50-54, 50.

[51] Hilsman, "Internal War," 52.

[52] Schlesinger, 341.

rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."[53] General Lyman Leminitzer, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff 1960-1962 (JCS), believed that the Kennedy administration was "oversold" on insurgency and COIN.[54] As Leminitzer recalled, "What the president had in mind was nothing less than a dynamic national strategy: an action program designed to defeat the Communist without recourse to the hazard or the terror of nuclear war; one designed to defeat subversion where it had already erupted, and, even more important, to prevents its initial taking root."[55] General George Decker, U.S. Army Chief of Staff (1960-62) responded to one of Kennedy's lectures by telling the president "any good soldier can handle guerrillas."[56] General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the JCS (1962-1964) and Kennedy's military mentor, declared that "it (counterinsurgency) is just a form of small war, a guerrilla operation in which we have a long record against the Indians. Any well-trained organization can shift the tempo to that which might be required in this situation. All this cloud of dust that's coming out of the White House really isn't necessary."[57]

As has been amply discussed, Kennedy's plan to combat the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere was the Alliance for Progress (AFP). The Alliance had two primary goals: promote economic development and modernize Latin America. [58] By addressing social reform

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[53] Kalev Sepp, "Best practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* 86.5 (October 2006):8-12; 8.

[54] Krepinevich, 26-27.

[55] Michael McClintock, *The American Connection: State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador* (London: Zed Books, 1985), 13.

[56] Blaufarb, 80; Birtle, 226.

[57] Krepinevich, 37.

[58] Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2007). As Jeffrey Taffet has demonstrated, the program was developed because of the flawed assumption that foreign aid, or the promise of it, would lead Latin American leaders to change their policies and accept U.S. ideas about development. Modernization theorists, as well as American politicians, believed that if

and alleviating discontent, the Alliance for Progress hoped to prevent further instability and other adverse conditions in the region that might lead to the establishment of another communist regime in the hemisphere. Despite its altruistic intentions, the program failed. Its failure was not only one of implementation but one reflecting the assumptions on which it was based: that Latin American nations would accept the American model; that the political and economic leadership of the region would recognize the interdependence of democracy and economic growth; and that they would support reform for the masses to stem the tide of revolution.[59]

The Alliance for Progress included a two-part process. In addition to improving the economies of the region and building democracy, another important facet was training the indigenous military forces. This entailed strengthening the region's armed forces via equipment modernization and training them in the art of COIN.[60] Overwhelmingly, the Alliance provided more economic than military aid.

According to Cole Blasier, between 1961 and 1970, approximately ninety-two percent of all U.S. aid was economic, with the remaining percentage composed of: 7.4 percent was military aid; .3 percent police and .3 percent military civic action aid.[61] While the amount of military aid may have been marginal, it played an important role in setting up security organizations and training military officers that were accused of numerous crimes in the hemisphere.

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countries were economically prosperous, they would not become communist. According to Michael E. Latham, the Alliance presented the U.S. as an advanced and deeply altruistic nation that regenerated its strength by assisting a region desperate to emulate its exemplary innovations and past accomplishments. See *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[59] Nelson, 10.

[60] James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982), 47.

[61] Cole Blasier, *The Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1910-1985* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1985), table 11.

Events in Latin America offered no easy solutions. When confronted with the overthrow of the dictator Rafael Trujillo and the policy options available, Kennedy argued "that there are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we can't really renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."[62] In many ways, this statement encapsulated the conundrum Kennedy faced in Latin America. In the 1960s, most of the governments in the Western hemisphere were military dictatorships. Despite being an avid supporter of freedom and democracy, when push came to shove, Kennedy sided with right-wing regimes. In the face of the continuing challenges from revolutionary nationalism and the choice between order and stability, Kennedy and his successor opted to support military governments over democratic governments they felt were sliding toward communism.[63]

Eventually, President Kennedy's moral concerns with social justice and progress were overridden by political and security concerns. As Stephen Rabe noted, these security-driven concerns were self-defeating because of a contradiction between aiding right-wing dictatorships and reform. [64] In short, while the *Alliance* and other military programs were supposed to promote stability and democracy, they created conditions that led to revolution. After the military overthrow of a Salvadoran government President Kennedy declared that "governments of the

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[62] William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995), 177.

[63] David Schmitz, *Thank God They're on our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 1999), 236.

[64] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999).

civil-military type of El Salvador are the most effective in containing communist penetration in Latin America."[65]

Following Kennedy's assassination and growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam, interest in continuing the Alliance for Progress diminished under Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ). Instead, the United States followed the ideas formulated by Johnson's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, Thomas Mann. In 1964, Mann publicly announced the policy that guided the Johnson administration: the Mann Doctrine. It called for the promotion of economic growth without emphasis on social reform, no preference for forms of government (to avoid charges of intervention), opposition to communism and protection of private American investment.[66] Political stability, not economic aid devoted to social programs, would spur prosperity.[67] Johnson and his successors sought to maintain political stability under whatever form of government promised it.

Nevertheless, some of Kennedy's efforts in Latin America continued after his death. Beginning in the 1960s, the American military, especially the Green Berets, began training Latin American militaries in the art of counterinsurgency.[68] From the 1960s onward, the U.S. Army sought to expand military, police, and intelligence partnerships with Latin American militaries while encouraging them to undertake civic action programs. In addition, the Army also hoped to

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[65] Quoted in Kyle Longley, *In The Eagle's Shadow: The United States and Latin America*, Second Edition (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 255.

[66] Longley 257.

[67] Taffet, 60.

[68] For a good synopsis of American police training efforts, see Martha Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University, 1998). In another move to facilitate closer relations between the various militaries in Latin America, increase cooperation among members and improve joint efforts at fighting communism, the U.S. established the Central American Defense Council (CONDECA) in 1964. Every country in the region except Costa Rica—it had abolished its army—were members.

impart upon them how a professional, apolitical and modern military organization functioned in a democracy.[69] At the heart of the program was the desire to avoid another communist take-over in the region. However, in the process, many students that participated in U.S. military training programs were accused of torturing fellow citizens, overthrowing governments, corroding democratic governance and carrying out assassinations. While U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine did not specifically condone such behavior, American military assistance did not prevent such abuses.[70]

To carry out American national security objectives in the region, the Pentagon provided several forms of military aid to Latin American countries, including El Salvador. Among the most important were the Military Assistance Program (MAP), the International Military and Education Training (IMET) and the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. Another frequently used resource was Military Training Teams (MTT), which often consisted of soldiers from the Special Forces. [71] The types of weapons, supplies and training curricula provided by the United States varied from one region to another. In Latin America after the Cuban Revolution, the principal items donated to region's militaries included helicopters, cross-country vehicles and surveillance gear. These were considered among the most important items for counterinsurgency operations. As McNamara explained in 1967, the MAP in Latin America "will provide no tanks, artillery, fighter aircraft or combat ships. The emphasis is on vehicles and helicopters for internal

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[69] Birtle, 294.

[70] However, Birtle also argues that "indigenous factors" played a far more important role in shaping the course of Latin American military officers than a few hours of COIN instruction at the SOA. See Birtle, 302-4.

[71] MAP typically provided direct grants of arms and equipments, such as tanks, to foreign militaries. IMET focused on training foreign military personnel, generally outside of the U.S. Often the ideas stressed in IMET were to supposedly promote democracy and increase cooperation between the U.S. and other countries. This program was thought to be the most cost-effective among all three. And finally, FMS provided credit to militaries to buy U.S. military supplies, including arms and defense equipment.

mobility [and] communications equipment for better coordination of in-country security efforts."[72]

U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the American military command responsible for Latin America, and U.S. military intelligence worked to create Latin American intelligence units proficient in psychological warfare, counter-guerrilla tactics and interrogation to combat internal subversion.[73] Students who received training often used it for repressive purposes in their own countries. Among those frequently targeted by SOA graduates were students, intellectuals, union organizers and religious workers. According to James Petras, Washington and its security apparatus was a nerve center for the organization of a variety of institutions, agencies and training programs providing the expertise, financing and technology for repressive and terrorist institutions.[74] Numerous critics have noted that the techniques taught by the U.S. military often resulted in the torturing, disappearance or death of people throughout the region. [75]

Many Latin American officers received training at the infamous U.S. School of the Americas (SOA), which was commonly referred to as the "School of the Golpes," or "School of the Dictators." The school was established under Kennedy and designed to give its cadets training in U.S. COIN doctrine. Classes at SOA were originally held in the Panama Canal Zone,

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[72] Michael Klare and Cynthia Arnson, *Supplying Repression: U.S. Support for Authoritarian Regimes Abroad* (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, 1977), 44.

[73] J. Patrice McSherry, "Operation Condor as Hemispheric "Counter-Terror Organization," in *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror*, edited by Cecilia Menjívar & Néstor Rodriguez (University of Texas Press, 2005), 30.

[74] James Petras, "The Anatomy of State Terror: Chile, El Salvador and Brazil," *Science and Society* 51.3 (Fall 1987):314-338, 315.

[75] More recently, the controversy gathered momentum after the Department of Defense declassified seven interrogation manuals used in the School of the Americas between 1987 and 1991. Dana Priest, "U.S. Instructed Latins On Executions, Torture; Manuals Used 1982-91, Pentagon Reveals," *Washington Post,* September 21, 1996; other have seen patterns of prisoner abuse in Iraq, that can be traced back to the 1960s, and includes tactics used in Latin America during the Cold War. National Security Archive, *Prisoner Abuse: Patterns from the Past: Electronic Briefing Book 122.* These manuals were also distributed in El Salvador.

but were transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984.[76] Salvadoran officers attended SOA, including ten graduates who participated in the notorious El Mozote massacre in 1981.[77] Even more egregious, two-thirds of those accused of committing human rights abuses during the war attended the SOA. [78]

The Pentagon was not the only federal government agency involved in counterinsurgency. Other organizations also became involved. In addition to the military, which was tasked with developing counterinsurgency doctrine, the State Department was responsible for providing policy guidance and the coordination of overseas internal defense programs. The CIA performed a variety of clandestine roles including coordinating intelligence, carrying out selected assassinations, coup plotting and training paramilitaries. U.S. AID emphasized police training and development. Finally, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), sponsored by the AFL-CIO, aimed at developing and strengthening mainstream labor unions. These organizations were supposed to function together, complimenting each other. In COIN theory, this is referred to as "unity of effort." However, people within these bureaucracies had fundamentally different ideas, especially the Pentagon and State Department, which threatened policy coherence.[79]

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[76] The school, which had an unsavory reputation, was closed down in January 2001 and has been officially been renamed as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

[77] Leslie Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 106.

[78] United Nations, *From Madness to Hope: The Twelve Year War in El Salvador, Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador,* http://www.usip.org/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf.

[79]The cultural differences between them prompted one historian to refer to them as the "striped pants" diplomats and the "gold braid" military officers. Eric Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

AID played a significant role in U.S. COIN efforts, especially its programs of public safety, civic action and community development. Publicly, AID affirmed its commitment to the Kennedy Administration's internal security policy. Within the administration though, that commitment was in doubt. Robert Komer, a member of Kennedy's National Security Council, and McGeorge Bundy, the president's National Security Advisor, were alarmed at the agency's reluctance to carry out a vital measure of the president's counterinsurgency strategy.[80] After a report criticized AID's handling of police training, Kennedy issued NSAM 177, effectively telling AID to increase its police training program.[81] In a memorandum to AID director Fowler Hamilton, Kennedy argued that

> Though [police programs] seem marginal in terms of focusing our energies on those key sectors which will contribute most to sustained economic growth…I regard them as justified on a different though related basis, i.e. that of contributing to internal security and resisting communist-supported insurgency.[82]

AID followed suit and established the Office of Public Safety (OPS) in November 1962. The creation of this office occurred as the result of Kennedy's instruction to AID to review its "support of local police forces for internal security and counterinsurgency purposes" in order to ensure these programs would not be neglected."[83]

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[80] Rosenau, 82.

[81] NSAM 177, "Police Assistance Programs," August 7, 1962. http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam177.htm.

[82] Quoted in Huggins, 106.

[83] McClintock, "American Connection," 54; NSAM 132, "Support of Local Police Forces for Internal Security and Counter-Insurgency Purposes," February 19, 1962, http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam132.jpg.

The Office of Public Safety focused its efforts on training police officers throughout the world including El Salvador, Iran and South Korea.[84] OPS trained personnel for every conceivable role in law enforcement; ranging from traffic control to paramilitary combat operations.[85] The organization aided police in three ways: providing necessary material such as shotguns and riot control gear; offering advanced training to foreign police agencies; and promoting greater links with these forces.[86]

Policemen were often considered as the "first line of defense" against insurgency. As David Bell, the former AID administrator remarked in 1965, "the police are a most sensitive point of contact between government and the people, close to the focal points of unrest, and…better trained and equipped than the military to deal with minor forms of violence, conspiracy and subversion."[87] There were several important justifications behind this reasoning.[88] According to Robert Komer, police were the "ideal prophylactic" against insurgency: the "preventive medicine intended to thwart guerrilla movements in their nascent stage."[89]

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[84] Police are important because they are close to the focal points of unrest and are more acceptable than the military as keepers of order over long periods of time. Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), "The Role of AID in Counterinsurgency" *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: An Anthology* (Washington: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1962), Folder "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency, Leighton Richard M, and Ralph Sanders: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: An Anthology," Box 13, Edward Lansdale Collection.

[85] Blaufarb, 85.

[86] Klare and Arnson, 23.

[87] Klare and Arnson, 17.

[88] Policemen regularly interspersed among the population and thus especially well-placed to detect and neutralize anti-government agencies while they are still small and vulnerable. They are also active in urban areas where conventional anti-guerrilla operations were not always applicable (overwhelming forces creates lots of casualties) and where most of the students, workers and unemployed *pobladores* lived. Klare and Arnson, 18.

[89] Quoted in Roseneau, 80.

However, AID was not the only organization charged with training police. The CIA or Department of Defense could also train troops. The decision depended upon the nature of the threat, the type of force to be assisted and the client country's preferences.[90] If lower visibility was desired, the CIA took up the task. Throughout OPS's history, the CIA was intimately involved with the organization. One of its main tasks was to recruit police agents who could furnish intelligence.[91]

OPS's aim was to establish and maintain law, order and internal security. An additional responsibility was creating a climate conducive to sound economic, social and political development. The program had two goals: prevent the spread of communism and democratic development.[92] As Jeremy Kuzmarov noted, these programs fulfilled a less explicit agenda in securing the power base of local elites amenable to the American interests. As the same author noted, this often backfired politically, breeding anti-American sentiment, resentment and fuelling vicious cycles of violence.[93]

The OPS worked diligently at preventing or controlling rioting or other similar public disturbances. The program provided countries with riot control gear such as tear gas and flak jackets, and non-violent training. AID was concerned about disorderly crowds, unruly demonstrations and other political disorders because "they are prime targets for exploitation by Communist agitators and agents...by instigating or exploiting such an event, the Communists can

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[90] Overseas Internal Defense.

[91] Huggins, 89. A.J. Langguth also noted that police agents often were prime candidates for enrollment as CIA employees. *Hidden Terrors* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[92] ICAF, "Public Safety Program" in *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: An Anthology* (Washington: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1962), Folder "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency, Leighton Richard M, and Ralph Sanders: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: An Anthology," Box 13, Edward Lansdale Collection.

[93] Jeremy Kuzmarov, "Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence and Nation-Building in the 'American Century," *Diplomatic History* 33.2 (April 2009): 191-221, 192.

obtain a political benefit far beyond anything they could achieve with their own frequently limited strength."[94] Equipping soldiers with riot control gear also appeared to be cost effective. One enthusiast noted that "The total cost of a 225 man riot control company, fully equipped with personnel carriers, tear gas, batons, hand arms and a tank car for spraying crowds with indelible dye comes to only $58,000."[95]

By 1968, its peak year, OPS fielded 458 advisers in thirty-four countries, with a budget of $55.1 million. In Latin America, more technicians worked in the program than in sanitation and health.[96] From its inception in November 1962 to its demise in 1975, the program trained some 7,500 senior officers in U.S. facilities, and anywhere from 500,000 to over a million foreign police overseas.[97] In El Salvador between 1957 and its termination in 1974, the United States spent approximately $2.1 million to train 448 Salvadoran police, provide arms, communication equipment, and riot-control gear and transport vehicles.[98]

American training under the OPS was designed to professionalize the nation's security forces. Nevertheless, this type of activity often undermined the very principles which U.S. AID was designed to promote. Throughout the program's existence, both graduates and American personnel were accused of torture. Victims sometimes reported hearing English-speaking

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[94] ICAF, Public Safety Program, 338.

[95] Rabe, "Controlling Revolutions," 118.

[96] Stephen Rabe, "Controlling Revolutions: Latin America, the Alliance for Progress and Cold War Anti-Communism," in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961- 1963*, ed., Thomas G. Paterson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989):105-122, 118.

[97] McClintock, "Instruments," 189.

[98] Cynthia Arnson, "Beefing the Salvadoran Military Forces: Some Components of U.S. Intervention," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed., by Marvin Gettleman, (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 222-3.

voices—American—during the interrogations.[99] Critics have often blamed the American training programs for imparting the various torture techniques used during interrogations. In particular, they have pointed to a 1963 CIA interrogation manual as providing information on how to deal with "resistant sources."[100] As one critic noted, American advisers often gave their students conflicting advice. Some were adamantly opposed to torture, while others were more accepting of the practice.[101]

Civic action was also central to U.S. counterinsurgency policy. This strategy contains economic, military, political and social functions.[102] The main goal of civic action is to build legitimacy between the government and its citizens, by demonstrating that the former cares about the well-being of its populace. Or put another way, civic action seeks to facilitate "an identification of governmental programs with the aspirations of the people."[103] Civic action programs were tested throughout the world, including in Latin America, but also in South Vietnam. Several of the more popular civic action projects included repairing and road building, sanitation and home construction.[104] As the coordinator of both military and economic

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[99] Langguth provides several examples, including in Brazil and Uruguay, pp. 133-145.

[100] The full manual, often referred to as *Kubarak Counterintelligence Interrogation* is available on the National Security Archive's website. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122.

[101] Langguth, 139.

[102] The economic aspect of civic action is aimed at development, especially in rural areas. Military uses of civic action include stationing troops in strategic locations, securing the population and isolating them from the insurgents, and securing vital intelligence. Politically, civic action has been used to improve the government's or military's image with the population, and extending the government's influence into remote areas. Finally, the social aspect of civic action has often focused on health and education.

[103] The Role of AID in Counterinsurgency" 328.

[104] According to the *Counterinsurgency Planning Guide* published by the U.S. Special Warfare School in the 1960s, "the initial priority should be given to select high-impact projects aimed at establishing the credibility of the civic action program. If longer range projects are undertaken, they should be accomplished in stages to permit partial use and allow intermediate evaluation of their effectiveness." See Willard Foster Barber and C. Neale Ronning, *Internal Security and Military Power; Counterinsurgency and Civic Action in Latin America* (Columbus: Ohio State

assistance, AID performed the vital role of managing U.S. economic assistance and civic action projects.[105]

In spite of the benevolent-sounding intentions, historically these projects have been plagued by politically motivated projects stressing quick and short-term results. Decades later, the U.S. experienced similar problems in El Salvador when implementing civic action programs to demonstrate that the Salvadoran government's commitment to improving its citizens' lives. Unfortunately, these issues still confound U.S. development today.[106]

Civic action emphasized a positive and interactive role by a nation's military. In the 1960s, influential social scientists such as Lucian Pye believed that the military were leaders of the modernization process.[107] However, the strategy was also designed to promote a "responsible and non-political military establishment."[108] Unfortunately, civic action implicitly encouraged the military to enter the political arena by linking security to development and allowing this expanded role to permeate into other sectors of society to defeat or forestall insurgencies of any

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University Press, 1966), 184; Development agencies stress long-term projects. Recently, Oxfam International criticized involving the military into development and civic action projects in Afghanistan. According to a report, it has led to a militarization of aid, the targeting of aid workers, and political motivated, not long-term, self-sustaining projects. Oxfam, "Quick Impact, Quick Collapse: the Dangers of Militarized Aid," January 27, 2010, http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org; and also see Oxfam, "Aid Agencies Sound the Alarm of Militarization of Aid in Afghanistan," January 27, 2010, http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressrelease/2010-01-27/aid-agencies-sound-alarm-militarization-aid-afghanistan.

[105] Johnson, 23.

[106] Development agencies stress long-term projects. Recently, Oxfam International criticized involving the military into development and civic action projects in Afghanistan. According to a report, it has led to a militarization of aid, the targeting of aid workers, and political motivated, not long-term, self-sustaining projects. Oxfam, "Quick Impact, Quick Collapse: the Dangers of Militarized Aid," January 27, 2010, http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org; and also see Oxfam, "Aid Agencies Sound the Alarm of Militarization of Aid in Afghanistan," January 27, 2010, http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressrelease/2010-01-27/aid-agencies-sound-alarm-militarization-aid-afghanistan.

[107] Lucian Pye, "Armies in the Process of Political Modernization," in *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries,* ed. John J. Johnson, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1962): 69-91.

[108] Barber and Ronning, 61.

stripe.[109] In a memorandum written by National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, "Kennedy sought to encourage local forces to undertake these types of projects as indispensable means of strengthening their society's economic bases and establishing a link between the army and the populace." Kennedy hoped to include civic action projects in existing and future military assistance programs.[110] In El Salvador, the U.S. and Salvadoran Armed Forces would use civic action to attempt to convince Salvadorans in the countryside that the army and government which had once repressed them, was now their friend.

Finally, U.S. policymakers designed a program known as Community Development to contribute "directly to the development of modern social institutions."[111] Community Development—similar to civic action –focused on linking the government and its citizens together in a closer bond. U.S. policymakers intended the program to be a mechanism for making government responsive to the peoples' needs.[112] As with civic action, though, "self-help" and self-subsistence formed the basic assumptions, which of course are very "American" ideals. "With the people" not "for the people" defined the spirit of the program. Ultimately, village councils ultimately carried the burden and responsibility for choosing the projects and to arrange for the use of resources.[113]

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[109] Rabe, "Most Dangerous Area in the World," 144.

[110] NSAM 119, "Civic Action," December 18, 1961, http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam119.jpg.

[111] ICAF, "Role of U.S. AID in Counterinsurgency," 328.

[112] Overseas Internal Defense.

[113] ICAF, "Role of U.S. AID in Counterinsurgency," 329.

El Salvador under the Alliance for Progress

U.S. COIN efforts in El Salvador did not suddenly begin in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Martha Huggins dates the beginning of the relationship to the 1940s, when the United States began an active role in training the militaries and police forces of Latin America.[114] In 1960, Eisenhower's last year in office, Salvadoran officers received U.S. military training at facilities in the Panama Canal Zone. While Kennedy's OIDP strategy inherited elements from his predecessor, he greatly expanded its size and the government's commitment to it. Within El Salvador, many of the counterinsurgency initiatives launched under Kennedy, save the Alliance for Progress, were retained by his successors.

U.S. military assistance programs in El Salvador, and in Latin American in general, emphasized the threat of internal subversion.[115] Nevertheless, the Salvadoran military also continued to focus on external issues, primarily during the 1960s as tensions with Honduras increased. According to one account, between 1960 and 1971, El Salvador received some $6 million in aid despite the lack of an internal threat.[116] During the 1960s, El Salvador was one of Central America's most stable republics, especially compared to its neighbor Guatemala. No real security concerns posed a risk to its stability. Nevertheless, U.S. military aid and assistance programs not only continued but were greatly expanded. However, by the end of the decade, protests wracked the country. New political organizations developed, and by the beginning of the

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[114] Martha K. Huggins, "U.S. Supported State Terror: a History of Police Training in Latin America," in *the Vigilantism and the State in Modern Latin America: Essays on Extralegal Violence,* ed. Martha K. Huggins (New York et al: Praeger, 1991), 219.

[115] State Department Memorandum for the President, April 28, 1960, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS).

[116] Don L. Etchinson, *The United States and Militarism in Central America* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 95-96.

1970s, several radical groups of students began violently demonstrating and attacking vestiges of the Salvadoran state.

Under the Alliance for Progress, El Salvador was the largest recipient of U.S. aid in Central America. Between 1962 and 1965, the country received $63 million worth of aid.[117] This included but was not limited to radios, jeeps, gas masks, binoculars, gas grenades and ammunition. This funding trained the National Guard, National Police and the Treasury Police, all of which were implicated in serious human rights abuses. More specifically, the program that provided the training was the AID's Public Safety Program. The leader of OPS, Byron Engle, believed that the program improved the capabilities of these organizations.[118] Despite Engle's positive assertion, these units routinely violated human rights in El Salvador before and during the Salvadoran civil war.

American military officers became involved with the Salvadoran military, training not only its military officers in internal defense, but also in collecting and analyzing intelligence. U.S. military aid focused on preventing internal enemies, not just communists, but also those critical of the regime, from gaining power. In El Salvador, as in the rest of Latin America, the term "communist" was a catch-all phrase for anyone opposed to the government, from students, to labor organizers to religious workers. The U.S. military presence not only contributed to the shift in the Salvadoran military's ideological stance on behalf of anticommunist policy with

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[117] Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 173.

[118] Byron Engle to Earl Sears Chief Public Safety Officer, April 13, 1964, Box 59, IPS 1/General/El Salvador Folder, 1956-60, Records of AID, Office of Public Safety Latin American Branch Country File, El Salvador 1956-1972,RG 286, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park (NARA).

international ramifications; it also consolidated a long association between the Pentagon and Salvadoran military's high command.[119]

Arguably, the most notorious Salvadoran unit created during this juncture was *ORDEN* (Spanish acronym for order), a rural paramilitary group founded by Col. José Alberto "Chele" Medrano, responsible for maintaining security in the countryside and fighting communists in El Salvador. Its purpose was to "indoctrinate the peasants regarding the advantages of the democratic system and the disadvantages of the communist system."[120] Its methods of persuasion varied, but when verbal persuasion failed, it had other tactics it could use. The organization was notorious for kidnapping, torturing and killing supposedly subversive *campesinos*. It also recruited among former military members and the old, detested neighborhood patrols.[121]The Green Berets helped Medrano plan the structure and ideology of ORDEN and trained its leaders, including Col. Nicolás Carranza and Domingo Monterrosa, who would go on to play prominent roles in the civil war.[122]

Medrano also created the *Agencia Nacional de Servicios Especiales de El Salvador* (ANSESAL).[123] Its goal was to create a network of informants (*orejas*, or ears) who would provide the regime with information on individuals or activities that were considered threatening

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[119] Philip J. Williams & Knut Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*, (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 52.

[120] Tommy Sue Montgomery, "Fighting Guerrillas: The United States and Low-Intensity Conflict in El Salvador," *New Political Science* 9.1 (Fall/Winter 1990): 21-53, 24.

[121] Laura-Santiago, 97.

[122] Nairn, 23.

[123] Medrano was also on the CIA's payroll and was assassinated by insurgents in March 1985.

or unfavorable to the state.[124] *Las orejas* were part of a larger network of informers that spied on peasants and other individuals with suspect motives or loyalties.[125] Predictably, this arrangement was often used to settle old scores or vendettas. ANSESAL's role was to assess information received from ORDEN and then pass it along to the president, who also made the important decision of how to act upon the intelligence. According to the journalist Allan Nairn, U.S. military operatives provided technical expertise and intelligence advisers to ANSESAL, and also supplied the organization with intelligence and surveillance which was later used against individuals assassinated by "death squads."[126]

Between 1962 and 1965, the 8th Special Forces Group—The Special Action Force for Latin America—deployed 234 Mobile Training Teams (MTT) to seventeen different countries, including El Salvador. During this span, El Salvador received eleven teams, including missions that focused on counterinsurgency; civic action; psychological operations (psyops); engineering; ordinance; forestry; airborne operations; and infantry tactics.[127] This time-span also corresponded with the highest rate of U.S. military advisors deployed to Latin America.

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[124] Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 148.

[125] The FMLN would also make a concentrated effort to attack and kill the informers. This was a policy referred to as *ajusticimientos.* "Documento 40: plan de guerra," July 1980, folder 3, Box 5, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[126] Allan Nairn, "Behind the Death Squads: An Exclusive Report on the U.S. Role in El Salvador's Official Terror," *The Progressive* (May 1984): 20-29, 22.

[127] Andrew Birtle, email correspondence with the author, February 26, 2013. The figures he provided are located in 8th Special Forces Group, Special Action for Latin America, Historical Report, 1965, U.S. Army Center for Military History.

Throughout the mid-1960s, the U.S. had approximately 1,300 military personnel stationed in the region, compared to 800 in 1959.[128]

During President José María Lemus's (1956-1960) reign, El Salvador was considered to be an island of stability. However, the changing political landscape in Latin America—the ousting of Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Fidel Castro's rise to power—inspired a new wave of political mobilization in El Salvador. [129] State Department officials, while consistently noting the small size of the *Partido Comunista de El Salvador* (PCS), also worried about Lemus's efforts to combat communism.[130] In his request for U.S. aid, Lemus played upon the Cuban Revolution and the Domino Theory. As the president of El Salvador remarked to the U.S. ambassador, "Central America is like an exposed hemisphere geological backbone. Break one of the vertebrae, a single country, and the whole hemisphere crumbles politically. Let El Salvador fall to communism and the neighboring countries will be automatic."[131]

After initiating a crackdown at the National University in San Salvador, Lemus was overthrown a replaced by a Civil-Military junta. Subsequently, AID described the Salvadoran government's main "political problem" as the "continuing opposition of many of the liberal intellectuals, professional people, university professors and students."[132] U.S. operatives

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[128] The total cost of training Latin American militaries between 1951 and 1967 was approximately $91 million. Brian Smith, "U.S.-Latin American Military Relations Since WWII," in *Human Rights and Basic Needs in the Americas*, ed by Margaret Crahan, (Washington: Georgetown University School of Language: 1982): 260-300, 269-270.

[129] Joaquín M. Chávez, "The Pedagogy of Revolution: Popular Intellectuals and the Origins of the Salvadoran Insurgency, 1960-1980" (PhD Diss, New York University 2010), 31.

[130] Chavez, "Pedagogy," 39.

[131]Telegram, October 20, 1960, Box 59, IPS 1/General/El Salvador Folder, 1956-60, Records of the Office of Public Safety Latin America Branch Country File, El Salvador 1956-1972RG 286, NARA.

[132] Cited in McClintock, *The American Connection*, 159.

attempted to explore ways in which university students and civilians could cooperate with the military in joint action in social and economic projects in both rural and urban areas.[133] However, despite the suggestions, these groups proposed had no interest in working with the institution that trampled on their prerogatives.

Despite having a more reliable government in power, the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador continued to keep a close watch on the PCS. Embassy officials fretted over the likelihood of exiled leaders carrying out attacks outside of the country, as well as the influence of the Cuban Revolution.[134] In the initial aftermath of the president's removal, the threat from insurgency abated. However, as one official noted "the subversive organizations of Castro/Communist orientation while temporarily handicapped by the exiling of many of their more capable leaders, continue to exist, and they retain a sizeable following."[135] To argue that the tiny PCS—a party that lacked popular support—threatened either the Army or the stability of El Salvador was untrue. However, it would not be the first or the last time an embassy official stretched credulity to the breaking point.

A study conducted by the Department of Defense in 1963 noted the small size of the PCS and the success of the government's vigorous anti-communist campaign.[136] By the end of 1963, the threat posed by communist elements to the government of El Salvador sharply declined.

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[133] Background Paper, "El Salvador Plan of Action from January to December 1964," ND, Box 3, Political Affairs & Rel., Pol. 1 Gen. Policy & background, ES Briefing Material 1963, Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, RG 59, NARA.

[134] McClintock, "American Connection," 199.

[135] Donald P. Downs, telegram, "Recommendations for an Assistance Program to the Public Security Forces of El Salvador," May 19, 1961, Box 59, IPS1/General/El Salvador Folder, 1961, Records of the Office of Public Safety RG 286, NARA.

[136] Department of Defense, "Status of Military Counterinsurgency Programs Part V," September 18, 1963, Archives Unbound.

According to the CIA in 1964, it was "one of the hemisphere's most stable, progressive republics."[137] By the early 1970s, El Salvador had state intelligence repressive capacities that might have seemed beyond any reasonable calculus of need, even considering the possibility of war with its neighbors. Indeed, the state was prepared and predisposed to confront an enemy that did not exist.[138]

Revolutionary Ferment

During the 1970s, the oligarchy-military relationship that governed El Salvador since the 1930s came under increasing fire. From 1932 until 1979, an alliance between the elite and the military governed El Salvador.[139] Tranquility often came at an appalling price. In 1932, the government brutally suppressed a peasant rebellion in the western portion of El Salvador. The resulting massacre, orchestrated by President Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and his security forces, known as *La Matanza*, killed an estimated 10-30,000 Salvadorans.[140] The precise

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[137] Cited in LaFeber, "Inevitable Revolutions," 174.

[138] Aldo Laura-Santiago, "The Culture and Politics of State Terror and Repression in El Salvador," *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror*, edited by Cecilia Menjívar & Néstor Rodriguez (University of Texas Press, 2005), 94.

[139] At determined points, the Salvadoran government allowed brief periods of liberalization. These "openings," which were political and economic, occurred mostly during the 1960s. However as Paul Almeida has noted, these often backfired for the government because it encouraged daring civic organizations to defend their interests and organize. If governments closed these limited openings, they ran the risk of more violent and disruptive forms of political action and arguably violence. Paul Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10. As Tommy Sue Montgomery has noted, this process was often followed by a counter-coup by the military. It was a cycle of consolidation of power by conservatives, growing dissent and repression, a coup d'état by a progressive faction of the army, the reemergence of the conservatives and their re-assumption of control of the government. Montgomery, "Revolution in El Salvador," 57. When protests and violence convulsed El Salvador increasingly in the 1970s, the Salvadoran government responded with the medicine it was most familiar with: repression.

[140] The ultimate number will probably never be known. One of the more popularly cited numbers is 10,000. See Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).The causes and effects of this massacre have been a topic of recent debate. Two scholars in particular have made significant contributions. Jeffrey Gould has questioned several key aspects of the massacre, including that the rebellion was led by the Salvadoran communist party; the ethnic composition of the participants in the massacre and how the Communist party and FMLN subsequently downplayed their ethnic character; and the key role of urban

number will probably never be known. The massacre not only represented a watershed event in modern Salvadoran history, but proved formative in the construction of the ruling elite's ideology.[141]

For the next forty years, an alliance between the rich and prosperous Salvadorans, the oligarchy, and the military dominated El Salvador. The former dominated El Salvador quite thoroughly—the forty families—owning practically all of the arable land in El Salvador and its economy. As a CIA assessment noted, "In no other Latin American country in modern times has executive power been so exclusively an Army preserve. By monopolizing political and military power, supporting the laissez-faire economic policies of the traditional economic elites and employing brutal and repressive measures, the military presided over a system that was outwardly stable and prosperous."[142] William Stanley referred to this relationship as the "protection racket state." In exchange for ruling and allowing its officers to enrich themselves through ownership in companies such as *ANTEL,* the state-owned telecommunications company, the Salvadoran Army protected the oligarchy's power. It was not always a smooth relationship.

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skilled workers. See Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Jeffrey Gould, "Revolutionary Nationalism and Local Memories in El Salvador," in *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History*, ed. Gilbert Joseph (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 138–171. Other scholars have noted how changing political conditions have affected how both the right and left in El Salvador have interpreted the massacre. See Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching and Rafael Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007). For an account of the massacre, see Roque Dalton, *Miguel Mármol* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987.

[141] Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[142] CIA Intelligence Assessment, "El Salvador: The Potential for Violent Revolution," February 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, National Security Archives Online (NSA).

There were often disagreements, especially between the oligarchy and those military officers more oriented towards reform. These tensions boiled over in October 1979.[143]

Throughout this decade, there were several important events that undermined the Salvadoran political and economic system.[144] After the fraudulent presidential election in 1972, El Salvador became increasingly polarized. The country descended into further chaos under the victorious candidate, Armando Molina. His rule radicalized Salvadoran society and sparked the growth of popular organizations.[145] These groups formed the nucleus of a growing insurgency in El Salvador. While in the early 1970s they could have been considered inconsequential, by the end of the decade they represented a growing threat to the prevailing social order in the country. Threats to stability and order also came from the political right as well, despite becoming increasingly fractured. Together, they convulsed the country, leading to a bitter twelve year civil war.

As Salvadoran society unraveled, the Salvadoran left fragmented. The viability and necessity of adopting armed struggle was a major fault line. [146] In 1970, Salvador Cayetano Carpio and his followers split off from the PCS to form the *Fuerzas Populares Libertdad* (FPL) in 1972. Around the same time, a group of students departed from the FPL and formed their own

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[143] William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

[144] There are many excellent secondary sources that document the 1970s and the outbreak of the Salvadoran Civil War. These include Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1982); Tommy Sue Montgomery's *Revolution in El Salvador;* James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982); Bonner's *Weakness and Deceit*.

[145] Baloyra, 64.

[146] After the failure of Che Guevara's Bolivian adventure, the Salvadoran PCS concluded that "we are not, therefore, expressing opposition to armed struggle in order to take power, nor are we even questioning all forms of guerrilla warfare. We only question one form: the guerrilla foco." David E. Spencer, "External Resource Mobilization and Successful Insurgency in Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador, 1959-1992" (PhD, George Washington University, 2002).

organization, the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) founded by Joaquín Villalobos and Rafael Arce Zablah. After the murder of Roque Dalton, a Salvadoran intellectual and one of Latin America's most renowned poets, and intense ideological debates, the ERP further fragmented, leading to the creation of the *Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional* (FARN). Finally, there was the independent *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (PRTC). By the end of the 1970s, there were numerous insurgent groups in El Salvador that had differing aims, strategies and goals.[147] What united them was a common desire to overthrow the existing government and a shared perception of the PCS as a revisionist party that had profoundly deviated from Marxist-Leninist doctrine.[148]

In the United States, the newly elected President Jimmy Carter hoped to restore America's moral position that had been poisoned by the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon's presidency. As president, Carter promised to promote and champion human rights. Yet, his human rights policy was never allowed to overshadow immediate national security concerns.[149]

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[147] These various groups had an armed wing and their own popular organization that interacted with the masses. They recruited members, spread propaganda, organized Salvadorans and represented the legal and open wing of the armed groups. Working with the clandestine guerrillas, these organizations sought to harness popular support to link their struggle with the armed insurgents and overthrow the regime. As the chaos and violence deepened, these groups began actively arming themselves and seeking to achieve power through the gun. The various front groups were the BPR, affiliated with the FPL; *las Ligas Populares de 28 Febrero* (LP-28) associated with the ERP; and *Resistencia Nacional* (RN) the front organization of the FARN. Members of these groups were routinely targeted and many were arrested, tortured or killed by Salvadoran security forces or death squads. As the repression intensified those who escaped the carnage eventually fled to the countryside to take up arms against the government. Later in the civil war, the guerrillas would try to rebuild the networks they had previously established.

[148] Chavez, "Pedagogy," 266.

[149] Carter did not push the issue of human rights with key U.S. allies such as South Korea, Iran and the Philippines. William LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," *International Security* 6.1 (Summer 1981): 27-52, 28.

***Tiempos de Locura*[150]**

U.S. interest in El Salvador dramatically increased after the overthrow of President Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July 1979. After the deposition of Iran's Shah, Somoza was the second strategically vital U.S. ally toppled that year. Some officials in Washington were concerned that Somoza's overthrow was going to set off similar revolutions throughout the hemisphere. That same month, the American Embassy in El Salvador concluded that "if confronted with a Nicaragua-type situation the El Salvadoran military establishment could easily collapse in four to six weeks." However, Ambassador Frank Devine called for this assessment to be reevaluated.[151] Recognizing the gravity of the situation, U.S. policymakers developed a series of contingency plans. According to one of the options, should the general [Carlos Humberto Romero] step down and transfer power to a transitional government, the United States would "firmly come to the support" of El Salvador, providing the government with military aid and technical assistance to help the Salvadoran army "to better cope with the guerrillas." As the contingency plan noted, "this might require U.S. advice for counterinsurgency."[152]

Within El Salvador, Somoza's overthrow had a profound effect on many Salvadoran army officers, many of whom could envision the same fate befalling them. The Nicaraguan revolution, more than any other single event, galvanized the feeling of a group of young

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[150] This name is derived from the title of Rafael Menjívar Ochoa's *Tiempos de Locura, El Salvador 1979-1981* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2006).

[151] Devine noted that after 1977, the U.S. had poor contact with the Salvadoran military. Consequently, there was distrust between U.S. advisers and their Salvadoran counterparts. The situation was most likely considered to be poor. In the same cable, representatives from SOUTHCOM noted that inspections of the Salvadoran military produced "alarming results," but it did not elaborate. See Telegram, Devine to Secretary of State, December 11, 1979, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.A cable on December 13, 1979 from Devine to the Secretary of State discussing the military and political situation in El Salvador and possible U.S. aid remains classified.

[152] Memorandum from Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 10/13/1979, CREST Files, NLC-132-78-1-2-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

reformist military officers that there was a need for change.[153] This group, the *Juventud Militar,* wanting to avoid a repetition of Nicaragua and the fate that befell that country, decided to depose General Carlos Humberto Romero in October 1979.

The coup deepened American involvement in El Salvador. According to Raymond Bonner, between the end of World War II and 1979, U.S. military assistance to El Salvador totaled approximately $16.7 million. Economic aid for the same period equaled $199 million.[154] By the end of Reagan's first administration, these amounts doubled, as well as U.S. interest in the country.

After General Romero went into exile, he was replaced by the Revolutionary Junta Government (JRG). The first junta included three civilians and two colonels. There were strong internal contradictions within the group, which eventually became untenable. Even before Romero was ousted, Ambassador Devine noted that the Salvadoran military had expressed its "reluctance and even repugnance at the prospect that a civilian president might well appoint a civilian as Minister of Defense to rule over their professional destinies."[155] As Philip Williams and Knut Walter noted, while reformist military officers were willing to enter into an alliance with different social and political forces, their overriding concern was the state and the military's core interests. Most importantly, they were not willing to contemplate or countenance civilian control over the military.[156]

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[153] Montgomery, "Revolution: Origins and Evolution," 10.

[154] Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 11.

[155] Telegram from Ambassador Devine to Secretary of State, September 11, 1979, El Salvador Online Collections, National Security Archives Online (NSA).

[156] Williams and Walter, 110.

After recognizing the JRG, government officials debated U.S. policy toward the new regime. Ambassador Devine argued that the new Salvadoran regime represented the last chance "of staving off a takeover by the extreme left."[157] While concerned about the insurgents and their allies, Washington also fretted about the possibility of a rightist coup. From an American policy standpoint, the immediate problem in El Salvador was the inability of the Christian Democrats and reformist military officers to reach an agreement on a new cabinet or the direction of the new government.[158] In spite of these issues, the Carter administration moved quickly toward supporting the junta and preventing the dominoes from tumbling in El Salvador.

For the remainder of Carter's presidency, American political objectives in El Salvador consisted of bolstering the JRG and preventing its collapse. Washington supported the creation of a democratic government committed to the promotion of human rights. The actors considered most likely to topple the junta were hardline military officers and their allies in the oligarchy and the Left. The U.S. was keen to prevent a right-wing coup led by elements hostile to U.S. interests and thwarting their attempts to derail important reforms.[159] The latter, which will be discussed below, were backed by Washington to steal the thunder from Salvadoran groups that demanded changes to the country's socioeconomic structure and to create support for the JRG. In order to divide and weaken El Salvador's left, one Carter official called for opening a dialogue with key Salvadoran actors such the Archbishop of El Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero, in hopes of

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[157] Telegram from Ambassador Devine to Secretary of State, October 24, 1979, El Salvador Online Collections, National Security Archives Online (NSA).

[158] Memo from Zbigniew Brezinski to President Carter, January 20, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, National Security Archives Online (NSA).

[159] Letter from Warren Christopher to Jose Zalaquett, August 8, 1980, folder "El Salvador-General 06/04/1981, box 4, Edwin Meese Collection, Ronald Reagan Library.

convincing them to cease cooperating with supposed extremist elements and support the JRG.[160] In order for these goals to succeed, American aid was essential. [161]

U.S. military strategy attempted a rather delicate balancing act: providing military aid and training to a repressive force, while improving their professionalization. A key component of this strategy was reining in and marginalizing the extremist elements responsible for human rights abuses. American military aid was designed to reform the Salvadoran military so that it could wage a "clean counterinsurgency" to defeat the insurgents.[162] This strategy was predicated on tying aid to improvement in their professionalism and the marginalization of officers implicated in human rights abuses and hardliners.

Security assistance for El Salvador was intended to assist the government in implementing its reform programs and to halt the violence. Under the first incarnation of the JRG, the U.S. packaged a deal including MTTs and $4.3 million of FMS credit. However, the Salvadoran junta collapsed in January 1980 before it approved the arrangement.[163] As the slaughter within El Salvador escalated, U.S. officials attempted to justify continued American support. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's hawkish National Security Advisor, played up Cuban involvement in the insurgency. According to a memorandum written by Brzezinski, U.S. military assistance is "our response to Cuban and other external involvement," and "it represents

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[160] Memorandum from Robert Pastor to Zbignew Brzezinski, 2/15/1980, CREST Files, NLC-24-65-9-1-4, Jimmy Carter Library.

[161] Memo, "Talking Points for Use with Congress," ND, Box 42, El Salvador II Document Collection: Part 21G: US Aid to El Salvador 1979 to 1981, El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

[162] LaFeber, 249.

[163] Telegram from Warren Christopher, 02/05/1980, CREST Files, NLC-16-120-3-26-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

our support for the reformist goals of the new government."[164] While the U.S. provided the lion's share of weapons, it also looked to other countries such as Argentina, Colombia and Italy to fill the void. [165]

The Salvadoran government also preferred for U.S. assistance to be part of a multi-lateral effort. The JRG was keen to minimize any possible public perception that it was especially beholden to the U.S. for military aid, lest it become a political liability and "a battle cry of the extreme left."[166] Robert Pastor, National Security Council advisor for Latin America, agreed, arguing that "one of the biggest problems that the junta had to wrestle with is that it is perceived as a U.S. creation without any political base of its own. In short, we have the right approach to the problem, and it would be a mistake to abandon it when it is working."[167]

On March 3, 1980 the head of the second junta resigned, plunging the country into another crisis. Several days later, on March 9, José Napoleón Duarte, former mayor of San Salvador and leader of the PDC, returned to El Salvador and assumed control of the government. This new governing coalition attempted to make radical reforms to Salvadoran society and also to prevent further violence against civilians, by outlawing ORDEN and ANSESAL.

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[164] Memo from Zbigniew Brezinski to President Carter, "January 20, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA. In the memorandum, Brezinski mentioned that the Department of Defense also planned on speaking to the Italians about supplying helicopters to the Salvadoran government.

[165] Devine questioned whether this type this kind of scale and assistance would be enough to stem the tide against El Salvador's "military extremist left." Frank Devine, Telegram, February 1980, Box 42, Part 21C (Folder Name?), El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

[166] The various countries would perform different tasks. The Salvadoran government wanted the Colombians to send experts in guerrilla warfare; the Spanish were asked to provide training to the National Guard; and the U.S. was supposed to help with surveillance and interception, and provide equipment and civic action techniques to the military. Oddly, the West German role was not discussed. Memo from Robert Pastor to Brzezinski, 02/21/1980, CREST Files, NLC-24-20-11-4-7, Jimmy Carter Library.

[167] Zbigniew Brzezinski to David Aaron and Les Denend, 10/30/1980, CREST Files, NLC-17-141-6-5-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

Unfortunately, the junta presided over continued bloodshed. These organizations were simply disbanded and reorganized under Roberto D'Aubuisson, a former colonel in the Salvadoran Army, whose name was linked to various death squad abuses.[168]

U.S. policy moved quickly to support the reformed junta under Duarte. In a telegram to the American Embassy in El Salvador, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance outlined U.S. policy toward the Salvadoran government. The U.S. continued to support the implementation of reform efforts while ending the repression by the armed forces, particularly from the security forces, "which are the greatest offenders," and broadening the JRG's base of support. The U.S. also hoped that the PDC and moderate political elements would be able to establish a working connection with the political left before violence further radicalized them.[169]

Realizing the seriousness of the issue and the need to change it, the Salvadorans attempted to redress the issue by themselves. Tentative steps were taken by the first JRG, but its implementation would have to wait until the second incarnation. On March 6, 1980 the JRG promulgated agrarian reform in a program that was supported and encouraged by the Carter administration. In the words of Colonel Adolfo Majano Ramos, the leading progressive military officer in the junta,

> The law will take the land out of a few hands and give it to many…allowing the people to create their own destiny. Owners would receive compensation with cash and long-term government bonds which they will use as collateral for bank loans allowing them to switch investment from the agricultural to industrial sector… We're doing away with the hacienda land system in El Salvador. Up till now, the masses of people have lived on the

[168] Mazzei, 170.

[169] Cyrus Vance, Telegram, March 16, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

> marginal edge of the nation's economy. We're going to take the land away from the very few and give it to the many so they can control their own destiny.[170]

In El Salvador, the ownership of land was one of the most unequal in all of Latin America. The country had both the highest ratio of landless families out of the total population of any country in Latin America and the highest ratio of tenant farmers to total population.[171] Although the Carter Administration had given the land reform its blessing, several officials, especially Ambassador Muskie, were concerned about its implementation.[172] Carrying out land reform was essential to restructuring the exploitative social structure that fueled the Salvadoran insurgency.

The oligarchy did not respond favorably to the agrarian reform. Many among these privileged ranks viewed it as a threat to their livelihood. Some members opted for exile in Honduras or Miami, where they pursued their opposition to the land reform, including the formation of death squads.[173] The existence of these death squads and their connection to these affluent expatriates was open knowledge to officials in Washington, who dubbed the exiled members of the Oligarchy as the "Miami Six."[174] Others openly resorted to violence. On January 4, 1981, two Americans, Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, along with the head of the *Unión Communal Salvadoreña* (UCS) Rodolfo Viera, were murdered at the Sheraton Hotel in San

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[170] "Choice Land is Grabbed by El Salvador: Government Imposes Form of Martial Law, *Miami Herald,* March 7, 1980.

[171] Roy L. Prosterman, Jeffrey M. Riedinger, and Mary N. Temple, "Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis," *International Security* 6.1 (Summer 1981), 59-60.

[172] The telegram also noted that the JRG was "dealing with a two-edged sword" that could alienate both the military and the moderate left if it was delayed. "JRG Appears Ready for First Steps in Agrarian Reform," November 28, 1979, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[173] Robert White mentioned their existence in number of Congressional Hearings, See t*he Situation in El Salvador*, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, March 18 & April 9, 1981 (Washington: U.S. GPO, 1981).

[174] Telegram, Millionaires' Murder Inc," January 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Salvador. Viera, like many others who met their ends at the hands of death squads, had been publicly threatened prior to his assassination. The land reform workers' murders were most likely a calculated political statement, especially since it was carried out by members of the National Guard who had ties to Hans Christ, a prominent Salvadoran businessman.[175] Pearlman, who had an "obsession" with distributing land, had been involved in land reform efforts in El Salvador dating back to 1966.[176] According to Philip Agee, a former CIA operative, as well as Wade H. McCree, U.S. solicitor general, Pearlman was actually a covert CIA agent.[177]

Almost as soon as the reforms were decreed, peasants began to be evicted by their disgruntled landlords. The number of evictees is hotly disputed. The UCS claims it was as high as 9,000, while the Salvadoran National Financial Institute for Agricultural Lands (FINATA) claims it was significantly less at around 3,822.[178] Violence would continue to plague agrarian reform throughout the course of the Salvadoran civil war. Both government forces and the FMLN attacked vestiges of the program. However, most sources, including the AIFLD, attributed most of the violence to Salvadoran government forces.[179]

After Duarte's return, Carter replaced Frank Devine with Robert White, who presented his credentials as ambassador on March 11. The new ambassador was not afraid to speak his mind, a trait which ultimately cost him his position. While openly critical of the right wing,

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[175] United Nations, "From Madness to Hope."

[176] Mike Sager, "Slain U.S. Adviser had an 'Obsession' to Distribute Land," *Washington Post*, Jan 5, 1981.

[177] Philip Agee confirms this in his book, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary,* as well as Michael Sussman, *AIFLD: U.S. Trojan Horse in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Epica, 1983).

[178] Shirley Christian, "Salvadorans Battle Erosion of Land Reform," *Miami Herald,* July 13, 1982.

[179] Richard V. Culahan, Memo to William C. Doherty, "Violence Against Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries and Workers Pertaining to Real Properties," November 12, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

oligarchy and the insurgents, White supported the JRG as the best available option. In a cable from the American Embassy in San Salvador, White announced his support for the regime but argued that U.S. policy should be realistic. Referring to the PDC, he labeled it "a truncated version of the European species whose leaders have been out of touch with the people for many years and who cannot make the proper political moves because they lack the power to end officially sponsored, encouraged or tolerated violence."[180] The primary institution inhibiting the JRG's power was the Salvadoran army, which would continually frustrate U.S. initiatives in the future.

The Carter administration also considered using American military trainers in El Salvador to accomplish U.S. security goals. U.S. policymakers debated sending a variety of MTTs, including teams specializing in helicopter repair and training, guerrilla warfare and civic action. These units were deployed to train the Salvadoran Army, not the other security forces. According to one supporter, this would help the U.S. strengthen the hands of the Salvadorans trying to curb the repression. There was another reason as well; to make it clear to both the military officers within the JRG and the extreme right that the "purpose is to train the army to deal with extremists on both sides by 'using the minimum lethal force.'"[181] Using a divide-and-conquer strategy, the MTTs would "wean" the moderate elements in the military away from the oligarchy.[182] It was the hope and belief of more than one American operative that providing military training would afford the U.S. greater leverage over the Salvadoran military by tying

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[180] Robert White, Telegram, March 1980, Box 42, Part 21 C, El Salvador Human Rights Collection, RG 59, NARA.

[181] Memo from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 03/13/1980, CREST Files, NLC-17-39-1-1, Jimmy Carter Library.

[182] Telegram from David Aaron to Robert White, 01/01/1981, CREST Files, NLC-16-128-4-11-7, Jimmy Carter Library.

American aid to improvements in human rights. Officials within the PDC concurred. As one U.S. policymaker noted, the PDC viewed the MTTs as a way of demonstrating American support for reforms and as a means to increase their leverage (through the U.S.) over the military.[183] It was not a unique formula; Carter's successor followed a similar strategy.

Not everyone in Carter's administration embraced this policy. Several officials believed that it would harm American prestige and interests by being associated with such an unpopular actor in Salvadoran society. Ambassador White believed that the "MTTs will be interpreted by all sectors [Salvadoran] as support for the armed forces as currently constituted and as approval for the campaign of repression."[184] Ambassador William Bowdler also expressed his skepticism by observing that "we deceive ourselves if we think that we will save the situation by putting these MTTs in." Should the U.S. decide to proceed and the Salvadoran military continue the same tactics, the U.S. would find itself "in a position of receiving the blame for what they're doing."[185]

The deployment of American military trainers was a sensitive issue within the Salvadoran government. The JRG insisted that the MTTs be packaged as a multi-national effort. U.S. officials attempted to convince Venezuela to send a team to train the Salvadorans along with American troops. The Venezuelans agreed in principle, as long as the U.S. referred to the MTTs "as groups of technicians seeking to study in-depth the requirements of the Salvadoran military

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[183] Telegram from David Aaron to Robert White, 01/01/1981, CREST Files, NLC-16-128-4-11-7, Jimmy Carter Library.

[184] One of the civilians on the junta, José Morales Erlich, told Ambassador White that he was opposed to them. Telegram from Ambassador Robert, 08/14/1980, CREST Files, NLC-16-123-4-20-2, Jimmy Carter Library.

[185] Robert Pastor to Brzezinski, 12/21/1980, CREST Files, NLC-17-44-8-5-2, Jimmy Carter Library.

in the fields of communications and transport."[186] In early March 1980, a team was delayed until international support increased.[187] Subsequently, Secretary of State Vance suggested training Salvadorans out of country.[188] However, MTTs were also postponed because of human rights violations and spiraling violence, a move that greatly annoyed the Pentagon.[189]

While the Carter Administration debated supplying weapons to the Salvadoran junta, several actors within El Salvador argued against it, including a former member of the JRG, Hector Dada Hirezi, and Archbishop Romero. Dada Hirezi, a member of the second junta who resigned in March 1980, complained that sending U.S. advisers would cause further violence, not prevent it. Dada also argued that adding additional U.S. "counterinsurgency advisers" would lead to another dirty war.[190] In February 1980, Archbishop Romero composed a letter to President Carter. Romero argued that providing weapons to the regime instead of "promoting greater peace and justice in El Salvador, would undoubtedly serve to make more acute the injustices and repression against those groups who have often strived to obtain respect for their fundamental rights."[191]

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[186] Memorandum from Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 02/14/1980, CREST Files, NLC-24-65-9-1-4, Jimmy Carter Library.

[187] National Security Files, Brzezinski Office Files, Memorandum from Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 03/10/1980, "El Salvador 3-10/1980" folder, Box 11 Egypt 12/78—Ethiopia, Jimmy Carter Library.

[188] Cyrus Vance, Telegram, March 16, 1980, ibid.

[189] In a memo from Pastor to Brzezinski, Pastor noted that "if we do not get a firm decision on the MTTs, we may face a mutiny across the river. At the moment, DOD and JCS are confused and uncertain" about their delay. Zbigniew Brzezinski to David Aaron and Les Denend, 10/03/1980, CREST Files, NLC-17-141-6-5-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

[190] "Hector Dada Press Conference, March 17, 1980."

[191] Archbishop Romero to President Carter, February 17, 1980, Box 42, Part 21 C, El Salvador Human Rights Collection, NARA.

Secretary of State Vance wrote the response to Romero's letter. As Vance declared in his letter, the Carter administration saw the JRG as offering the "best prospect for peaceful change toward a more just society" and declared that the bulk of the aid was economic. The secretary of state also promised that if any of the aid was used to repress human rights, the United States would reassess the situation, implying the termination of American aid.[192]

Arguably, it was the Archbishop's murder which marked the beginning of El Salvador's civil war in earnest. On March 24, 1980, a few weeks after the launch of agrarian reform, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while performing mass. His murderers were linked to D'Aubuisson. In a country already increasingly polarized, the archbishop's murder pushed El Salvador past the breaking point. While the death squads and military had attacked, harassed and murdered priests in the past, Romero's death marked a departure, plunging the country into further chaos.

Romero's death did not alter U.S. policy toward El Salvador. American aid continued to flow. This was despite growing concern in the U.S. over American support for a government that was incapable of keeping the violence within its borders in check. In June, Ambassador White outlined the justifications for supporting the regime:

> The U.S. main interest is in fostering the creation of a stable, progressive, popularly supported, democratic government, capable of finding peaceful solutions to the social and economic problems that have troubled this country for decades, thereby introducing domestic stability which in turn will contribute substantially to the peace and stability of the whole region. The security assistance program is intended to remove major obstacles

[192] Cyrus Vance to Archbishop Romero, March 11, 1980, Box 42, Part 21 C, El Salvador Human Rights Collection, NARA.

> standing in the way of that interest, principally domestic terrorism and subversion from asked, both left and right with assistance from abroad.[193]

Worrisome to many in Carter's administration was the inclusion of six UH-1H helicopters. Ambassador White was instructed to use both the helicopters and the accompanying MTT as inducements to persuade the Salvadoran military to end right-wing violence and halt the "excessive use of the armed forces."[194]

In August 1980, the U.S. provided El Salvador with $6 million in credits for the purchase of basic transportation, communications and riot control equipment. The last item had been rejected the year before due to the deteriorating human rights situation.[195] White's predecessor argued that American riot-control training had allowed the Salvadoran government to deal effectively with demonstrations and occupations of factories and farms without "resorting to their traditional method of maximum force with guns and bullets."[196] The purpose was to improve the security forces' capacity to properly prevent a take-over by rightist elements or the insurgents. As Warren Christopher noted, the administration would not continue assisting the

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[193] Telegram, Annual Security Assistance Assessment- El Salvador," June 2, 1980, Box 42, Part 21D U.S. Aid to ES 1979-1981, El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

[194] According to White instructions, he was to inform the JRG that the U.S. was prepared to lease the helicopters on the understanding that they would take specific measures to reduce and bring under control the violence participated in by the military. As evidence of good faith, the U.S. would begin training Salvadoran pilots as soon as they could be identified. And provided the Salvadoran military followed through, the helicopters would be delivered as soon as the training was completed. At the bottom of the memo, Carter asked "what kind of measures?" By whom and how can they be trusted and assured?" Memorandum from Warren Christopher to President Carter, 06/28/1980, CREST Files, NLC-15-11-6-44-9, Jimmy Carter Library.

[195] Report, 07/19/1979, CREST Files, NLC-20-25-1-1-0, Jimmy Carter Library. Between September 1978 and August 1979, the U.S. had turned down requests for pistols and revolvers, ammunition, tear gas, CH-47 helicopters and night vision goggles. Report: "A Selective and Representative List of Conventional Arms Transfer Cases which were Turned Down or Turn off for Policy Reasons from September 1, 1978 through August 31, 1979," ND, CREST Files, NLC-15-49-2-12-7, Jimmy Carter Library. However, in October 1979, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance authorized the American ambassador to provide El Salvador with tear gas and other related, non-lethal material. Memorandum from Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 11/08/1979, CREST Files, NLC-128-14-13-6-4, Jimmy Carter Library.

[196] Telegram, February 12, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

country if it used American aid for repressive purposes.[197] Christopher also argued that American aid could increase the professionalization of the Salvadoran military and "enhance orders not to abuse human rights."[198]

As El Salvador moved toward civil war, the various insurgent groups continued to bicker.[199] Uniting the disparate guerrilla factions proved troubling. While the groups quarreled, Castro pledged to withhold his support if they could not put aside their differences and form a unified front.[200] In October 1980, with Castro's patronage, the disparate insurgent organizations combined, forming the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). This façade of unity masked deep ideological and strategic divides that separated the various factions. Nevertheless, the FMLN proved a formidable enemy.

Ronald Reagan, the former actor and governor of California, election as U.S. president in the election of 1980 was hailed by Salvadoran conservatives. Reportedly, they widely rejoiced by firing off their automatic rifles.[201] Some of those who celebrated Reagan's victory in El Salvador expected him to drop human rights and unleash a new round of violence and brutality.[202] As one diplomat recalled, they "felt somehow vindicated by Reagan's victory" and

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[197] Letter from Warren Christopher to Jose Zalaquett, August 8, 1980, folder "El Salvador-General 06/04/1981, box 4, Edwin Meese Collection, Ronald Reagan Library.

[198] Ibid.

[199] Nevertheless, the DRU proclaimed in September 1980 that the people's struggle was nearing an end. According to the DRU, the insurgents had made numerable achievements, especially regarding military strategy. See DRU, Comunicado de la Dirección Revolucionaria Unificada al Pueblo Salvadoreño, Septiembre 1, 1980, CEDEMA, http://www.cedema.org/index.php?ver=mostrar&pais=19&nombrepais=Elpercent20Salvador.

[200] Spencer "External Resource Mobilization," 252.

[201] Alan L. McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2006), 86.

[202] John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 154.

"that we've held out against these pious, idealistic human rights policies of Carter. Now we can get down to some serious killing."[203] As William LeoGrande noted, for the wealthy Salvadorans, "their way of life was under attack, their wealth and privilege at stake…Nicaragua stood before them as a terrifying example of what could happen…The United States stood idly by, doing nothing to save its oldest friend in the region."[204]

The continuing chaos led the Carter administration to approve further military aid. Among the aid items to be distributed were tear gas, gas masks, bullet proof vests, riot helmets, jeeps and six UH1H helicopters. Ambassador Robert White recommended allowing Washington to supply helicopters to the beleaguered country for economic, political and military reasons. While noting that the government had not complied with the administration's demands to curb violence and the role of the security forces it provoking it, White believed the U.S. should send six helicopters to El Salvador as soon as possible.[205]

The murder of six leaders from the *Frente Democrático Revolucionario* (FDR) on November 27, 1980 prompted several American policymakers to reconsider their support for the Salvadoran military. The approval subsequently expressed by several high-ranking Salvadoran officers further tested their patience. Many of them viewed the killing as a positive act and believed that the leaders "got what they deserved" for being "useful fools" for the "terrorists."

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[203] Quoted in Bonner, 212.

[204] Leogrande, In our Own Backyard, 57.

[205] Ambassador White favored the release of the helicopters on humanitarian, economic and military reasons. The helicopters could be used to gather harvests, assist with evacuating wounded civilians and evacuees, and transporting troops to inaccessible regions. At the same time, the ambassador before granting the request hoped to use the aid to force improvements in human rights and bring the left and military to the negotiating table to achieve a negotiated settlement. Robert White, "Helicopters: Assessment and Recommendation," November 27, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Moreover, these same individuals believed that other leftist leaders should be handled in the same way. [206] A position paper written in early December laid out several options for the Carter administration, including suspending all FMS security assistance and sales, excluding lethal equipment from any further aid packages or simply fulfilling all existing obligations.[207]

In response to the brazen murders, the Carter administration instructed Ambassador White to delay the delivery of the helicopters. Warren Christopher, Patricia Derian, the Assistant Secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, and Ambassador White all considered this response insufficient. Derian argued that U.S. policy had failed because it had pursued two irreconcilable goals. "On the one hand we have sought to maintain the institutional integrity of the armed forces irrespective of their conduct." The U.S. had also attempted to strengthen the "moderates within and without the JRG and so assist the JRG to extend its control over the armed forces." As Derian noted, these "two goals, because they are inconsistent" had failed. Consequently, the military was controlled by elements hostile to U.S. interests.[208] Christopher, Derian and Ambassador White argued that not only should military aid be suspended, but military training as well. They also viewed this as an opportunity to promote U.S. goals in the country by using the event to pressure the JRG to reform the military.[209]

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[206] Unknown Document, "Satisfaction of Many Military Officers with Assassination of Leaders of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR): Belief that the Same Tactics should be Used to Eliminate Other Leftist Leaders," December 1, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[207] Series of Position Papers on Foreign Military Sales and International Military Education Training to El Salvador; Options and Pros and Cons for Suspension of Assistance, December 1, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[208] Memorandum from Patricia Derian to Secretary of State, December 4, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[209] Telegram from Christopher to Bowdler, November 29, 1980. El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Events only further deteriorated. Weeks before Reagan's inauguration, on December 4, 1980 the bodies of four American churchwomen were exhumed outside of San Salvador. The women had been arrested, raped and killed by members of the Salvadoran National Guard for being alleged subversives.[210] In response to the death of the churchwomen, the Carter Administration suspended aid to El Salvador on December 4, 1980. Less than two weeks later, another event led the White House and U.S. policymakers to reconsider the ban.

The CIA noted in a memorandum, published in the first week of 1981, that while the armed forces and Salvadoran guerrillas were both weak, the latter were clearly ascendant. The report argued that extensive aid was essential for the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) survival. It was clear who had to step in: the United States. A more immediate concern was the ominous signs that the guerrillas were going to launch a new offensive later in the month.[211] The intelligence proved fairly accurate, although the offensive came quicker than anticipated.

On January 10, 1981, the FMLN launched its "Final Offensive." The offensive aimed at both toppling the existing junta and presenting the Reagan administration with a *fait accompli*. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the insurgents believed that the Reagan administration would pursue a more active policy, threatening their goals and

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[210] This claim was not held just by the Salvadoran military; UN ambassador designate Jeanne Kirkpatrick, suggested that the deceased were not nuns, but FMLN political activists. Secretary of State Alexander Haig infamously called them "pistol packing nuns" and suggested that the vehicle they were in may have run a roadblock. LaFeber, 277. A State Department spokesman later responded in a letter to William Ford, brother of one of the slain churchwomen, that Haig's remarks had been "misinterpreted" and that his suggestion that the attempt to run a roadblock was "only one theory and not a fact." Bonner, 76.

[211] CIA Memorandum, "El Salvador: Military Prospects," January 2, 1981, DDRS. The same report also argued that the interruption and release of military and economic aid sent different signals to different elements of the military. It noted withholding aid may encourage but will not restrain the Right. In fact, the document said it might embolden the right to stage a coup.

plans.[212] As guerrilla commander Fermán Cienfuegos declared, "The situation in El Salvador will be red hot by the time Mr. Reagan arrives. I think Mr. Reagan will find an irreversible situation in El Salvador by the time he reaches the presidency."[213] The FMLN was emboldened by the recent Sandinista success and also because the Salvadoran army was weak and divided.[214] Prior to the offensive, approximately 1000 Salvadorans went to Cuba and an undetermined amount received training in Nicaragua.[215] They also believed the timing was right. The offensive featured three separate elements: military, infiltration of the armed forces and a general strike.[216] It was a formula the FMLN would try again, in 1989, with slightly better results. In its call to arms, the FMLN called upon all supporters to

> rise up as one man with all the means of combat, under the orders of their immediate leaders, in all the war fronts and throughout the length and breadth of the national territory, to fight valiantly for the definitive overthrow of the regime of repression and genocide of the criolla oligarchy and imperialism.[217]

When the Final Offensive began, the Salvadoran security forces, despite being weak and poorly trained, successfully anticipated the attack. Within a week, the offensive had faltered and the rebels were forced to retreat back to the countryside. There were two major issues within the

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[212] This assessment also argued that the offensive was launched because the government had strengthened its political bases and increasing pressure from the Salvadoran armed forces, which most secondary sources disagree with. Memo to Brzezinski, 01/09/1981, CREST Files, NLC-1-18-3-20-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

[213] Quoted in Leogrande, "Our Own Backyard," 68; Bonner 223-224.

[214] One of the leading commandantes in the FMLN, Cayetano Carpio, was opposed to launching the final offensive. A proponent of prolonged people's war, Carpio insisted the timing was not yet right, nevertheless, he acquiesced. Brian J. Bosch, *The Salvadoran Officer Corps and the Final Offensive of 1981* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 1999), 75.

[215] The estimation of the number of Salvadorans comes from a rebel defector. See Spencer "External Resource Mobilization,"260.

[216]José Moroni Bracamonte & David E. Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995), 17-19.

[217] "El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory: A Call by the General Command of the FMLN to Initiate the General Offensive" box 43, Part 21H: U.S. Aid to El Salvador, 1979-1981, El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

FMLN: despite being unified, the groups were not completely in sync together and they lacked the proper military capacity to take power, including arms and ammunition.[218] Despite suffering a setback, one FPL insurgent noted that the offensive had provided the first-hand battle experience to FMLN troops that attacking isolated Army guard outposts could not.[219]

According to an internal study, "The FMLN recognizes that, except for the attack on the central base of the air force, it did not manage to strike the forceful military blows in the capital that were needed to sustain the full development of the strike" and ignite a popular insurrection. The FMLN also justified its withdrawal not as a defeat, but as part of its strategy.[220] In a private interview with one senior FMLN commandante, the official noted that "if the enemy had been well prepared, efficient and coordinated, we would have been annihilated."[221]

Following the Final Offensive, Carter's advisers pressed for immediate resumption of aid to the increasingly embattled JRG. According to Brzezinski, most people within the administration and government supported restoring aid "except State." Supporters claimed that it was in the U.S. national interest to support the JRG, arguing that failure to resume military assistance could weaken and unravel the government.[222] Carter's National Security Advisor, eying long-term ramifications and the administration's legacy, justified the resumption of aid because:

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[218] Jenny Pearce, *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango, El Salvador* (London : Latin America Bureau, 1986), 193.

[219] Spencer, "Resource Mobilization,"265.

[220] "El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory."

[221] Quoted in Montgomery, "Revolution in El Salvador," 139.

[222] Memo from Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 01/14/1981, CREST Files, NLC 15-99-1-4-2, Jimmy Carter Library.

> …it would be extremely damaging not only to our national interest but to the historical record of this administration to leave office unwilling to take the hard decision to provide lethal assistance to an essentially middle of the road government, beleaguered by revolutionaries almost openly assisted by the Cubans via Nicaragua.[223]

Ambassador White agreed, stating that in "having to choose between guerrilla terrorists of the far left and a badly flawed but decent government working to control rightist excesses, the people have definitely turned their backs on the far left and refused it any active encouragement."[224] Edmund Muskie, Vance's replacement as Secretary of State, also defended the decision to restore "modest military assistance" to El Salvador based on the progress made in the churchwomen murders and the military situation.[225] To further justify this course of action, the administration noted that for the previous fifteen months the U.S. had responded to Salvadoran requests by dispatching non-lethal aid. However, the Final Offensive changed the calculus.[226] According to one unidentified State Department official, the decision was based on "substantive merits." As the official explained,

> …the guerrillas and their external supporters were taking advantage of our forbearance and were moving fast, so as to be one step ahead of the new administration. We would have appeared naïve at best had we not reversed our policy prior to the Reagan inauguration. This was among other things, a test of our own professionalism.[227]

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[223] Memo from Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 01/14/1981, CREST Files, NLC 15-99-1-4-2, Jimmy Carter Library.

[224] Telegram, "Resupply of Salvadoran Armed Forces," January 11, 1981, box 43, 21H: U.S. Aid to El Salvador, 1979-1981," El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

[225] Cable, Muskie to All American Republic Diplomatic Posts, January 14, 1981, folder "AT-El Salvador, 01/01/1981-01/17/1981," box 1, Roger Lilac Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[226] "Justification for the President in Determination to Authorize the Furnishing of Immediate Military Assistance to El Salvador," January 1981, box 43, 21H: U.S. Aid to El Salvador, 1979-1981," El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

[227] Quoted in W. Scott Thompson, "Choosing to Win" in El Salvador: The Current Danger, *Foreign Policy* 43(Summer 1981): 78-83, 78. Thompson who at the time of this article was also an ardent supporter of Reagan's foreign policy in El Salvador and was a member of the Committee for the Free World who announced their support of the new president's policies in an advertisement in the *New York Times* on April 6, 1981.

Shortly before leaving office Carter authorized additional military and economic aid to El Salvador, including rifles, helicopters, ammunition, grenade launchers and flak vests.

By the time Carter departed the White House, according to official counting, there were twenty-three U.S. military personnel in El Salvador, including helicopter maintenance crews, an Operations and Planning Team working with the Salvadoran high command and a permanent Military Group (MILGROUP) all stationed in San Salvador. Nevertheless, there were discussions about increasing the number of advisers in El Salvador by thirty-three. This expansion would be accompanied by a broadening of their role to include naval interdiction training, counter-guerrilla and airmobile operations. As the briefing paper cautioned, this increase would bring Americans closer to attacks by hostile forces, increase U.S. visibility and could potentially bring the U.S. administration within the terms of the War Powers Resolution.[228]

As President Carter left office, he was still plagued by the unresolved Iranian Hostage Crisis, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and a Soviet Union that was purportedly gaining strength and looking to take advantage of American vulnerability across the world, including in the Western Hemisphere. Conservative academics and military officers demanded that the U.S. reverse the gains that the communists had made in the world, including in Latin America, under Carter. One of the more notable calls was written by the Committee of Santa Fe, comprised of members from the Council for Inter-American security, a Conservative organization founded in 1976 to promote security cooperation between the United States and Latin America. In its report the committee vitriotically declared that in 1980, "the Americas are under attack. Latin America, the traditional alliance partner of the United States, is being penetrated by Soviet power. The

[228] Briefing Paper, "Final Offensive by FMLN," January 10, 1981," Box 40, Part 17, El Salvador Human Rights Cases, RG 59, NARA.

Caribbean rim and basin are spotted with Soviet surrogates and ringed with socialist states."[229] Three of the members of this committee became members of the Reagan administration. According to another bulletin released by the Council for Inter-American Security, Soviet expansion hinged on three links: encirclement, isolation and deprivation of raw materials. In this new round of competition there were three important areas: the Middle East, the provider of oil; Southern Africa, the pipeline; and the Caribbean, the nozzle.[230]

Reagan soon made it clear that he would stake his reputation and define his foreign policy by making progress against the Soviet Union in Latin America. One of the countries where he thought his administration could score a quick victory against the Soviet Union was El Salvador. In the process, the president elevated the country to assume an important position in his administration's policymaking which was not commensurate with its strategic significance to the United States. Perhaps more importantly, it was not as easy or cost-free as the president and his policymakers imagined

[229] Quoted in Robert Holden & Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: a Documentary History* (New York & Oxford: OUP, 2000), 289.

[230] Press Release, "Three Soviet Objectives in the 1980s," folder "Press Releases," box 7, Council for Inter-American Security, Hoover Institution.

CHAPTER THREE

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION ENTERS THE MAELSTROM, 1981-1984

On February 2, 1982 the atmosphere on Capitol Hill was heated. On that day, the Reagan Administration was set to certify that El Salvador had made significant progress on human rights in the past six months. Receiving a congressional stamp of approval was required to continue providing aid to America's beleaguered ally. Congress enacted this measure to ensure for itself a hand in shaping U.S. foreign policy toward El Salvador, where members (as well as the American public) had serious doubts about the wisdom of continuing to provide aid to a country so beset by government corruption, violence and human rights abuses.

Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-Americans Affairs, testified that while progress was slow, there were encouraging signs in El Salvador, including in human rights, agrarian reform and a commitment to holding elections. On this basis, Enders argued that Congress should continue funding the Salvadoran government. In response to his testimony, Congressmen Gerry Studs (D-MA) could barely conceal his disdain. Studs, evoking Orwellian language, thundered:

> I think someone has done the president a great disservice. Someone somewhere has obviously prevailed upon him to sign his name to that certification document. If there is anything left of the English language in this city after your assault by your immediate superior, it is now gone because the President has just certified that up is down and in is out and black is white. I anticipate his telling us that war is peace at any moment…You take empty rhetoric and call it reform. You accept promises without having demanded action. You look at a 14 month gap between a murder and the application of a lie detector test and call it an investigation.[1]

[1] U.S. Congress, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador (Volume I)*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, 97th Congress, 2nd session (February 2, 23, 25 & March 2, 1982).

Enders's testimony and Studs's incredulous response encapsulate the intensity and emotion that the Salvadoran conflict elicited in the United States. While the names and faces may have changed, throughout the next several years, the message remained the same. When testifying in front of Congress, White House officials and government policymakers routinely asserted that the U.S. was making progress in El Salvador. It had to do so. Its Salvadoran ally was almost completely dependent on American support to survive. Severing its life line would have left the Salvadoran junta gravely weakened and potentially on the edge of collapse.

This chapter focuses on U.S. involvement and COIN strategy during the height of the Salvadoran civil war (1981-1984). It begins with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan and concludes with the election of José Duarte in the Salvadoran 1984 presidential elections. American interest in El Salvador, which began prior to 1981, peaked during these years. For the first four years of the Reagan administration, violence and human rights abuses in the Salvadoran conflict were at their apogee and it was also at the forefront of national debates in the U.S. Newspapers frequently reported grisly accounts of massacres, human rights violations and insurgent victories, all of which the Reagan administration disavowed. For the first two years of his administration, the president spent a considerable amount of time and political capital pursuing American goals in the country; however, Regan's Salvadoran policy aroused significant opposition across U.S. society and Congress. These years also coincided with an intensification of the Cold War on all fronts, in which the Reagan administration attempted to reverse Soviet gains across the globe.

One of the primary aims of this chapter is to analyze and discuss the various U.S. supported and funded COIN programs designed to defeat the FMLN, reform El Salvador's political and social system, and maintain the American backed regime. Using U.S. government

and Salvadoran sources, this chapter will analyze and trace the development of these programs. Many of the ambitious policies developed to achieve U.S. goals were devised and practiced during this time, including the launching of the National Campaign, continuing agrarian reform, professionalizing the military and holding elections to build a centrist, stable and pro-U.S. Salvadoran government. Several of these policies had been used in previous conflicts, such as in the Philippines and Vietnam. While these efforts may not have been exact replicas, former American COIN experiences informed U.S. strategy in El Salvador. For the next several years, the U.S. government helped its Salvadoran ally stave off defeat. Nevertheless, while U.S. aid and assistance may have prevented an FMLN victory, its partner was no closer to victory after four years than it was at the start of the Reagan administration.

This chapter will also incorporate the FMLN and their evolving strategy. For the next few years, the insurgents employed a combination of conventional and unconventional tactics in their attempt to overthrow the Salvadoran government. Using interviews with former insurgents and captured guerrilla documents, it will discuss the origins of the FMLN's strategy and how they combated both the Salvadoran and U.S. COIN efforts. This is important because most studies of COIN neglect a very important aspect: the insurgents get their own vote.

Rehashing Vietnam Counterinsurgency

According to the Reagan administration, the U.S. confronted a dire threat to its national security in Central America. His predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had supposedly allowed communism to spread in the region while the White House stood idly by. Reagan's policymakers believed that failure to confront communism and defend regional allies would trigger a domino

effect. While Reagan wanted to "rollback" communist gains in the region, there were limits to American options.

The specter of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam hovered over U.S. policymaking and strategy. For U.S. strategists, deploying U.S. ground troops was an unfeasible option. Congress and the Pentagon were reluctant to commit American ground troops in battle unless the conflict was winnable, involved sufficient force levels, and had public support and a clear exit strategy.[2] To confront subversion in the Western Hemisphere, Washington relied on small groups of Special Forces to train the region's military forces—or in the case of Nicaragua, proxy forces—and provide economic and military aid to its beleaguered allies.

The spread of insurgency in Central America confronted the U.S. Army with a conflict that it had spent the years after Vietnam either avoiding or trying to forget. However, anything that resembled or was associated with counterinsurgency was anathema; it was too indelibly linked to American defeat in South Vietnam. Proponents of counterinsurgency, including veterans of the conflict, continued to emphasize its importance and the need for the U.S. Army to study and be prepared for this type of contingency. They received an unexpected boost from the American hostage rescue imbroglio in Iran in April 1980. While the fiasco weakened President Carter, it also acted as a catalyst for reorganizing the U.S. Special Forces, increasing their capabilities' and strengthened proponents of COIN who argued that the U.S. needed a new

[2] Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger gave an influential speech in 1984 in which he expressed these sentiments and several others including: the conflict had to be fought with the "intention of winning," employ "decisive force" to achieve clearly definable military and political objectives, and force should be used as a last resort. Originally known as the Weinberger Doctrine, it was later updated by General Colin Powell, who added that the U.S. must use "overwhelming force" and has since been referred to as the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine.

doctrine to combat its unconventional enemies.[3] In the process, proponents of counterinsurgency rebranded the strategy of combating insurgency as Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC). Despite the name change, the fundamental elements of American COIN doctrine remained the same.

According to the U.S. Army's definition of the term, LIC is a "political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states."[4] This rather broad and imprecise definition encompassed a wide variety of scenarios under its umbrella, including counter-narcotics, COIN, counter-terrorism and peace keeping operations. For those who experienced American LIC interventions firsthand, it was readily apparent that the term was a misnomer. As John Waghelstein acknowledged, LIC is "*total war* at the grass roots level".[5] The term was a catch-all phrase that combined the interrelated doctrines of counterinsurgency, special operations and unconventional warfare.[6] Michael Klare, a fierce critic, provided his own cynical definition: "the amount of murder, mutilation, torture, rape and savagery that is sustainable without triggering widespread disapproval at home."[7]

While both of these definitions have their merits, for American policymakers, LIC represented more than a specialized category of armed struggle; it was a strategic reorientation of

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[3] For a discussion of how the U.S. rebuilt its Special Operations forces and how Desert Eagle acted as a catalyst for their reform, see Susan Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1997).

[4] U.S. Army and Air Force. *Field Manual 100-20: Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1990).

[5] Quoted in (italics in original) John Waghelstein, "Post-Vietnam Counterinsurgency Doctrine," *Military Review* 65.5 (May 1985): 42-49.

[6] Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counter-Terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 334.

[7] Quoted in Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 40.

the U.S. military establishment and a renewed commitment to employing force in a global crusade against Third World revolutionary movements or governments.[8] In June 1987, the Reagan Administration issued NSDD 277, "National Policy and Strategy for Low Intensity Conflict." Using a definition almost verbatim to the Army's definition, this document asserted that LIC "is of primary concern to the United States when its elements are used to assault the national interests, values and political foundations of the U.S., its friends and allies." Defeat in these conflicts could lead to "loss of access to strategic minerals and energy sources"; "gradual shifting of friends and allies into position of accommodation with interests hostile to the U.S."; and "assaults on democratic principles." Recognizing the importance of patience, the document asserted that "the U.S. response to this form of warfare requires the national will to sustain long-term commitments."[9] As Michael McClintock observed about LIC, the real change was not in the doctrine, but in its relative significance in foreign policy. The high-profile commitment to LIC meant eschewing overt and conventional armed intervention in favor of military action through U.S. proxies, allies and paramilitary assets, anywhere below the threshold of conventional armed conflict.[10]

The Salvadoran insurgency helped to briefly resuscitate interest in the subject among the military and U.S. policymakers. In spite of its official name, this supposedly new variant of COIN was as destructive as its predecessor. Advocates of LIC did not have to wait long to dust off the policies from Vietnam. The primary arena for this round of experimentation with COIN

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[8] Michael Klare and Peter Kornbluh, "the New Interventionism: Low-Intensity Warfare in the 1980s and Beyond," in *Low-Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties*, ed. Michael Klare and Peter Kornbluh (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 3.

[9] National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 277, "National Policy and Strategy for Low Intensity Conflict," June 15, 1987, available online at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/Scannedpercent20NSDDS/NSDD277.pdf.

[10] McClintock, 335.

occurred in Latin America. For counterinsurgency enthusiasts, the spread of insurgency in Latin America provided its practitioners with another opportunity to reapply tactics (and presumably refine them) from Vietnam—and win.

"Win one for the Gipper"

While Carter had paved the way for increased American aid to its beleaguered ally, the new administration quickly amplified it. Under Reagan, U.S. intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War represented a dramatic departure from his predecessor. For the first two years of his presidency, the administration expended considerable time and attention to the Salvadoran civil war. Despite significant opposition in the United States from Congress and the American public, the Reagan administration succeeded in continuing to fund the JRG.

The Reagan administration cast the Salvadoran conflict in several different manifestations. One of its more preferred explanations proclaimed that the Salvadoran conflict was another Cold War confrontation between the East and West.[11] The White House repeatedly argued that the upsurge of revolutionary activity and violence in the region was the result of Moscow and Havana's machinations. The president often characterized the threat posed by a FMLN take-over as imperiling the national security of the United States. As the president noted, "San Salvador is closer to Dallas than Dallas is to Washington, D.C…It is at our doorstep and

[11] Most scholars that have studied the conflict sharply disagree. They have traced the outbreak of war to the country's history of economic exploitation, political stratification and control of the political system by the military and oligarchy. See Enrique A. Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982);Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982); Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Alan L. McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2006), 89.

it's become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere."[12] Reagan described his administration's policy in El Salvador as designed to stop the advance of communism and support moderate anti-communist governments that produced political change, social reform and economic growth peacefully and incrementally.[13]

In the minds of Reagan and his inner circle, success in El Salvador was key to the administration's goal of restoring the credibility of the U.S. after years of erosion and excising the "Vietnam syndrome" from the American psyche. Burying the ghosts of Vietnam was an important part of both Reagan and American Conservative's attempts at confronting the Soviet Union and winning the Cold War. Before taking office, Reagan stated that "it is time we purged ourselves of the Vietnam syndrome. If the U.S. cannot respond to a threat near our borders, why should Europeans and Asians believe that we're seriously concerned about threats to them?"[14] To challenge the "Evil Empire," the United States had to rebuild and expand its military. Reagan, like previous American statesmen, believed that once again, American credibility was at stake. As one scholar has recently asserted, the president "wanted to send a message to others in the world that there was a new management in the White House."[15] As countries in the region quickly realized, the Reagan administration was not afraid to flex America's military muscle to achieve its foreign policy goals.

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[12] Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Current Documents: 1984* (Washington: Dept. of State, 1984).

[13] Memorandum from L. Paul Bremer III to Richard V. Allen: Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador, February 23, 1981, folder "NSC0004 27 February 1981 (Poland, Caribbean Basin, etc). 2/4," box 1, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[14] Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 198-99.

[15] Stephen Rabe, *the Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2011), 158.

For one administration official, the Salvadoran conflict provided the president with an opportunity to restore American confidence and pride. According to Alexander Haig, President Reagan's first Secretary of State, El Salvador was "winnable." It was politically defensible, militarily winnable and geo-strategically advantageous.[16] As Haig also noted, the U.S. would "draw the line" in the tiny country, defending the hemisphere against supposed Soviet encroachment.

As such, the conflict fit into the administration's plans to rollback communist gains and prevent the collapse of another American ally. Consequently, El Salvador was also viewed by the White House as part of a larger struggle confronting the U.S. in Central America. In other words, it was one front in a much larger regional conflict. Early in Reagan's administration, U.S. policymakers debated how to respond to the various crises in the region. Reagan's irascible and blunt Secretary of State viewed Cuba as the source of trouble. Haig wanted to send a message to the Cubans emphasizing that "we mean business. What we are deciding now is taking a course of action that is designed to stop Cuban adventures and we are willing to use any kind of pressure to succeed."[17] Haig also believed that the best approach was to go "to the source." As the Secretary of State remarked to Reagan, if given the word, "I'll turn that fucking island into a parking lot."[18] Reagan's advisor to the United Nations, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, argued that time was of the essence. "We do not have time to build coalitions. We can cooperate with individual countries, but they will work together in time…We cannot wait for public opinion either to form…We need to focus on El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala in that order. We can use covert action. We can

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[16] LeoGrande, 81.

[17] Minutes of a Meeting, "Strategy toward Cuba and Central America," November 10, 1981, folder "NSC 00024 11/10/1981: Strategy toward Cuba and Central America, El Salvador," box 3, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[18] LeoGrande, 82.

employ proxy forces." However, not all of Reagan's aides considered El Salvador as important as Kirkpatrick. The Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCI), Bill Casey, a hardened anti-communist crusader who had come to the CIA "to wage war on the Soviet Union,"[19] reiterated during questions that "the main target is Nicaragua." Kirkpatrick disagreed, according primacy to El Salvador. In Nicaragua, she believed that the U.S. could let "others do the work for us."[20]

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union's foreign policy toward Latin America fluctuated, especially when there were disputes within the communist world. Until the 1960s, the Soviet Union did not actively support armed revolutionaries in the western hemisphere, instead favoring the region's communist parties who did not support the Cuban revolutionary approach, also known as *foquismo*.[21] Soviet support for revolutionaries in the Third World did not begin in earnest until Nikita Khrushchev assumed the chairmanship of the Soviet Union. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet directorate feared that if it did not support armed combatants in the region, Cuba would act independently in the Western hemisphere and potentially ally itself with the Chinese. In spite of Moscow's concern about Fidel Castro's "adventurism," they wanted to keep their ally happy at a time when the Chinese were competing for the loyalties of the Third World.[22] This policy proved short-lived though. In the 1960s, Moscow reversed itself, which

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[19] Quoted in Oliver Stone & Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* (New York: Gallery Books, 2012), 246.

[20] Minutes of a Meeting, "Strategy toward Cuba and Central America," November 10, 1981, folder "NSC 00024 11/10/1981: Strategy toward Cuba and Central America, El Salvador," box 3, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[21] The *foco* theory argues that a small group of armed cadres can create the conditions necessary for revolution, and then assume control and lead a general insurrection.

[22] Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 41.

was partly attributed to Nikita Khrushchev's removal and because armed revolutionaries had proved inefficient in establishing socialism and weakening the hegemony of the United States.[23]

This trend continued into the 1970s. According to Danuta Paszyn, until the Sandinistas' victory in 1979, Central America was the most neglected region in Soviet foreign policy formulation due to proximity to the United States and the staunch anti-Soviet sympathies of the ruling elites. It was not until after the election of Reagan and mounting pressure on Nicaragua that Moscow began to pay more attention to the region.[24] As Hal Brands has noted, fifteen years after Moscow had distanced itself from the guerrillas, the Kremlin revised that policy. After reaching nuclear parity with the United States, expanding its power projection capability and installing seven new Marxist governments during the 1970s, Moscow developed a newly found swagger in its foreign policy. In few areas did prospects seem more promising than in Latin America. Sensing American vulnerability after the fall of Somoza, the Soviet Union became more aggressive in the western hemisphere.[25]

While Moscow may have developed a keener interest in the hemisphere in the 1980s, Cuba was more active in the region than its ally. For several *comandantes*, it was also more essential. At no time during this period did El Salvador weigh heavily on Soviet policymakers' minds. FMLN *comandantes* who visited Moscow often left either empty-handed or with vague assurances of support. The Eastern Bloc was equally hesitant to provide overt material assistance as well. When Schafik Handal, leader of the PCS, visited Moscow, he never met with any high-

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[23] Daniela Spenser, "The Caribbean Crisis: Catalyst for Soviet Projection in Latin America," in *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War,* ed. by Daniela Spenser & Gilbert Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 77-8.

[24] Danuta Paszyn, *The Soviet Attitude to Political and Social Change in Central America, 1979-1990* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 8-9.

[25] Brands, 196.

ranking Soviet officials and did not receive a response for a request for aid.[26] Nevertheless, while Moscow initially hesitated to send arms directly to the FMLN, the Kremlin arranged arms shipments from North Korea, Eastern Europe and Vietnam. These arms were delivered to Havana, then to Managua and transferred overland, or by air or sea to El Salvador.[27] Even though Moscow may have provided aid to the FMLN, especially through Cuba and Nicaragua, its role in the hemisphere and its support for the Salvadoran revolutionaries was grossly distorted by the Reagan administration.

El Salvador also pitted the U.S. and its various allies, including the region's militaries and its non-democratically elected leaders, against Latin America's various reform movements. It was a contest over political and social arrangements dating back to the colonial era, but one that played out with escalating intensity during the twentieth century.[28] To borrow a phrase from Melvyn Leffler, it was a struggle for the "soul of mankind" in Latin America.[29] During the 1980s, this struggle convulsed and devastated Central America. These conflicts were further exacerbated by the White House's policies and its embrace of repressive regimes. In Stephen Rabe's rather mild characterization, "restraint did not characterize his administration's policy

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[26] Pasyzn, 92. Facundo Guardado, who traveled to the Soviet Union, did not obtain any substantial amount of aid. *Comandante Balta* also traveled abroad, visiting the Eastern Bloc, Western Europe and the PLO. Similar to Guardado, Balta's travels did not yield any significant achievements. According to both, while they may have received some arms from the Socialist Camp, they were never provided with large amounts of funds. Facundo Guardado, interview with author; Medrano, interview with author.

[27] Brands. 198. David E. Spencer's dissertation about external support for insurgencies also analyzes the Salvadoran civil war. Spencer's main argument is that insurgencies generally cannot survive without outside assistance. In his estimation, Cuban and Nicaraguan support was crucial in enabling the FMLN to continue the war for twelve years. Spencer, "External Resource Mobilization."

[28] Brands, 9.

[29] The quotation is derived from Melvyn Leffler's book, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

toward Central America."[30] The price that these various reform movements and actors paid was incredibly high, including in El Salvador.

The Reagan administration's goal in El Salvador was to defeat the FMLN both militarily and politically. Viewing the Salvadoran conflict as a Soviet incursion into Washington's sphere of influence, the administration believed that a political settlement was inadequate. The president-elect declared, "You do not try to fight a civil war and institute reforms at the same time." Rather, "Get rid of the war. Then go forward with the reforms."[31] As Fred Iklé, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy remarked, "We do not seek a military defeat. We do not seek a military stalemate…we seek victory."[32] It proved to be a long, difficult task. The method to accomplish this rested on using COIN, which involved the use of American Special Forces, AID and other government organizations.

U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador rested on several pillars, including political, economic and military ones. To prevent the further spread of communism and increase domestic and international support for the Salvadoran regime, carrying out important political and economic reforms was essential. These efforts aimed at redressing socioeconomic imbalances fueling discontent, and establishing the Salvadoran government's credibility and legitimacy. Among the most important milestones was holding constituent assembly elections that had been scheduled for 1982. These elections were considered important not only for the government's legitimacy within El Salvador but also for its reputation abroad. The military aspect of the equation focused on not only defeating the FMLN by adopting U.S. COIN

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[30] Rabe, 158.

[31] LeoGrande, 90.

[32] Study, American Friends Service Committee Report: "The U.S. Pacification Program in El Salvador," ND, Folder 2.4, Box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

strategies, but also re-educating and professionalizing the Salvadoran army to prevent further human rights abuses and to support the political process. Closely related were efforts to win Salvadoran civilians' hearts and minds through a series of civic action programs.

The foundations of U.S. military strategy in El Salvador

From the early 1980s, American counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador can be best described as adhering to the policy known as "KISSSS:" keep it simple, sustainable, small and Salvadoran.[33] As a study conducted during the middle phase of the war noted, the essence of the American approach in El Salvador was to provide a besieged ally with weapons, ammunition and economic aid, while preserving the principle that the war is theirs to lose.[34] However, in spite of the massive U.S. intervention in El Salvador, the American government decided not to commit ground troops. Instead, the U.S. deployed Special Forces advisers to train the Salvadoran military using counterinsurgency techniques to defeat the insurgency.[35] However, as authors have noted, the military failed to persuade the Salvadoran forces to use the tactics the Americans preferred or to reform the military.[36] Even more importantly, the policies the U.S. devised did

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[33] Tommy Sue Montgomery, "Fighting Guerrillas: The United States and Low-Intensity Conflict in El Salvador," *New Political Science* 91 (Fall/Winter 1990): 21-53, 29.

[34] Andrew Bacevich et al, *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Cambridge & Washington: Pergamon Brassey's, 1988), V.

[35] The limit was set at 55 advisers, which was mandated by Congress to avoid expanding American involvement. However, according to most sources this number was routinely violated. Additional advisors often trained Salvadorans in Honduras; were classified as medical staff; or would simply fly out of the country and later return. Americans were also not allowed to accompany Salvadoran troops into the field, but they were occasionally involved in fighting. For an example, see John Terzian, "SF Advisors in El Salvador: the Attack on El Paraiso," *Special Warfare* 14. 2 (Spring 2001): 18-25.

[36] William Stanley and Mark Peceny, "Counterinsurgency in El Salvador," *Politics & Society* 38.1 (2010): 67-94; Benjamin Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1991); Bacevich et al.

not address the root causes—socioeconomic inequalities and a lack of political space—of the insurgency.[37]

1981 was not an auspicious year for the American counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador. In spite of the failure of the FMLN's Final Offensive, the government's position remained tenuous. As Ambassador Deane Hinton noted in June 1981, not only was the situation "bad" but "matters may be going against the army." In Morazán and Chalatenango—two insurgent strongholds—the situation "is worse today than ever."[38] There was concern among Salvadoran officers that if the insurgents could not be dislodged from Morazán, then the country could conceivably be split in two.[39] Roger Fontaine, the Director of the Latin America Affairs Directorate, National Security Council, also captured the bleak situation, noting that the FMLN had made progress on wearing down Salvadoran troops, consolidating liberated zones and increasing their followers and regaining international legitimacy. While noting that insurgent gains would not force the Government of El Salvador (GOES) to capitulate, a stalemate did not favor U.S. interests. Echoing other members of the administration, Fontaine argued that the U.S. "needs, above all, to place El Salvador on a higher priority than it has."[40]

The Salvadoran army suffered from several deficiencies. According to a Salvadoran general, its strategy was inappropriate and incoherent, and they failed to grasp how to respond to

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[37] Montgomery, "Fighting Guerrillas," 21-23; Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: the U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 132-133.

[38] Telegram, June 6, 1981, "Guerrillas" folder, Box 6: Subject Files: Abrams—Christian Democratic Party, NSA Archival Collection.

[39] Draft report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[40] Memo from Roger Fontaine and Robert L. Schweitzer to Richard Allen, August 19, 1981, folder CO046 El Salvador (047000-052999), box 68, WHORM Subject Files (017091-145499), Ronald Reagan Library.

the enemy.[41] One of the primary goals of the American COIN effort aimed at improving the Salvadoran military's operational performance. It proved to be a difficult challenge. As one U.S. advisor noted, "we were on our last legs. We had to reform or we were going to lose. And it wasn't because the guerrillas were so good; it was because the Army was so bad."[42] As early as 1981, the Central Intelligence Agency considered the war to be a stalemate.[43] Alexander Haig agreed, but also worried that the country might collapse because the cumulative economic losses might demoralize the people and discredit the government.[44]

By February 1981, there were approximately twenty-five U.S. personnel in El Salvador, including helicopter pilots, maintenance MTTs, OPAT and a Military Group (MILGP). The NSC had also approved an additional six-man MTT, increasing the number of Americans to over thirty. All of these individuals were stationed in San Salvador or in its immediate environs. The administration, as well as Duarte, preferred to increase the number, preferably to fifty-four, and expand their presence outside of the capital.[45] American military personnel in El Salvador were slated to perform a variety of roles that were deemed essential to carrying out U.S. strategic

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[41] Juan Orlando Zepeda, *Perfiles de la guerra en El Salvador* (San Salvador: New Graphics, 2008), 175.

[42] Mark Danner, *the Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 22-23.

[43] CIA, "Near-Term Prospects for El Salvador," December 14, 1983 (CIA FOIA).

[44] Memorandum, Alexander Haig to Ronal Reagan, "The Risk of Losing in El Salvador and What can be Done About it," August 11, 1981, folder "NISC00030 17 August 1981 (East-West Trade, Central America, Strategic Forces)," box 2, Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library. Haig's opinion was also supported by Reagan's first National Security Director Richard Allen.

[45] Memorandum from L. Paul Bremer III to Richard V. Allen: Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador, February 23, 1981, folder "NSC0004 27 February 1981 (Poland, Caribbean Basin, etc). 2/4," box 1, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

goals. Among the most important were training the Salvadoran Navy to interdict weapons sent from sea and halting the infiltration of foreign fighters.[46]

Administration officials were also aware of the dangers this expansion entailed. Not only would it bring Americans closer to combat, but if they were involved in combat, it might provoke Congress into using the War Power resolution.[47] Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger believed that American combat deaths would lead "to another Vietnam" or "political criticism of the president."[48] Reagan's policymakers also recognized the need to "blur the distinction between 'adviser' and 'trainer.'"[49] The term adviser, while ostensibly neutral, was indelibly linked to Vietnam. During Congressional testimony, John Bushnell, a State Department official, addressed the term "advisers" and their role in El Salvador:

> I think we get a little tied up here in terms of the words we use. I resist the word 'adviser' because it covers an awful lot of things. We don't have anyone in El Salvador that is going out on missions with Salvadoran forces. All the people that we have are technicians or trainers who are doing a back-up job, teaching them to use helicopters, repair helicopters, make plans, this sort of thing.[50]

Despite Bushnell's assurances, advisers were occasionally involved in combat. In a particularly embarrassing incident, American advisers were filmed by a television crew carrying their

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[46] Memorandum from L. Paul Bremer III to Richard Allen, "Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador," February 17, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[47] In order to preempt concern, several White House officials argued that the administration should meet this threat head on, by consulting informally with Congress. Most policymakers believed that the War Powers Resolution did not apply to the present circumstances. Memorandum from L. Paul Bremer III to Richard Allen, "Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador," February 17, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[48] Memo from Robert Schweitzer and Roger Fontaine to Richard Allen, NSC Meeting 25 February: SIG Paper on El Salvador," February 24, 1981, folder "NSC 0004 27 February 1981 (Poland, Caribbean Basin, etc) 4/4," box 1, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[49] Memorandum from L. Paul Bremer III to Richard V. Allen: Paper for the NSC Meeting on El Salvador, February 23, 1981, folder "NSC0004 27 February 1981 (Poland, Caribbean Basin, etc). 2/4," box 1, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[50] State Department, *American Foreign Policy Current Documents, 1981* (Washington: Dept. of State, 1981), 1258.

M16s.[51] Consequently, the soldiers were flown out of the country to avoid any further discussion of the matter.

In February 1981, Reagan authorized the first of several large aid shipments to El Salvador. That same month, the White House published the "White Paper," which theoretically provided evidence of communist intervention in El Salvador.[52] It was soon discredited. Undaunted, the White House approved $25 million in aid, the majority of which came from discretionary funds that allowed it to circumvent congressional approval. Later that month, the administration increased the number of advisers in El Salvador from twenty-eight to fifty-four.[53] Reagan's moves immediately provoked controversy, especially in Congress. His use of discretionary funds represented the first of many battles over Salvadoran policy between the executive and legislative branches.

The continued poor performance by the Salvadoran armed forces against the FMLN led U.S. officials to rethink their overall war strategy. In November 1981, General Fred Woerner was dispatched to El Salvador as head of a military advisory group to study the Salvadoran army and write a report based on its observations. The group's primary mission was to draft a strategy compatible with U.S national security objectives and interests, while receiving the endorsement

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[51] U.S. Congress, United States Senate Committee of Foreign Relations, *El Salvador: the United States in the Middle of a Maelstrom*, Joint Committee Report (Washington: U.S. GPO, March 1982).

[52] Eventually, most of the conclusions were disputed by popular magazines such as *Newsweek* and even pro-administration newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). There were many questions about the veracity of the document, including the amount of weapon tonnage involved as well as questions of authorship concerning the "insurgent documents." The author of the report, John Glassman, even confided to a reporter from the WSJ that parts of it were "misleading" and "over-embellished." "Apparent Errors Cloud U.S. 'White Paper' on Reds in El Salvador," *Wall Street Journal,* June 8, 1981.

[53] Longley, 303.

of the Salvadoran military.[54] It had other tasks, such as designing a force structure within El Salvador's resource capabilities, strategically assessing the military situation and imparting upon the Salvadoran high command the importance of strategic planning.[55] Ultimately, the general and his staff spent approximately eight weeks analyzing the country's military and addressing their weaknesses. Woerner's report pessimistically stated that the Salvadorans "couldn't win the war with what they were doing."[56]

Woerner's military strategy involved preventing the isolation of the eastern region of the country and the establishment of a "liberated zone" by the FMLN in the province of Morazán; protecting the nation's infrastructure and the constituent elections; and interdicting arms and materiel into El Salvador. Woerner painted a picture of an incompetent military being led by officers who had no grasp of how to confront the insurgency they faced. For example, the D-2, the military intelligence officer, was characterized as "incompetent, stupid and lazy." Woerner's team was also unable to persuade the Salvadoran high command to identify rightist terrorism as a threat, which it believed could erode popular support for the government. Relations between the military and Christian Democrats continued to be terrible. Woerner reported that "they *hate* [emphasis in the original] each other." However, the report argued that the two would continue

[54] Report by the Comptroller General of the United States: U.S. Military Aid to El Salvador and Honduras," August 22, 1985, folder "U.S. Military Aid to El Salvador {and Honduras}," box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[55] Draft report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[56] This was an assessment made by John Waghelstein, commander of the U.S. MILGRP in El Salvador, who was familiar with the report. Manwaring & Prisk, 223-4.

to work together in the short-term, even if the Christian Democrats won the upcoming constituent elections.[57]

The Salvadorans' counterinsurgency capabilities were non-existent. Civic action was considered unnecessary because the Salvadoran military believed that "the people are with them and thus see no requirement." However, virtually no data existed to back up these claims, except for a public opinion poll conducted in San Salvador months before the team arrived.[58] Perhaps more importantly, civic action was "primarily a function of the interest of local commanders which is quite minimal, if not zero."[59] While calling for population control measures, there was no national registration system that could be used to catalogue an individual's identity or to survey them.[60] Psychological operations were also frowned upon because Ambassador Deane Hinton considered them "black propaganda" and believed that "the best way to proceed is to tell the truth."[61] Despite the deficiencies discussed, Woerner believed that they could be overcome.[62]

For policy recommendations, Woerner's report presented three courses of action. First, U.S. officials could continue funding the Salvadoran military at its current levels, which the report characterized as a "defensive strategy foreboding limited survival." Woerner cautioned

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[57] Information Paper, "BG Woerner's Briefing on the El Salvador Military Situation," November 18, 1981, folder "El Salvador, Oliver North, NSC," box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[58] Draft report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[59] The assessment also noted that this was a "fertile area for U.S. training assistance." "Draft report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[60] The report called for maintaining and publishing a black list of insurgents' identities and their aliases at sensitive points around the country and in nationally syndicated newspapers.

[61] Information Paper, "BG Woerner's Briefing on the El Salvador Military Situation," November 18, 1981, folder "El Salvador, Oliver North, NSC," box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library; "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[62] Information Paper, "BG Woerner's Briefing on the El Salvador Military Situation," November 18, 1981, folder "El Salvador, Oliver North, NSC," box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

policymakers that if they chose this option, it would result in failure because of economic and political collapse. Another option was to expand funding levels to approximately $277 million, which, while improving internal defense capabilities, would not produce a strategic victory. It was an offensive strategy to gain and maintain the initiative and designed to partially control El Salvador's territory and its infrastructure. The last option came with a price tag of $402 million. This amount of funding would provide arms and the adequate training required, while simultaneously providing "enhanced defense against Nicaragua."[63] The report recommended adopting this course of action, which would presumably lead to a strategic victory. Ultimately, this was the option U.S. policymakers selected.[64]

Woerner based his plans on a hypothetical five-year timeline (he did not explicitly define how long the campaign would take) and estimated that it would cost approximately $300 million. He was wrong on both accounts. [65] Despite the official status of the mission, Woerner's report was never formally approved by the Department of Defense. Nevertheless, it established the foundation for U.S. military assistance to El Salvador. According to Hugh Byrnes, the Woerner Plan's strategy and the subsequent build up and rearming of the Salvadoran army prevented an FMLN victory in 1983, but also contributed to a change in guerrilla strategy the following year.[66]

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[63] Information Paper, "BG Woerner's Briefing on the El Salvador Military Situation," November 18, 1981, folder "El Salvador, Oliver North, NSC," box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[64] Draft Report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[65] For Woerner's own discussion of the strategy see Max Manwaring & Courtney Prisk, *El Salvador at War: an Oral History of Conflict from the 1979 Insurrection to the Present* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1988).

[66] Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: a Study of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 80.

Constructing an aggressive force

For many American COIN practitioners, the Salvadoran military approached the conflict clumsily, using a "conventional" approach, which was comparable to using a hammer to swat a fly. Supposedly, the Salvadoran military had a "garrison" and 9-5 mentality that refused to take the fight to the insurgents.[67] According to American COIN strategists, the Salvadoran army lacked the essential training to successfully implement U.S. pacification efforts. For those familiar with American military aid programs to the region during the Cold War, this is a curious assertion. The Salvadoran military had received decades of U.S. schooling provided at the SOA or in the United States, military hardware, and collaboration between the Green Berets and Salvadoran intelligence agencies such as *ANSESAL.* As one adviser acknowledged, the problem was not a lack of U.S. counterinsurgency training, it was "getting them [the Salvadorans] to actually use these tactics."[68] Critics of U.S. policy in El Salvador viewed the matter quite differently: since the Salvadoran military had been practicing American COIN strategy for decades, it was responsible for the devastation of the country.

In 1980, the U.S. army created the first of several aggressive Salvadoran units designed to hunt down and destroy the insurgents, *Los Batallones (de Infantería) de Reacción Inmediata* (BIRI). Also referred to as rapid reaction battalions, the BIRIs were designed to quickly deploy across the country and conduct the small-unit and long-range reconnaissance patrols that are the foundation of COIN strategy. The U.S. military had created similar units in earlier conflicts,

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[67] American journalists commonly used this term to refer to the Salvadoran Army. One former Special Forces officer found this misleading and asserted that "American journalists, while writing their stories in the bar of the El Camino Real Hotel, are quite fond of tacking a 9-5 label on the Salvadoran Officer Corps. The numbers are correct, but in their drunken haze they have transposed them." Rather, the Salvadoran armed worked from 0500-2100. Peter Koalis, "Arms and the Atlacatal," *Soldier of Fortune,* January 1984.

[68] Quoted in Michael Childress*, The Effectiveness of U.S. Training Efforts in Internal Defense and Development: The Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1995), 31.

including the "hunter-killer" teams in the Philippines after WWII. These battalions received the best equipment available. The BIRIs were trained by the U.S. military at a variety of locations, including in the United States and Panama. These units participated in several important battles throughout the conflict, including in large scale pacification initiatives. By the end of the conflict, there were five rapid reaction battalions; however, all of them were disbanded after the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992 at the behest of the FMLN.

The first and most important unit was the Atlacatl Battalion, a name derived from a mythical figure in Salvadoran history. It was formed in Panama at the School of the Americas, but its training was carried out at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina by U.S. Special Forces. The unit's training did not originally include counterinsurgency, because the battalion's commander believed his soldiers' two years of experience made this unnecessary.[69] In the beginning, American Special Forces trained a total of 1,383 members. Two years later, only 250 of the original members still served in the unit.[70]

The Atlacatl Battalion was considered to be the most professional and aggressive unit in the entire Salvadoran army. According to a State Department telegram, it was unique because it was the "largets" [sic] unit in the army and was comprised of soldiers recruited from across the nation, not locally.[71] In a British diplomat's opinion, the battalion was unlike the rest of the army. As he noted, "they are different, they, like the IRA (Irish Republican Army), enjoy

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[69] Herard von Santos, *Soldados de elite en centroamérica y México* (Imprenta Nacional: San Salvador, 2008), 154.

[70] Report, Inquiry from Senator Moakley about Atlacatl Battalion: Response from Carl W. Ford, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense International Security Affairs, Caleb Rossiter Files, El Salvador, National Archives, Washington DC.

[71] Telegram, "El Salvador/Status of the New Atlacatl Battalion," October 14, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

killing."[72] Despite being labeled as the most elite and professional unit of the army, the Atlacatl Battalion was implicated in numerous human rights abuses throughout the conflict, which were examined by the United Nations Truth Commission after the termination of the conflict. One of the more egregious examples occurred near the end of the war, when members of the unit assassinated six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter at the *Universidad Centroamericana* in 1989; an act that would have severe ramifications for U.S. aid.

U.S. military operatives also formed *Cazador*, or "hunter" battalions. These forces were smaller than their BIRI counterparts, containing about a third fewer soldiers. Most of these forces were trained in Honduras at the Regional Military Training Center. The U.S. hoped to build approximately fourteen of these units, each comprised of 350 men. Similar to the rapid reaction battalions, the *Cazadores* were designed to attack the FMLN and perform small-unit and long-range reconnaissance missions. However, they operated within a specific theatre and were not a nation-wide force that could rapidly deploy across El Salvador at a moment's notice.

In addition to creating more aggressive forces schooled in the art of American counterinsurgency, U.S. military trainers focused on professionalizing the Salvadoran armed forces. This included persuading the Salvadoran military to adopt U.S. tactics to fight insurgency and halt human rights abuses. Leigh Binford argued that the magnitude of this task should not be underestimated. "It consisted of nothing less than a total makeover of the military institution and its personnel, rather like insisting that an adult who had grown up speaking one language and acting according to one set of cultural assumptions internalize a completely different language

[72] Memorandum, "The Atlacatl Battalion and Alleged Human Rights Abuses, Section: Atlacatl's Record and U.S. Policy," "Barriers to Reform," El Salvador, box 2, folder "Barriers to Reform-Research," Records of the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, Caleb Rossiter Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.

and way of being—and rapidly, in a matter of months or at best a few years."[73] It also required a "large dose of imperial pretentiousness" to believe that the Salvadoran Officer Corps and its allies would adopt the American advisers' advice, especially when their livelihoods and property remained in the balance.[74] One could also presumably understand Salvadoran hesitancy to accept American COIN advice when one considers that the U.S. military had used these same tactics in Vietnam and lost.

In molding the Salvadoran army to emulate the American model, the U.S. hoped to create a bulwark for human rights. Preventing human rights abuses, along with civic action projects, would convince the population to support the government. In theory, it was a formula for winning Salvadoran hearts and minds. Washington officially maintained that the Salvadoran military had improved its human rights record and followed American advice. U.S. military strategists were concerned that continued human rights violations, combined with a lack of progress in outstanding legal cases such as the murder of the four American churchwomen, could potentially cause Congress to terminate funding. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration routinely downplayed such abuses and blamed them either specifically on the FMLN or "unknown assailants."[75] Human rights abuses also declined in 1984, which has generally been attributed to U.S. advice and aid. However, several sources strongly disagree and have argued that it had little to do with an ideological embrace of the American strategy. Leigh Binford characterized the shift in human rights abuses as a cynical but shrewd response to political concerns. The Salvadoran high command adopted different tactics due to the failure of its

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[73] Leigh Binford, *the El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 146.

[74] Binford, 146.

[75] After the conflict, the UN Truth Commission attributed over eighty percent of all human rights abuses committed during the war to Salvadoran security forces, not insurgents or "unknown assailants."

scorched earth campaigns, U.S. control over the purse strings and an accumulation of negative press reporting. This view was echoed by Human Rights Watch, which believed that the decrease was not based on structural elements—the criminal punishment and removal of the killers—but on an ephemeral shift in policy, where they decided to kill fewer people, remaining free to reverse the policy when needed.[76]

Throughout the war, the Salvadoran military proved hesitant to adopt the strategies promoted by their trainers.[77] Of course, there were times, like a pacification effort of an ambitious scope in June of 1983, when the Salvadoran military operated along the lines proscribed by their American benefactor. As the CIA remarked in 1982, U.S. military aid extended to this date had neither increased U.S. influence over the Salvadoran armed forces nor made them substantially more effective. The limited deliveries attached conditions and "on again off again timetable" had left many Salvadoran officers believing U.S. aid was illusory.[78] In spite of the massive amount of aid, the U.S. never had the requisite leverage to compel the Salvadoran military to fully comply with its wishes. They astutely realized that Washington was committed to their survival and feared "losing" another country to communism. In short, the Salvadoran military recognized that it had some flexibility and did not have to completely accept their American counterparts' advice—at least while the Reagan administration was in power.

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[76] See Binford, 150; Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991).

[77] Several authors have made this claim including Michael Childress, *The Effectiveness of U.S. Training Efforts in Internal Defense and Development: The Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1995); Schwartz; Bacevich et al; and Todd R. Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008).

[78] CIA, "Status of the military capabilities of the El Salvadoran government to stem insurgency within that country and plans for a U.S. military assistance program for El Salvador," January 2, 1981, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS).

Insurgent Strategy

While the Salvadoran army had numerous short-comings, the FMLN's strategy exploited and exposed their deficiencies. The FMLN represented the interests of five military and political factions with competing outlooks and strategies. While they may have been united in their overall goal—the overthrow of the Salvadoran government—they often differed over the best means to achieve it. For example, the two largest organizations, the FPL and ERP, approached the conflict differently. The FPL, under the influence of its founder Cayetano Carpio, the "Ho Chi Minh of Latin America," favored Prolonged People's War (PPW) which had been most famously executed by Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap.[79] Like North Vietnam's victorious campaign of reunification, the FPL hoped to drag the war out long enough to erode U.S. resolve to the point where their support for the Salvadoran government would dry up. Conversely, the ERP pursued a more direct path of insurrection, hoping to provoke a massive uprising, such as the 1981 Final Offensive. In spite of bitter internal conflicts, the FMLN's general command managed to remain united during the war.[80]

Throughout the civil war, the FMLN pursued a politico-military approach that aimed at defeating the Duarte regime militarily and undercutting its popularity across the country. Arguably, in the early 1980s, the Salvadoran insurgents emphasized the military aspect of the formula, hoping to inflict a series of military defeats against the regime, which would lead to its collapse. After the failure of the Final Offensive, the FMLN established a force that imposed a

[79] According to Diana Villiers-Negroponte, Carpio gave this name to himself. However, Sheldon Liss argued that others referred to Carpio as Ho Chi Minh because of his age. Dianna Villiers-Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31; Sheldon B. Liss, *Radical Thought in Latin America* (Boulder, San Francisco & Oxford: Wesview Press, 1991), 81.

[80] One of the biggest sources of contention and hostility was over the murder of the renowned Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, who was murdered for "revolutionary deviations." According to many different accounts, the order to arrest and murder the poet was given by the head of the ERP, Joaquín Villalobos.

series of military defeats against the regime. Until 1984, U.S. officials privately worried about the possibility of a collapse in El Salvador.

The FMLN used previous conflicts to design its strategy. At its core, it combined an inter-related combination of military and political elements. The most commonly cited example was Vietnam, especially Giap's theories about revolutionary war. Not only did the North Vietnamese and its allies defeat the U.S., but many of the strategies they used including exhausting the will of the United States, and the use of attrition, were considered ideal and appropriate for El Salvador.[81] Prior to his death, the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton wrote an article that was posthumously published in the Salvadoran journal *Polemica Internacional.* Dalton's article provided a synthesis of U.S. strategy in Vietnam and the role of the insurgent in a "guerrilla war." Among the most important tasks were destroying enemy forces through attrition. As the article noted, "annihilating enemy forces will break the aggressive nature and strengthen the revolutionary forces."[82] The case study of Vietnam was also important for another reason: it provided the U.S. with the COIN strategy it applied in El Salvador. Joaquín Villalobos considered his country as a pilot project in irregular warfare. As he noted, "All that was applied in Vietnam, and subsequently improved and corrected, has been put into El Salvador without

[81] The *Fuerzas Especiales Selectas* (FES), the special forces of the FMLN were modeled after the North Vietnamese sappers. These units carried out the most daring and spectacular raids of the conflict. Each faction within the FMLN had their own FES units, however, the ERP developed the largest and most sophisticated units. David E. Spencer, *From Vietnam to El Salvador: The Saga of the FMLN Sappers and Other Guerrillas Forces in Latin America* (Westport: Praeger, 1996) 2-3.

[82] *Polemica Internacional* Junio 1980, folder 1, box 1, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

success."[83] Throughout the conflict, whenever the Salvadoran Army adjusted its strategy or tactics, the FMLN attempted to adapt and counter them.

Several Salvadoran insurgents studied the *Tupamaros*, an urban based insurgency in Uruguay that used robberies, kidnappings and terrorism to create chaos and spark uprisings. Also frequently cited was Brazilian radical Carlos Marighella, the author of the *Mini-manual of the Urban Guerrilla* (interestingly, no insurgents identified the experiences of the Algerian FLN as offering relevant lessons for the struggle in the 1970s).[84] These urban insurgent tactics were especially useful the late 1970s when the Salvadoran Left used acts of urban terrorism such as kidnapping wealthy businessmen for ransom and political organizing in the major cities. Meanwhile, the ERP and other insurgent groups drew inspiration from the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions (which some insurgents had experienced first-hand). While Cuba and Nicaragua provided assistance to the Salvadoran radicals, their stories of triumph over U.S. client regimes were not always considered relevant or applicable. Facundo Guardado, an FPL insurgent, believed that the Cubans and the Sandinistas did not have the necessary experience to train the FMLN in the concepts of guerrilla warfare. The more practical and relevant example was the North Vietnamese. However, according to Guardado, the Sandinistas proved to him that overthrowing a corrupt regime was possible.[85]

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[83] Joaquín Villalobos, "Popular insurrection: Desire or reality?" *Latin American Perspectives* 16.3 (Summer 1989): 5. Comandate Balta also agreed with Villalobos's statement.

[84] The various *Comandantes* interviewed did not seem to find the case relevant, despite the use of urban terror and the FLN's utilization of international organizations to publicize and condemn French behavior in Algeria.

[85] Facundo Guardado, interview with author, San Salvador, August 22, 2013.

As the conflict continued, the experiences of Giap and Mao demonstrated their utility for several *comandantes*.[86] However, *Comandante* William Pascasio (Memo) mentioned that he focused less on Giap and concentrated more on Carl Clausewitz's *On War*. Pascasio reasoned that the Salvadoran Army resembled a Prussian-style force, like the German-trained Chilean Army, and that the situation in El Salvador differed from Vietnam.

The particular case models the insurgents studied were determined by the role they played in the insurgency. For those who were more involved in the politico-military aspect of the revolution, the Vietnamese model would have appeared more appropriate. For those strictly concerned with military matters, Clausewitz was more appealing because of the Salvadoran Army's conventional mindset from the outset of the conflict.

The Prussian strategist has been indelibly associated with the conventional military approach to waging war. This has troubled military historians such as T.X. Hammes, Mary Kaldor, and Philip Meilinger, who have been critical of Clausewitz, arguing that the "new wars" the U.S. has faced in the first decade of the twenty first century are not led by states, and thus his approach to warfare is no longer applicable to today's conflicts.[87] Historians such as Bart Schuurman and Christopher Daase believe these critics are mistaken due to a fundamental misunderstanding of his writings on their part.[88] In particular, Daase argues that Clausewitz not only discussed guerrilla warfare, but had a firm grasp of its essentials. Many of the strategies

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[86] Juan Ramón Medrano, a former FMLN Comandante and Facundo Guardado confirmed this in both of their interviews. William Pascasio (Memo), interview with the author, San Salvador, August 19, 2013. None of the former insurgents interviewed studied Algeria or mentioned it as a useful example.

[87] According to these critics, Clausewitz's conception of war is state-centric, or a military competition between two nations. A very concise introduction to these authors critiques of Clausewitz is provided in Bart Schuurman's article "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars," *Parameters* (Spring 2010).

[88] Christopher Daase, "Clausewitz and Small Wars," in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Hew Strachan & Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars."

associated with this type of war, including small-scale attacks against enemy detachments or its weak points, were highlighted during Clausewitz's various lectures on the subject. From Daase's standpoint, there is much to learn about guerrilla warfare from reading Clausewitz.

The Prussian military strategist also recognized the importance of time: it favors the insurgents. States waging counterinsurgency interventions lose strategic power without demonstrating tactical success. Perhaps this maxim is best summarized by Henry Kissinger's "Clausewitzian insight" about the U.S. in Vietnam: "the guerrilla wins if it does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win."[89] Thus, while Clausewitz is generally associated with conventional war and the application of concentrated firepower, arguably, his writings also resonate with insurgents and are more proscriptive for them than generally imagined.

The FMLN divided the war into three stages, similar to Mao or Giap. Under "The Revolutionary War of the People," the FMLN organized the conflict into the stages of growth and consolidation; strategic equilibrium; and the strategic counteroffensive.[90] The latter term was a staple of Mao and Giap's approach to insurgency; it is also indicative of the influence they exerted over the FMLN's strategy. To implement its strategy of PPW, the FMLN applied three different modes: guerrilla, maneuver and attrition warfare.[91] While revolutionary war was supposedly a linear process, it was flexible. The FMLN were not constrained ideologically to one particular strategy or approach, which enabled them to switch between strategies when it suited them.

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[89] Quoted in Daase, 214.

[90] La guerra revolucionaria del pueblo, 1987, Folder 2, Box 2, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

[91] José Moroni Bracamonte & David Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), 13.

After the failure of the Final Offensive, the FMLN regrouped and analyzed its failures. A subsequent investigation determined that its failure was tactical, not strategic.[92] While the FMLN had a large force at its dispersal, it lacked the necessary training and experience.[93] Assessing that the time was not yet ripe for a full insurrection, the FMLN turned its attention to successfully building and training a larger force.[94] Pablo Parada Andino (*Comandante* Goyo), military adviser to Salvador Sanchez Cerén (and current Vice-President of El Salvador), recounted the great difficulty of the years that followed. The lack of clothing, military experience and resources made an already dangerous situation even more hazardous. One of the primary goals was simply to survive.[95]

Over the next several years, the FMLN fought the conflict using a combination of both conventional and unconventional strategies. While occasionally fighting in large-scale formations, the insurgents continued using strategies associated with guerrilla or revolutionary warfare, including political organizing, the establishment of "rear guards" and attacking when they had the advantage. Between 1981 and 1984, the FMLN inflicted a series of defeats on the Salvadoran government and destabilized the nation's economy. Nevertheless, in spite of these achievements, victory proved elusive.

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[92] Bracamonte & Spencer, 20-21.

[93] Pablo Parada Andino, interview with the author, San Salvador, August 20, 2013. It also lacked training on how to effectively and properly use their arms. Raúl Mijango, *Mi Guerra: testimonio de toda una vida* (San Salvador: Laser Print, 2007), 143.

[94] José Medrano, interview with the author, San Salvador, August 22, 2013.

[95] Pablo Parada Andino, interview with the author, San Salvador, August 20, 2013.

One of the FMLN's central goals was to create additional "rearguards."[96] These were insurgent controlled areas where they carried out important tasks such as recruiting, strengthening their popular organizations and training military forces. The FMLN also established military schools such as "*Comandante* Fran" in its rearguards. Some of the graduates of this school became part of the ERP's elite unit *la Brígada Rafael Arce Zablah* (BRAZ). In Morazán the ERP established a training ground for the *Fuerzas Especiales Selectas* (FES).[97] The FMLN consolidated its rearguard in the northern and eastern regions of El Salvador. Several others were established near Honduras, where insurgents could slip across the border and close to the established refugee camps. Two of the more important rearguards were Chalatenango and Morazán, which were dominated by the FPL and ERP respectively. In contrast, the Salvadoran government focused on shoring up its bases of support in western El Salvador and the main cities, including San Salvador.

The three elements behind the FMLN's strategy were the destruction of national infrastructure, disruption of the constituent elections in 1982 and demoralization of the nation's armed forces. These would remain constant throughout the conflict.[98] Insurgent documents repeatedly mention the importance of wearing down its enemy's forces. Referred to as *el desgaste*, or attrition, this tactic relied on surprise attacks, ambushing troops using small patrols, and later in the conflict, the use of small improvised mines. The Woerner Report noted that 75

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[96] Documento: El Plan Puente, 1981, folder 4, Box 5, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[97] Mijango, pp. 152 & 265-269.

[98] Documento 57: "Plan militar general DRU," February 1981, folder 4, box 5, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

percent of all casualties were the "result of ambushes (primarily vehicular) and mines or booby traps."[99]

From 1981 onward, the FMLN's campaign of economic sabotage served several purposes. First and most obvious, it hampered the Salvadoran economy. Economic recovery was an essential aspect of both the United States' and Salvadoran counterinsurgency plans. Sabotage created uncertainty about the economy and triggered capital flight. It also dried up investment in the country, costing jobs and leading to further discontent.[100] Attacking power stations, utility poles, hydroelectric dams and coffee harvests were also designed to test the legitimacy of the government and its ability to provide essential services to the people and promote the socioeconomic development of the country.[101] In addition to disrupting the Salvadoran economy, targeting the nation's infrastructure also tied down army units to provide static defense at sensitive locations and limited their ability to carry out offensive operations against the FMLN.[102]

The FMLN's policy wreaked havoc on the Salvadoran economy. The State Department estimated that the FMLN caused $826 million in damages to the Salvadoran economy between 1979 and 1983. Cumulative U.S. economic assistance during this period totaled $607 million.[103] According to a U.S. government document, the FMLN caused approximately $263 million in

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[99] Draft Report, "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," November 16, 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[100] United States Senate Committee of Foreign Relations. *El Salvador: The United States in the Middle of a Maelstrom*. Joint Committee Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1982.

[101] See Max Manwaring & Courtney Prisk, *A Strategic View of Insurgencies: Insights from El Salvador*, McNair Papers, Number Eight (Washington, D.C.: The Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1990).

[102] Bryne, 106. Juan Ramón Medrano, interview with author, San Salvador, El Salvador, August 19, 2013.

[103] State Department Presentation, January 26, 1984, folder "Unclass: El Salvador-1/261984-3/25/1984, box 6, Constantine Menges files, Ronald Reagan Library.

damages in 1984 alone, roughly six percent of El Salvador's gross domestic product. Total cumulative damages since 1979 were assessed at $1.2 billion.[104] These attacks continued throughout the war, taxing the Salvadoran government's resources and capabilities. Not only did the FMLN's strategy prevent economic growth, but it kept its enemy dependent on U.S. aid.

One of the key lessons of the U.S. COIN experience in El Salvador is that the insurgents get a vote. In most counterinsurgency studies, including El Salvador, their voices have often been curiously absent. This is surprising because one of the best ways to gauge the effectiveness of American COIN strategy is by analyzing how the insurgents reacted to its various pacification efforts. Sidelining insurgent voices not only obscures the contributions they made in forcing alterations in U.S. strategy or tactics, but it also seems to suggest that the only voices that matter are the U.S. government or the military advisors who devised the various counterinsurgency efforts. The FMLN's strategy influenced not only the direction of the war, but also how the U.S. government and its ally responded.

Yunque y martillo

Early in the conflict, the Salvadoran army responded to FMLN attacks and offensives by pursuing a policy of *tierra arrasada* or scorched-earth. For the first several years, civilians were forcibly relocated and those suspected of supporting, or at least sympathizing with the insurgents, were killed. As an internal FMLN document noted, terror and relocation were two fundamental aspects of this strategy. It traced the practice of cleansing certain areas of the country, especially the north (*despoblar el norte del país*), back to the U.S. experience in

[104] Report, "El Salvador: Domestic Troubles," December 11, 1985, El Salvador folder, box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

Vietnam.[105] This was also euphemistically known as *la limpieza*, the clean-up. According to the journalist Mark Danner, the areas "infected" by communism were "being ruthlessly scrubbed; the cancer would be cut out, even if healthy fish had to be lost too."[106] This strategy was aimed at removing the "fish from the water" or removing the population away from the insurgents.[107]

The Salvadoran Army relied on large-scale sweeps to cleanse suspected insurgent areas using *el yunque y martillo*, the anvil and hammer. A staple of warfare, the hammer and anvil tactic uses two forces: one attempts to outflank the enemy, while the main force confronts the enemy head on. Its goal was to maneuver behind and push the insurgents toward a predetermined point where the army would smash them. Generally, these tactics failed because the FMLN avoided being caught between the hammer and the anvil. As the army rummaged through the countryside, it often harassed or terrorized Salvadoran villagers, and in one instance, destroyed an entire village.

Arguably, the most brazen demonstration of this strategy occurred at El Mozote, where the Atlacatl Battalion—the most professional force in the entire Army—rounded up and deliberately murdered hundreds of civilians. As Leigh Binford has argued, the Salvadoran officers who directed the massacre viewed mass terror as a legitimate tactic of COIN; in doing so they demonstrated that they had mastered, perhaps too well, the lessons imparted by their various American advisers, who not only trained the unit, but disseminated a paranoid anticommunist

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[105] "La situacion a dos años de generalización de la guerra revolucionaria popular," February 1983, folder 2, box 1, Salvadoran Subject Collection Hoover Institution.

[106] Danner, 52.

[107] Juan Ramón Medrano, interview with the author, August 19, 2013, San Salvador.

ideology that reinforced preexisting fears and justified the use of any and all methods to defeat the enemy.[108]

This "paranoid, anticommunist ideology," the National Security Doctrine, presented an invisible and menacing worldwide communist movement that threatened "Western civilization and ideals" by uniting political, social, economic, psychological and military resources to mobilize a popular base to subvert the state.[109] Castro's rise to power and the specter of internal subversion led to a reformulation of U.S. national security doctrine in the region. This doctrine encouraged the region's militaries to view social actors as internal enemies and threats.[110] Lacking any external threats, the region's militaries embraced the doctrine to stamp out any revolutionaries intent on replicating the Cuban Revolution.[111] To combat this threat, the state was justified in using repression and terror. As Douglas Porch has noted, the face of COIN in Latin America was more concerned with repression and violence, rather than the winning of hearts and minds.[112]

The number of people killed at El Mozote is a subject of dispute. Reagan officials such as Thomas Enders and Elliot Abrams denied that a massacre ever occurred. When reporters from the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* published stories about the massacre, the Reagan

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[108] Binford, 47.

[109] Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myth of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 231.

[110] J. Patrice McSherry, "Operation Condor as a Hemispheric 'Counterterror' Organization," in *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror,* ed. Cecilia Menjívar & Néstor Rodriguez (Austin: University of Texas, 2005), 29.

[111] Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina and International Human Rights* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 25.

[112] Porch, 231.

administration was set to certify the next day that the Salvadoran government had made progress in improving its human rights record. The UN Truth Commission posited that a "group of more than 200" men, women and children had been killed.[113] A list compiled by *Tutela Legal*, the human rights office of the Archbishopric of San Salvador, claimed that 767 people died. Some authors, including Leigh Binford, among others, has argued that approximately 1,000 civilians were deliberately and systematically murdered. A forensic post-examination conducted after the war, revealed the true horrors of the massacre: approximately eighty-five percent of the 117 victims discovered at what had been the sacristy of El Mozote's church were children under the age of twelve.[114] It was an excellent example of the now infamous statement attributed to an American officer in Vietnam, "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it."[115]

Ultimately, indiscriminate attacks against civilians were self-defeating. They incurred the ire of Congress and alienated rural Salvadorans. They also increased the FMLN's revolutionary activity and its interaction between the people.[116] The failure of this approach strengthened the hand of the American trainers attempting to convince the Salvadoran army to eschew killing insurgents in favor of civic action and development projects. In June 1983, their efforts paid off.

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[113] United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, available online at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf.

[114] United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, available online at http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf.

[115] See "Major Describes Move," *New York Times,* February 8, 1968; For an interesting follow up article read, "Ruined Bentre, After 45 Days, Still Awaits Saigon's Aid," *New York Times,* March 15, 1968.

[116] Balta, 140.

Building a moderate and centrist political force

Political reform in COIN is meant to create institutions that build foundations of support among the people. Its ultimate goal is to bestow national and international legitimacy upon the government. Opening the political process to the people is meant to convince them that they have increasingly greater control over their lives by sharing in the decisions of government.[117] In El Salvador, the strategy involved holding elections and establishing a viable, moderate political center against the extreme left and right. The goal was to replace formal military rule with a "third force" civilian government capable of capturing support at home and abroad.[118] The major component of this program was holding scheduled Constituent Assembly elections in 1982 and presidential elections in 1984.

Elections were seen as a critical element in the American counterinsurgency effort. They were considered as a means of enhancing the regime's legitimacy and serving as a non-violent means of resolving the conflict between the Christian Democrats and the far right. Potentially, they could also defuse the danger of the right if they could channel their grievances into an election campaign.[119] Elections were also used to build legitimacy for Duarte and to create a centrist party, acceptable to the U.S. public and Congress. Elections in El Salvador also served another important purpose: to gain Congressional support to continue providing funding. The Presidential elections in 1984 were highly touted by the Reagan administration as a sure sign that democracy was moving forward in El Salvador. However, both of these elections excluded the FMLN, as well as the smaller leftist parties in the country. Two decades later, another American

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[117] Richard Alan White, *The Morass: United States Intervention in Central America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 20.

[118] LeoGrande, 112-113.

[119] LeoGrande, 129

statesman would claim holding elections in the midst of a civil war represented a triumph for the United States and its ally.

U.S. officials repeatedly claimed that the Salvadoran leftists had no intention of participating. Rather, they preferred to shoot their way into power. Arguably, there were several individuals and factions within the FMLN who had no interest in participating. However, even if they had wanted to, their security could not be guaranteed. The center-left FDR remained unwilling to participate due to fear they would be murdered, as their leadership was in November 1980. More importantly, the Salvadoran military opposed the participation of the left in the elections.[120]

The 1982 constituent assembly elections occurred in the midst of the fighting. Ambassador Hinton asserted that "the elections will indicate very clearly that the vast majority of the people of this country are in favor of something different than these five or ten or fifteen thousand misguided individuals that are trying to destroy the country."[121] The FMLN attempted to disrupt the elections, especially in the eastern portion of the country. The insurgents also issued a series of warnings to civilians threatening them to stay at home and avoid travel and military garrisons. One of the warnings informed civilians: "Do Not Pay Attention to Guillermo Ungo; he and the FDR do not speak for the FMLN." Ungo issued a statement saying that the FMLN would not target voters on Election Day.[122] However, not all of the factions participated. According to one *Comandante*, the ERP and the RN were the only groups that attempted to

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[120] LeoGrande, 158.

[121] LeoGrande, 158.

[122] Telegram, "Threats Against Voters," March 05,1982, box 1: FMLN File Indices, FMLN Background 5/84-6/84, FMLN Background 1980-1992, Records Relating to the UN Truth Commission, 1980-1993, RG 59, NARA.

disrupt the elections. According to Raul Mijango, the other groups, especially the FPL, considered their actions "petit-bourgeois" and irrelevant to their strategy of PPW. They believed that trying to disrupt the elections would not lead to the decisive battle that would open the solution for a military or negotiated end to the conflict. In other words, it was a waste of effort and resources.[123]

To disrupt the Constituent Assembly elections, the groups within the FMLN who supported this policy concentrated on probing attacks on urban centers, destroying the means of transportation and other infrastructure, and intimidating voters. As Ambassador Hinton noted, their efforts were marked by "intensity and boldness." The Salvadoran insurgents launched several small attacks against cities in the provinces of Usulután and Morazán. The American ambassador believed that the aim of these attacks was to demonstrate insurgent strength and achieve propaganda victories ahead of the elections. In spite of the FMLN's actions, the U.S. Country Team predicted that the elections would proceed as planned.[124] Their predictions turned out to be accurate.

Ultimately, the FMLN failed to significantly disrupt the scheduled constituent elections, except in areas they effectively controlled.[125] *Comandate* Balta conceded that the elections were a triumph for the Duarte government. In particular, this was because they were able to hold them in the midst of the war and prevent the FMLN from derailing them.[126] An insurgent publication

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[123] Raúl Mijango, *Mi Guerra: testimonio de toda una vida* (San Salvador: Laser Print, 2007): 156.

[124] Telegram, "Country Team Assessment of Security Environment for Elections," March 18, 1982FMLN Background 1980-1992, Records Relating to the UN Truth Commission, 1980-1993, RG 59, NARA.

[125] Raymond Bonner, "For the Left, Big Setback: Rebels Failed to Bar Nation from Voting," *New York Times,* March 30, 1982.

[126] Juan Ramón Medrano, interview with author, August 19, 2013.

produced during the war agreed, noting that the military tactics it employed during the elections were inadequate.[127] On election day, a record number of Salvadorans cast their ballots. Some sources claim that approximately eighty-five percent of Salvadorans voted. As Alexander Haig proudly noted in a telegram to diplomatic posts, in past Salvadoran elections as many as fifty percent of voters in some departments had submitted blank or defaced ballots; in this election the number was approximately twelve percent.[128] The Reagan administration cast the election as a resounding success and vindication not only for U.S. policy but for the spread of democracy in the region. However, voting was mandatory for civilians and enforced by security checks. To protest, voters often submitted defaced or blank ballots rather than not participating at all. In spite of this, years later, Dick Cheney used the 1982 election to support the George W. Bush administration's policy of holding constituent elections in Iraq.[129] Much as Vietnam had served as a precedent for El Salvador, the Salvadoran conflict provided a useful example for a future conflict: the second Iraq War.

Even before the election results were announced, American policymakers were concerned about the likelihood of ex-Major Roberto D'Aubuisson's party winning the elections. The previous year, the former intelligence officer accused of orchestrating the assassination of Archbishop Romero had founded his own political party, the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA), which had strong links with the extreme right in Guatemala City and Miami. Reportedly, the CIA spent $2 million to prevent the election of D'Aubuisson. The prospect of

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[127] Telegram, "FDR Publication," January 25, 1983, box 1: FMLN File Indices, FMLN Background 5/84-6/84, FMLN Background January 1983-April 1984, Records Relating to the UN Truth Commission, 1980-1993, RG 59, NARA.

[128] Telegram, Haig to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts, April 1982, folder "Cable file—El Salvador, 04/011982-04/14/1982," box 12, Roger Fontaine Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[129] Peceny and Stanley, 68.

D'Aubuisson being elected was a nightmare; keeping Duarte in power was crucial for continuing congressional support. The CIA feared his victory because it could lead to the political isolation of the regime and potentially boost the credibility of the FMLN.[130]

In 1984, El Salvador held a presidential election. Policymakers in Washington were not overly enthusiastic about either of the front runners. In spite of the generous aid provided by the United States to Duarte's government since 1982, he was not the Reagan administration's favored candidate. The White House's ideal choice was Fidel Chavez Mena, a rival in Duarte's party who was more conciliatory and had a better relationship with both the private sector and the army. Unfortunately, Mena failed to secure the PDC nomination. Washington quickly bestowed its blessing on Francisco Guerrero of the *Partido de Conciliación Nacional* (PNC), the military's political party that had ruled the country during the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately for U.S strategists, its new candidate came in a disappointing third during the first round of voting.[131] Ultimately, the race came down to Duarte and D'Aubuisson. Since the latter had been labeled as a "psychopath" and "mentally unstable" by the CIA, it was an easy choice to back Duarte. The United States provided Duarte with $10 million to pay for expenses, and another $1.4 million directly for his campaign.[132]

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[130] CIA Intelligence Estimate, "The Election Outlook in El Salvador," in Salvadoran Human Rights Volume I, Library of Congress.

[131] Washington was concerned that a Duarte victory would encourage the private sector to urge its allies in the military to overthrow him. Duarte also came across as openly antagonistic and supposedly reveled in angering his rivals. U.S. officials turned to Guerrero because they hoped he would siphon off votes from D'Aubuisson to place second behind Duarte in the first round of voting. With D'Aubuisson eliminated, *ARENA* supporters would flock to Guerrero who would defeat Duarte in the election. LeoGrande, 247-248.

[132] CIA, "El Salvador: the Role of Roberto D'Aubuisson," March 4, 1981 (CIA FOIA website). For the amount spent by the U.S., see LaFeber, 318.

After Duarte's election, many moderates in Congress became reluctant to oppose aid despite evidence that the military, not Duarte, was still in control and that the military corruption and repression were continuing.[133] Moreover, with Duarte and his Christian Democrats in office, the Reagan administration could convince Congress—previously reluctant to back an obvious rightist and authoritarian regime—to increase economic and military aid.[134] As Cynthia Arnson noted, if Duarte did not win the 1984 presidential election, it would have spelled the end of Reagan's policy in El Salvador.[135] Had a man associated with death squads and the assassination of Archbishop Romero been elected, Congress could have made Reagan's policies much more difficult. Duarte's election allowed the White House to focus its attention elsewhere in the region. For the next several years, Reagan's Salvadoran policy took a backseat, as the administration focused on Nicaragua.

Agrarian Reform

Agrarian reform, a key element of COIN strategy in rural areas, continued under the Reagan administration. The program aimed at not only restructuring El Salvador's unequal land tenure system, but also undercutting support for the FMLN. Under this initiative, privately held land was to be managed through collective ownership by government-run agricultural organizations. After land was identified and expropriated, these groups would help manage the properties and pay the government for their usage. However, it was beset by challenges from

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[133] Kenneth Sharpe, "U.S. Policy toward Central America: the Post-Vietnam Formula under Siege," in the *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s,* ed. by Nora Hamilton (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 23.

[134] Martin Diskin, *The Impact of U.S. Policy in El Salvador, 1979-1985*, policy papers in international affairs no. 27 (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1986), 59.

[135] Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 149

both sides of El Salvador's political spectrum.[136] Even some of Reagan's supporters questioned the reform.[137]

The main U.S. agency tasked with administering and advising the land reform campaign was the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD). Created in the 1960s as the international arm of the AFL-CIO in the Americas, the AIFLD received the majority of its funding from U.S. AID. Under Carter, the Salvadoran government closed the AIFLD's offices. To convince the Salvadoran government to reopen its offices, AIFLD sent Michael Hammer—who was later assassinated by opponents of agrarian reform—to plead the agency's case. Hammer's visit was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, prior to the overthrow of the Romero regime, the American organization was allowed to return, but the JRG coup prevented the necessary signature to reopen the office.[138]

Agrarian reform in El Salvador contained three distinct phases, which were meant to proceed in linear fashion. Phase I of the agrarian reform initiated the process of transferring land from the large landowners to the peasants. Properties in excess of 500 hectares were expropriated

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[136] As one U.S. document noted, "While innocent campesinos are being hit from both sides of the political spectrum, there is a good deal of evidence that much of the violence is being carried out by government security forces." See "Difficulties with the Implementation of Decree 207 ('land to the tiller') in El Salvador's Agrarian Reform Program," Date Unknown, NSA El Salvador Online Collections, NSA. The left viewed it as a façade to return things to the status quo antebellum, and finally the center believed that agrarian reform would overcome poverty in the campo. At best, these views oversimplified matters.

[137] Conservative opposition saw agrarian reform as the first step toward Communism and that all privately owned farms would be collectivized. Representing this view point, Virginia Prewett, a conservative writer working with the Council for Inter-American Security, argued that the program was a terrible idea that had replaced private enterprise and agriculture with state control. Denouncing it as "instant Socialism" tailor made by President Carter, Prewett opined that "supporting this attack on free enterprise, the U.S. had severely damaged El Salvador's prospects for political stability by undermining the productivity of its economy." Virginia Prewett, "Washington's Instant Socialism in El Salvador," folder 1, box 5, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution. Checchi and Company Report to AID, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," December 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[138] Checchi and Company Report to AID, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," December 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

and their owners compensated by bonds determined on the declared value on their tax statements from 1976 to 1977.[139] As elsewhere, landowners undervalued their reported earnings or simply parceled their land into smaller sizes to avoid their inclusion in phase I. The implementation of phase I aroused the ire of conservative Salvadoran landowners and the military, who demonstrated their hostility by assassinating three agrarian reform officials, two of them American, in January 1981. Violence and threats against *campesinos* and government officials associated with agrarian reform continued for the next several years.

Phase II, announced in March 1980, targeted farms ranging between 100 to 500 hectares. Originally, phase II was postponed until after the 1982 constituent elections. Even though it was considered to be at the heart of the reform program, it was never formally implemented. The land targeted twenty-three percent of the nation's best farmland and nearly seventy-five percent of the nation's export crops.[140] Many of the farms affected grew coffee, one of the country's most important crops, and belonged to prominent Salvadoran families.[141] Besides wanting to avoid alienating key sectors of the Salvadoran right, the U.S. government did not want to weaken the already shaky Salvadoran economy.[142] As a U.S. embassy briefing book noted, phase II required administrative, financial and personnel requirements beyond those available to the Salvadoran government.[143]

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[139] Checchi and Company Report to AID, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," December 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[140] Quoted in the World Bank Country Study, *El Salvador: Rural Development Strategy* (Washington, World Bank: 1998), 196.

[141] Checchi and Company Report to AID, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," December 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[142] LeoGrande, 167.

[143] U.S. Embassy Briefing Book, ND, folder 2.1, box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

Phase III, promulgated in April 1980, was designed to transfer the title of land ownership to Salvadoran *campesinos* who had rented the land they plowed. Excluded from the decree were owner-operated farms of less than 100 hectares, which constituted about half of the country's farms and half of the land in farms.[144] Decree 207 was supposed to benefit approximately 150,000 small farmers. The most attractive feature of the program was its "self-executing nature." Once the decree was promulgated, implementation would proceed rapidly and orderly.[145] It affected the middle class of Salvadoran farmers, which grew the most economically productive crop, coffee.

Phase III drew criticism from both Salvadoran and U.S. quarters. From the outset, it was not well adapted to Salvadoran conditions. Most renters worked plots of less than three acres of very poor land—not nearly enough to support the average family of six. The land's low quality required frequent rotation of crops to avoid soil exhaustion, so peasants rarely rented the same plot two seasons in a row.[146] D'Aubuisson, who had vociferously opposed agrarian reform, claimed that phase III hung "over the economy like the sword of Damocles."[147] Officials within the Salvadoran government, including within the Ministry of Agriculture and the *Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria* (ISTA) opposed the decree. While officials of the latter generally supported Phases I and II, they condemned the rigidity of the law, which stated that any land was subject to expropriation, but more importantly, they felt it provided its beneficiaries

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[144] Checchi and Company Report to AID, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," December 1981, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[145] "Difficulties with the Implementation of Decree 207 ('land to the tiller') in El Salvador's Agrarian Reform Program," Date Unknown, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[146] LeoGrande, 168.

[147] Telegram, "Ambassador Kirkpatrick's Lunch Conversation with Roberto D'Aubuisson and ARENA Leaders," February 14, 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

with little more than "token benefits." As one document stated, Decree 207 would create '*minifundistas*' of the most diminutive order, and their lives would be just as precarious as ever."[148]

The greatest political liability of phase III, according to an internal AID document, was that it was "designed virtually in its entirety by Americans and slipped into legislation without their (Salvadoran government) being consulted. The fact is known and resented."[149] This was a sticking issue in the program, not only in the land reform, but as will be discussed later, the military aspect as well. The author of the program, Roy Prosterman, worked for the AIFLD. His effort was not an original idea either. The "land to the tiller" program in El Salvador was modeled on an agrarian reform effort he launched in Vietnam.[150] Prosterman believed that these efforts would preempt support for revolution by restoring peasants' economic security and giving them a stake in the incumbent regime.[151]

Phase III had strong political undertones as well. According to the American journalist Raymond Bonner, Prosterman's Land to the Tiller Program was meant to emulate Douglas MacArthur's land reform program in post-war Japan. In Prosterman's opinion, MacArthur's program effectively destroyed communists as a political force in Japan. He also told a hostile

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[148] The report also noted that the agricultural practice of "slash and burn practiced" by Salvadoran peasants, which relied on rotating the soil, would also rapidly deplete the quality of the soil of the land granted to them by Decree 207. "Difficulties with the Implementation of Decree 207 ('land to the tiller') in El Salvador's Agrarian Reform Program," Date Unknown, NSA El Salvador Collection.

[149] "Difficulties with the Implementation of Decree 207 in El Salvador's Agrarian Reform Program," Date Unknown, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[150] Michael Sussman, *AIFLD: U.S. Trojan Horse in Latin America and the Caribbean;* (Washington, DC: Epica, 1983), 17.

[151] T. David Mason, *Caught in the Crossfire: Revolutions, Repression and the Rational Peasant* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 148.

audience of Salvadoran businessmen that the program would be successful, "breeding capitalists like rabbits."[152] Former Ambassador White also agreed, remarking that Prosterman thought "it was going to build a middle class, a group of people who had a stake in society."[153] In theory, Phase III would create a group of small land-holding Salvadoran farmers who would naturally be pro-capital. This new class of *campesinos* could also conceivably become the moderate and centrist force in El Salvador to counterbalance the extreme left and right.

As violence against *campesinos* and cooperative members continued, AIFLD officials were concerned that members of the *Unión Comunal Salvadoreña,* especially in western portions of the country, might renounce their membership. This organization was especially strong in the departments of Santa Ana, Ahuachapán and Sonsonate, which were areas with high rates of violent incidents against agrarian reform officials and its supporters. The UCS was set up to improve the plight of the Salvadoran peasantry through self-improvement projects. Created by a network of Salvadoran AIFLD members in the 1960s, its membership quickly expanded from 4,000 members at its inception to 70,000 six years later, and 120,000 by 1980.[154] Because of its attempts to co-opt peasants and bring them under effective government control, the UCS was routinely accused by its critics of being an appendage of the U.S. government. While acknowledging the merit of these claims, Molly Todd argued in her recent study of *campesinos* during the conflict, that they are also overblown. For Salvadoran peasants, their affiliation with the UCS proved to be beneficial not only in terms of material acquisition and skills, but also

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[152] Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 194-195.

[153]Quoted in Bonner, 195.

[154] Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 33.

because they gained economic and political awareness and experience with political organization. In Todd's opinion, the UCS actually paved the way for future *campesino* organizations.[155]

The perpetrators of the anti-*campesino* violence were thought to be Canton Patrols, who were "universally against Decree 207."[156] The prospect of a mass renunciation of membership could be potentially destabilizing and a blow to agrarian reform. As one official noted, the violence demonstrated the tremendous frustration that existed, "which neither the government nor the armed forces seemed to understand or wanted to pay attention to." This view was also shared by critics of agrarian reform who similarly accused the Salvadoran government and military of either ignoring or downplaying violence against the various peasant cooperatives. This posed a serious issue because while their withdrawal would not mean they would support the insurgents, it could potentially "give many right-wing military elements an excuse to persecute the UCS and ask them to seek protection from the FMLN."[157] The violence against the organization, left unchecked, might potentially drive its members into the arms of the insurgents for want of a peaceful alternative. Furthermore, it could possibly destabilizie agrarian reform in El Salvador's western departments.

Nearly a year after the launching of agrarian reform, the program's existence was threatened. An AIFLD reported submitted to the American embassy noted as such. There were several actors who wanted to see it fail: large landowners and their private armies and the

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[155] Todd, 35.

[156] Memorandum from Richard Culahan to Bill Hallman, "Arming Canton Patrols," October 23, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[157] Memorandum from Richard Culahan to William Doherty Jr., May 26, 1981, folder El Salvador: 06/01/1981-06/03-1981, box 5, Roger Fontaine Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

FMLN. The agency routinely worried about disillusioned Salvadoran peasants joining the ranks of the FMLN. Another threat was the Canton Patrols—rural armed groups—that were not supportive of agrarian reform, especially Decree 207.[158] Instances of throwing renters off the land, forcing *campesinos* to renounce their right to ownership, or using force to evict the renters, "although illegal," appeared to happen on a "widespread scale."[159] There was reason for concern: the processing of titles was barely moving; evictions had accelerated, and illegal rent collections by former landlords were also increasing.[160]

The situation remained bleak in 1982. In a *Washington Post* article, land reform workers charged that the reform program, strongly supported by the Reagan administration as a key to the future of Salvadoran democracy and stability, was near collapse because of military backed terror and murder, illegal peasant evictions and a slow, "frequently hostile" bureaucracy.[161] However, the UCS seemed to back track almost immediately upon this story becoming widely known. Within a few days, the organization praised the Duarte government for "positive attitudes" toward the troubled land redistribution plan and for accepting policy recommendations from the group, including promises to overcome lethargic bureaucracy and widespread brutality.[162] Duarte also planned on submitting cases of violence to the Salvadoran Attorney

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[158] Memorandum from Richard Culahan to Bill Hallman, "Arming Canton Patrols," October 23, 1980, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[159] "Difficulties with the Implementation of Decree 207 ('land to the tiller') in El Salvador's Agrarian Reform Program," Date Unknown, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[160] Telegram, April 1981, "Guerrillas" folder, Box 6: Subject Files: Abrams—Christian Democratic Party, NSA Archival Collection.

[161] Karen DeYoung, "Salvadoran Land Reform Imperiled, Report Says," *Washington Post,* January 25, 1982.

[162] Charles Mohr, "Salvadoran Peasants Praise Land Policy," *New York Times,* January 30, 1982.

General's office.[163] Nevertheless, the group did not repudiate its gloomy findings in its December letter.[164]

After the Constituent Assembly elections, violence against *campesinos* soared. By the middle of 1982 opponents of the reform effort won key positions within the Salvadoran government and began to strip important provisions from the legislation. After winning control of the Constituent Assembly, D'Aubuisson used his powers to end transfers of land under phases I and III, and delayed the implementation of phase II. Moreover, he obtained key posts for his supporters within the *Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria* (ISTA) and *Financiera Nacional de Tierras Agrícolas* (FINATA).[165] Nevertheless, the U.S. government maintained that the agrarian reform program was working by arguing that land reform had passed its political crisis point and violent resistance had been defused.[166] In spite of these optimistic pronouncements, the following year, death squads resumed their practice of targeting agrarian reform activists and supporters in the Salvadoran government by sending them death threats. The intimidation worked, further truncating and blunting the reform's effectiveness.[167]

Beyond its intended role of defeating and discrediting Marxist insurgents, the agrarian reform program in El Salvador also had the rather straightforward goal of simply ending the

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[163] Letter, "AIFLD Translation of Acknowledgement of Receipt of UCS Documents on Decree 207 by Jose Napoleon Duarte," January 4, 1982, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[164] Union Comunal Salvadoreña, Letter to William Doherty, "UCS Statement on Land Reform," January 25, 1982, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[165] Daniel Siegel & Joy Hackel, "El Salvador: Counterinsurgency Revisited," in *Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties,* ed. Michael Klare & Peter Kornbluh, 112-135.

[166] Bureau of Intelligence and Research Analysis, "El Salvador: Brighter Prospects for Land Reform," March 17, 1983, folder "El Salvador," box 1, Jaqueline Tillman Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[167] LeoGrande, 227.

country's pervasive wealth disparity. Unfortunately, eleven years after the program began, wealth had become even more concentrated and the gap between rich and poor had grown.[168] While the program arguably diminished the further radicalization of the peasantry, it never broke the FMLN's power over the countryside. The most important stage of agrarian reform—phase II—was not only delayed, but it was opposed by key sectors in both the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. The political right proved indefatigably hostile by first trying to prevent the program's implementation and eventually in killing the program altogether.[169] This opposition was compounded by violence against agrarian reform officials, from the FMLN and the coffee oligarchy and its various paramilitary networks. Ultimately, agrarian reform failed to achieve its lofty ambitions.

Regional Peace Initiatives

In January 1983, officials from Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela gathered at Contadora, an island off the coast of Panama. Known as the "Contadora Group," these countries tried to devise a plan to end the conflicts that ravaged Central America. In particular, the Contadora mediators believed that their collaboration could lead to a decrease in intrusive U.S. intervention in the region and force the principle belligerents to negotiate.[170] In September 1983, the group produced a twenty-one point agreement that called for an end to the militarization of the region and for further democratization. The following September, it followed up its previous efforts by issuing an agreement that included advancing the promotion of democracy, ending the

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[168] Schwartz, 49.

[169] Schwartz, VI.

[170] Diana Villiers Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

region's conflicts and increasing economic cooperation. To enforce compliance, Contadora created regional committees to evaluate and verify the implementation of its protocols.

The Contadora group's preferred method of work consisted of dialogue among foreign ministers. They made no effort to include non-governmental regional actors, such as the FMLN. Central American guerrilla forces were excluded because they were considered to be illegal. Consequently, the FMLN viewed the group's initiatives cynically and actively opposed them.[171] This was a curious claim, because two years before, the FMLN had been recognized by France and Mexico as legitimate political actors. The Mexican government's policy was completely at odds with its northern neighbor. Unlike the Reagan administration, the Mexican government believed that the various military governments in Central America would not be able to survive growing demands for political and social change. According to the American Ambassador to Mexico, Mexico's recognition of the FMLN was based on an assessment that the odds for an eventual FMLN victory had improved.[172] However, the Mexican government also recognized that bolstering repressive regimes prolonged instability and radicalized calls for change. As a Mexican diplomat informed Washington, "…we recognize that the pressures for change can no longer be smothered. These countries have to find their own solutions, even if this means revolutions. Otherwise they will never be stable."[173]

Contadora's proposals received a mixed response from the Reagan administration. Secretary of State George Shultz, a political moderate, preferred a diplomatic solution. On the

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[171] Villiers-Negroponte, 5.

[172] Telegram, "GOM Moves toward Recognition of FMLN/FDR," August 1981, box 1: "FMLN File Indices, FMLN Background 5/84-6/84," FMLN Background 1980-1192, Records Relating to the UN Truth Commission, 1980-1993, RG 59, NARA.

[173] Alan Riding, "López Portillo to Reagan on Central America: Don't," *New York Times,* January 4, 1981.

other hand, hardliners within the administration, especially the NSC, denounced the pact because it legitimized the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.[174] As Walter LaFeber acknowledged, "The United States set out to destroy the Contadora agreement."[175] The hardliners within the Reagan administration ultimately won out. After ratification by Nicaragua, the Reagan administration refused to sign the document, calling it a publicity stunt.[176] The Reagan administration rejected the agreement because it included recognition of the Sandinistas. The U.S. then successfully pressured its closest allies in the region, including Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, to reject signing the convention and outside mediation.

Despite the lack of tangible progress, these initiatives began the process that produced the Esquipulas Accords. These proposals provided a non-violent means of ending the region's conflicts, which clashed with the Reagan administration's preference for securing military victory. Ultimately, it was Latin American initiatives, rather than anything that emanated from the White House, that ended Central America's bloody conflicts. Whereas U.S. diplomacy and military intervention have been decisive in terminating other conflicts, the same cannot be said for the Salvadoran civil war. As will be discussed later, the termination of the war had little to do with American COIN strategy. In addition, this also contrasts with the "success" narrative promoted by COIN advocates and supporters of U.S. policy during the conflict, which claims that the American counterinsurgency effort led to the end of the conflict and the promotion of democracy in El Salvador.

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[174] Longley, 311.

[175] LaFeber, "Inevitable Revolutions," 297.

[176] LeoGrande, 360.

Pacification

According to General Wallace H. Nutting, Commander in Chief of U.S. Southern Command (1979-1983), the situation at the end of 1982 and early 1983 was dire. After finishing his tenure, he told interviewers that "…at the end of '82, early '83" the "whole thing was about to go down the tubes. The leftist guerrillas…were very strong. The armed forces did not yet have their act together."[177] The CIA also agreed, commenting that the stalemate that began in 1981 had continued.[178] Most contemporary accounts argued that while the situation had stabilized, victory still eluded the Salvadoran government.

In 1983, continued doubts about the feasibility of the American approach existed in both the U.S. and Salvadoran government. In a meeting between the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and Ambassador Hinton and the leaders of ARENA, Kirkpatrick expressed her concerns. She noted that "guerrilla war is not won by popular support alone; guerrillas win wars by violence." According to her, the "military aspect of the war" was "the most important in the short run." If the government continued its poor showing, none of the civic action programs, such as public health, mattered. She seemed to infer that while these were important parts of the struggle, they were secondary.

Kirkpatrick also asked D'Aubuisson about his views of the conflict. As the former colonel claimed, the government's approach was inadequate. As he explained to Kirkpatrick and Hinton, "this is not World War III; this is not the war of large operations; this is a war of propaganda where the motivations of the guerrillas have to be studied." He also complained that

[177] Manwaring & Prisk, 233.

[178] CIA, "Near-Term Prospects for El Salvador," December 14, 1983 (CIA FOIA).

the U.S. had been supporting the wrong man—General José Guillermo Garcia, whom he considered a capable and shrewd man, but also very sinister.[179] The following year, General Garcia was removed from his position and replaced by General Eugenio Vides Casanova, whom American political and military officials touted as the right man at the right time. For his supporters, Casanova would apply American COIN theories and take an aggressive approach to the FMLN—and win.

U.S. government agencies also registered their concern as well. The Defense Intelligence Agency acknowledged that "While the ESAF (El Salvadoran Armed Forces) has improved its capabilities both qualitatively and quantitatively since 1980 the essential political ingredient still eludes the government. Until the GOES can bring the kind of secure environment and economic development to rally support among the general population," the Army's COIN campaigns could only inflict brief setbacks on the insurgents.[180] Frustrated analysts also noted continuities between Vietnam and El Salvador, including the prevalence of American operatives in El Salvador who had served in Southeast Asia. One official portrayed the stakes in drastic fashion, "If pacification fails, we're sunk. We'll either have to give up the Salvadoran effort entirely…or we'll have to make a larger commitment—maybe even troops." [181]

U.S. policymakers also complained about the implementation of pacification efforts. According to one memorandum, in spite of using some "correct" COIN principles, the American

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[179] Telegram, "Ambassador Kirkpatrick's Lunch Conversation with Roberto D'Aubuisson and ARENA Leaders," February 14, 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

[180] This same analysis also expected for the ESAF to make "moderate progress against the guerrillas in the coming year." Defense Intelligence Agency Intelligence Appraisal, "El Salvador: Military-Guerrilla Balance," January 14, 1983, folder "El Salvador, Oliver North, NSC" box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[181] Study, American Friends Service Committee Report: "The U.S. Pacification Program in El Salvador," ND, Folder 2.4, Box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

strategy had serious flaws. In particular, there were two liabilities: the Salvadoran military's bureaucracy confounded efforts by low-ranking officers to apply new doctrine or changes in tactics, and the American strategy was misguided because as the report warned, no country the size of El Salvador could maintain this brand of "costly assistance" without permanent outside funding.[182]

Another source agreed, acknowledging that "the Salvadoran military faces sharp competition for its resources and manpower. On the one hand, static defense is needed to protect key targets such as railroads, bridges and the harvest. On the other hand, the military needs to engage in offensive operations of varied scale to reduce the guerrillas' freedom to operate and keep them off balance."[183] In other words, the COIN designed by the U.S. came with a hefty price tag and was not sustainable because the government lacked the capabilities to carry out the program. This was precisely what David Haines warned about in his article about current U.S. COIN practice.[184] Arguably, these concerns also reflected an admission that the FMLN's strategy of wearing down the army and attacking its vulnerabilities was achieving results.

In spite of a massive increase in U.S. aid, the military and political situation remained tenuous. As Richard White sarcastically remarked, after three years of fiddling around trying to defeat the insurgents with "unscientific" measures like death squad murders and repeated army

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[182] Memo, "A Low-cost Tactical and Offensive Strategy for the Systematic Defeat of Urban and Rural Guerrilla Forces in El Salvador," folder "El Salvador Military Issues {01/01/1983-07/31/1983}," box 11, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[183] Telegram, "Report on Situation in El Salvador Part, Report on the Salvadoran Situation Part II," January 16, 1984, folder "El Salvador Box 9," box 1, David Wigg Giles, Ronald Reagan Library.

[184] David Haines, "COIN in the Real World," *Parameters* 38.4 (Winter 2008): 43-59.

rampages and massacres throughout the countryside, the time had come to "let the professionals run the show."[185]

In June 1983, the U.S. and Salvadoran army embarked on an ambitious civic action and pacification plan known as the National Campaign Plan (NCP), to regain momentum in the countryside. Arguably, this represented a victory for American military trainers who had pleaded with the Salvadoran military to alter their tactics. Calling the NCP a "turning point in the war," a U.S. military official acknowledged that "We will win or lose on this operation."[186] One of the authors of the plan, Colonel John Waghelstein, commander of the U.S. Military Group, believed that "the military assets for conducting a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan were now available. What we did was pick up where the Woerner Report left off and run in the direction it pointed."[187]

According to a State Department telegram, this campaign was a vital test of the commitment and capabilities of the Salvadoran military to counter the guerilla advances of recent months.[188] The plan's blueprint was loosely based around Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS); a program originating in Vietnam and remembered as a success story in what was otherwise a costly debacle. Some of the participants were included in the National Campaign Plan.[189] One such official was L. Craig Johnstone, Enders' principal assistant for Central America. Johnstone had served as a district-level senior

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[185] White, 159.

[186] Russell Watson & James LeMoyne, "A Plan to Win in El Salvador," *Newsweek,* March 21, 1983.

[187] Quoted in Manwaring & Prisk, 234.

[188] State Department, "Briefing Paper on El Salvador. Issues Include: state of War in El Salvador; U.S. Military Assistance to El Salvador," June 10, 1983, DDRS.

[189] Edward Cody, "U.S. Advisers Urged Operation," *Washington Post,* June 15, 1983.

adviser and a special assistant to CORDS director William E. Colby.[190] He was also reported to be the principal architect of the Salvadoran pacification plan.[191]

The NCP was an attempt to win popular support and regain government control over contested zones. It incorporated elements of civilian and military action, and focused on the San Vicente and Usulután provinces, which were both economically and strategically important areas. The operation was a test of the new strategy to deny the insurgents the use of their once secure bases and to initiate development projects and civic action.[192] According to Todd Greentree, the NCP embodied an American "can-do approach" founded on solid accumulation of lessons learned from other COIN experiences. The only problem was it would have been a stretch for even the most developed country to carry out, let alone an underdeveloped country in the midst of a civil war and political transformation.[193] In other words, the U.S.-designed policies were, at best, difficult for the Salvadoran government to implement, especially under war-time conditions.

The pacification effort included four phases: planning, offensive, development and consolidation.[194] The first order of business required the Salvadoran army to flush the insurgents out of the vicinity via military sweeps of the area, securing it, and stationing troops to protect the population. The second phase initiated extensive civic action projects, including building

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[190] LeoGrande, 224.

[191] Bonner, 247.

[192] Report, "El Salvador: Evaluation of Operation 'Well Being for San Vicente,'" September 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

[193] Todd R. Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 103.

[194] State Department, Internal Memorandum, "Combined Political, Economic, Military Plan," January 1, 1983, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

hospitals, schools and other institutions to transform the civilians' lives. Another important element was repairing damaged infrastructure including power lines, bridges and roads, and reopening schools and clinics. In COIN theory the consolidation phase is the most important phase of the process. After removing the insurgents and beginning development projects, the Salvadoran army handed over security to local security forces. According to a State Department fact sheet, it was during this phase that the causes of the insurgency would have been addressed through goodwill and the building of popular support.[195]

The agency charged with overseeing the National Campaign Plan was the National Commission for the Reconstruction of Affected Areas (CONARA in Spanish). The organization's main goal, as the name states, was rebuilding communities devastated by subversive violence or natural disasters and improving their standard of living. One of their essential tasks was restoring public services to the affected communities. Providing aid and essential services was intended to win the support of rural Salvadorans and establish the legitimacy of Duarte's government. According to a telegram sent by former Ambassador Hinton to the Department of Defense, the program had an additional component, which was fighting the war on poverty.[196]

CONARA consisted of a series of reconstruction projects that were short, medium and long term. Reconstruction was envisioned as a three step process: an immediate phase of providing and restoring aid, followed by an escalation of the process and then consolidation.

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[195] State Department, Internal Memorandum, "Combined Political, Economic, Military Plan," January 1, 1983, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[196] Department of Defense, Telegram to Secretary of State, "CONARA," March 1983, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Unlike the NCP, CONARA was supposed to support nation-wide efforts.[197] Later in the conflict, the organization sponsored "open town meetings" which, according to a government brochure, were examples of "democracy in action" that provided a way to exercise "freedom within a participative context."[198] Citizens elected local representatives who participated in municipal councils, the Municipalities in Action. Members of these councils presented their requests to CONARA, who were supposed to initiate public works along with the central government.[199]

According to several accounts, corruption was rampant in CONARA. One report detailed a former director who had misused and stolen funds provided for the agency. This scandal proved to be only the tip of the iceberg.[200] The agency was referred to as "notorious black hole," swallowing money without results, and as one American official quipped, "it was the worst agency you could ever set up."[201] Like many other U.S. COIN efforts, including in Afghanistan and Vietnam, U.S. aid was siphoned off by corrupt officials, never reaching those it was intended to.

"Operation Well Being," the first large operation of the National Campaign Plan, was regarded as a crucial test of the army's ability to break a pattern of large-scale sweeps followed by withdrawals that allowed the guerillas to recover their strongholds.[202] The region selected for

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[197] Gobierno de El Salvador, *Comisión nacional de restauración de areas* (San Salvador: Gobierno de El Salvador, 1983). A copy is available at the Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES) library.

[198] CONARA, *Cabildos Abiertos: La revolución pacifica en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Publicidad Rumbo, ND). A copy is available at the Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES) library.

[199] CONARA, 11.

[200] James LeMoyne, "Salvador Candidate Suspected of U.S. Aid Misuse: He is Reportedly Backed by Duarte's Son within the Governing Party," *New York Times*, March 6, 1988.

[201] Bacevich et al, 44.

[202] Cody, "U.S. Advisers Urged."

the NCP was one of the most fertile agricultural regions, but more importantly, it had also been partially depopulated.[203] One hundred days after the launch of Operation Well-Being, the Salvadoran army had achieved or surpassed all of its objectives for the province of San Vicente. CONARA was also in the process of reopening schools, health clinics, cooperative farms, and along with the U.S. government, providing loans to small businesses such as banks or poultry farmers. As one embassy official noted, "While 1983 opened poorly for the El Salvadoran Armed Forces, new leadership, an increase in resources due to U.S. assistance and the impetus of the combined National Campaign Plan, had given a new sense of purpose, with the army in the field and morale high." Nevertheless, embassy officials warned that it was too "soon to know if the trend can be sustained."[204]

In spite of the optimism, the Salvadoran government lacked the essential resources to pursue the combined civil military operations actively outside the priority areas.[205] As a reporter from *Soldier of Fortune* noted about a recent military operation, "With only three quick reaction battalions, it is difficult to take and hold areas long enough to establish a government presence and then prove to the people caught in between the guerrillas and the army that the latter is preferable."[206] It was a classic case of "good intentions sabotaged by inadequate resources."[207] A lack of adequate resources confounded similar pacification efforts in the future. CIA reporting

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[203] Study, American Friends Service Committee Report: "The U.S. Pacification Program in El Salvador," ND, Folder 2.4, Box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

[204] Telegram, August 20, 1983, "Guerrillas" folder, Box 6: Subject Files: Abrams—Christian Democratic Party, NSA Archival Collection.

[205] Telegram, August 20, 1983, "Guerrillas" folder, Box 6: Subject Files: Abrams—Christian Democratic Party, NSA Archival Collection.

[206] John Metzger, "SOF Visits America's Front Line with Battling Belloso's," *Soldier of Fortune,* July 1983.

[207] Bacevich et al, 44.

made note of modest successes between June and August. After the Salvadoran army swept through, all but one of the insurgent camps in the area of operations had been abandoned.[208] Langley noted that the NCP produced some positive results; however, the FMLN launched a series of counteroffensives that halted their gains. The insurgents capped off their advances the following year by overrunning a major Army garrison and destroying a vital bridge.[209]

An important element of the National Campaign Plan was the development of civil defense units (CDs). The development of CDs continues to be a mainstay in U.S. COIN strategy, including in Iraq. One of their main functions was to provide static security after the military's departure. They also collected intelligence and regulated the movement of civilians to quarantine them from the guerillas.[210] Besides bolstering efforts by regular forces to control the countryside, civil defense also provides a mechanism for inducing people to support the government.[211] However, many of the people recruited for CD forces were very likely former members of ORDEN, who had been linked to previous human rights abuses. Unpleasant memories of ORDEN and other death squads were partly responsible for this lack of enthusiasm.[212]

Poorly armed civil defense units were also ineffective against insurgent forces returning to the San Vicente province during the national campaign. They were also insufficiently armed and consistently outgunned. Compounding this tactical weakness was the all too common

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[208] Report, "El Salvador: Evaluation of Operation 'Well Being for San Vicente,'" September 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

[209] CIA, "The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance," June 1, 1984, CIA FOIA.

[210] Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Research Assessment, "Guatemala and El Salvador: Civil Defense as a COIN Tactic, November 1987, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[211] Bacevich et al, 40.

[212] Bacevich et al, 41-42; Study, American Friends Service Committee Report: "The U.S. Pacification Program in El Salvador," ND, Folder 2.4, Box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

practice among CD personnel of abandoning their weapons when fleeing from the enemy. As one Salvadoran Colonel wryly observed, "sending them out on patrol is a better supply for the rebels than the Nicaraguans."[213] This pattern of failure led to the creation of a national-level program for training and equipping civil defense forces.[214] This new training program was based on the U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Programs from Vietnam—combining Americans and Vietnamese civilians—that would correct abuses and corruption and create a defense structure that would complement the COIN effort of the ESAF.[215]

Once the army moved into the area, the insurgents largely disappeared, allowing the army to occupy the territory. The insurgents were employing the classical guerilla warfare strategy of avoiding superior forces. Theoretically, the army was supposed to remain until the insurgents were defeated. However, the Salvadoran army never had enough troops to permanently occupy the territory, even with subsequent increases in manpower. Eventually, the battalions had to move elsewhere to provide security or be redeployed to carry out operations against the FMLN. Instead of attacking locations where the Salvadoran Army was strongest, the FMLN assaulted vulnerable locations, requiring the ESAF to move their forces.

In response to the NCP, the guerillas directed their actions away from San Vicente, the focal point of the program, toward areas where the army was weaker. Beginning in September 1983, the FMLN launched another offensive, seizing new areas across the eastern third of the

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[213] White, 165.

[214] Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Research Assessment, "Guatemala and El Salvador: Civil Defense as a COIN Tactic," November 1987, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[215] Defense Intelligence Agency, Defense Research Assessment, "Guatemala and El Salvador: Civil Defense as a COIN Tactic," November 1987, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

country, including in the provinces of San Miguel, Usulután and Morazán.[216] They followed up these attacks with another set of devastating attacks against the army a few months later. In late 1983 and early 1984, the ESAF were routed in two separate areas—El Paraíso, an army barracks designed by American engineers said to be impenetrable, and at the Cuscatlán Bridge. According to the Salvadoran Army, El Paraíso was the battle with the government's single highest casualty count in four years of war.[217] The destruction of the Cuscatlán Bridge severed the main carrier of traffic to the eastern third of the country.[218] These failures showed that, despite the ambitious campaign, the rebels were still able to determine the pace and initiative of battle.

Estimated troop strength for the Salvadoran military in 1983 was approximately 25,000.[219] By the end of the war, that number more than doubled. In 1992, the Salvadoran military had roughly 60,000 soldiers at its command. By comparison, El Salvador's population was estimated at 4,600,000 million according to World Bank census data. Approximately one out of every twenty-five Salvadorans was in the armed forces, making it one of Central America's largest militaries.[220] According to State Department figures, the only other two countries with

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[216] Robert Rivard, "El Salvador: The Rebels Show New Strength," *Newsweek,* December 5, 1983, 80.

[217] Tommy Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (Boulder & San Francisco, Westview Press, 1992), 171; Robert J. McCartney, "El Salvador Confirms Loss of 100," *Washington Post,* January 4, 1984.

[218] "Salvadoran Rebels Cut Vital Span," *Washington Post,* January 2, 1984.

[219] This estimate is derived from Table 6.3 in Philip J. Williams, & Knut Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 140. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) offered a higher number for El Salvador's population, listing it at approximately 4,850,000. This same report put the total size of El Salvador's military at 24,650. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 1983-1984* (London: IISS, 1983).

[220] This data was derived from a World Bank Census Report, which can be found on its website, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?page=6.

higher figures were Cuba and Nicaragua, respectively.[221] For several years, Guatemala had a military comparable to El Salvador, but its population was a little more than double that of El Salvador. By 1992, Guatemala's military had been far surpassed numerically.[222] These numbers support critics' who argued that U.S. COIN strategy was unsustainable and inappropriate for the country. Despite building one of Central America's largest militaries, it never was able to inflict a military defeat upon the FMLN. These figures are also indicative of the relative popularity of the FMLN, because of the size of the force constructed to defeat them.

When the rebels reoccupied an area vacated by the military, they set up their own shadow governments including local governing bodies, hospitals and a rudimentary legal system. The strategic goal was to establish these areas as strongholds or bases from which they could launch attacks. According to journalists who visited these areas, the disposition of the local population ranged from passivity to support. Reflecting the general mood, one local woman stated "the only thing preventing massive incorporation is fear that the army will return."[223] A *Newsweek* reporter who also traveled to a rebel stronghold noted that the villagers were as intimidated by the rebels as by the army.[224] Even if the civilians were not uniformly supportive of the insurgents, they at least tolerated them. This made cooperation with the ESAF even more difficult.

Ultimately, American-backed pacification efforts failed for a variety of reasons. The counterinsurgency operations devised for the Salvadorans were contingent on the availability of

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[221] U.S. State Department Special Report 103, "Cuban Armed Forces and the Soviet Military Presence," August 1982. A copy is available at www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a497385.pdf

[222] According to IISS, for 1983-1984, Guatemala had 21, 560 men under arms out of a population of 7, 600,000. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 1983-1984* (London: IISS, 1983).

[223] Sam Dillon, "Salvadoran Rebels Carve out Enclave," *Miami Herald,* November 27, 1983.

[224] Robert Rivard, "El Salvador: The Rebels Show New Strength," *Newsweek,* December 5, 1983, 80.

considerable manpower and resources.[225] Besides the corruption within the state apparatus, these efforts were also hampered by the conspicuous presence of U.S. fingerprints that simply would not wash off. No matter how much aid the United States put into El Salvador, it could not have achieved U.S. objectives, given the illegitimacy of the government.

There was also a question of will.[226] As Todd Greentree notes, it was never entirely clear just how determined the ESAF was to win, either on American terms or at all. The ESAF had been fighting communism in their own way since 1932 and had not hesitated to sever their formal ties with the U.S. military in 1977 over what they considered to be the indignity of the Carter human rights policies.[227] According to the Colonel's Report, written and published during the conflict, the failure of the NCP convinced hardline Salvadoran commanders to forget about winning hearts and minds and focus on pursuing and killing the guerrillas.[228]

A thorn in the president's side

Throughout Reagan's first administration, his Salvadoran policy faced resistance from the legislative branch. From 1981-1984, Congress attempted to participate in shaping the administration's Salvadoran policy by attaching conditions to aid. These measures included reining in security forces abuses, making a concerted effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights standards, honoring a commitment to holding free elections and making continuing progress in land reform. Every six months, the Regan administration was required to go before Congress and submit its certification. This came to be known as the "dance of

[225] Bacevich et al, 44.

[226] Greentree, 103.

[227] Greentree, 99.

[228] Bacevich et al, 44.

certification."[229] In 1983 Reagan eliminated the law. Despite threats to cease aid to El Salvador, the U.S. Congress never cut the purse strings. As Elliot Abrams, Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, noted, Congress "didn't cut off aid, because it didn't want to risk being blamed, if the guerrillas won as a result for 'losing' El Salvador. Instead, they required certification—which is to say, they agreed to fund the war while reserving the right to call us Fascists." Similarly, Deane Hinton later described the process "As a way for the Congress…to be for and against something at the same time."[230]

In order to create a bi-partisan consensus on U.S. policy toward El Salvador, President Reagan nominated former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in July 1983 to chair a commission to support the administration's policies.[231] Rather than presenting new ideas, the Kissinger Commission simply validated Reagan's anti-communist policies.[232] The commission's findings, presented in January 1984, were also one of the foundations on which U.S. strategy toward El Salvador rested.[233]

The Kissinger Report viewed regional instability as being caused by external actors who exploited socioeconomic conditions, an argument that most Latin American specialists and critics of the Reagan administration have hotly disputed. While it placed the burden of responsibility on external actors, it spent little time addressing the internal conditions that gave rise to the outbreak of the civil war in the first place. The commission's report advocated a

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[229] Sharpe, 21.

[230] Quoted in Danner, 91.

[231] Despite the label of "bi-partisan" there was only one liberal democrat on the panel. The remaining Democrats on the commission were chosen to appeal to moderate or conservative Democratic constituencies. LeoGrande, 238

[232] Longley, 311; LeoGrande 239.

[233] The other key components were the National Campaign Plan and the Woerner Report. Childress, 3-5.

thorough application of American COIN, by promoting a strategy of political, social and economic development as the key to defeating insurgency.[234] According to Benjamin Schwartz, the Kissinger Commission provided the fullest explanation of the administration's LIC policy. In effect, it described the "two-track" strategy the U.S. had pursued in El Salvador, which included fortifying the ESAF to wear down the insurgents and strengthen civilian government to weaken the rebels' claims to political legitimacy.[235] Nevertheless, the Kissinger commission's focus on the struggle for political legitimacy conspicuously excluded an important actor—the FMLN. The Reagan Administration denied the legitimacy of any presence by the FMLN in the political process. The U.S. government had, and still has, a long history of denying the legitimacy of popular movements that have opposed America's right-wing allies, including in El Salvador and Vietnam.

While the insurgents attracted considerable support initially, they lost ground between 1982 and 1984. Additionally, unlike the Sandinistas in neighboring Nicaragua, the FMLN were never able to attract any support from the business sector.[236] Nevertheless without popular support, the FMLN simply could not have continued the struggle for twelve years.

The Reagan Administration faced opposition from American allies as well. French and Mexican dissent rankled Washington, however, there were other countries whose lukewarm support for Reagan's Central American policies annoyed the State Department. Several European countries, including West Germany, had members of parliament, especially Social

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[234] Schwartz, 11.

[235] Schwartz, 12.

[236] David Spencer, External Resource Mobilization and Successful Insurgency in Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador, 1959-1992" (PhD Diss, George Washington University, 2002), 287.

Democrats, or populations that were sympathetic to the FMLN. These sympathies exasperated U.S. diplomats, including American Ambassador to El Salvador, Edwin Corr.[237]

After the commission's findings were presented, the battle turned back to Congress, where considerable opposition to Reagan's policies persisted. As in the past, Reagan threatened to circumvent Congress by using discretionary funds that did not require the legislative branch's approval. Various government officials tried to win support on Capitol Hill by promising military victory in El Salvador. At a congressional hearing discussing U.S. Southern Command's role in Central America, General Paul Gorman, its commander in chief, predicted that the Salvadoran Armed Forces could have 80-90 percent of the country under "effective" control within two years if Congress implemented the findings of the National Bipartisan Commission.[238] Reagan's National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane was even more optimistic, declaring that the war would be over within a year.[239] Despite the rosy predictions, the conflict outlasted the Reagan administration.

Ultimately, the election of Duarte in 1984 accomplished what Kissinger's bipartisan committee could not—build a solid majority coalition in Congress behind virtually unlimited military aid.[240] Until 1989, Congress approved U.S. aid to El Salvador largely without any reservations. Several months after Duarte's election, Reagan won re-election in a landslide. After

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[237] Ambassador Corr was especially irked by the reception of the Sandinista Foreign Minister, Miguel D'Escoto, at a meeting of West European and Latin American diplomats. In his telegram, he complained that the "corpulent and bearded" minister was "the center of attention from the moment he entered." The diplomats "gathered around him in obsequious sycophancy and fawning admiration." Telegram, "Diplomatic Bias toward the Sandinistas and FMLN/FDR," 2/23/1988, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[238] U.S. Congress, *the Role of the U.S. Southern Command in Central America*, August 1, 1984 (Washington: U.S. GPO, 1984).

[239] Quoted in LeoGrande, 259.

[240] As LeoGrande argues, Duarte provided hope that he could transform El Salvador into something resembling a real democracy. Even for skeptical members, he still represented the lesser of two evils. LeoGrande, 259.

winning a second term, the White House focused less on El Salvador, and turned its attention toward destabilizing Nicaragua by using a covert army, the Contras. While the administration may have placed more emphasis on Nicaragua, it did little to diminish the fighting in El Salvador.

Conclusion

After Duarte's election in 1984, it appeared as if Reagan's Salvadoran strategy was proceeding as planned. With a little help from the U.S., Duarte's party had emerged victorious in the constituent and presidential elections in 1982 and 1984 respectively, the Salvadoran military had avoided defeat and a number of reform efforts were under way. However, large-scale pacification efforts such as the NCP, while achieving some short-term gains, failed to meet expectations. By 1984, it was hard to argue that the massive expenditures had brought the administration closer to achieving its foreign policy goals in El Salvador.

One area where U.S. aid made a discernible difference was enlarging the Salvadoran military. According to multiple figures, U.S. aid and training expanded Salvadoran forces between 40 and 50,000 during this period. In 1989, government forces totaled 55,000. As one analyst noted, this represented a 300 percent increase in the size of the army.[241] Estimates of insurgent strength were less precise, ranging anywhere from 5-15,000 men and women under arms. Colonel John Waghelstein cited a ratio of 4:1 in favor of the Salvadoran government.[242]

To offset this numerical disparity, as well as the accumulation of casualties, the FMLN adopted a policy of forced recruitment in 1983, which coincided with a government amnesty

[241] Childress, 24.

[242] John Waghelstein, interview by Colonel Charles Charlton Jr., p 66, transcript, Senior Officers Oral History Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

program.[243] In spite of the policy, the CIA did not believe that the practice was widespread.[244] However, the American embassy disagreed.[245] Several former insurgents believed that the forced recruitment harmed the FMLN, including *Comandante* Memo, who acknowledged that it created a social and political problem for the FMLN.[246]

Despite the infusion of American aid, success in El Salvador was never guaranteed. While the FMLN may have lost the initiative by 1984, it still remained a formidable force. As the CIA noted, improvements in the Salvadoran army's performance and U.S. aid did not lead to overall gains on the ground, as the guerrillas still dominated at least as much of the country as they had two years before.[247] By the end of 1983, the State Department noted that the guerrillas had taken more than seventy-five towns and garrisons and had retaken the initiative.[248]

The insurgents were arguably at their strongest in 1983 and early 1984. Joaquín Villalobos, in an interview conducted during the war, offered an earlier date of June 1982. According to Villalobos, at this point, the FMLN had made a quantitative leap that would lead to a military victory.[249] Estimates about how much territory the insurgents controlled varied from one-fifth to as much as one-third. Raul Mijango, promotes a higher figure, claiming that they

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[243] John Waghelstein, interview by Colonel Charles Charlton Jr., p. 66, transcript, Senior Officers Oral History Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

[244] CIA, "The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance," June 1, 1984, CIA FOIA.

[245] Telegram, "Report on the situation in El Salvador, July 1984," folder "Unlcass: El Salvador-3/31/1984-7/13/1984," box 6, Constantine Menges, Ronald Reagan Library.

[246] William Pascasio, AKA Comandante Memo, interview with author, August 20, 2013.

[247] CIA, "The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance," June 1, 1984, CIA FOIA.

[248] Byrne, 85.

[249] Marta Harnecker, "De la insurrection a la Guerra," entrevista con Joaquín Villalobos, noviembre-diciembre 1982, biblioteca de Universidad Centroamericana.

controlled almost as much as sixty percent of Salvadoran territory.[250] In an internal FMLN report, in the year between June 1982 and July 1983, the FMLN obtained control of an additional one-fifth of El Salvador's territory. The same document claimed that the insurgents controlled more than 5000 kilometers, seventy municipalities, and "80 percent of strategic military territory."[251]

The CIA fretted in April 1983 that continued insurgent gains could conceivably give the insurgents a psychological advantage.[252] The Salvadoran army's morale was low. As a 1983 article in the *Miami Herald* reported, only fifteen percent of soldiers trained by the U.S. in 1981 still served in the Salvadoran army, and nearly one-half of those trained in 1982 had quit.[253] CIA analysts also argued that the FMLN's policy of releasing prisoners of war had eroded the will of many poorly trained units in the Salvadoran army to fight.[254]

Although the Salvadoran government avoided defeat and held elections that established its legitimacy within the U.S. Congress, it was no closer to defeating the insurgents in 1984. Fortunately for Duarte's government, El Salvador ceased to be a source of friction between the Executive and Legislative branches. Instead, the attention shifted to Nicaragua, where the Reagan administration was in the process of ramping up a covert war against the Sandinistas. Similar to belligerents in other wars, the FMLN experienced successes and defeats during the first years of the conflict. Until early 1984, the insurgents often held the initiative and in spite of

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[250] Raul Mijango, Interview with the author, San Salvador. August 22, 2013.

[251] FMLN, "Sobre el carácter y perspectiva de la guerra revolucionaria en el Salvador," January 1984, loose papers (no folders), box 1, Nidia Díaz Collection, Hoover Institution.

[252] CIA, National Intelligence Daily Report, Monday April 18, 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

[253] "U.S. Trained Salvadorans Tend to Quit," *Miami Herald,* June 15, 1983.

[254] CIA, National Intelligence Daily Report, Monday April 25, 1983, CIA CREST Files, NARA.

the massive U.S. aid, still remained a formidable foe. However, that same year, the nature of the conflict changed.

Starting in middle to late 1984, the insurgents switched tactics, seeking wear down the Salvadoran government and dry up U.S. support by prolonging the war. The Salvadoran government also changed its strategy by embarking on a more aggressive and sustained air war against the FMLN. The infusion of U.S. helicopters and aircraft devastated and depopulated portions of the country, helping displace Salvadorans who either fled to Honduras, joined the rebels, or emigrated to the U.S. While the Reagan administration may have turned its attention elsewhere in the region, the war continued and exacted a heavy toll on El Salvador and its economy.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHASING VICTORY, 1984-1988

1984 in El Salvador literally began with a bang. On New Year's Day, the FMLN launched two large-scale and high-profile attacks. The Salvadoran insurgents assaulted El Paraíso, a modern U.S. designed military barrack, which was briefly captured, and during another operation they destroyed the Cuscatlán Suspension bridge. This bridge's destruction severed the main link between Eastern and Western El Salvador. Besides demonstrating the FMLN's continued ability to carry out spectacular operations, these attacks damaged the morale and psyche of the Salvadoran army. Following the attacks, a high-ranking Salvadoran official lamented "We are losing the war…and the only way to salvage the situation is to give the troops something to fight for. Until that time, we cannot be saved, no matter how much military equipment arrives from the United States."[1]

The attacks represented another setback for the White House's Central American ally. Secretary of State George Shultz admitted that these had been "tough blows for the army and government." Discussing the destruction of the bridge, Shultz noted that the guerrillas made excellent use of "diversion, lax security and first rate intelligence."[2] While these attacks demonstrated the ability of the FMLN to continue inflicting military defeats against the government, by the end of the year, the strategic outlook had been reversed. Not only did U.S. aid stabilize the Duarte regime, but it also changed the Salvadoran government's fortunes. Over

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[1] Chris Hedges, "Salvador Army Morale Sinks After Losses," *Christian Science Monitor,* January 9, 1984.

[2] Telegram, "Reaction to New Year's Strikes by Guerrillas," January 4, 1984, Box 9, Folder "Guerrilla Activity in El Salvador-Folder 2032, NSA.

the course of the next several years, the counterinsurgents made some notable gains against their adversary; nevertheless the FMLN remained an unvanquished force.

While the beginning of 1984 may have unsettled American policymakers, they felt more confident as the year progressed. As the last chapter demonstrated, U.S. policymakers believed that Duarte's election as president marked a decisive turning point in the war in favor of the Salvadoran government. From 1984 until 1989, this trend generally continued. Most of the literature has characterized this phase of the conflict as a stalemate. This term implies that neither side was powerful enough to defeat the other or achieve a decisive victory. Perhaps though, it is more accurate to label it as a moving equilibrium.[3] Over the next several years, there were several notable momentum shifts; the strategic center of gravity alternated between favoring the insurgents and government.

Even though the military outlook had stabilized, several negative trends continued. In particular, the number of displaced civilians grew steadily. Aerial bombardment and large military sweeps caused massive dislocation in the countryside. To escape economic turmoil, war, and violence, thousands streamed across the border into neighboring Honduras. Salvadorans also immigrated to the United States, where more than 400,000 illegally entered the nation's borders.

The Salvadoran economy also continued to flounder. Key statistical indicators in every important category had dropped precipitously since 1980, including unemployment, capital flight, investments and declining GDP. The number of impoverished Salvadorans also rose amid deteriorating economic conditions. According to the executive director of the Central American Refugee Center, Sylvia Rosales-Fike, approximately ten percent of the nation's population lived

[3] Dr. John Fishel, interview with the author, Norman, Oklahoma, April 11, 2014.

in squalid squatter camps by 1989.[4] As the war dragged on, Duarte's American advisors pressured him to adopt austerity measures that ultimately damaged him politically.

Similarly, the various reform measures implemented before 1984 (including agrarian and banking) continued. These efforts were designed to stabilize El Salvador's economic and political system and address the root causes of the conflict. Despite benevolent intentions, these reforms failed in part because of the elites' intransigence and the continuing deterioration of the economy. Nonetheless, Washington continued to maintain that these efforts were promoting progress and reform for the vast majority of Salvadorans.

This chapter will continue to elaborate upon the various COIN tactics the United States and its ally used to defeat the FMLN. Many of the programs already established prior to 1984, such as civil defense, persisted. The CIs also employed similar strategies they had used in the past. For example, American tacticians and their Salvadoran counterparts also experimented with what was, in many ways, a national-level version of the National Campaign Plan and reaped similar results. When not trying to win hearts and minds, the Salvadoran military spent its time augmenting its military and incorporating new U.S. military hardware to its arsenal.

For the next several years, conventional logic in Washington assumed that generous American aid had enabled El Salvador to make progress improving its human rights record, promoting democracy and defeating the FMLN. On the positive side of the ledger, counterinsurgent forces eventually reduced their nemesis' ranks and their tactics also forced the insurgents to reappraise their strategy. The guerrillas also contributed to their reversal of fortune by implementing tactics such as forced recruitment and the use of mines. Despite the FMLN's

[4] United States Senate, *Central American Migration to the United States,* June 21, 1989, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 101 Cong., 81.

declining military prospects, it avoided decimation in a large and decisive battle. They spent the next several years preparing to launch one last large-scale offensive to take power or improve its bargaining stance at the negotiating table. It proved to be an apt decision. More importantly, even though both sides were not strong enough to defeat their adversary, the Salvadoran people had tired of years of constant war, deprivation, displacement, and violence.

Death from Above: the Expansion of the Air War

After attempting to win the war through the hearts and minds approach in 1983, the Salvadoran High Command embraced American firepower and its technological advantage over the FMLN. For the next several years, air power increasingly assumed a prominent role in the U.S. supported war effort. Ever since the surprise attack at the Ilopango Airbase in 1982, in which the FMLN destroyed most of the Salvadoran Air Force, the U.S. government had gradually been restocking their ally's inventory of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.[5] Helicopters played a crucial role and served a variety of purposes, including transporting troops quickly across the nation's territory, negating the enemy's speed and establishing the element of surprise. However, their primary function was transporting infantry forces for offensive operations and providing firepower.[6]

The increased shipment of American helicopters to El Salvador concerned U.S. congressmen. There were several reasons fueling their apprehension, including the possibility of an increase in civilian casualties, and their exploitation by the FMLN. American officials tried to reassure concerned congressional representatives by portraying them not as offensive weapons, but as machines aimed at preventing civilian deaths. For example, the Hughes 500, according to

[5] Byrnes, 132.

[6] James Corum, "The Air War in El Salvador," *Airpower Journal* (Summer 1998):27-44, 31.

a briefing paper, was a highly effective scouting machine that could provide close observation to minimize risks to the safety of *campesinos*.[7] William Ball, the Assistant Secretary for Legislative and Legal Affairs, tried to allay fears by downplaying, or simply discouraging, the use of the term "helicopter gunship." Ball, who viewed it as misleading, countered with his own definition. According to him, "helicopter gunships" were "armed attack helicopters" that included a variety of heavy weapons, and were used for offensive purposes. He continued to test the elasticity of the English language by insisting that instead of providing "gunships," the U.S. supplied El Salvador with "all-purpose transport and utility helicopters." Nevertheless, he also noted that, in 1983, the U.S. government supplied its ally with M-27 mini-guns—weapons capable of blanketing a large area with concentrated firepower. In case anyone should be concerned about their usage, Ball conceded that these weapons had been used, but qualified it by arguing that they had been employed "in the defensive mode," when the helicopter received "hostile fire from guerrilla forces." The Assistant Secretary also further elaborated about their effectiveness, noting that "the minigun has occasionally been effective in providing aerial fire support for government troops in contact with the enemy."[8]

After the U.S. Congress approved virtually all of the Reagan administration's funding requests in 1984, the Pentagon doubled the size of the Salvadoran Air Force almost overnight. At the beginning of the year, El Salvador possessed nineteen aircraft. By year's end, they had forty-six at their disposal.[9] The Salvadoran Air Force's inventory eventually included Huey (UH-1)

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[7] Briefing Paper, "Hughes 500 Briefing Paper," ND, U.S. Security Assistance—Helicopters (Folder 1689), Box 13: Salvadoran Biographies to Security Assistance, El Salvador II Collection, NSA.

[8] Letter, "Response by William Ball III, Assistant Secretary of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs to Senator Lawton Chiles," April 30, 1985, U.S. Security Assistance—Helicopters (Folder 1689), Box 13: Salvadoran Biographies to Security Assistance, El Salvador II Collection, NSA.

[9] Corum, 33.

helicopters, A-37 jets and the AC-47 "Spooky" gunship. The latter plane, affectionately dubbed "Puff the Magic Dragon," contained powerful guns that could literally fire thousands of rounds per minute. These planes provided close air support to U.S. combat troops during the Vietnam War and pulverized the Vietnamese countryside. Nevertheless, those destined for El Salvador were not outfitted with the regular weapons out of fear that their indiscriminate usage could produce heavy civilian casualties.[10] According to a former American Special Forces operative, these planes were more accurate than the A-37s, and produced fewer casualties by virtue of their targeting systems and their lack of missiles or bombs in their payload.[11]

Beginning in 1984, the Salvadoran Air Force repeatedly attacked contested areas, mostly in northern and eastern El Salvador. Areas repeatedly bombed by the Salvadoran Air Force included Chalatenango, Morazán and Guazapa Volcano, all guerrilla strongholds. In the words of the political scientist Jenny Pearce, between 1984 and 1985 the bombing practices of the Salvadoran military established a "free-fire" zone in Chalatenango. This designation was critical because individuals residing in these areas were considered as either guerrillas or their supporters, and were thus viewed as legitimate targets. One Salvadoran officer offered the following explanation behind this strategy, claiming that "there are no civilians. There are only concentrations of guerrillas, so we keep these areas under heavy fire."[12] According to a Salvadoran military spokesman, "the people who move in zones of persistence are identified as guerrillas." "Good people—the people who are not with the guerrillas—are not there."[13]

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[10] LeoGrande, 266.

[11] Dr. John Fishel, interview with the author, Norman, Oklahoma, April 11, 2014.

[12] Pearce, 227.

[13] Quoted in LeoGrande, 266.

Residents of these areas were subjected to artillery barrages and blistering aerial assaults. They were followed up by large sweeps of the suspected villages by Salvadoran troops. These military maneuvers were intended to "drain the sea" by forcing the area's inhabitants to flee (or kill them), thus depriving the FMLN of access to food, intelligence or shelter. Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa, a favorite of U.S. officials, summed up the strategy aptly. "Our first goal is to clean up the province militarily…This means we cannot permit civilian contact with the rebel army. We must separate the people from the guerrillas and then crush the guerrillas…Without a civilian base of support, the guerrillas are nothing but outlaws."[14] As Americas Watch argued, the frequency with which air attacks were followed by ground sweeps left little room for doubt that the Salvadoran military considered noncombatants legitimate targets.[15] Viewing civilians in insurgent strongholds as "legitimate targets for attack," these practices resulted in the destruction of numerous communities in an effort to deprive the guerrillas of their support.[16]

Officially, the White House and State Department denied that civilians had been deliberately targeted. Since Reagan's inauguration, it had been common practice for both of these actors to deny that its client had committed human rights abuses or any other types of actions that could have jeopardized U.S. aid. They stressed that President Duarte had taken strict measures to avoid needless casualties by issuing guidelines regarding aerial combat operations that stressed the importance of "fire discipline" and the preservation of non-combatant lives. In a memo written for Secretary of State Shultz, the author facetiously claimed that "we know of no

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[14] Quoted in Kenneth Sharpe, "El Salvador Revisited: Why Duarte is in Trouble," *World Policy Journal* 3.3 (Summer 1986): 473-494, 475.

[15] Americas Watch Committee and the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, *Free Fire: A Report on Human Rights in El Salvador August 1984* (New York: Americas Watch Committee, 1984).

[16] UN, "From Madness to Hope."

instance when these guidelines have been disregarded."[17] Nevertheless, a study conducted by retired U.S. General John Singlaub was highly critical of the military's bombing practices, arguing that escalating the air war could cause indiscriminate casualties, weakening popular support for the government.[18]

These practices increased civilian displacement. After 1985, the number of individuals uprooted by the war spiked dramatically, creating an exodus "unprecedented in the hemisphere."[19] By 1987, approximately 500,000 Salvadorans had been displaced—ten percent of the population.[20] Two years later, that figured had increased to 600,000 and another 1.5 million had fled beyond the nation's borders.[21] Besides fleeing across the border to Honduras, tens of thousands of Salvadorans illegally immigrated to the United States. Arguably, this is one of the conflict's most enduring legacies. Consequently, the Salvadoran population in the United States increased from approximately 100,000 to half a million in 1990.[22] As they entered the U.S, the American government refused to admit them as refugees displaced by war, despite the fact that many fled for that very reason. Accepting that San Salvador had persecuted its own people—

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[17] Memo for George Shultz, ND, folder "El Salvador-Death Squads Oliver North (1), box 18, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan library.

[18] Robert Parry, "Pentagon Warned Against Escalating Salvador War," *Associated Press,* May 31, 1984.

[19] This figure was cited by Sylvia Rosales-Fike during her testimony before the U.S. Senate committee. United States Senate, *Central American Migration to the United States,* June 21, 1989, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 101 Cong., 87.

[20] Elisabeth Wood, "Civil War and Reconstruction: The Repopulation of Tenancingo," in *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador,* Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford, eds (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004). 126-146, 128.

[21] United States Senate, *Central American Migration to the United States,* June 21, 1989, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 101 Cong., 87.

[22] David Haines & Karen Roseblum, editors, *Illegal Immigration in America: a Handbook* (Westport, Greenwood Publishing, 1999), 234.

with substantial U.S. support—would have contradicted U.S. government policy toward the country.[23]

Even as the numbers of dislocated civilians increased, Salvadorans attempted to return home and resume their lives. In July 1985, the archdiocese of San Salvador along with tacit acceptance from the Salvadoran military and FMLN, established a repopulation community in Tenancingo, to settle displaced civilians.[24] Years later, refugees in Honduras also began the grueling process of returning to El Salvador. However their attempts were resisted by the Salvadoran government. Nonetheless, Duarte and his successors eventually acquiesced in part due to the determination of the displaced, but also because their efforts received considerable media attention. The process of fleeing (*la guinda*), resettling in Honduras, and returning carried political ramifications for the Salvadoran government. Through their actions, the *campesinos* forced the state to recognize them as "agents, citizens, and members of the national body. By going home they reclaimed fundamental civil rights."[25]

In spite of the concerns about civilian casualties and displacement, aerial bombing raids and the increased usage of helicopters caused considerable damage to the FMLN. As several *comandantes* recounted, it was helicopters and airpower, not American COIN doctrine or the various strategies and tactics associated with it that caused the FMLN significant consternation. The increased reliance and usage of air power was an important factor that led the insurgents to

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[23] Haines & Rosenblum, 240.

[24] Elisabeth Wood describes the repopulation of this village as part of reconstruction efforts and to redefine civil society, including the relationships between the elite and the villagers. As Wood argues, the results were short-lived and limited. See "Civil War & Reconstruction," especially pp. 130-146.

[25] Todd, 217.

decentralize their forces.[26] For an already beleaguered and taxed rebel army, some units were forced to assume another burden of war: assuming responsibility for the people's care and well-being.[27] Over the next several years, the FMLN attempted to counter the helicopters and fighter jets, but it was not until 1989 that they had the means to challenge their enemy's dominance of the skies. Despite never adopting a successful anti-helicopter strategy, the Salvadoran insurgents were able to escape encirclement and wide-scale annihilation of their forces through luck and an intimate knowledge of the terrain.[28]

Building Central America's Second Largest Military

American tacticians had other concerns besides enlarging the number of aircraft at the Salvadoran military's disposal. Carrying out an intensive counterinsurgency strategy necessitated the creation of more Salvadoran troops. In theory, force expansion would enable the United States' ally to maintain offensive operations against the FMLN, while simultaneously allowing it to provide static defense at sensitive locations. The latter requirement, according to one account, consumed two-thirds of Salvadoran forces.[29] The ERP's leading strategist exposed a flaw behind the theory that creating more troops would lead to victory:

> It revolves around the assertion that the army has more battalions, more helicopters, more artillery…It excludes the political and social factors and tries to establish and justify the following thesis, 'we have an army that is so big, and the North Americans help us so much that we cannot possibly lose the war.'...But history provides us with lessons. We must remember that: Somoza began his war with 7,000 troops…and lost when he had 15,000!...The North Americans began their intervention with 3,000 advisers helping an

[26] Facundo Guardado, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

[27] José Medrano, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

[28] Balta, 257.

[29] U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), *El Salvador: Military Assistance has Helped Counter but not Overcome the Insurgency* (Washington: GAO: 1991).

> army of 125,000 South Vietnamese…they lost when they had 500,000 troops supporting 1.2 million Vietnamese.
>
> In no case was the war won by the revolutionaries through the achievement of military superiority. These wars were won because the revolutionaries knew how to carefully use available military resources as part of the ongoing political struggle while bringing all of the people into the war…Our goal is to…wear the enemy down.[30]

As Villalobos adroitly realized, American taxpayer money built the region's second largest military force behind Nicaragua, and like its neighbor, victory in El Salvador proved elusive. For William Meara, a former Special Forces officer who advised the Salvadoran military in PSYOPS, the American military's infatuation with building a large army reflected the institution's conventional background. In his opinion, the U.S. Army's intellectual and organizational culture was a major impediment to a decisive victory for the Salvadoran government.[31] In the end, the prodigious size of the Salvadoran military built by U.S. policy could not overcome the Duarte government's inability to end the war or improve the people's well-being through his economic measures or development programs.

Like many other American initiatives in the conflict, efforts to expand the size of the Salvadoran military were hampered by forces outside of their control. The Woerner Report noted that the Salvadoran military's officer corps was understaffed. This trend continued throughout the conflict. To compensate, officers fulfilled multiple roles, or in John Waghelstein's phrase, they wore "many hats."[32] According to Frank Smyth, who covered the conflict for various news outlets, this discrepancy forced American military advisers to take a more active role in the field,

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[30] Quoted in William Meara, *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 60.

[31] Meara, 57.

[32] John Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, April 01, 2014.

including planning and coordinating attacks against the FMLN.[33] Throughout the remainder of the war, the U.S. struggled to train enough competent officers to implement American COIN in El Salvador.

A study conducted by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) in 1991argued that American efforts to build a more professional force had not met critical benchmarks. In particular, the expansion of the Salvadoran military had resulted in inadequate training. The report's findings discovered that inexperienced troops had constrained the military's ability to carry out the aggressive maneuvers requested by U.S. advisers.[34] More importantly, professionalizing the Salvadoran army by changing its customs and traditions, as well as organizing a force more adept at carrying out American COIN doctrine was never met.[35]

U.S. officials, including in the military and embassy, continued to emphasize the centrality of civilians and the necessity of securing their allegiance. They stressed the importance of civic action in the *campo* and lobbied Duarte to launch a more expansive effort than the National Campaign Plan in 1983. Eventually, proponents were rewarded. In 1986, another attempt was made to woo Salvadoran civilians through civic action programs. Unlike its predecessor, this time the program was applied nation-wide. Nevertheless, it still failed to achieve its objectives.

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[33] Frank Smyth, "Secret Warriors: U.S. Advisers Have Taken up Arms in El Salvador," *The Village Voice,* August 11, 1987.

[34] U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), *El Salvador: Military Assistance has Helped Counter but not Overcome the Insurgency* (Washington: GAO: 1991).

[35] Robert Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam and El Salvador* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2006), 103.

The FMLN's Strategic Reappraisal

By the middle of 1984 American military aid began to alter the nature of the conflict. As the Salvadoran military expanded and received more weapons, their new firepower greatly increased insurgent casualties. FMLN insurgents also noticed a difference in their adversary's behavior, especially in terms of tactics. Most noteworthy, the Salvadoran military created additional units, besides the rapid reaction battalions, that could carry out the long-range, small-unit tactics cherished by the American advisers.

American Special Forces troops also continued their mission of attempting to professionalize the Salvadoran military and persuading them to adopt tactics derived from U.S. COIN doctrine. In particular, U.S. advisers repeatedly emphasized the need for night-time patrolling, small-unit action and long-distance reconnaissance missions. U.S. operatives had identified their lack of usage by their allies as tactical deficiencies. For some American advisers, including Col. John Waghelstein and Gen. Fred Woerner, these measures had been successfully used against their adversaries in Vietnam. Eventually, their patience was rewarded. The Salvadoran military created units capable of performing these tasks, which acted on specific intelligence. The adoption of these units was noted by the FMLN, who tried to devise measures to counter these formations.

Particularly worrying for one *comandante* was the creation of *las Patrullas de Reconocimiento de Alcance Largo*, (PRAL), mobile forces that operated using "irregular tactics" in the FMLN's rearguard.[36] These units disrupted many of the FMLN's offensive operations.[37]

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[36] Mijango, 256.

They also inspired fear, or "*la pralitis"* among the insurgents, especially those stationed around the Guazapa Volcano. According to one account, no one wanted to move, pick up food, or go on patrol out of fear that they would be ambushed by a PRAL unit.[38]

PRAL units were trained by the 7th Special Forces detachment, along with CIA help, and modeled on previous U.S. COIN experiences. Prior incarnations included the "Hunter Killer" teams used in the Philippines to search and destroy the Filipino insurgents. Acting on specific military intelligence, these aggressive, small-unit formation's primary functions were to track and locate guerrillas, disrupt their operations and either capture or kill them.[39] They were intended to remain in the field for several weeks and apply persistent pressure to the rebel army and never give them any respite.

A study written by a former American adviser also agreed with the former insurgent, noting that these units "accounted for hundreds of guerrilla casualties and has been instrumental in disrupting guerrilla combat operations, logistical nets and base camps. The unit has proven that El Salvadoran troops, with the proper training and leadership can operate effectively in small groups and they have set a standard for valor for the rest of the ESAF [El Salvadoran Armed Forces]."[40] To combat these units, the FMLN increasingly relied on their local militias and the masses. The former were used to impede the PRAL's movements, while the latter were used to

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[37] Herard von Santos, *Soldados de Elite en Centroamérica y México* (San Salvador: Imprenta Nacional, 2008), 139.

[38] Von Santos, 140. The term was used by members of the FAL stationed at Guazapa Volcano. Herard von Santos, email interview with the author, October 7, 2014.

[39] John Fishel & Max Manwaring, *Uncomfortable Wars Revisited* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2006), 115.

[40] Quoted in Smyth. He noted that the CIA had been active in providing training for PRAL units and used intelligence gathered from their missions to coordinate air strikes against FMLN detachments.

alert FMLN combatants if these units penetrated camps.[41] Their countermeasures failed to halt these units' ability to infiltrate and attack their rearguards.

From 1984 onward, the FMLN increasingly emphasized the political nature of the conflict. Before then, arguably the political aspect of the Salvadoran guerrillas' strategy had been subordinate to the military component. For the next several years, the insurgents adopted Prolonged People's War (PPW), which was closely related to the Vietnamese strategy authored by Vo Nguyen Giap and used to devastating effect against the French and United States. Increasingly, the FMLN relied on political organizing and establishing greater links (and in some cases reestablishing) with the civilian population. Of all the organizations within the FMLN, this strategy was most associated with the FPL.

As the name implies, the ultimate goal under Prolonged People's War is to carry out a lengthy and protracted struggle that would eventually topple the government. Rather than trying to annihilate the enemy in one decisive battle, PPW relied upon political organizing and eroding the enemy's will to fight by causing enemy casualties or desertions. This strategy was predicated on creating the conditions necessary for a massive uprising that would lead to the overthrow of the government. From the American embassy's view, this approach was explicitly based on the expectation that one day U.S. assistance to El Salvador would be terminated. By creating a prolonged political and economic crisis, chaos and instability would create the conditions for Duarte's removal.[42]

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[41] Bracamonte & Spencer, 159.

[42] Report, "Status of the War," Security Assistance—Helicopters (Folder 1689), Box 13, El Salvador II Collection: Salvadoran Biographies to Security Assistance, NSA.

Increasingly, the Salvadoran insurgents focused their efforts on establishing the conditions necessary to launch one last large-scale offensive, known as the strategic-counteroffensive. Modeled along the lines of the 1981 Final Offensive, this plan required the establishment of a military and political vacuum for the FMLN to exploit. To create the necessary climate, the rebels focused on five essential tasks: attrite enemy forces, organize the masses, break down the enemy ranks, destabilize and sabotage the economy and increase its forces. These missions were significant features of the FMLN's strategy for the next several years.[43]

Insurgent attacks against the Salvadoran economy skyrocketed. Statistics indicated that during the first six months of 1985, economic sabotage increased more than 550 percent over the same period the previous year. Electrical facilities were a favored target. In 1986 insurgents destroyed nearly forty electrical pylons causing lengthy blackouts in San Salvador and eastern portions of the country.[44] Their objectives included not only capital intensive sites, such as power plants or dams, but key agricultural products, in particular coffee and sugar. This strategy forced the Salvadoran military to redirect soldiers to protect the harvests. Otherwise, farmers simply left their fields fallow. As the conflict continued, these attacks exacted a heavy toll on the country's economy.

Economic sabotage caused considerable damage to El Salvador's financial system, and hobbled its recovery. Total cumulative damages caused by either FMLN attacks or other factors

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[43] "Military Strategy of the FMLN," May-June 1985, Folder 3, Box 2, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[44] CIA Intelligence Analysis, "El Salvador: a Net Assessment of the War," February 1986, CIA FOIA website.

between 1979 and 1985 potentially exceeded $1.2 billion.[45] Several years later, a U.S. AID study in 1987 approximated that the costs to repair and replace infrastructure damaged by FMLN attacks was $600 million, and lost production hovered at $1.5 billion.[46] By attacking the nation's infrastructure, the insurgents forced the United States to divert money from weapons to repairs.[47] Not only did these attacks hinder economic recovery, but they also undercut the president's popularity as well.

Beginning in 1984, Washington increasingly turned its attention to the regime's most serious liability, the economy.[48] The country's economic tailspin had been dramatic. Between 1979 and 1981, the country experienced a twenty percent decline in productive activity and a twenty-six percent fall in per capita income. In 1981, investment virtually stopped, industrial production fell by seventeen percent and unemployment was rampant in construction, commerce and transport.[49] Between Reagan's inauguration and Duarte's election, United States aid and credits prevented the Salvadoran economy's collapse. However, while Washington's resources had kept the ship from sinking, economic recovery was considered essential for stability and the termination of the conflict. Nevertheless, the Salvadoran economy continued its downward spiral after 1984. Leading economic indicators were staggering. By 1985, the unemployment rate

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[45] Defense Intelligence Agency Study, "El Salvador: Domestic Troubles," December 11, 1985, Folder "El Salvador," Box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[46] Byrnes, 143.

[47] Bracamonte & Spencer, 24.

[48] LeoGrande, 278.

[49] Byrne, 101.

was thirty percent, with another thirty percent underemployed. Inflation continued as well; that same year was American officials estimated it at twenty-two percent.[50]

To engineer the Salvadoran economy's revitalization, American policymakers argued for the implementation of classic neoliberal economic principles. Among the ideas touted included financial restraint, the promotion of private enterprise and ending social subsidies.[51] With no end in sight, Duarte increasingly became more dependent on U.S. aid. As his government's reliance grew, Washington pressured the Salvadoran president to adopt its solutions to halt the economy's further deterioration.

Originally, Duarte promised an economic recovery project that emphasized public sector jobs and continuing government subsidies. His actions were meant to address the nation's unemployment crisis and alleviate the burdens faced by his poorest urban constituents. Duarte's policies did not please the Defense Intelligence Agency, who complained that his "hesitation to take needed austerity measures, show clear resolve in enforcing public sector labor codes, and to work sincerely with the private sector to reactivate the economy," was halting economic progress.[52] American officials demanded that the Salvadoran president tighten his financial belt and slash social spending.

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[50] LeoGrande, 278.

[51] Duarte's successor went even further, dismantling state monopolies and privatizing the banking system, which had been nationalized by the first junta. Alfredo Cristiani also began the process of reorganizing the farm cooperatives established under the various agrarian reform acts. Edwin Corr, "Societal Transformation for Peace in El Salvador," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 541, Small Wars (September 1995): 144-156, 152.

[52] Defense Intelligence Agency Study, "El Salvador: Domestic Troubles," December 11, 1985, Folder "El Salvador," Box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

Under pressure from the U.S., Duarte unveiled an economic package that alienated both sides of the political spectrum, including his most supportive constituents. Known as the Economic Stabilization and Reactivation Plan (1986) its measures included slashing spending on subsidies, adopting a policy of monetary restraint and devaluing the *colón*. Consequently, opposition to the president increased and San Salvador experienced a series of strikes, including the largest since 1980 led by the National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS). In the end, Duarte's inability to end the war and improve the economy caused considerable political damage to his party.

While the FMLN may have scaled back its offensive operations, its work with the masses continued. To further strengthen its links with civilians, the FMLN unveiled a new strategy: *Poder Popular Doble Cara*. The insurgents aspired to extend their rear guards in the *campo* to the nation's main population centers. In many ways, *Poder Popular* mirrored Mao's strategy of moving the struggle from the periphery to the center. Its ultimate intention was creating the conditions necessary in the country's primary population centers for a massive uprising. During the 1970s, the Salvadoran left had established an impressive array of urban networks and activists who brought the Romero regime to its knees. Reactivating the revolutionary struggle in the cities was necessary because years of repression by the Salvadoran security forces and death squads, combined with the failure of the "Final Offensive" in 1981 had decimated their urban networks. By 1981, the main bulk of the FMLN's urban cadre had either been killed, fled to the *campo* or was dormant.

Under *Poder Popular* the FMLN created legal and transparent organizations to establish links with civilians, organize them and elevate their political consciousness. The double-sided feature of this plan envisioned creating shadow networks within these groups that would expand

the FMLN's influence and enact its strategy. In particular, two groups targeted by the insurgents included labor unions and student organizations. Crucially, these groups would establish the groundwork, and once the decisive battle began, help lead the progressive forces to victory. The FMLN also attempted to infiltrate its cadre into the PDC.[53] After the creation of new organizations or the infiltration of existing ones, insurgents and their sympathizers carried out open and transparent organizing and developed labor and logistical networks among the people.

After their formation, these groups would attack the government's legitimacy by carrying out strikes, work stoppages and demonstrations. The goal was to increase and accelerate the militancy of the workers through a rigorous propaganda effort that demonized Duarte's government.[54] As they became more radicalized, the FMLN's allies would increasingly launch more confrontational and violent activities designed to force the Salvadoran government to respond and thus provoke the security forces to overreact. According to CIA analysts, repression could potentially alienate the Salvadoran working and middle classes, two of the president's key constituencies. A violent response by the Salvadoran government could also be used as a propaganda tool for the FMLN to potentially weaken U.S. public and congressional support for continued funding.[55]

An assessment conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency believed that the insurgents' decision to resurrect its urban strategy reflected its sagging military fortunes in the

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[53] Mijango, 339.

[54] Poder Popular Doble Cara: Lineamientos de Organizacion," ND, Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[55] CIA Intelligence Assessment, "El Salvador's Insurgents: Resurrecting an Urban Political Strategy," September 1986, CIA FOIA website.

field.[56] From this perspective, the FMLN's decision was borne out of weakness. Yet, political organizing and establishing networks with sympathetic individuals had been a hallmark of FMLN strategy, even predating its formation in 1980. While it could be argued that its military decline had forced certain elements with the insurgent high command to abandon pursuing the decisive battle, *Poder Popular* was not indicative of the guerrillas' weakness. Rather, as the CIA would belatedly realize years later this strategy altered the outcome of the conflict.

Throughout the conflict, insurgent rearguards played a prominent role in the FMLN's strategy. As the term is often described, a rearguard is part of a military formation that protects the rear and flank of the main force either before the assault or during withdrawal. The FMLN offered a different conception of this strategy. From the beginning of the conflict, the Salvadoran guerrillas established rear guards in areas where they were dominant. Each organization within the FMLN had their own. They served a variety of purposes, but according to an U.S. government appraisal, their primary functions included staging and supporting military operations.[57] Nevertheless, they often played other roles as well, including political efforts to spread the FMLN's influence and undermine the government's legitimacy. As the conflict progressed, the guerrillas increasingly expanded its network of rearguards and tried to prevent its enemy from extending its reach into these zones.

The FMLN established three types of rearguards, each of which served a different purpose. Strategic rearguards, often located in Northern El Salvador, offered support and protection for the FMLN's senior leadership and major concentrations of their forces. They also

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[56] CIA Intelligence Assessment, "El Salvador's Insurgents: Resurrecting an Urban Political Strategy," September 1986, CIA FOIA website.

[57] Unknown author, "JTIC Special Advisory 03-91—Salvadoran Insurgent Repopulation of Rear Guard Areas, Part II," March 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

served as its political base, primary source of recruits and its material support. Operational rearguards, including Guazapa Volcano, served as forward operating bases—small military bases used to support tactical operations—and linked the other two rearguards. The third and final rearguard, tactical, offered support during offensive operations and provided rest for the troops, medical attention, food and other basic necessities.[58]

Rearguards also served an important role in the informational and psychological struggle between the two belligerents. *Radio Venceremos,* a rebel run radio station, broadcast from one of the ERP's strategic rearguards. This radio station served as a propaganda outlet for the FMLN for domestic and international audiences. However, it also provided stirring accounts of the insurgents' recent exploits, and in some cases comedic relief. For many it provided their key source of information. In spite of considerable obstacles and numerous attempts to knock the station off the airwaves, *Radio Venceremos* continued operating almost uninterrupted. Destroying the radio station was an obsession of Salvadoran Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterossa, who lost his life trying to seize one the radio's transistors.

Beginning in 1985, the FMLN initiated a strategy of repopulating its rearguards with displaced persons. In particular, they targeted the Salvadoran refugee camps in neighboring Honduras. These exiles often had subtle or explicit connections with the rebels. Molly Todd's research has demonstrated that the relationship between these two actors varied between individual refuges and their camps. In Todd's words, "it is safe to say" that "the majority of the refugees (with the exception of those at Buenos Aires) identified with the basic principles of the

[58] Unknown author, "JTIC Special Advisory 03-91—Salvadoran Insurgent Repopulation of Rear Guard Areas, Part II," March 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

FMLN's struggle and therefore were at least partially sympathetic if not active contributors."[59] According to one U.S. estimate, between 1988 and 1991, the insurgents repopulated approximately 16,000 refugees into settlement areas near insurgent bases.[60] These resettlement communities played a key role in the FMLN's strategy by expanding their rearguards and influence throughout the Salvadoran countryside. Repopulating its rearguards with displaced persons forced the Salvadoran military to modify its strategy. In particular, the Salvadoran military was forbidden to enter these repopulation communities, and could not conduct military operations within 1.5 kilometers of these communities; a concession that most likely caused unending frustration to the FMLN's enemy and American tacticians.[61]

Before the insurgents could launch the strategic counteroffensive, they needed to lay the groundwork militarily as well. While political organizing was extremely important for their overall goal, the high command continued to envision that they would achieve power through a coordinated military offensive. Unlike the previous stage of the conflict when the FMLN concentrated on inflicting a decisive military defeat against the Duarte regime, the means changed. Arguably, their most pressing goal was weakening the morale of the Salvadoran army. To accomplish such a task, the insurgents relied on the policies of *el desgaste* or attrition, infiltration of the Salvadoran military and incorporating classic aspects of guerrilla war doctrine. These tactics included sneak ambushes, shadowing enemy units, launching pin prick attacks and occasionally massive assaults on a fixed position.

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[59] Todd, 133.

[60] Unknown author, "JTIC Special Advisory 03-91—Salvadoran Insurgent Repopulation of Rear Guard Areas, Part II," March 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[61] Unknown author, "JTIC Special Advisory 03-91—Salvadoran Insurgent Repopulation of Rear Guard Areas, Part II," March 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Starting in the summer, the FMLN decided to rely on an economy of force and preserve their units. Thus, they dispersed their forces and reduced their size from operating in company formations to platoons. This strategy was more adept at carrying out a conventional guerrilla war. As they unveiled their new strategy, the slogan became "*convertir El Salvador en un mar de guerrillas y pueblo organizado*!"[62] The decision has often been attributed to the increased usage of airpower and the growing effectiveness of the Salvadoran military. During the middle of the war, the FMLN disputed such efforts, claiming that its strategic reappraisal was an initiative launched from within, not forced upon them by the Salvadoran military.[63] Even though they may have broken their forces down into smaller units, they still occasionally massed their troops to launch spectacular attacks. The guerrilla leadership also extolled the virtues of the switch. As they noted in one of their documents, while the enemy would continue to try to destroy as many insurgent forces as possible, the Salvadoran military would still never be able to create a force large enough to destroy them, nor to sustain continued action against the FMLN.[64]

To demoralize Salvadoran troops, the FMLN focused on expanding the war into areas where it had previously been inactive. Doing so would disperse the enemy's units and not allow them to concentrate their forces. The guerrillas attempted to extend the conflict to the western departments, which were far from their strongholds. Unlike the 1930s, when western El Salvador was a hotbed of agitation and unrest, this region of El Salvador remained quiescent for most of the conflict. To implement this new plan, the FMLN attacked Sonsonate, where it destroyed

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[62] Mijango , 257.

[63] "Readecuacion tactica del ejercito: un Nuevo fracas," 1986, Folder 3.1, Box 3, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[64] "Linea Militar: Fase prepatoria de la contraofensiva estrategica*,"* November 1986, Folder "loose collection," Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

machinery at a local coffee processing plant, damaged buildings and sacked a bank. All of this occurred within a fifteen minute drive from a major army base.[65]

Anti-personnel land mines played an important role in the FMLN's strategy. Even though the insurgents had relied on these weapons since 1980, beginning in 1985 their usage skyrocketed.[66] Mines performed a variety of functions, including injuring or killing enemy soldiers and weakening their morale. In particular, landmines were used to slow down the large military sweeps that followed aerial bombardment. By thinning the Salvadoran military's ranks, it would limit their ability to carry out operations and possibly prevent them from conducting more aggressive maneuvers especially in the FMLN's rearguard. Most of the mines used by the FMLN were home-made varieties that were used to attack columns of troops or military vehicles such as jeeps.

These weapons increasingly caused the majority of the Salvadoran army's casualties. CIA reporting noted that in 1986 mines accounted for nearly two-thirds of all military fatalities. In 1985 they caused approximately one-third of all combat-related deaths; and in 1984 sixty-five out of 2,508.[67] Medical care required for individuals injured by mines also placed further strain on the fragile Salvadoran economy, draining the government's dwindling resources.[68] After the

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[65] Sharpe, 477.

[66] According to one account, after the termination of the conflict, approximately 20,000 landmines threatened rural Salvadorans.

[67] CIA Latin America Review, "El Salvador: Guerrilla Use of Mine Warfare," June 1987 (date is unclear), CIA FOIA website.

[68] CIA Latin America Review, "El Salvador: Guerrilla Use of Mine Warfare," June 1987 (date is unclear), CIA FOIA website.

end of the war, the high numbers of veteran amputees compelled the Salvadoran government to provide disability pensions and transitional job training.[69]

Civilians also paid a heavy price. The indiscriminate usage of mines in the Salvadoran *campo* caused a sharp rise in amputees, especially among children and farmers. As members of the FMLN admitted to the UN Truth Commission, they often laid mines with little to no supervision. According to various accounts, in 1985, between thirty-one and forty-six people were killed by the FMLN mines.[70] The following year, at least another forty-six people were killed by mines, as well as an additional 162 wounded.[71] Establishing a comprehensive estimate of the number of civilian casualties caused by landmines has proven elusive. However, according to Human Rights Watch, 20,000 mines remained undetonated after the conflict, posing a serious risk to thousands of civilians.[72] While various human rights groups criticized the Salvadoran government for its abuses, they were largely silent about the FMLN's usage of mines. Other organizations such as the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), who opposed all forms of U.S. aid and intervention, also avoided mentioning the FMLN's indiscriminate use of mines.

The FMLN's usage of mines was exploited by the U.S. and Salvadoran government. To cite such an example, a poster entitled "Innocent Victim of FMLN Mines" depicted a girl missing a leg, who was presumably injured by one of these weapons. Posters emblazoned with this image greeted international visitors at the Salvadoran airport, and as the CIA noted, this

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[69] Charles Briscoe, "Los Artefactos Explosivos Improvisados: Spanish for IEDs," *Veritas* 2.1 (2006): 47-53, 52.

[70] UN, "From Madness to Hope."

[71] CIA Latin America Review, "El Salvador: Guerrilla Use of Mine Warfare," June 1987 (date is unclear), CIA FOIA website.

[72] Human Rights Watch, *Landmines: a Deadly Legacy* (New York: HRW, 1993), 186.

poster along with previous efforts had positive effects both in El Salvador and internationally. Supposedly, this particular propaganda effort paid handsome dividends with human rights organizations—which had been highly critical of the U.S. and Salvadoran government—except those "functioning as insurgent front groups."[73]

Coinciding with its urban initiatives, the FMLN slowly began bringing the war to El Salvador's main cities. These efforts included assassinations of military officers such as José Alberto "Chele" Medrano, founder of ORDEN, to commemorate Archbishop Romero's murder, as well as government officials. Insurgent attacks in the nation's capital increased fifty percent, from thirty-six in 1985 to fifty-four in 1986, and acts of sabotage also rose thirty-five percent, from fifty-four to seventy-three.[74] These forays also included artillery barrages against government targets, by using home-made munitions. Wildly inaccurate, these attacks caused civilian casualties, causing anger at the FMLN.[75] These attacks served several purposes. First, they were designed to precipitate a military and political crisis in El Salvador's cities by sowing chaos and disorder. The insurgents' continued ability to launch attacks was also meant to demonstrate the government's inability to prevent them. Assassinations of government officials and former military officers associated with repression delivered a powerful message to the nation's elite: the FMLN could still reach into the heart of San Salvador. These activities laid the groundwork for the strategic counter-offensive. Nevertheless, while these attacks may have

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[73] CIA Latin America Review, "El Salvador: Guerrilla Use of Mine Warfare," June 1987 (date is unclear), CIA FOIA website. A picture of this poster is available in this CIA document. There is also an additional copy in the Library of Congress Salvadoran Human Rights Collection.

[74] Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, "Bankrolling Failure: The United States Policy in El Salvador and the Urgent Need for Reform," November 1987, Box 2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[75] Bracamonte & Spencer, 32.

caused disorder within the nation's main cities, they never posed a major threat to the existence or functioning of the government.

Despite the turn toward PPW, the FMLN still maintained the capability to launch several high profile attacks and concentrated attacks against various government installations continued to be a mainstay of the FMLN's military repertoire. Some of the more infamous examples included the attack on the Cerron Grande Dam, the 3rd Brigade headquarters at San Miguel and El Paraíso, the same base that the FMLN overran in 1983. The ERP also carried out a daring raid against a training center, which targeted the American trainers stationed there. The objectives of that attack were to "kill gringos, kill seasoned troops and capture recruits."[76]

In May 1984, the FMLN struck again at San Miguel in a well-coordinated assault. While the insurgents left without taking control of the installation, the Salvadoran military turned the assault into a public relations disaster by lying about the numbers injured and killed, and then being caught by the media. After the attack, when asked by a fellow American serviceman about the incident, a U.S. adviser confidently claimed that it was "completely insignificant militarily," and believed that it did not represent a shift in the "military balance." Instead, the insurgents had merely "concentrated its forces," and staged a "spectacle" that "didn't mean anything."[77]

Much like San Miguel, the FMLN also attacked El Paraíso again. During the second attack in 1987, a U.S. advisor, Gregory Fronius, lost his life. Those killed in action also included sixty-nine Salvadorans. Of that number, none of the fatalities included officers; once the attack

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[76] Telegram, "Anatomy of the CEMFA Attack," October 25, 1985, Guerrilla Activity in El Salvador—Folder 7020, Box 9: Subject Files-Economic-Guerrilla Activity," El Salvador II Collection, NSA.

[77] Meara, 58.

began, they allegedly took shelter in an underground bunker.[78] Instead, the majority of the deaths were recruits.[79]

The continuation of these attacks served as a troubling reminder that the FMLN could continually strike at a time of its choosing and create unease within important sectors of the government. From a conventional view, these spectacular attacks may not have been a rousing military success. However, perceptions are just as critical as battlefield success in an insurgency. Thus, even if a particular event does not alter the strategic balance in the war, its impact can be felt much farther and broader by affecting civilian perceptions. Paradoxically, counterinsurgent forces can defeat insurgent forces militarily, but lose the political battle at the same time. The Lyndon Johnson administration experienced this firsthand in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive. The Salvadoran government and military also learned this lesson the hard way in 1989.

Over the next few years, the repeated bombings, growth of the Salvadoran military and its ability to operate for longer periods of time reduced the FMLN's effectiveness, as well as its number of troops. While estimating the exact amount of insurgent troops was notoriously difficult, one estimate offered between 6-7,000 troops. That number was a sharp decline from the height of the FMLN's power in 1983.[80] The government's strategy also forced civilians to make a difficult decision: flee or serve in the various pacification efforts. If they refused, they were often coerced into service, especially in civil defense units. As the war progressed, the Salvadoran guerrillas offered a similar option to civilians.

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[78] LeoGrande, 277.

[79] John Fishel, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

[80] U.S. GAO.

In order to compensate for their diminished ranks, the insurgents began relying on forced recruitment, a practice that greatly harmed their reputation in the countryside.[81] When the Salvadoran guerrillas entered a village, they offered the residents a stark choice: either serve with the FMLN or fight for the enemy.[82] In many instances, military-age males selected an option not included—they fled. For suffering civilians, forced recruitment represented another taxing burden. Along with military sweeps and bombing attacks, this practice created a substantial amount of displacement in the *campo.* As Americas Watch noted about the practice, "it is clear that the Salvadorans regarded forced recruitment as sufficiently onerous that they fled their homes preferring misery to coerced military service with the guerrillas."[83]

Even the FMLN's supporters recognized that their reliance on urban terrorism, assassinations and forced recruitment had cost them popular support. Father Ignacio Ellacuría believed that the FMLN had made grave errors and had lost its momentum. In particular, he criticized the insurgents for their attacks against civilians, forced recruitment and called for an end to economic sabotage, including "respect for agricultural crops and the economic livelihood of the civilian populace." To regain lost momentum, in his opinion the FMLN needed to humanize its conduct (as well as the government) and negotiate in good faith. According to U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering, several years before his death, Ellacuría realized that the FMLN would never win the war even though they had switched tactics.[84] Ambassador Corr agreed with Pickering's assessment, noting that the Jesuit priest believed that the FMLN were losing and

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[81] Several former *comandantes* interviewed acknowledged the damage caused by this strategy; Todd, 74.

[82] Wendy Shaull, *Tortillas, Beans, and M16s: Behind the Lines in El Salvador* (London ; Winchester, Mass: Pluto Press, 1990), 46.

[83] America's Watch, 56.

[84] Telegram, "Conversation with UCA Rector Ellacuría," May 22, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

called for dialogue.[85] As the conflict progressed, Ellacuría would use his contacts and influence with the FMLN senior leadership to try to persuade them to negotiate an end to the struggle and moderate their demands.

After the Salvadoran government regained the initiative in 1984, the FMLN had largely been forced on the defensive. For the next several years, the insurgents adapted its strategy to meet the existing situation on the political and military fronts. According to a variety of sources, including the United Nations, former insurgents and U.S. advisers, the insurgents also experienced a decline in popular support, as well as a drop off in acquiring new recruits between 1984 and 1988. Slowly but surely, the guerrillas pursued their newly revised strategy. American and Salvadoran analysts mistakenly viewed the FMLN's tactics as a sign of weakness, while in reality they were methodically expanding the scope of the war. In 1987, the FMLN high command sensed an opening. The cumulative effects of the earthquake that leveled parts of San Salvador, the incompetence of the Duarte regime and economic malaise had produced discontent. Sensing the country was on the verge of insurrection, the FMLN unveiled a new strategy, *Plan Fuego*.[86] *Fuego* attempted to accelerate the revolutionary process by precipitating a military and political crisis using many of the strategies employed throughout the conflict. More importantly, it initiated the process that led to the strategic counter-offensive, which rocked San Salvador in 1989.

Destroying Local Power

By the end of 1982, the FMLN considered local power as a central part of the United States' counterinsurgency strategy. From their view, mayors and civil defense units anchored the

[85] Edwin Corr, interview with the author, Norman Oklahoma, April 11, 2014

[86] Bracamonte & Spencer, 31.

various COIN initiatives used in the Salvadoran *campo*. Besides presiding over local government, the mayors also represented the face of Duarte's government at the local level. Civil defense units attempted to provide security for the development projects considered necessary to cement the central government's legitimacy with its constituents at the village level. Originally, the insurgents intended to combat *el poder local* by political means.[87] Nevertheless, their original strategy failed; in response, they resorted to violence to destroy the representatives of the central government in the countryside.

Beginning in 1985, the FMLN increasingly targeted mayors throughout the country. These officials often received death threats, endured harassment, or in some cases were either murdered or kidnapped. The ERP was the insurgent organization most associated with this strategy. The guerrilla leadership viewed mayors as legitimate targets by describing them as the "repressive apparatus of local control designed to prevent the masses from organizing themselves."[88] These officials represented the central government's presence in the countryside and were often the ones who implemented San Salvador's policies. Thus, mayors were viewed as collaborators who organized counterinsurgency efforts, paramilitary groups and administered civic action programs. They were also targeted because the Salvadoran insurgents viewed them as "choke points" in the "U.S. counterinsurgency strategy."[89]

By assassinating mayors, the FMLN strove to dismantle local governance and sever the link between the nation's capital and the rest of the country. Destroying the central government's political and military rural apparatus would prevent the Duarte government from enacting its

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[87] "El Salvador Vencera: Hablan los comandantes del Frente Farabundo Martí (San Salvador, 1982)," Folder 6, Universidad Centroamericana, San Salvador.

[88] Quoted in Byrnes, 134.

[89] CIA Intelligence Estimate, "El Salvador: Rebels Target Mayors," February 24, 1989, CIA FOIA.

various policies aimed at combating the FMLN. Furthermore, it served to reduce the reach and visibility of the government. The FMLN's strategy forced the U.S. embassy to admit that it "successfully hindered, if not altogether eliminated in some towns, local government.[90] Yet, the policy also cost it some degree of popular support, since the targets had been trying to implement much needed development programs.

The FMLN's efforts caused considerable damage to civic action efforts in the *campo*. The often abrupt departure of mayors, as well as the dissolution and disruption of the council meetings, in the words of a CIA analysis, "interrupted the flow of millions of dollars in economic assistance and government service. While the military can eventually assume the functions of the civil authorities in most cases, the ability of the government to deliver much-needed services, such as potable water, electric power, schools, medical facilities, and transportation has been seriously eroded in many areas."[91]

Killing civilians also acted as a means of intimidation. The insurgents did not have to assassinate the mayors to make a point. Harassment or death threats could achieve the desired results. Executing mayors demonstrated a stark contrast between the central government's inability to protect its allies and the FMLN's ability to act with impunity. Instead of relying upon indiscriminate violence, the FMLN chose specific individuals for assassination. The Salvadoran rebels were not simply draining the sea.

Unfortunately for the FMLN, not all of the mayors marked for execution were despised by their constituents or were corrupt. Nor was attacking local mayors viewed as a legitimate or viable strategy by all FMLN *comandantes*. Father Ellacuría and *comandantes* realized that, while

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[90] Telegram, "A Mayor's Story," February 17, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[91] CIA Intelligence Analysis, "El Salvador: Rebels Target Mayors," February 1989, CIA FOIA Website

this policy successfully eliminated local representatives, it also damaged the FMLN's standing. According to a former FPL insurgent, the benefits from killing mayors was outweighed by the tangible benefits that sometimes resulted from working with a mayor, such as information about the Salvadoran military and its movements.[92] Not all mayors suffered the reputation of being corrupt party hacks who were "enemies of the people" or beyond rapprochement.

After the war, the UN Truth Commission investigated the FMLN's campaign of assassination against the mayors. The commission focused specifically on the ERPs activities, including eleven executions carried out by this faction. Indeed, one of the more striking aspects of the Truth Commission's Report is an almost complete absence of discussion of war crimes committed by the other factions of the FMLN. Nevertheless, as the report observed, this practice violated international humanitarian and human rights law.[93] Even more important, killing mayors cost the insurgents broader popular support.

Reagan's Diminished Ally

In El Salvador, the American government would "sink or swim" with Duarte. The White House viewed Duarte as indispensable for U.S. success; President Reagan was among Duarte's staunchest advocates. According to Ambassador Edwin Corr, Reagan admired the Salvadoran president and declared that "We should keep giving him the support he needs."[94] And, the White House, as well as the U.S. government, backed Duarte to the hilt providing his government with generous American aid. Government analysts also waxed lyrical about Reagan's ally, viewing the Salvadoran president through the great man in history lens. They went as far to claim that

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[92] Pablo Parada Andino, interview with the author, August 20, 2013.

[93] UN, "From Madness to Hope."

[94] Ambassador Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

"success" in El Salvador had solely been the result of Duarte.[95] Unfortunately for his backers in Washington, he emerged seriously weakened by the FMLN's brazen actions.

In September1985, the FMLN abducted Ines Duarte, the Salvadoran president's daughter. While the kidnapping generated some positive results for the rebels, according to the U.S. embassy, it also damaged its reputation abroad, especially in Western Europe. U.S. officials scrutinized the reaction in European capitals, especially Paris, where the government had previously extended recognition to the FMLN. According to diplomatic reporting, the kidnapping had rendered the Salvadoran insurgents "non grata" with the ruling Socialist Party in France. This came at a time when Paris was already annoyed with the FMLN for its seeming inability to efficiently allocate funds which the government had generously granted it.[96]

Yet, in spite of the negative reaction in Europe, it apparently did not overly concern the FMLN leadership. According to an individual who spoke with Ambassador Edwin Corr, "the FMLN leadership does not feel that they have lost the military initiative. On the contrary, they continue to believe that they are winning the war. The kidnapping of Ines Duarte and the mayor demonstrates…that the guerrillas feel strong enough to withstand the loss of western international support which the kidnappings entail."[97]

Within El Salvador, two important forces warned Duarte not to compromise with the FMLN. The Salvadoran right, especially the Coffee Growers Association, was especially critical.

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[95] Memo, "El Salvador: Where we are and What's Needed," December 12, 1985, folder "El Salvador," box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronal Reagan Library.

[96] This cable did not specify the funding provided by the French government and the Socialist Party. Telegram, "Effect of the Kidnapping of President Duarte's Daughter on French Attitudes toward the Salvadoran Rebel Movement," October 12, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[97] Telegram, "Ambassador Corr's Meeting with ….[excised]," September 26, 1985, Box 12, Folder "Negotiations between El Salvador Government and Guerrillas—484,) NSA.

This organization, which represented the extreme right in El Salvador, placed several advertisements in local newspapers attacking Duarte. They claimed that presidential acquiescence to the FMLN's demands would represent an abuse of his power and compromise Salvadoran national security. The possibility that several former guerrillas could be released caused considerable irritation within the Coffee Growers Association. One of the group's advertisements pulled the emotional strings of its readers by asking "How…will one explain to soldiers who have lost limbs in combat that those who have perpetrated this violence are being set free? How will one explain to mothers, wives and other relatives of soldiers killed in combat that their losses, for whom they weep, were in vain?" As the embassy warned, the attacks against Duarte indicated that his handling of the affair had led to a deterioration in public support for the Salvadoran president.[98]

Initially, the Salvadoran military backed Duarte. However, as the crisis dragged on, its support for the president declined. In particular, senior Salvadoran military officers believed that Duarte's willingness to meet the FMLN's demands, specifically the release of captured insurgents, had put the guerrillas in control of the situation, "if not the nation's decision-making process." In their view, the president had become too involved with the case since it was his daughter, and that his eagerness to secure her release had forced him to make unnecessary concessions to the guerrillas.[99]

The kidnapping fiasco weakened Duarte's relationship with the military. In particular, his decision to free former FMLN fighters as part of his daughter's release provided the "opportunity

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[98] Telegram, "Duarte Kidnapping: ARENA and Coffee Grower's War President not to Compromise National Security for Daughter," October 1985, Box 12, Folder "Negotiations between El Salvador Government and Guerrillas—484,) NSA.

[99] Telegram, "Increasing Lack of ESAF Support for the Manner in which Salvadoran President is Attempting to Resolve his Daughter's Kidnapping," October 5, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

for conservative officers in the Salvadoran military who disliked Duarte, especially members of the *Tandona*, to criticize President Duarte."[100] To be fair, it was never a smooth relationship even under the best of circumstances. In particular, it damaged his credibility with the military, which always had been tenuous. Furthermore, the president's handling of his daughter's kidnapping also undermined the prestige of the progressive officers with the military, leaving the traditionalists ascendant.[101] Their marginalization concerned the American embassy because this sector of the Salvadoran officer corps was considered as the president's main ally within the military. In the end, according to Ambassador Corr, Duarte's authority with the military, "which he had worked so hard to build up," had been compromised. For the U.S. ambassador, Duarte had to do something dramatic to regain the momentum. According to the American embassy, "what he would really like is a major military victory or a dramatic social or diplomatic initiative" to reverse the gains. Among them, Duarte pursued a "'National Plan' to bring both security and services to the non-metropolitan area and population of El Salvador." [102]

Salvadoran institutions also agreed with the American ambassador's analysis. From UCA's perspective, the kidnapping forced the government to negotiate directly with the FMLN, which itself represented a victory for the insurgents. More importantly, a State Department telegram believed that many Salvadorans changed their perceptions of the FMLN. According to Father Ellacuría, instead of being considered simply as "terrorists," people began viewing the insurgents as a genuine political-military power. The favorable concessions granted to the FMLN

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[100] This particular *tanda* was arguably the most import source of discontent in the Salvadoran military. Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

[101] Defense Intelligence Agency Study, "El Salvador: Officer Politics," December 16, 1985, folder "El Salvador," Box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Regan Library.

[102] Telegram, "The Ines Duarte Kidnapping: a Balance Sheet," October 29, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

by Duarte boosted its fighters morale and reinforced their faith in their strategy. On this stance, the embassy disagreed.[103]

To regain his momentum after the hostage rescue imbroglio, Duarte's American supporters believed that he must cease acting as if he were still "on the campaign trail" and "begin to govern."[104] The American embassy noted that while the conflict damaged the existing political status quo, Duarte was "a scrapper" who

> wanted to put the kidnapping behind him and get to the real work he know he must (and he alone can) tackle: the implementation of tough fiscal measures to buck up the economy; an aggressive military campaign aimed at bringing decisively home to the guerrillas that their choice is to negotiate in a meaningful way or be hunted down and killed or captured; and pursuit of a 'National Plan' to bring both security and service to the non-metropolitan area and population of El Salvador.[105]

Officials within the Reagan administrated also agreed with the ambassador's last point, noting that the government needed to further extend government services and projects to the Salvadoran *campo* through the National Plan and win greater support of the people to deny support to the FMLN.[106] The following year, the Salvadoran government attempted to implement its own version of the National Plan.

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[103] Telegram, "UCA Analysis of the Ines Duarte Kidnapping: FMLN Strengthened, GOES Weakened, FDR the Big Loser," December 17, 1985, Box 12, Folder "Negotiations between El Salvador Government and Guerrillas—484," NSA.

[104] Memo, "El Salvador: Where we are and What's Needed," December 12, 1985, folder "El Salvador," box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronal Reagan Library.

[105] Telegram, "The Ines Duarte Kidnapping—A Balance Sheet," October 29, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[106] Memo, "El Salvador: Where we are and What's Needed," December 12, 1985, folder "El Salvador," box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronal Reagan Library.

Dialogue

Over the following years, the two antagonists met six times, including at Palma in 1984; Ayagualo in November 1985; Sesori in October 1987; and Mexico City and San Jose, Costa Rica in September and October 1989. Even though the belligerents held periodic talks, they produced very little in terms of substance.[107] For both sides, dialogue played a subordinate role to pursuing victory on the battlefield. The much needed breakthrough did not occur for several more years, well after both sides had given up on achieving a decisive military victory.

In October 1984, President Duarte made a bold step: he decided to hold peace talks with the FMLN. His gambit represented the first time that the Salvadoran government had seriously proposed to engage in dialogue with the rebels. Archbishop Romero's successor, Arturo Rivera y Damas, offered to arrange a meeting between the Salvadoran government and the guerrillas. Duarte's gestures were not reciprocated by the American Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Even though Pickering tried to persuade Duarte not to meet with the rebels, he failed. However, once the Salvadoran president publicly announced the meeting the administration supported his initiatives publicly.[108] Both sides agreed to meet on October 16, 1984 at the village of La Palma.

The negotiations at La Palma were enormously popular in a country that had endured six years of war and economic privation.[109] After the talks concluded, both sides expressed optimism. Duarte considered the meeting to have "been the most transcendental hours in

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[107] Byrnes, 141.

[108] LeoGrande, 262.

[109] LeoGrande. 262.

Salvadoran history."[110] The Reagan administration also reacted positively, claiming that the meeting offered a "vindication" of the president's strategy. According to the White House's logic, the administration's policy made the talks possible because U.S. strategy had reduced violence in El Salvador, curbed human rights abuses and "restored" democracy with Duarte's election.[111] Yet, there remained hard liners on both sides who viewed dialogue with utter contempt. Included in this category was D'Aubuisson, Duarte's *bête noire*, who characterized the meeting in a refrain he used repeatedly to attack his political rival. For the president's arch-nemesis, La Palma "was not a dialogue, it was a monologue between old friends who support the same cause: socialism. It was not real, they did nothing concrete."[112] Even though the dialogue at La Palma resulted in a lack of tangible achievements both sides agreed to meet one month later.

Following on the heels of La Palma, the Salvadoran army launched a major offensive against the FMLN. During this operation, Colonel Domingo Monterossa, who was characterized by the U.S. military strategists as their ideal prototype—even though he was involved in the massacre at El Mozote—was killed by a bomb planted in a radio transistor. These operations had been planned in advance. Senior U.S. officials, including Fred Iklé, and the head of Southern Command, Paul Gorman, believed that the FMLN were on the verge of defeat. One week before La Palma, the Under Secretary for Defense announced that the Salvadoran military had broken the stalemate and could successfully neutralize the insurgents within two years. A senior

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[110] Sam Dillon & Juan Tamayo, "Salvadorans will keep Talking," *Miami Herald,* October 16, 1984.

[111] Alfonso Chardy, "La Palma Talks are a Credit to Reagan Policy, aides say," *Miami Herald,* October 16, 1984.

[112] Associated Press, "Salvador Rightist Leader Calls Peace Talks a Fraud," *Miami Herald,* October 18, 1984.

Pentagon official interviewed by the *New York Times* also sounded an optimistic note declaring that the "Salvadoran army has turned the corner."[113]

In November 1984, representatives from the FMLN and Salvadoran government met at Ayagualo. Unlike the first meeting, this round of dialogue produced nothing but frustration. Both sides dug in their heels, especially the head of the ERP, who "used the occasion to show his followers" that "he would not concede to the president on any matter."[114] At La Palma, Duarte had promised to discuss measures to "humanize the armed conflict," but under pressure from the Salvadoran military and Reagan administration, the Salvadoran president dropped the issue. Duarte demanded that the FMLN lay down their weapons, accept a general amnesty and participate in elections. The guerrillas rejected his overtures by proposing a power-sharing arrangement, a gradual de-escalation of fighting, followed by a cease-fire, then the formation of a new government, a new constitution and a reorganization of the armed forces before elections were held.[115] After the talks failed, the Salvadoran protagonists resumed the war. Peace would not come for several years.

The U.S. embassy under Ambassador Corr firmly supported Duarte's various talks with the rebels, a move supported by the Reagan administration. Before his arrival in El Salvador, President Reagan instructed his ambassador to win the war. However, the White House supported a negotiated settlement as long as it was "acceptable."[116] While the U.S. ambassador

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[113] Philip Taubman, "U.S. Aides say Salvadoran Army is now on top," *New York Times,* October 7, 1984.

[114] Diana Villiers-Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 50.

[115] Sharpe, "El Salvador Revisited," 482.

[116] According to Ambassador Corr, "The elements of a peace agreement had to include the FMLN's acceptance of the 1984 Constitution (with some amendments but not a re-write), free and fair elections with more than one political party, the rule of law, respect for human rights, civilian control over the military, etc.. We would not and

may have supported dialogue, he was not impressed with the FMLN's proposals. A November 1985 telegram characterized one insurgent peace proposal as "old wine placed in new bottles." The ambassador also believed that the FMLN had hardened its position since the previous year. He also perceived a rupture between the FDR, the diplomatic arm and international representatives of the Salvadoran insurgents and the FMLN. If true, he argued, it might be worth trying to exploit. As the telegram rhetorically asked, "is the FDR attempting to distance itself from the baggage of preconditions and set the stage for its own talks with the GOES [Government of El Salvador]?"[117]

The various peace deliberations held before 1989 failed to produce any positive results in part because the belligerents believed that military victory was within their reach. Negotiations were subordinate to a military victory. In Hugh Byrnes's opinion, these periodic meetings were public-relations exercises because neither side wished to be portrayed as intransigent. They also failed because neither side reached a consensus on several issues. Their respective positions were far apart. Duarte demanded that the FMLN lay down its arms and participate in elections while the FMLN claimed his government was illegitimate because it had conducted elections in the midst of a war and repression, and that the insurgents must be included in a coalition government to guarantee a lasting peace.[118] Ultimately, several years elapsed before both sides realized that it would require a negotiated settlement to end the conflict.

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did not accept the FMLN's proposals of a shared government in transition to some kind of future government yet to be defined." Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

[117] Telegram, "Dialogue One Year after Ayagualo—No Movement with the FMLN: but just maybe with the FDR," December 1985, Box 9: Files—Economic Assistance-Guerilla, Folder 486, NSA.

[118] Brynes, 142.

Human Rights

Prior to Duarte's election as president in 1984, the Reagan administration routinely maintained that its ally had made dramatic strides in improving its human rights record. According to Ambassador Corr, Reagan instructed him to continue improving human rights in El Salvador.[119] While Reagan publicly endorsed these endeavors, the White House also habitually denied or ignored the abuses committed by Salvadoran security forces and the military, attributing them to either unknown elements or the FMLN. Human rights organizations, church groups, and the United Nations have demonstrated that Reagan not only was mistaken but blatantly and knowingly distorted the truth. Throughout the remainder of its second term, the Reagan administration repeatedly assured both the American public and international audiences that its Salvadoran policy had produced the intended results. The White House's supporters offered several different justifications to support their claims, including a drop in death squad violence, holding constituent and presidential elections, and continuing "progress" in criminal cases where violence had been committed against U.S. citizens.

Supporters of U.S. policy believed that the Salvadoran government turned the corner in 1984. Central to these alleged improvements were two factors: pressure from the U.S. government to reform or face a cut off of aid and American military assistance. Periodically, Americans had to threaten their allies by linking continuing funding to reform. Former MILGP commander John Waghelstein tried to impart this connection to one of his Salvadoran counterparts. When his ally argued that El Salvador's "fight was the United States' fight," Waghelstein reminded him that "unlike Vietnam, where we'd committed 450,000 troops it would

[119] The ambassador also emphasized the importance of improving human rights to his country team. Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

not take me long to put the 55 trainers on an airplane." According to Waghelstein, his Salvadoran colleague understood his point.[120]

Whereas death squad murders and large-scale massacres committed by the Salvadoran army and security forces characterized the first several years of the conflict, these practices became less pronounced. By 1984 the number of victims killed by these entities dropped considerably. In 1985, the number of people killed by government forces was estimated at 1,655. In 1982 5,962 people were alleged to have been killed.[121] These trends continued until 1991, when the American embassy discontinued tracking murders. However, political killing never stopped. If anything it became more selective. Death squads continued to operate, threatening labor activists and journalists until the termination of the conflict. The common refrain offered by Washington, and repeated today by supporters of the U.S. intervention, was that U.S. aid and threats to cut off aid were responsible for the vast improvement in the human rights record and the drop in political murders. For Michael Radu, U.S. military aid enabled the Salvadoran military to perform the role required of them: provide protection against the guerrillas.[122]

The turning point occurred after Vice-President George HW Bush's visit to El Salvador in February 1984. While toasting the Salvadoran president the vice-president reminded his listeners about the central tenets underling American COIN strategy and criticized certain sectors within El Salvador.

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[120] Quoted in John Waghelstein, "Military-to-Military Contacts: Personal Observations—The El Salvador Case," *Low Intenisty Conflict and Law Enforcement* 10.2 (Summer: 2003), 22

[121] UN, "From Madness to Hope."

[122] Michael Radu & Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Latin American Revolutionaries: Groups, Goals, Methods* (Washington: International Defense Publishers, 1990), 70.

> A guerrilla war is a long, arduous effort fought on many fronts: military, economic, social, and political. But the crucial battle is not for territory; it is for men's minds. The guerrillas never lose sight of that objective. They know the government is responsible for protecting the people. So their goal is to cripple the government, distort its priorities, and sow doubt about its legitimacy. For a government to survive a guerrilla challenge, it must continue to protect it even as it fights to defend itself from those who play by other rules-or no rules at all. As it does, it must continue to respect the rule of law and the rights of the individual. And it must honor basic human decencies. If it does not, it will lose that crucial battle for the support and approval for the people.[123]

In theory, the vice president's speech demonstrated the Reagan administration's new found commitment to human rights to the Salvadoran rightists. Bush's remarks came after Ambassador Pickering voiced similar remarks to the Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce.

Pickering's predecessor Deane Hinton had made similar remarks before this organization two years earlier. Unlike his successor and the vice-president, Hinton's speech was interpreted hostilely by the Reagan administration, which ruffled the feathers of Reagan's more intransigent administration officials, including his National Security Adviser William Clark. It cost Ambassador Hinton his position. Fortunately for Pickering, the hardliners within the president's cabinet had been sidelined temporarily, although they continually shaped the administration's Central American policy for the remainder of Reagan's tenure. Supporters have often claimed that, after the ascendancy of the moderates, the administration increasingly emphasized human rights.[124]

The intent was to threaten the withdrawal of U.S. aid if the Salvadorans failed to reform. Nevertheless, it has yet to be proven that the Salvadoran military and government ever took Washington's threats seriously. As the political scientist William Deane Stanley observed, human rights reform only happened when serious money was involved, in a context of growing

[123] Department of State Bulletin, "Vice President Bush Visits Latin America," February 1984.

[124] Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

military danger, and then only to the degree absolutely required.[125] Salvadorans recognized, more so than most Americans, that the position of the Republican president and their democratic opponents was identical on the important issues concerning El Salvador: both were adamant, for domestic political and geostrategic reasons that El Salvador not fall to the FMLN. How then could the Salvadoran armed forces and far right be pressured to reform by threats if Washington had affirmed its determination to draw the line in that country?[126]

Critics, including independent human rights agencies, vehemently denied Reagan's assertions. The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights believed that U.S. training played a minor role in the declining human rights abuses. Rather, the Salvadoran military and security forces reached the conclusion that the previous harsh measures used at the beginning of the war were no longer required.[127] Even though these activities declined, they did not stop. Rather they occurred in smaller numbers and there were no further massacres that matched the size and severity of El Mozote. The failure of the Final Offensive in 1981 and continuing repression had either decimated the FMLN's urban networks or had forced them to flee for the mountains and jungles. Abuses continued, but not on such a large-scale. Nevertheless, the Salvadoran high command reverted to type once the insurgents brought the war to the nation's capital in 1989.

Civic action, nationwide

Ever since General Woerner had completed his survey of the Salvadoran military in 1981, American tacticians had envisioned creating a "National Plan" based upon U.S. COIN

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[125] William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 263.

[126] Schwartz, 82.

[127] Martha Doggett, *Underwriting Injustice: AID and El Salvador's Judicial Reform Program* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1989).

prescriptions that would implement a nation-wide aggressive civic action and military operation that would gain the civilians' allegiance and turn the tide against the FMLN. Implementing such a program required close civil-military cooperation. As chapter three discussed, in 1983 Salvadoran operatives launched the National Campaign Plan, a civic action effort that focused on two key provinces. However, it failed to meet its objectives for a variety of reasons. Several years later, the Salvadoran government came the closest it ever did to implementing a truly nation-wide civic action effort to promote economic development and strengthen the central government's relationship with its citizens.

In 1986, the Salvadoran counterinsurgents unveiled a new COIN initiative modeled on the NCP. Unlike the previous incarnation, *Unidos Para Reconstruir* (UPR) expanded its area of operations to all of El Salvador's departments. UPR contained many of the same strategies used in the National Campaign Plan, including a clear, hold, and build phase of operations. To remove insurgents, the Salvadoran military bombed these areas first, and then initiated large-scale sweeps to force them out of the contested region. Once the area was secure, or the guerrillas had fled, the civic action programs began. These programs were considered necessary to kick start rural development and bind the civilians closer to the central government. Unfortunately, much like its predecessor, similar issues confounded the UPR.

Friction between military and civilian agencies continued. In spite of the American embassy and MILGP's efforts, getting these two actors to fully commit and embrace the various operations proposed by the Salvadoran and American counterinsurgents proved to be a daunting task. As the Central Intelligence Agency recognized, a "less-than-total commitment on the part

of some civilian and military authorities" plagued civic action efforts in El Salvador.[128] Distrust between the two continued to be another reoccurring theme. For example, unlike the NCP, during *Unidos Para Reconstruir* the reconstruction efforts were handled by the military, not CONARA. The latter organization was widely recognized for its corruption and pilfering funds earmarked for development. Even though civic action programs are supposed to include interaction between civilians and the military, it continued to be non-existent under the National Campaign Plan's successor. Duarte's party was especially resentful of the military's role because party members viewed it as a thinly veiled attempt to eclipse civilian control, especially over the rural areas where security was tenuous.[129] Declining budget allocation for civic action services represented an indicator of the government's lack of support for the program. Over a period of five years, funds for public works programs and services declined by about one-third.[130]

A lack of resources hindered the implementation of UPR. Once again, a government struggling through a serious economic crisis was tasked—with generous American aid—to implement a resource intensive and expensive COIN program. Perhaps even more importantly, Duarte's government lacked the proper bureaucracy to execute such a blueprint. The Salvadoran government's bureaucracies' inability and unwillingness to successfully implement the National Campaign Plan should have given COIN tacticians pause for concern. Expecting that a government whose scant resources had been taxed by an operation that focused exclusively on two departments could successfully execute it nation-wide represented a dubious proposition. Extending civic action efforts nation-wide stretched the already meager resources thin. In the

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[128] CIA Intelligence Analysis, "El Salvador: a Net Assessment of the War," February 1986, CIA FOIA website.

[129] Schwartz, 52.

[130] CIA Intelligence Analysis, "El Salvador: a Net Assessment of the War," February 1986, CIA FOIA website.

words of a critic of the Salvadoran military, by expanding the effort throughout the entire nation, "each of the regional commanders would get a piece of the pie. The problem was that by spreading its development effort around to keep the officer corps happy, the government insured that nowhere would its effort be decisive."[131] In October 1986, San Salvador was rocked by an earthquake that caused considerable damage. The already scant funds destined for the UPR were redirected toward the nation's capital to assist in relief and rebuilding.

The FMLN correctly understood the central premises behind the UPR. From the point of view of the FMLN's leadership, they viewed it as a clear indication that the FMLN held the advantage in organizing the masses in its rearguard and the failure of the military to prevent the regrouping of its forces.[132] *Comandate* Claudio Armijo discussed the main themes of UPR, noting that it consisted of coordinated military actions to consolidate territory, civic action, development with the intention of disputing the FMLN's control of the masses and applying pressure in their rearguard.[133] An insurgent publication issued during the war noted there were three parts to the UPR: retake insurgent zones, contest their expansion with *las masas*, and protect the government rearguard. Put another way, it was an attempt by the Salvadoran government rebuild local government in the insurgents' rearguard.[134] The FMLN devised its own slogan for UPR, "*quitar el agua al pez, aplica la ensuciar el agua al pez y en definitive, la*

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[131] Walter & Williams, 120.

[132] Poder Popular Doble Cara: Lineamientos de Organizacion," ND, Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[133] "Excerpt of Speech by *Comandante* Claudio Armijo," *Boletin Informativo* (June 1986), Folder 2.2, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[134] "Poder Popular Doble Cara: Lineamientos de Organizacion," ND, Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

de acabar con el agua."[135] Other FMLN documents characterized UPR as propaganda, psychological war, a game of appearances that did not contain strategic concessions to the masses.[136]

Continuing on with this theme, the FMLN also adroitly realized another glaring issue with the UPR and most of U.S. COIN doctrine. Essentially, this program was trying to salvage the economic system in El Salvador, not fundamentally reconfigure it. This worked in the FMLN's favor, because in their view the people wanted reform, not a continuation of the same system.[137] Enacting far-reaching economic reforms through COIN has always presented its practitioners with a problematic and vexing conundrum. Historically, CI forces—especially U.S. allies in the Third World—have fought to protect their interests, not reform them. The elite in El Salvador had no real interest in carrying out economic reforms, and the U.S. government did not have the appetite or the interest in pressuring them to make the necessary changes. If governments such as Duarte's had carried out the reforms it would have validated the insurgents' grievances, providing them with a form of legitimacy, something U.S. policymakers attempted to avoid at all costs. In Michael McClintock's words, "Similarly, how could national elites…accept a real democratic process when they were convinced that it would bring precisely the changes demanded by the insurgents?"[138]

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[135] "Readecuacion tactica del ejercito: un Nuevo fracaso," 1986, Folder 3.1, Box 3, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[136] "Linea Militar: Fase prepatoria de la contraofensiva estrategica," November 1986, Folder "loose collection," Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[137] "Poder Popular Doble Cara: Lineamientos de Organizacion," ND, Box 1, David Spencer Collection, Hoover Institution.

[138] McClintock, 420.

Grassroots Initiatives

After UPR stalled out, American officials and Duarte reassessed their options. They decided not to completely abandon civic action, but reconfigure and improve its overall implementation. The result was a new initiative known as *Municipios en Acción,* or Municipalities in Action (MEA), an effort that began in earnest in 1988. Ambassador Corr's close working relationship with President Duarte generated this new initiative. The program reflected the ambassador's previous experience as a career diplomat who had been involved in grassroots and nation-building development, with insurgencies and COIN in several countries, and his previous duty as a Marine Corps infantry officer.[139]MEA fulfilled his criteria for defeating insurgency: promoting development; establishing democracy and legitimacy and facilitating economic recovery.

Previous incarnations of civic action in El Salvador had primarily been coordinated and carried out principally by the Salvadoran military with MILGP and U.S. AID backing, but with limited and inadequate participation from the civilian side of the Salvadoran government.[140] Unlike its predecessors, civilian involvement became more pronounced under MEA. Consequently, civilians worked with the embassy, Salvadoran government and military, and the MILGP to promote development. After several failures, the CIs had finally established inter-agency coordination. A sympathetic appraisal of the program characterized the interaction as harmonious, noting "the military provided the helicopters and trucks. US AID provided the edibles and healthcare. Humanitarian organizations contributed donated materials from the

[139] Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

[140] Edwin Corr, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

international community."[141] While civilians were supposed to control the allocation of resources, critical U.S. personnel noted that while this was "great in theory—wait until you get out in the Salvadoran ambience."[142]

This quote also raises another troubling issue for practitioners of COIN. Besides bureaucratic friction between the military and civilian agencies, the former's involvement in both the political and military realm meant that it had to divide its efforts between the two. This drew resources and attention from the military's primary focus: fighting. For many military officers in the U.S. and El Salvador, it made them uneasy and represented a distraction from the institution's primary mission. SOUTHCOM's commander Paul Gorman complained about counterinsurgency's emphasis on civic action, especially the 1960s variant, describing it as a product of "military hubris and political naïveté which then affected our policies" and which hopefully, "may never again be associated with U.S. policies for low intensity conflict."[143] Using the military to enact development or civic action efforts often meant that when push came to shove, the military resorted back to what it was most familiar with: killing insurgents.

Under MEA, Salvadoran mayors received U.S. funding to carry out development projects. The plan targeted the eradication of corruption and ensuring that its intended beneficiaries received the bulk of the funding. To avoid the notorious black hole, CONARA was

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[141] Scott W. Moore, *Purple, not Gold:* Lessons from USAID-USMILGP Cooperation in El Salvador, 1980-1992 (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1997), 62.

[142] U.S. Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, 15.

[143] Quoted in McClintock, 418.

mostly cut out of the loop. However, it continued to disperse checks to local mayors.[144] Nevertheless, its role became increasingly marginalized as the conflict continued.

This new incarnation of civic action envisioned allowing Salvadoran *campesinos* to decide how to use the funds provided by AID. However, officials from this organization felt the need to intervene in the decision-making process to ensure that their audience made the correct decisions. In the beginning, administrators made a deliberate effort "to guide" each village to request "five components:" a school, government building, electricity, a telephone and improve roads. These elements were viewed by the program's practitioners as necessary requirements to build and sustain local governance.[145]

Municipalities in Action held open hall meetings, *cabildos abiertos,* where civilians participated in discussing how development funds would be spent. Local mayors presided over these meetings, who after a consensus was reached on a particular project, contracted the required services.[146] According to a Salvadoran government brochure, these meetings were examples of "democracy in action" that provided a way to exercise "freedom within a participative context."[147] The program was intended to emphasize and generate "grassroots involvement" locally and involve residents.[148]

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[144] CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: The Struggle for Rural Control, A Reference Aid," Folder 3.1, Box 3, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[145] Moore, 60.

[146] Moore, 59.

[147] CONARA, *Cabildos Abiertos: La revolución pacifica en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Publicidad Rumbo, ND). A copy is available at the Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES) library.

[148] CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: The Struggle for Rural Control, A Reference Aid," Folder 3.1, Box 3, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

In contrast with other civic action initiatives, Municipalities in Action has been considered as a success. Unlike its predecessors, this program continued for the remainder of the Salvadoran Civil War. A key indicator used by advocates to demonstrate the program's effectiveness was the number of municipalities that participated in the program. By the time the ink dried on the peace accords in 1992, all but nineteen of El Salvador's 262 municipalities had participated in the program.[149] According to one source, there was minimal fraud involved. Even more importantly, the MEA increased "government support and presence in the countryside."[150] While local involvement was viewed as key to the program, as Hugh Byrnes has accurately noted, it "did not necessarily equate to a winning of hearts and minds and was compatible even with allegiance to the insurgents."[151]

Regional Peace Efforts

As the U.S. government continued to seek a military or political victory in El Salvador, regional actors moved toward ending the region's conflicts, not their prolongation. Fearing that the existing wars could potentially convulse the isthmus in a larger clash, leaders from Central and South America had previously searched for a diplomatic solution. Their efforts had produced the Contadora Accords, which had been scuttled by the White House because of its lack of interest in peaceful coexistence with the Sandinistas.[152] In spite of the Reagan administration's best efforts to derail the peace process, it resumed in July 1985.

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[149] Moore, 60.

[150] CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: The Struggle for Rural Control, A Reference Aid," Folder 3.1, Box 3, Salvadoran Subject Collection, Hoover Institution.

[151] Byrnes, 149.

[152] The White House also refused to close down the contra camps. Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: the Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2012), 25.

The Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias, effectively launched the second peace process in 1987. Known as the Arias Peace Plan, it promoted the democratization of the region through the electoral process. Another element envisioned by Arias was the cessation of external support for the various wars that plagued the region. In February 1987, Arias presented his proposal to other Central American leaders during a summit in San José. These negotiations outlined a series of steps that could lead to regional cease-fires and demobilization.[153] Journalist Stephen Kinzer, who covered the Contra War extensively, noted that the "formula seemed utopian in its simplicity." Each Central American government would negotiate a cease-fire, declare a general amnesty and hold free elections. Non-regional powers would be asked to terminate their support for the guerrillas.[154] In August, using a strategy he learned from reading Franklin Roosevelt's biography, Arias arranged for the Central American leaders to meet without their aides present. In order to hammer out a consensus, everyone was locked into the room until an agreement had been reached.[155]

Much like the previous Contadora Accords, the Reagan administration tried to destroy the Esquipulas peace process. To undermine Arias, the Reagan administration funneled $433,000 to his political opponents through the National Endowment for Democracy and the Republican Institute for International Affairs.[156] In September, barely a month after the Esquipulas Accords were signed, the Reagan administration announced that it was seeking $270 million in aid for the

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[153] Rose J. Spalding, "From Low-Intensity War to Low-Intensity Peace: The Nicaragua Peace Process," in *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America,* edited by Cynthia Arnson (Woodrow Wilson Center: Washington, 1999): 31-64, 33.

[154] Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1991), 347.

[155] Kinzer, 349.

[156] Peace, 216.

contras, the CIA trained paramilitary army that had been trying to destabilize the Sandinista government.[157]

Certain members of the Reagan administration, especially Elliot Abrams, believed that the White House would convince Congress to continue funding the president's paramilitary allies. As Abrams confidently declared, if nothing else, "the president is absolutely determined not to leave the Soviet Union dominant in Central America; we will never allow that."[158] Unlike the previous regional peace efforts, their attempts to derail the agreements were resisted by congressional representatives opposed to a continuation of Reagan's proxy war against Nicaragua. However, the White House also met its match in Arias, who refused to be cowed by the administration's threats, and who continued to argue for dialogue and the continuation of the peace process.

In El Salvador, support for Esquipulas was muted. Duarte was concerned that the Central American democracies could be "picked off one by one in bilateral negotiations with the Sandinistas."[159] The FMLN realized that peace would mean giving up on revolution, while the military disliked the idea of negotiating with an actor they claimed to have defeated.[160] In spite of his distrust, Duarte eventually signed the accords. Three factors motivated the president. First, he sincerely wanted to end the conflict, even if it had put him at odds with his main ally, the United States. The agreement also unequivocally recognized the legitimacy of sovereign nations, reinforced elections and granted no formal status to insurgent organizations. Finally, his

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[157] Kinzer, 353

[158] Telegram, "Visit by Presidential Delegation Headed by Panamanians," March 22, 1986, DDRS.

[159] Telegram, "Visit by Presidential Delegation Headed by Panamanians," March 22, 1986, DDRS.

[160] Brands, 218.

Nicaraguan counterpart, Daniel Ortega informed Duarte that he would comply with the terms of the agreement.[161]

While the Esquipulas Accords made extensive efforts to end the contra war in Nicaragua, they also placed the quest for peace in El Salvador on the regional agenda.[162] Its stipulations also allowed the *Frente Democrático Revolucionario* (FDR) to return from exile and operate as a political party. Eventually, the FDR participated as a coalition in the 1989 presidential elections.[163] Especially crucial was the stipulation calling on outside powers to cease support for their respective clients. Using these agreements as a basis, the principle actors appealed in the following years to the United Nations for assistance in negotiating an end to the conflict. The international context also provided the necessary environment to establish peace.

Unwelcome Criticism

Even though the White House, U.S. military and State Department collectively expressed optimism about the conflict, persistent doubts about the war continued. Critics within Congress, especially Democrats, steadfastly challenged the administration's interpretation of the war effort. In November 1987, the Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus produced a study *Bankrolling Failure: United States Policy in El Salvador and the Urgent Need to Reform,* which was highly critical of the American war effort.

The study's conclusion was blunt and damning. According to *Bankrolling Failure,* U.S. policy was perpetuating, not terminating the conflict. Rather than leading to a military victory,

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[161] Greentree, 150.

[162] Byrnes, 169.

[163] UN, "From Madness to Hope."

American initiatives were leading to a stalemate. As the report caustically noted, the American government spent more than three billion dollars "bankrolling a failed policy."[164] Moreover, the committee's findings also faulted the American government for ignoring the very conditions which had provoked the outbreak of the civil war in the first place, especially a lack of arable land and continuing inequality and poverty.

Besides chipping away at the administration's portrayal of the conflict, the report also discussed existing U.S. COIN tactics, including civil defense. *Bankrolling Failure* noted several glaring issues surrounding the program, none of which were new. To begin, coercion continued to be a reoccurring theme. Fearing retaliation from the insurgents, civilians were reluctant to join CD units. In theory, membership was voluntary. However, local commanders were required to meet manpower quotas. If they could not produce the satisfactory numbers, they relied on forced participation. To coerce civilians into participating, local Salvadoran military officers simply blocked the delivery of U.S. aid to a particular area until they had acquired the sufficient forces necessary. One official familiar with civil defense argued for its termination, stating "there is no place for it. It creates armed power…[that becomes] the arbiter of life and the collectors of bribes."[165]

Bankrolling Failure also characterized the Salvadoran government's efforts to win hearts and minds as a failure. In the positive ledger, a combination of FMLN bungling and the Salvadoran military's strategy had eroded the strength of the rebels. Even though the ranks of the FMLN had been diminished, the report believed that they continued to maintain some form of

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[164] U.S. Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, 1.

[165] U.S. Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, 15.

support in the countryside. However, the report was also careful to acknowledge the much of the population refrained from overtly supporting one side over another.[166]

The report also criticized the administration's aid efforts as well. In particular, it argued that U.S. funding in El Salvador had prioritized military over economic concerns. According to data included in *Bankrolling Failure,* for every dollar used addressing the root causes of the conflict, the White House spent three dollars addressing military matters. These funds were insufficient because rebel attacks against the economy equaled U.S. economic assistance for stabilization, counterinsurgency and repairs. Moreover, economic and social data through international and U.S. sources demonstrated that living conditions for Salvadorans mired in poverty had declined significantly since the beginning of the war.[167]

Dissent also emerged from within the U.S. Army. Between 1987-1988, four U.S. Army colonels, who spent the year studying at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government wrote an influential study that analyzed the U.S. war effort in El Salvador. Commonly referred to as *The Colonels' Report*, it was highly critical of how the Pentagon and State Department had fought the war. Suffice to say, government officials did not appreciate the criticism.

The *Colonels' Report* highlighted several glaring issues with the U.S. COIN effort. Among the most important, the report argued that attempts to reform the Salvadoran military had produced mixed results. Despite hundreds of millions in aid, the Salvadoran high command still continued to fight the war according to its own prescriptions. For several years, the U.S. MILGP had tried to convince the Salvadoran high command to accept U.S. advice and approach the

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[166] U.S. Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, 2.

[167] U.S. Senate Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, 2-3.

conflict from a different tactical standpoint. Former U.S. advisors admitted that it was very difficult to change the upper officers' opinions of how to wage the war. One former American operative characterized the senior officers as "real Neanderthals."[168] However, they noted that training at the lower levels, especially among the non-commissioned officers, was much more effective.[169]

The authors blamed U.S. Army doctrine, with its emphasis on conventional strategy and tactics, for reinforcing the Salvadoran high command's decision to use American firepower and technology rather than COIN to defeat the FMLN. In the report's opinion, U.S. security assistance permitted the Salvadoran military to buy heavy weapons, such as howitzers and anti-tank artillery that provided "little utility." The study also chided the usage of howitzers, acidly noting that the "American experience in Vietnam demonstrated" that these weapons were "at best wasteful, and at worst, counterproductive."[170] The report also lambasted Washington's "rich man's approach to war," with its reliance on technology and high-teach weapons, which had little usage in the struggle over political legitimacy.

Even when the Salvadoran military and U.S. trainers used appropriate tactics, they failed to pay dividends. For instance, the report criticized the usage of psychological operations (PSYOPS). From the authors' view, the use of PSYOPS in El Salvador had been a dismal failure. To illustrate their ineffectiveness, the study noted that in 1984 the Army assigned an advisor who lacked fluency in Spanish to conduct PSYOPS—a critical deficiency, especially

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[168] Colonel James Hallums, email interview with the author, March 05, 2014.

[169] Colonel John Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, April 1, 2014. Col James Hallums also acknowledged the reticence of the Salvadoran high command. Email interview with the author, March 5, 2014.

[170] Bacevich et al, 30.

since the soldier could not effectively engage in conversation with his target audience. Small-unit action also languished. In the words of one American trainer, the Salvadoran military preferred to conduct "search and avoid patrols."[171] The four colonels also faulted the civil defense program for employing former paramilitary soldiers, and the "aged, lame, and the otherwise unfit" for military duty.[172] Even the civic action programs had failed to achieve their objectives, including the NCP and UPR because of the Salvadoran bureaucracy's inability to implement these programs.

The study also criticized the lack of cooperation between civilians and the military. However, the authors' ire was not directed at the State Department or the Army, but at Congress. Congressional representatives required the two actors to perform their duties separately. The U.S. military was not allowed to participate in civilian led projects. The colonels not only criticized Congress for prohibiting further integration between the two spheres, but also for providing inadequate funding and spending money on ineffectual development programs (carried out by U.S. AID).[173]

After its publication, the *Colonels' Report* received significant attention, especially within the U.S. government. Nevertheless, the report was received differently between the branches of the U.S. government. Critics of U.S. policy in El Salvador rejoiced at the report's findings, which validated their critiques of the American effort. Among those who enjoyed the

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[171] The report noted that PRAL units had "achieved successes far out of proportion to their size." Apart from these units, "Salvadoran attempts to adopt small unit tactics have been ineffective." Bacevich et al, 37.

[172] Bacevich et al, 40.

[173] Bacevich et al, 12.

report included Van Gosse, a former member of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), who read the report with "considerable satisfaction."[174]

The U.S. Army did not react toward the study in a hostile manner. Lead author Andrew Bacevich characterized the army's reaction as "mildly annoyed."[175] Among those irritated included American advisors who served in El Salvador. A former Special Forces soldier resented the study's findings claiming that the authors had already developed their argument before their arrival. Moreover, the study's intimation that the Army deployed its second string officers rankled him.[176] While some sectors of the army may have disagreed with the report, the authors did not experience any official repercussions. Even General Woerner, who was indirectly criticized, agreed with certain aspects of the study.[177] One of the authors, James Hallums, also agreed stating that the Army "was very tolerant of the report." It did not hinder any of their careers, and moreover, the book was widely read at one of the Army's officer schools. However, other branches of the government viewed the report differently.[178]

Predictably, the White House did not enjoy the study. For years, the Reagan administration had claimed that El Salvador had made considerable progress in meeting key benchmarks including limiting human rights abuses and professionalizing the Salvadoran officer corps. Now, an independent study had confirmed, that if anything, the U.S. was nowhere close to obtaining its goals in the country. As one of the authors recounted, a senior official from the

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[174] Van Gosse, email correspondence with the author, July 29, 2012.

[175] Andrew Bacevich, email interview with the author, February 14, 2014.

[176] Dr. John Fishel, interview with the author, April 11, 2014.

[177] General Fred Woerner, phone interview with the author, May 15, 2014.

[178] Colonel James Hallums, email interview with the author, March 5, 2014.

Defense Department bluntly told him that the report was not welcome by the Reagan administration, and "not needed at this time." [179]

The *Colonels' Report* was not well received at the American embassy in San Salvador either. Employees characterized it as "exaggerated," "outdated" and even "unbalanced." These were some of the milder words used. As one embassy official groused, the report was published in the "People's Democratic Republic of Massachusetts, where it's read five times a day, like the Koran. It's bullshit."[180] Ambassador William Walker was not a fan of the report either. The ambassador reacted by vetoing one of the authors as a nominee for MILGP commander as retribution.[181]

Interestingly, both studies did not question the U.S. intervention or the rationale behind it. The four colonels, like U.S. policymakers before them, assumed that the United States would continue intervening in Latin America with positive results. Perhaps more importantly, as Tommy Sue Montgomery has noted, they perpetuated the belief that there existed a need for American intervention to protect its threatened interests.[182] Instead, both studies focused their efforts on the implementation of American aid, which both agreed had been flawed. On the positive side, both studies analyzed problems that plagued the U.S. COIN effort. Arguably, none of these factors were ever satisfactorily resolved at any point during the war.

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[179] Colonel James Hallums, email interview with the author, March 5, 2014.

[180] Quoted in Michael Massing, "The Stale, Small War in El Salvador," available on the Alicia Patterson Foundation's website, http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/stale-small-war-el-salvador.

[181] Colonel James Hallums, email interview with the author, March 5, 2014.

[182] Tommy Sue Montgomery, "Fighting Guerrillas: the United States and Low-Intensity Conflict in El Salvador," *New Political Science* 9.1 (Fall/Winter 1990): 21-53.

Encouraging Signs?

At a welcoming ceremony for Duarte at the White House in 1987, the Great Communicator fired a broadside at his critics and extolled his administration's accomplishments in El Salvador:

> It was not long ago that El Salvador was all but written off by many in this city's circles of power. The Communist guerrillas, it was said, were an irresistible force, and the cruel tactics of the right could not be thwarted. The cause of democracy was doomed, so they said…Those of us who have stood in support of the democratic peoples of El Salvador are especially proud of what has been achieved in recent years…In a relatively short times, you've [Duarte] brought the military under civilian control and helped turn it into a professional and respected part of Salvadoran society, a responsible force both national security and democratic government. You've reformed the police and set about to improve the system of justice. You have created a climate of respect for human rights and the rule of law.[183]

In this particular speech, Reagan lauded the positive aspects of U.S. aid. According to the president, the U.S. had consolidated democracy under Duarte, improved the professionalization of the military, and reformed the judicial system. Victims of abuses committed by death squads and security forces, including American citizens, would have disagreed with his sunny appraisal. The president's upbeat message regarding El Salvador reflected Washington's conventional wisdom. While there had been setbacks, continued progress was certain. More importantly, the war would end with a government victory.

The following year, in January 1988, Ambassador Corr offered a very optimistic view of the American war effort. His assessment could not have contrasted any more starkly with the media's portrayal. For the previous several years, Corr's predecessors in the American embassy,

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[183] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony for President José Napoleón Duarte Fuentes of El Salvador," October 14, 1987, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/search/speeches.

as well as the various commanders of the U.S. MILGP, had strongly disagreed with the U.S. media's coverage of the conflict. John Waghelstein, a former commander of the advisory effort, was one of the fiercest critics. The colonel fumed that American journalists' inaccurate and one-sided coverage of the conflict, especially Raymond Bonner, had caused the MILGP serious difficulties.[184] Ambassador Corr also agreed, blaming the U.S. media and "some political interest groups" for:

> Painting an increasingly bleak picture of El Salvador as a country adrift and about to fall apart due to a failure of U.S. policy. These prophecies do not reflect reality as I see it. Progress continued to be satisfactory or better in four out the five key areas of U.S. interest (consolidation of democracy, defeating the Marxist-Leninist FMLN insurgency, improving the economy, obtaining Salvadoran support for U.S. Central America Policy). In the fifth area, human rights, there is hope that the recent slide can be halted.[185]

In particular, the ambassador identified several factors behind these supposedly misguided and negative perceptions. The list included the failure of the PDC to end the war and improve the economy; their defeat in the constituent elections; the delayed inauguration of the new legislative assembly; and the prospect of an ARENA victory in the 1989 elections. As Ambassador Corr noted, critics believed that these factors were threatening to plunge El Salvador "back in the dark days of the late 1970s and early 1980s."[186] Even though the ambassador may have tried to portray the war in positive terms to reassure Washington, these indicators must have caused some consternation in Washington, especially since a party the

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[184] Colonel John Waghelstein, "El Salvador and the Press: A Personal Account," *Parameters* 15.3 (1985). During an interview with the colonel, he also confirmed his initial observations.

[185] Telegram, "El Salvador: An Increasingly Brighter Future in 1990s—Provided the U.S. Stays the Course," June 28, 1988, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[186] Telegram, "El Salvador: An Increasingly Brighter Future in 1990s—Provided the U.S. Stays the Course," June 28, 1988, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

American government had prevented from winning a previous presidential election might win, thus undermining the foundation of U.S. policy in El Salvador.

Unlike the media, the ambassador maintained that the war against the FMLN continued to make progress, although not as "rapidly as we would wish." Corr counseled patience. Eventually, the U.S. would outlast its adversary. The ambassador also cautioned against trying to force a negotiated settlement. Rather, he advocated staying the course, and continuing to assist the Salvadoran government in improving their judicial system and human rights. However, by maintaining the administration's commitment to El Salvador, it would send a powerful message to the FMLN and force them to reassess their strategy and their negotiating stance.[187]

From a conventional military and political view, between 1984 and 1988, the United States ally had made notable progress. Politically, U.S. policymakers believed that democracy had been successfully entrenched in El Salvador after ensuring Duarte's election as president. Generous American military aid created the second largest military in Central America and increased the Salvadoran military's capability to carry out aggressive operations. The region's largest army belonged to Nicaragua, who was busy fighting the U.S.-backed *Contra* forces that terrorized the countryside. Similar to their neighbors, constructing a large army did not also result in victory. They also succeeded in reducing the size and strength of the FMLN. The insurgents also hurt their own cause with the practice of forced recruitment and attacks on elected officials. Nevertheless, the FMLN adapted by switching their strategy to prolong the war and outlast the United States. For the next several years, in spite of a reduction in its forces and undertaking measures that cost them broader support, the FMLN lived to fight another day.

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[187] Telegram, "El Salvador: An Increasingly Brighter Future in 1990s—Provided the U.S. Stays the Course," June 28, 1988, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

Despite preventing an insurgent victory in the short-term, the Salvadoran military was still unable to achieve a decisive victory over the guerrillas.

Despite these positive factors, there were several notable issues. Among the most important, the Salvadoran economy was still in dire straits. Not only did insurgent sabotage against the economy delay economic recovery, but they also damaged Duarte politically. His inability to address the fundamental economic grievances that fueled the insurgency also cost his government considerable legitimacy. Under pressure from Washington, the Salvadoran president adopted the rigid austerity measures prescribed by his allies, further costing him vital popular support from one of his largest constituencies. Consequently, money that could have been used elsewhere had to be used to pay for war related damages.

The FMLN's politico-military strategy continued to tie down a significant portion of the Salvadoran military in static defense, ensuring that the counterinsurgents did not have the manpower to completely eradicate the insurgents as a military threat. However, even if the Salvadoran military had been able to create a military force of over 80,000 troops, it would still have proven daunting to defeat a force that retained popular support.

In spite of a quantitative decline in human rights abuses, the Salvadoran Security Forces continued its persecution of opponents—both insurgent and civilian. Their complicity in death squad murders, disappearances, and human rights violations tainted Duarte's administration at home and abroad. His inability to prevent further abuses by the security forces, reform the justice system to punish the perpetrators, or exert civilian control over them, constituted a major shortcoming of his tenure in office. The emergence of a de-politicized and neutral security force

under civilian control —which is a characteristic of legitimate governments—had to wait until the end of the war.

Duarte's inability to deliver necessary public services also damaged his standing with the public. Rampant government corruption stymied efforts to provide essential services. An official in the U.S. embassy summed up the issue aptly, noting that "in this highly polarized, war-torn country, one of the few things upon which most Salvadoran agree is that their government does not work very well." The embassy official also noted that many people publicly blamed Duarte's party and "most privately admit[ted] that the problem was almost as bad in the 1960's and 1970's."[188] Arguably, the most notorious agency was CONARA, charged with administering civic action and development programs across the country.

The Salvadoran government's failure to deliver essential services or halt corruption also proved to be a considerable obstacle to the establishment of legitimacy. El Salvador's near-total reliance on U.S. largesse also undermined Duarte politically. While he was not Washington's puppet, his country's dependence on the United States made him susceptible to pressure from the White House and insurgent propaganda. If the rug had been pulled out from under Duarte, not only would the Salvadoran economy have collapsed, but its military would have been hard-pressed to sustain the fight against the FMLN.[189] Ahmed Eqbal made a similar point decades earlier. Even though Eqbal was discussing South Vietnam, his words ring true: "no foreign

[188] The document also attributed the failure of civilian institutions to bribery, incompetence, laziness, and a lack of funds. Telegram, "Post Reporting Plan: Governance: Generic Problems in the Functioning of Civilian Government Institutions" May 23, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[189] Bacevich et al, vii.

power has the ability to equip a native government with legitimacy… identification with a foreign power erodes the legitimacy of a regime."[190]

Building viable political institutions in the middle of conflict, a military occupation, or both, is hardly conducive to the creation of long-lasting stability. Generally, insurgents and their supporters do not participate –or are not welcomed—in elections. Their omission is fatal because these actors have credibility with the population. If they did not, the insurgency would eventually wither away. The continued exclusion of the FMLN and FDR from electoral politics accentuated the lack of political legitimacy in El Salvador. In theory, while the Salvadoran left was free to participate if they laid down their arms, there were no guarantees to ensure their safety. Moreover, given the previous history of El Salvador, they had sufficient reasons not to believe Duarte or the military. The establishment of political legitimacy, in which all parties were allowed to participate, free of violence, would ultimately take several more years.

Politically, United States policy was in trouble, especially after it was revealed that Duarte had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. Furthermore, his party was in the process of splintering and limping toward the presidential constituent elections in 1988. In spite of the optimism, the following year, the conflict would irrevocably change.

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[190] Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo & Yogesh Chandrani, eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 69.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATING THE BLOODLETTING, 1989-1992

Since 1980, Salvadorans had fought a brutal civil war that had devastated the countryside, caused widespread suffering and led to a massive emigration of Salvadorans, both across the border to Honduras and the United States. Throughout the previous eight years, the war ebbed and flowed, moving through periods of insurgent and government gains and stalemate. Despite being labeled as a low-intensity conflict, for those experiencing the war firsthand, it was anything but low-intensity. One constant in the war had been unwavering U.S. support from the White House. However, over the next few years, that commitment came increasingly under question.

Arguably, as the war entered a new year, few Salvadoran observers could have predicted that 1989 would be a decisive year in the conflict. Conventional wisdom held that however slowly, the Salvadoran military had improved significantly and would eventually win. Nevertheless several key events challenged prevailing assumptions about the war. Among them, new occupants emerged in both the White House and *La Casa Presidencial*, who according to most accounts, were more interested in ending the bloodshed than continuing it. For the past few years, the FMLN had concentrated on small-scale attacks, seeking to prolong the conflict until U.S. aid was terminated. Simultaneously, the insurgents had also been actively preparing one last large-scale demonstration of force. Later in 1989, an insurgent offensive changed both American and Salvadoran perceptions of the conflict and undermined many of the key assumptions behind U.S. support for El Salvador. These events also took place while the Cold War was winding down. As the decade old struggle meandered to its conclusion, the various conflicts that had

ravaged the region during the 1980s were also moving toward their denouement. Ultimately, the end of the Salvadoran conflict did not culminate in a military victory, but in a negotiated settlement.

This chapter begins in 1989 and concludes with the signing of the Chapultepec Accords, which terminated the Salvadoran civil war in January 1992. Rather than focusing on U.S. backed pacification efforts to defeat the FMLN, it will address how the insurgents forced both sides to negotiate and challenged prevailing notions about the conflict. Even though the Salvadoran government did not launch any nation-wide pacification efforts, aspects of U.S. COIN strategy still persisted, including the use of civil defense units. After the FMLN launched a large offensive, the war shifted from focusing on winning military victories to negotiations.

Supporters of the American intervention have often viewed the end of the conflict as a success for the Salvadoran government and as a vindication of the American strategy. While the government did not defeat the insurgents militarily, U.S. aid denied the FMLN a triumph on the battlefield. Military writers have been the most vocal in claiming victory for the government and Salvadoran forces.[1] Among the most important results of U.S. aid was that the American advisory effort strengthened and improved the battlefield capacities of the Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF). Moreover, they argue, the introduction of Americans also improved the regime's terrible human rights record. Perhaps most importantly, the Americans learned an important "lesson" from Vietnam: the host nation had to fight its own war.[2] Instead of American soldiers

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[1] H. Hayden, "Revolutionary Warfare: El Salvador and Vietnam: a Comparison," *Marine Corps Gazette* (July 1991): 50-54; Victor M. Rosello, "Lessons from El Salvador," *Parameters* (Winter 1993-94): 100-108; Alfred Valenzuela & Victor Rosello, "Expanding Roles and Missions in the War on Drugs and Terrorism: El Salvador and Colombia," *Military Review* (March-April 2004): 28-35.

[2] Richard W. Stewart, et al., *American Military History Volume II: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2003* (Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2009), 393-395.

fighting and dying, the small number of U.S. advisers ensured that the Salvadorans bore the brunt of the fighting. Therefore, by relying on a well-supported proxy, the U.S. was able to avoid the introduction of American ground troops and another quagmire. Unlike Vietnam, there was no "Americanization" of the conflict.

Supporters of the U.S. intervention also cite the spread of democracy to El Salvador as an important result of the war. They note that during the war, there was a peaceful transition of power, and that there have been five successive post-war presidential elections. However, these supporters also tend to downplay or ignore the role the U.S. played in meddling in the Salvadoran Presidential Election of 1984 to ensure Duarte's victory. Nevertheless, while there is some merit to these claims, they must be weighed against Greg Grandin's conclusion: "it took an unvanquished insurgency to force the kind of democratization that the United States had grudgingly supported as a means to defeat that insurgency in the first place."[3]

As Todd Greentree has noted, the Reagan administration believed that the Salvadoran conflict would be easy and relatively cost-free. As policymakers learned rather quickly, it was more complicated than they envisioned. Nevertheless, Greentree, a former State Department official who was sent to investigate the massacre at El Mozote, still believes that the U.S. effort was successful.[4] In spite of approximately $6 billion of U.S. aid, and the application of American COIN, the FMLN remained undefeated. Moreover, observers also questioned whether this aid allowed the U.S. to gain leverage over its Salvadoran allies. According to a former U.S. adviser to the Salvadoran High Command, they begrudgingly accepted U.S. advice when it was accompanied by promises of military aid, such as logistics or aviation support. Regarding

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[3] Grandin, "Empire's Workshop," 108.

[4] Greentree, "Crossroads of Intervention."

operational advice, U.S. advisers often walked away discouraged. The Salvadoran High Command believed that their situation was unique and that U.S. operational advice did not apply.[5]

Contrary to what COIN advocates and promoters of the "success narrative" in El Salvador have argued, the end of the conflict was not the result of the application of American COIN or from years of aid and support from Washington. Consequently, the establishment and strengthening of democracy that Washington policymakers and supporters of the U.S. intervention in El Salvador have trumpeted did not occur as the result of U.S. actions. Rather it was a mixture of events, including ones that happened far from El Salvador's borders, as well as internally. For example, after 1989, Salvadoran society had grown weary of the war and both sides wanted out Moreover, as the civil war moved toward its conclusion, international and regional events also prohibited the continuation of the conflict.

New Occupant

In January 1989, George H.W. Bush assumed the American presidency. The new president was a stark contrast from his predecessor, especially in his temperament. According to contemporary accounts of the newly elected president, he shared none of his predecessor's charisma. U.S. commentators often portrayed Bush as a "wimp." The *Washington Post's* Curt Suplee offered the following characterizations about the new occupant of the White House: "Wimp. Wasp. Weenie. Every woman's first husband. Bland conformist." Bush's supposed "wimpiness" was an allegation that had harmed his election campaign and continued to hound

[5] Col. James Hallums, email interview with author, March 5, 2013.

him into his presidency.[6] In a press conference, the newly elected President addressed these criticisms, quipping "people say I'm indecisive. Well, I don't know about that."[7] The new president also differed from his predecessor in an important way rarely noticed by critical reporters: George H.W. Bush was not nearly as committed to pursuing war in El Salvador as Reagan had been.

One of the Bush administration's goals was restoring bi-partisanship between the Executive and Legislative branches. James Baker III, President Bush's Secretary of State and a man of sharp political instincts, recognized the need to have a healthy and functioning relationship with Congress and the American press.[8] During his eight year tenure, Reagan's Central American policy, and the zeal with which he pursued it, had poisoned relations with Congress. The Bush administration had a particularly pressing issue before it: improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and ending the Cold War. Without congressional support, the administration feared it would be much harder to accomplish its goals. As Baker noted in his memoirs,

> I knew we had to find a way to get Central America behind us if we were to be able to deal aggressively with the decline of Soviet power. Moreover, it was an obstacle to the continued growth of democracy in all Latin America. Without a doubt, it was my first priority.[9]

Whereas his predecessor had made Central America a priority, Bush shared little of Reagan's proclivities or ideological fervor. Unlike Reagan, Bush seemed not to harbor any deep feelings toward the region. As vice-president and presidential candidate he played no role in

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[6] Stone & Kuznick, 464.

[7] Longley, 324.

[8] LaFeber, "Inevitable Revolutions," 346

[9] James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War & Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam's & Sons, 1995), 42.

policymaking or discussing it on the campaign trail.[10] In eschewing Reaganite zealotry, Bush and Baker instead favored quiet pragmatism.[11] Nevertheless, while El Salvador did not rank as highly on Bush's agenda, or Central America for that matter, his administration's goals in El Salvador were similar to Reagan's. U.S. policy toward the country remained predicated on preventing the overthrow of the government by either the extreme left or right in El Salvador. Nevertheless, its subordinate place on the president's agenda meant that he was not willing to pay heavy political costs to achieve his aims.[12]

Thus if the goals were the same, the policy was new. Rather than pursuing a military and political victory in El Salvador, the White House sought simply to end the conflict on the best possible terms. There were several factors behind Bush's Salvadoran policy. First, by 1989 the likelihood of an insurgent victory seemed remote. However, after a large scale insurgent offensive in November of that same year, the administration realized the need for a different approach. Also, successive elections in the country had provided for greater political stability, and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 was also extremely important.[13] The demise of the Warsaw Pact and eventually the Soviet Union greatly affected anticommunism as a factor influencing U.S. Central American policy. The implosion of the Communist bloc, as well as the termination of the aid pipeline to Cuba, removed the primary exporters of revolution—according to U.S. policymakers—in the hemisphere. Freed of the supposed threat from Moscow and

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[10] William LeoGrande, "From Reagan to Bush: The Transition in U.S. Policy towards Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies,* 22.3 (October 1990): 595-621, 595.

[11] LaFeber, 346.

[12] LeoGrande, "From Reagan to Bush," 620.

[13] Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 177.

Havana, the Bush administration pursued a more flexible approach to the conflict that was not moored to the Cold War struggle.

While the administration's goal may have been ending the various wars that plagued the region, as Cynthia Aronson has noted, the Bush administration did not have an overarching vision for extricating the U.S. from Central America.[14] Even though the White House may have lacked a strategic plan for ending the region's wars, it pursued a negotiated settlement rather than achieving military victory. It forged a bi-partisan policy that made continued U.S. assistance contingent on El Salvador's willingness to conduct good-faith negotiations with the rebels. In Hal Brands' opinion, the message from the Bush administration was blunt: negotiate or face the FMLN without U.S. support.[15]

Dark Clouds

As the UN Truth Commission Report *From Madness to Hope* noted, two contradictory trends characterized El Salvador in 1989: acts of violence, including human rights abuses, became more common and talks between the Salvadoran government and FMLN progressed with a view toward achieving a negotiated and political settlement of the conflict.[16] From 1989 until the end of the conflict in 1992, both sides continued to work toward ending the war. As in the previous years, negotiations between both sides offered brief glimmers of hope only to be dashed. Nevertheless, after 1989, there was no doubt that the war would end with a negotiated settlement.

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[14] Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 228.

[15] Hal Brands, "Reform, Democratization, and Counterinsurgency: Evaluating the US Experience in Cold War-era Latin America," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22. 2 (May 2011): 290–321, 310.

[16] Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador. *From Madness to Hope: The 12 Year War in El Salvador.* Last modified March 15, 1993. Available at http://www.usip.org/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf

For the previous several years, U.S. aid and training to the Salvadoran military had kept the FMLN off-balance and prevented them from launching any large-scale offensives that threatened the government's existence. In early 1989, various sectors of the U.S. government believed that this trend would continue. Conventional wisdom assumed that the Salvadoran military was progressing toward a military victory over the FMLN. Military studies conducted by several U.S. government agencies, including the CIA, Department of Defense, and the U.S. Military Group (MILGP) asserted that the U.S. was well on its way to achieving its goals.[17]

In spite of the apparently diminished risk of insurgent victory, there were other factors that worried policymakers. In a January 1989 talking points memo for the Director of the CIA (DCI), intelligence analysts discussed recent developments that posed a challenge to U.S. interests in El Salvador, including the upcoming March presidential elections, insurgent political propaganda efforts and a resurgence in death squad activity. None of the concerns included the possibility of a massive insurgent offensive. While the memo noted that these factors presented "new challenges," it did not characterize them as threatening the overall outcome of the war.

In January 1989 the FMLN presented a new peace proposal to the Salvadoran government and the Bush administration. It envisioned using the March 1989 Salvadoran Presidential Elections as a "step toward peace." As part of the plan, the FMLN called for delaying the elections by six months, ostensibly for logistical purposes.[18] The insurgents argued that they needed the additional time to prepare for the elections and to run as a viable party. U.S.

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[17] William Walker, interview with the author, Washington, DC, February 17, 2014. According to the MILGP study, there was no way the FMLN would win. The DOD and CIA made conclusions along similar lines, but also believed that no stalemate existed. CIA, "El Salvador Government & Insurgent Prospects," February 1989," Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, Library of Congress (LOC).

[18] Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 194.

officials believed this was simply a ploy to buy the FMLN more time to rearm and prepare for future military campaigns. According to the U.S. embassy, the proposal made the Salvadoran military nervous. The Salvadoran Minister of Defense, Rafael Humberto Larios, believed that the FMLN's proposal was dividing the political parties and made it appear that the government was intransigent while the FMLN was flexible on the issue of war and peace.[19] Nevertheless, if the proposal was rejected, the insurgents would boycott the upcoming presidential elections.

There were several factors behind this latest peace proposal. First, with the winding down of the Cold War, the international context appeared less promising. According to an embassy telegram, the FMLN had slowly changed its outlook because of the "Sandinistas failure to govern well in Nicaragua," as well as the "new environment created by *glasnost* in the Soviet Union." Internally, the party had also moved toward supporting negotiations, instead of solely continuing to fight until victory. However, the FMLN also allegedly felt confident of its electoral potential, if its conditions were adopted.[20]

The latest peace proposal, as well as insurgent propaganda, caused consternation at Langley because "although the armed forces [Salvadoran] retain the overall strategic edge, the insurgents have intensified military, political and diplomatic activities in recent months in a bid to undermine U.S. support for the government and enhance their credibility."[21] The FMLN aimed at weakening support for the Salvadoran government at home and abroad, while

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[19] Telegram, "Military Concern over Response to FMLN Political Initiative," February 22, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[20] Telegram, "Ambassador's Meeting with UCA Rector Ellacuría," April 5, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[21] CIA, "Talking Points for DCI," January 11, 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

enhancing their legitimacy. Their ultimate goal was to secure a power-sharing agreement that would enable the insurgents to become part of the Salvadoran government.

In particular, there were discouraging political signs in El Salvador. The PDC, which had won the constituent and presidential elections in 1982 and 1984, was in danger of losing the presidency to ARENA. As Duarte slowly succumbed to a stomach ulcer, his party fractured. By 1989, the PDC had weakened itself by in-fighting, incompetence and corruption. Demoralized and alienated from its base, it nearly disintegrated over choosing a successor to Duarte.[22] Their political fortunes seriously diminished, the Christian Democrats limped toward the next presidential election.

Another factor that cost the PDC support was a series of austerity measures launched under pressure from the United States to revive the economy. Preaching the gospel of the free market and slashing social spending, Duarte's measures succeeded in weakening the PDCs traditional base of support.[23] Unable to pass a tax increase to raise revenues because of rightist opposition, he was forced to cut spending, increasing unemployment. The cumulative damage from capital flight, guerrilla sabotage, and the 1986 earthquake left the country with fifty percent unemployment and underemployment, forty percent inflation, and a decreasing standard of living. U.S. economic aid could keep the country afloat, but economic recovery could not begin until the war was finished.[24]

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[22] Greentree, 108.

[23] Grandin, "Empire's Workshop," 104.

[24] LeoGrande, 565.

From 1985 onward, his party had also failed to resolve the country's most pressing problems: the economic downturn and the war.[25] Duarte's inability to produce results weakened support for his party across El Salvador. As one of the FMLN's leading strategists noted, it was part of a vicious cycle:

> The war requires more funds, and that forces them to take unpopular economic measures. Popular discontent as a result of the economic measures deepens the crisis and intensifies the war, and as the war intensifies more aid and government military spending are needed.[26]

These debilitating factors benefitted the PDC's main rival, ARENA. The previous year, the Christian Democrats lost the Constituent Assembly elections, allowing its main political competitor to gain the majority. In the upcoming March 1989 presidential election, the CIA forecast that ARENA's candidate Alfredo Cristiani would win. While he was considered a moderate within ARENA, intelligence analysts were concerned that his party's extremists—specifically D'Aubuisson—might advocate policies inimical to U.S. interests.[27]

Certain actors in El Salvador viewed an ARENA victory in the presidential election differently. The rector of the UCA, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, feared their defeat even more than their victory. In the Jesuit priest's opinion, an ARENA loss at the polls would leave the moderate wing within the party discredited and the hardliners would be quick to contest the election's results, blaming it on the machinations of the United States and current Salvadoran

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[25] Byrne, 123.

[26] Joaquín Villalobos, The *War in El Salvador : Current Situation and Outlook for the Future* (San Francisco CA: Solidarity Publications, 1986, 21.

[27] CIA, "Talking Points for DCI," January 11, 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

government.[28] Approximately one week before his murder, the Jesuit priest believed that D'Aubuisson was central to a negotiated settlement, which represented a *volte-face* for Ellacuría.[29] Even one prominent FMLN *comandante* preferred an ARENA victory. First, according to Villalobos, it would disprove the claim that a political center caught between two violent extremes existed. In response, the FMLN could capture the "center ground" of the Salvadoran political scene by robbing the PDC of its base. Interestingly, Villalobos also believed that a government dominated by ARENA would be easier to negotiate with than the PDC.[30]

Another disconcerting feature was the state of the Salvadoran economy. By 1989, there were startling economic indicators. The GDP of El Salvador had grown at an average of less than one percent between 1984 and 1989, and in 1988 was 6.5 percent below its 1980 levels. During this same time frame, per capita GDP was down sixteen percent from 1980. Agricultural production had also stagnated; between these same years it fell thirty-two percent, while per capita food production had fallen to eighty-five percent of the 1980 levels.[31] As the *New York Times*'s experienced reporter in El Salvador, James LeMoyne (who often wrote critically of the FMLN), noted, "In spite of more than $2 billion in American economic aid, infant mortality has risen, access to potable water has fallen and most rural health clinics do not have medicine."[32] Even though the U.S. government had provided its ally with hundreds of millions of dollars in

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[28] Telegram, "Ambassador's Meeting with UCA Rector Ellacuría," April 5, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[29] William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

[30] Telegram, "Ambassador's Meeting with UCA Rector Ellacuría," April 5, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[31] Byrne, 143.

[32] James LeMoyne, "The Guns of El Salvador: Eight Long Years of Political Terror," *New York Times,* February 5, 1989.

aid, it had done little to improve the Salvadoran economy or alleviate the suffering of the majority of the people—the very individuals whom the U.S and Salvadoran governments were trying to win over.

Recent insurgent efforts also concerned CIA analysts. For the past several months, the FMLN had intensified its military, political and diplomatic activities in a bid to undermine U.S. support for the government and enhance its credibility. In order to create the conditions necessary for the strategic counter-offensive, the FMLN carried out assassinations, strikes and work stoppages. In January 1989, a strike led by construction workers paralyzed 177 businesses leaving approximately 40,000 out of work.[33] A January CIA assessment suggested that the insurgents' efforts were also part of a much larger strategy to negotiate from a stronger position and achieve more favorable returns at the conference table.[34] This assessment was not far off the mark.

In 1989, the insurgents continued their policy of *ajusticiamientos*, summary executions of former allies, government officials, and civilians. This policy was also applied to insurgent combatants as well.[35] For the first half of the year, FMLN killings of civilians, when deaths from mines were included, "outstripped assassinations by uniformed government forces for the first

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[33] Zepeda, 242.

[34] CIA, "Talking Points for DCI," January 11, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[35] Over a period of several years, hundreds of FMLN combatants were murdered under the command of Mayo Sibrian, *el carnicero de paracentral*. Sibrian believed that the FMLN had been infiltrated by spies and the CIA. One study posits that his forces carried out 1,000 summary executions. These executions took place allegedly with the consent of Salvador Sanchez Ceren, Sibrian's boss, and current president elect in El Salvador. These crimes were also never investigated by the UN Truth Commission after the conflict. See Marvin Galeas, "Grandeza y Miseria en una guerrilla: informe de una matanza," *Reportaje especial de Centroamérica 21*; "Le pedí a Sánchez Cerén para massacre," *El Diario de Hoy,* December 10, 2008. A version of this article can be found online at http://www.elsalvador.com/mwedh/nota/nota_completa.asp?idCat=6351&idArt=3118159

time in the course of the war."[36] In early January, the FMLN resumed its campaign of assassinating mayors. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, this effort threatened to leave more than one-third of the nation without local authorities. This activity was mostly confined to areas under the ERP's control.[37] In February 1989, insurgents assassinated Miguel Castellanos, *nom de guerre* of Napoleon Romero García, a former FMLN guerrilla who had defected and wrote a prominent memoir about his experiences.[38] In spite of Castellanos' death, Villalobos told Father Ellacuría that there would be no killing of civilians during the upcoming elections, except for the mayors, a pledge to which the FMLN adhered. According to an embassy telegram, Villalobos remained "dogmatic" about the mayors, who, he believed, carried out "counterinsurgency functions and therefore were legitimate targets."[39] After the election, the FMLN also murdered other individuals including Francisco Peccorini, José Roberto García Alvarado, Cristiani's Attorney General, and José Antonio Rodrigo Porth, Cristiani's Chief of Staff. According to different sources, the continued killing of civilians cost the FMLN broader public support.[40]

Recent insurgent attacks in El Salvador's main population centers had also provoked a response from right-wing extremists. In particular, there was concern that this would lead to a

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[36] Americas Watch, *A Year of Reckoning: El Salvador a Decade after the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (Washington: Human Rights Watch, 1990), 8. As the report noted, deaths from mines declined substantially during the second half of the year.

[37] Douglas Farah, "El Salvador's Mayors Quit in Droves," *Washington Post,* January 8, 1989.

[38] Miguel Castellanos, *The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerrilla Leader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

[39] Telegram, "Ambassador's Meeting with UCA Rector Ellacuría," April 5, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[40] Telegram, "Ambassador's Meeting with UCA Rector Ellacuría," April 5, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA; the UN Truth Commission report noted that the murder of Castellanos, Peccorini, Alvarado and Porth caused the FMLN considerable damage in public opinion.

resurgence of death-squad activity. For the previous several years these shadowy units had been relatively quiet and had not resumed the large-scale bloodletting that had characterized the early part of the decade. In a January 1989 telegram, Ambassador Walker noted that the human rights situation was rapidly deteriorating and called into question claims that abuses were being curtailed.[41] By late 1989, observers claimed that there were nine death squads operating in the country, including the Revolutionary Anticommunist Action for Extermination (ARDE) that published a list of targeted opposition leaders, a practice which was eerily similar to earlier methods used by D'Aubuisson.[42] While these units operated quite openly and regularly during the early portion of the conflict, their activity after 1984 had become less noticeable. As a CIA memorandum cautioned, their resurgence could discredit the government and increase sympathy for the FMLN.[43]

The following month, the CIA produced an intelligence analysis that provided an assessment of the prospects of the two primary actors in the conflict. According to the report, for the past several years, the government had been reducing the size and effectiveness of the FMLN's forces. The assessment estimated that the insurgents had lost between fifteen to nineteen percent of their forces and predicted that this trend would continue, further reducing the FMLN by an additional one-third over the next three to five years. Nevertheless, despite the decrease in its overall size, the report cautioned that it was likely that the FMLN would be able

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[41] Telegram, "USG Response to Deterioration in Human Rights Situation in El Salvador," January 7, 1989, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[42] This was derived from a statement from Martha Doggett who appeared before Congress. See *El Salvador at the Crossroads: Peace or Another Decade of War, Hearings before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs,* 101st Congress, 110.

[43] CIA, "Talking Points for DCI," January 11, 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

to carry out its strategy of prolonged war, depending even more heavily on terrorism, sabotage and small-scale attacks.[44]

The assessment also discussed the continuing civil defense efforts in El Salvador. Paradoxically, in spite of receiving more aid than it previously had, the program continued to flounder. Noting that overall progress had been uneven, the assessment faulted bureaucratic ineptitude, inadequate funding, and the "failure of a sometimes indifferent military to provide adequate security."[45] In many ways, the same issues that confounded earlier pacification efforts, the NCP, UPR and civil defense, were still prevalent despite billions of dollars in U.S. aid and pressure to reform.

Security continued to be a serious issue with civil defense units. As Robert Downie has noted, civil defense was simply dangerous for civilians, because the Salvadoran military was notoriously late in responding to calls for assistance.[46] The weapons and training provided to these units were at best uneven, and at worst, obsolete. According to the CIA, the FMLN's assassination campaign against the mayors underscored the government's inability to protect those who supported it. One of the central functions of civil defense was to provide security in the Salvadoran countryside that would allow the government to resume governing and carrying out its basic social and political functions. Warning that continued failure to protect these local government officials could not only potentially destroy the "always weak civil administration in large parts of the country," it could also undermine the program as well. As the intelligence

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[44] CIA, "El Salvador Government & Insurgent Prospects," February 1989," Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, Library of Congress (LOC).

[45] CIA, "El Salvador Government & Insurgent Prospects," February 1989," Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, LOC.

[46] Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 142.

report gloomily noted, the "government's inability to counter these tactics is a major weakness of its counterinsurgency program."[47]

Allegations of members of civil defense units violating human rights or associating with death squads continued to hound the program. In October 1990, the American embassy learned that a "semi-official" civil defense force, *Los Patrióticos*, had not only received training from the Salvadoran Army's First Brigade in San Salvador, but also acted as force multipliers. Even more disconcerting were allegations that U.S. advisers had participated in training this unit. Ambassador Walker believed that the individuals in this group provided membership for the death squads. The ambassador feared that if American soldiers were associated or implicated in providing training to people who could be guilty of human rights abuses, it would be damaging to U.S. interests.[48]

The group's membership was noteworthy because its composition differed from the rest of the civil defense units. *Los Patrióticos* were comprised of wealthy Salvadoran citizens who provided security to some of San Salvador's more affluent neighborhoods. The group had been created in response to the FMLN's efforts to "bring the war to the rich"[49] The ambassador was dismissive of *Los Patrióticos*, labeling them as "adventure seeking, gun toting, Soldier of Fortune magazine subscribing, rich young extremists who see themselves as patriots." Another appraisal was equally as harsh, describing them as "rich momma's boys and pot-bellied

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[47] CIA, "El Salvador Government & Insurgent Prospects," February 1989," Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, LOC.

[48] Telegram, "US MILGP Involvement with Questionable Civil Defense Training at First Brigade," October 29, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[49] Office of the Secretary of Defense, memorandum, "Civil Defense Training in El Salvador," October 30, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

patriots."[50] Fearing ties to death squads or violators of human rights, the American ambassador not only called for a review of U.S. policy toward the program, but also argued that it should be terminated.[51] In his view, the continuing support for Civil Defense—as well as U.S. psychological operations—was sheer "stupidity."[52]

The ambassador's telegram led to a review of U.S. support for Civil Defense. The subsequent review noted some deficiencies with the program. This assessment discussed the origins and traced the historical development of civil defense units in El Salvador. U.S. support for the program began with the launch of the NCP in 1983. Unfortunately for American strategists, "civil defense was a poorly executed part of the plan." Consequently, Ambassador Thomas Pickering was charged with developing a new CD program, as well as reforming it. From 1983 onward, the U.S. MILGP had provided training to Salvadorans who then trained the CD units. In military parlance, this was referred to as the "train the trainers."[53] Nevertheless, U.S. advisers had on occasions provided direct training to CD units in El Salvador. One critic noted that while Walker may have overreacted regarding this particular unit, he agreed with his overall conclusion: "U.S. military should not be training the Civil Defense." In his opinion, these units tended to be "poorly trained, uneducated, underpaid *campesinos* whom [sic] either abuse their authority or are so incompetent that they become a weapon repository for the FMLN."[54]

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[50] Memo, "Civil Defense Training in El Salvador," October 30, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[51] Telegram, "US MILGP Involvement with Questionable Civil Defense Training at First Brigade," October 29, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[52] Ambassador William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

[53] DOD Memorandum, "Training Policy for ESAF Civil Defense Units," November 05, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[54] Memo, "Civil Defense Training in El Salvador," October 30, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

In spite of the concerns, the American military did not support an immediate cessation of support for the program. For one supporter, CD units represented a "bargaining chip" for the government in the peace talks. However, he also believed that several units had fulfilled their duties of acting as a barrier between the insurgents and the rural population.[55] On the other hand, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Inter-American Affairs) M.J. Byron agreed with the ambassador that any training provided *Los Patrióticos* should be terminated. For him, the U.S. government could not be associated with the group if there "is even the hint of improper activities or intentions."[56] Ultimately, the Department of Defense decided to gradually phase out support for the program.[57]

Overall, like other U.S. COIN efforts in El Salvador, civil defense failed to meet its objectives. Addressing CDs, Benjamin Schwartz concluded that there were three reasons why the program in El Salvador failed to meet its objectives. First was the continuing association with violence and human rights abuses. Former members of ORDEN continued to be involved in civil defense units, which Salvadoran *campesinos* were well aware of. In many areas, much of the population considered them devices of repression, not security. Reports of local military commanders using CDs as their private henchmen, extorting and intimidating villagers, continued.[58] Even more concerning, the Salvadoran military and government refused to adequately support the program. For the former, supporting civil defense units was a "very low

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[55] Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Memorandum, "DOD Position on USG Involvement with Salvadoran Civil Defense," November 21, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[56] Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Memorandum, "Response to Ambassador Walker's 29 October Message on Civil Defense Training," November 1, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[57] Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Memorandum, "DOD Position on USG Involvement with Salvadoran Civil Defense, "November 21, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[58] Downie, 138

priority." Moreover, both actors' commitment to the program had always been weak.[59] Salvadoran military officers defended their lack of support because they were concerned that weapons provided "will end up in the guerrillas' hands." Finally, the program failed to persuade the mass of people freely to choose the existing order in preference to the FMLN. If civilians had enthusiastically supported the program, it would indicate that they actively supported the government, which would demarcate victory, because "he who gains the allegiance of the people wins."[60]

Overall, the February intelligence prospectus identified some positive findings and negative aspects. However, the assessment made one substantial error: it claimed that the FMLN did not have the ability to launch a

> political-military offensive along the lines of its proposed strategic counteroffensive in 1989. The FMLN has not greatly increased the pace of its purely military operations nor has it been able to bring about a lasting strategic dispersion of government forces; FMLN front groups and penetrations of the armed forces are not able to foment a popular or military insurrection.[61]

Nevertheless, the memo was confident that the U.S. government was well on its way toward achieving its objectives in the country. Several months later Congressman Dave McCurdy (D-Oklahoma) also sounded a note of optimism claiming that "the growing political isolation of the hard left appears to be matched, contrary to popular wisdom, by its declining military

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[59] DOD memorandum, "Whither USG Involvement with Civil Defense in El Salvador," November 11, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[60] Schwartz, 54-55.

[61] CIA, "El Salvador Government & Insurgent Prospects," February 1989, Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, LOC.

capability."[62] By the end of the year, the FMLN contradicted these cheery assessments, as the war entered a new and final stage.

Changing of the Guard

In March 1989, the ARENA candidate, Alfredo Cristiani, won the Salvadoran presidential elections, running on a campaign of promises of economic recovery and negotiating with the FMLN.[63] In a telling sign, the PDC lost San Salvador, a traditional bastion of support. The election left ARENA as the leading political force in the country.[64] In spite of his election, doubts in Washington about Cristiani persisted.

Months earlier, the CIA was concerned that Cristiani's election could pose problems for the United States. Politically, his election marked the collapse of the PDC, and with it, a decade of U.S. policy. Not only did a party that Washington had routinely tried to prevent from gaining the presidency win, but his party controlled the Constituent Assembly as well. There was concern in both the Congressional and Executive branch that an ARENA government might lift the constraints imposed on the death-squads and that repression would receive a green light.[65] Nevertheless, after Cristiani's victory, the United States embraced a political party that it had spent a significant portion of the decade vilifying.

For the previous several years, Cristiani's party struggled over defining its vision for the future. In particular, it was a contest between the party's founders and their backers, which

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[62] Quoted in Arnson, 230.

[63] LeoGrande, 566.

[64] Mario Lungo, *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

[65] LeoGrande, "From Reagan to Bush," 607.

tended to be the reactionary wing, and a more moderate, reformist sector. In the late 1980s, the balance of power shifted in favor of the latter. In Jeffrey Paige's words, this sector, also known as the "Agro-Industrial elite," which Cristiani represented, gained increasing prominence within ARENA and sidelined the agrarian interests, D'Aubuisson's primary backers. For Paige, this should not be underestimated because their triumph over the hard-line elements made the Chapultepec Accords possible, as well as the transition to democracy.[66]

Over time, the relationship that had dominated El Salvador for almost half a century – between the military and oligarchy—had become increasingly fractured. The cracks in this alliance also proved to be important to the end of the conflict. To be fair, the affiliation between these two groups was never as smooth as portrayed. Throughout the twentieth century, reformist military officers who had been concerned about the dominance of the oligarchy had tried to implement small reforms to stave off revolution, including in 1979. Unfortunately, their efforts were either defeated by the hostility of the Salvadoran elite or their own conservative military peers.

The rupture began prior to the outbreak of the civil war, when reformist military officers supported a tepid agrarian reform act that was vehemently opposed by the landed agricultural interests. Over time, the military began to see its former ally as concerned above all else with profit. Perhaps naturally, a similar view was shared by the oligarchy, who viewed military officers as dangerous economic competitors and bristled at the unfair advantages they enjoyed, including no municipal taxes and preferential business deals.[67] The reformist sectors of ARENA

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[66] Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 321.

[67] Knut & Williams, 124.

also viewed the military as an obstacle to peace and thus to the rehabilitation and expansion of the Salvadoran economy.

The internal dynamics within ARENA also mirrored larger changes in the economic elite's situation. By the end of the 1980s, the coffee growers had ceased to be the dominant economic force within El Salvador. Nevertheless, despite losing their position on top of the economic ladder, they still retained considerable influence within ARENA. The moderate sectors of ARENA did not rely on the military for their security as the traditional elites did. For those owners who relied less on land and the services typically provided by the Salvadoran military, they saw these government forces as a threat, not only because of the fear they inspired but because of the taxes they imposed for protecting their private property.[68] From their perspective, the military's power needed to be circumscribed, but they also believed that FMLN members should be given access to political participation as long as they laid down their weapons.[69]

Before the FMLN launched a large-scale offensive, doubts existed about Cristiani. However, his handling of the affair changed minds in Washington. For example, ten months after his inauguration the American ambassador saw encouraging signs. Ambassador Walker listed a few positives, including that the government had initiated economic reforms, weathered the insurgent offensive and sidelined "a few—but far from enough—undesirable" military officers. Arguably, an important, "largely unnoted but critical," improvement had been his ability to keep the Salvadoran military committed to negotiations that represented a "stark contrast with the

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[68] Diana Villiers-Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 57.

[69] Villiers-Negroponte, 58.

suspicions that marked Duarte's less ambitious talks with the FMLN."[70] Over the next few years, Cristiani proved more amenable to negotiating with the FMLN and ending the conflict without securing a military victory.

A Salvadoran Tet?

On November 8, 1989, a daily intelligence estimate noted that the Salvadoran military reported unusual insurgent activity. According to the Salvadoran military, the FMLN was planning on launching an attack soon, "possibly this week," indicated by an "unusual concentration of rebels in and around San Salvador." The military was also concerned about the FMLN assassinating government officials and feared reprisals would follow from "rightists or renegade elements in the military."[71] According to Orlando Zepeda, military intelligence had recognized that the insurgents were planning a major offensive.[72] These moves represented the first phase of an insurgent offensive, which aimed at infiltrating men, weapons and equipment into the capital city.[73] However, while the Salvadoran government and military realized that the insurgents were preparing for something big, it was not a question of *if* but *when* they would strike.

For the previous several months, there had been escalating repression against center-left party activists, including labor unions, throughout the country's cities. These activities culminated in the bombing of the *Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños*

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[70] Telegram, "Struggling on Many Fronts: Cristiani after Ten Months," April 5, 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[71] Intelligence Estimate, "El Salvador: Capital Tense," November 8, 1989, El Salvador Human Rights, LOC.

[72] Zepeda, 199.

[73] Lt. Col. Charles Armstrong, "Urban Combat: The FMLN's 'Final Offensive' of 1989, *Marine Corps Gazette* (November 1990), 53.

(FENASTRAS).[74] While the FMLN and Salvadoran government had been negotiating, a bomb struck the office of FENASTRAS on October 31, 1989. It was the third time the organization had been targeted that year. Whereas the previous incidents did not result in the loss of life, this attack killed nine people, including the union's secretary general, Febe Elizabeth Velásquez, and wounded forty others. Following the bombing, the FMLN suspended peace negotiations with the government. The explosion was one of the primary motives for launching the offensive.[75] While the attacks were initially blamed on the guerrillas, that was unlikely. *FENASTRAS* had been critical of the government for decades and was closely linked with FARN, one of the five groups of the FMLN. As the UN Truth Commission noted, this incident occurred in the context of number of attacks against the Salvadoran army and opponents of the government. Before the bomb exploded at its headquarters, members of FENASTRAS had received death threats for months, including some who disappeared after their arrest.[76]

On November 11, 1989, one day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the FMLN brought the war to the nation's capital. Simultaneously, the Salvadoran insurgents also launched large urban offensives in Santa Ana, Zacatecoluca, Usulután and San Miguel, but these were minor engagements compared to the campaign directed at San Salvador. This major operation represented the culmination of a strategy the insurgents had carried out for the past several years, which was aimed at producing a decisive battle and massive uprising. This offensive, also known as *Hasta al tope,* or *Ofensiva fuera los fascistas, Febe Elizabeth vive* (named for the murdered FENASTRAS secretary general, Febe Elizabeth Velásquez), shook the government's confidence

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[74] Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 217.

[75] Byrne, 152.

[76] Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope.*

and profoundly affected the peace negotiations. For the next several weeks, the army struggled to evict the insurgents from San Salvador.

The offensive caught the American embassy completely off-guard. The previous night, the embassy hosted the Marine Corps ball, an event which would never have happened had they been aware that an attack was coming.[77] Next morning, the embassy staff rose to very sobering news—both literally and figuratively—the capital was under attack. Perhaps more importantly, for the next few days after rebels attacked the capital city, the situation in San Salvador was precarious. The biggest fear within the American embassy was that the poor would rise with the FMLN. Even though they did not, the fear was palpable. The offensive also struck fear in the Salvadoran high command. According to Ambassador Walker, their mood was "panic stricken." As the days progressed, the embassy lost confidence in senior Salvadoran military officers. Eventually, the high command's fear and paranoia led it to commit arguably one of the biggest mistakes in the war.[78]

There were several reasons why the FMLN launched the offensive in 1989. According to Facundo Guardado, there were two goals behind the attack, at best to take power by sparking an insurrection, at a minimum to sustain combat in the cities for seventy-two hours to produce a favorable change in the correlation of forces.[79] An internal FMLN document also believed that 1989 was the correct time to launch the strategic counter-offensive.[80] The election of Cristiani's government, which had no political experience handling the international implications of the

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[77] Ambassador Walker, interview with author, February 17, 2014.

[78] These impressions were gathered from an interview with Ambassador Walker; interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

[79] Marta Harnecker, *Con la Mirada en alto: historia del FPL* (Chile: Ediciones Biblioteca Popular, 1991), 140.

[80] "Program Politica," 1989.

conflict, was seen as a weakness by the Salvadoran guerrillas. In addition, the FMLN believed that it could count on the support of its allies in Latin America: Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela and Panama.[81] By November 1989, the FMLN had been fully rearmed. According to David E. Spencer, weapons imported from the Soviet Bloc enabled the FMLN to launch the offensive, and to sustain combat for an additional two years.[82]

The offensive also aimed at bolstering the FMLN's position for political concessions at the peace talks.[83] While Cristiani's representatives had held negotiations with the FMLN, they had failed to offer any significant concessions. Mario Lungo also concurs, arguing that the offensive was not designed to defeat the nation's armed forces. Rather, the uprising sought to provoke a qualitative change in the correlation of forces that would help start the stalemated negotiations process that would lead to a negotiated settlement.[84] Nevertheless, there were some sectors of the FMLN that still held out hope for a decisive victory. Unfortunately for subscribers to this theory, the massive uprising never occurred. For the previous several years, the insurgents had been building and expanding its network of rearguards for this very occasion. The underlying idea was that the presence of the FMLN's forces would provoke an insurrection by important social groups that would take up arms against the government.[85]

During the offensive, the FMLN occupied the neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, rather than attacking military barracks. As they moved into San Salvador from the surrounding

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[81] Zepeda, 204.

[82] Spencer, 281-282.

[83] Christopher Marquis, "Salvador Battle Hurt Talk Hopes," *Miami Herald,* November 16, 1989.

[84] Lungo.

[85] Mijango, 320.

countryside, the insurgents often commandeered houses and launched attacks against government forces.[86] The FMLN's urban tactics were based on the "defense of the *colonia*," the Spanish word for neighborhood. Essentially, the insurgents occupied a pre-determined central house, defended by a series of interconnecting ones in a neighborhood and several outer concentric rings of mobile and stationary defenders. These were created in order to facilitate the movement of fighters and communication among the rebels, and to avoid enemy fire.[87]

While the FMLN initially remained in the working class neighborhoods, as the offensive spread, insurgents took up positions in the wealthier suburbs, bringing the conflict to the doorstep of the nation's wealthiest individuals. As the *New York Times's* James LeMoyne noted prior to the offensive,

> The affluent elite is cloistered from the war inside high-walled mansions watched by bodyguards…Young men of monied families danced in the discos all night, secure in the knowledge that they will never have to fight in the war that has killed more than 25,000 peasant soldiers, most of them draftees.[88]

The offensive was the first time in several years that the wealthy had experienced the full burden of war. For one wealthy Salvadoran, his experience with the insurgents, who occupied his home briefly, was not a traumatizing experience. In fact, according to him, the rebels treated him with respect and did not steal or vandalize his property.[89] Previously, the FMLN had carried out selective assassinations of prominent individuals in the capital, such as members of the government or defectors, but now this sector of society experienced firsthand the reach of the FMLN.

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[86] "Terroristas se atrincheran en casas de particulares," *El Diario de Hoy,* November 14, 1989.

[87] Armstrong, 53.

[88] LeMoyne, "The Guns of El Salvador."

[89] The individual was the former president of the Salvadoran airline, Taca, who relayed the story to Ambassador William Walker. William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

To dislodge the FMLN from occupying neighborhoods, the Salvadoran Air Force bombed the working class neighborhoods, which caused civilian casualties, although the estimates are hotly disputed.[90] In one case, the Salvadoran Air Force dropped three 500 pound bombs on a guerrilla command outpost, which according to one account, killed one civilian, wounded another, and killed an indeterminate number of insurgents. As one adviser lamented, this event gave critics the impression that the "Air Force was bombing indiscriminately without regard for civilian casualties or property damages."[91] Bush administration officials, such as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, disputed the claims of "indiscriminate bombing," stating that "President Cristiani gave explicit orders to the Air Force" to prevent indiscriminate bombing and that the Salvadoran government "bent over backwards to avoid injuring civilians."[92]

After the launching of the offensive, the Bush administration tried to minimize its impact and cast it as a move by a desperate actor. Secretary of State James Baker called it a "desperation move" and insisted "there is no threat to the Salvadoran government."[93] As Aronson noted, "The FMLN failed totally in this offensive," losing "between fifteen and twenty percent of their forces."[94] *El Diario de Hoy,* a conservative Salvadoran newspaper, trumpeted on November 14 that the "terrorist offensive" was under control. In the same article, the newspaper castigated the FMLN for having a "total disregard" for human rights by launching indiscriminate attacks

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[90] *Miami Herald,* "Aircraft Strafe Salvadoran Capital," November 15, 1989.

[91] Armstrong, 55.

[92] This quotation was part of Aronson's testimony before Congress. *El Salvador at the Crossroads: Peace or another Decade of War, Hearings before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs,* 101st Congress (January 24, 31, and February 6, 1990).

[93] Quoted in Arnson, 246.

[94] Quoted in LeoGrande, "After the Battle of San Salvador," *World Policy Journal,* 7.2 (Spring 1990), 331.

throughout the nation's capital.[95] One U.S. diplomat disagreed with these assertions, telling a reporter, "this is not your average tin cup guerrilla group playing army in the hills. That's a serious force." [96] Indeed, the FMLN's offensive did not represent the actions of a desperate actor. Rather, it was the culmination of years of work that was intended to produce results favorable to the FMLN.

Murder

In the midst of the rebel offensive, a murder committed by the Atlacatl Battalion further damaged the credibility of Cristiani's government, as well as it international reputation. On November 16, the Atlacatl Battalion entered the UCA campus and murdered the Jesuit priests Ignacio Ellacuría, Rector of the university; Ignacio Martín-Baró, Vice-Rector; Segundo Montes, Director of the Human Rights Institute; and Amando López, Joaquín López , and Juan Ramón Moreno. After dispatching the Jesuits priests, the Atlacatl Battalion found their housekeeper and her daughter and murdered them as well. The most professional battalion in the Salvadoran military attempted to cover up the crime by staging a fake machine gun fight and attributing the slaying to the FMLN, by writing on a piece of cardboard "FMLN executed those who informed on it. Victory or death, FMLN."[97]

The murdered Jesuit priests had been viewed with both suspicion and distrust by the Salvadoran military. Even prior to the outbreak of the civil war, Roman Catholic priests and clergy had been persecuted by the military and the security forces for their "subversive"

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[95] "Ofensiva Terrorista Bajo Control Dice Gobierno," *El Diario de Hoy,* November 14, 1989.

[96] Christopher Marquis, "Salvador sends Heavy Arms into Suburbs; toll tops 300," *Miami Herald,* November 14, 1989.

[97] Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope.*

activities. These "nefarious acts" included educating civilians that their fate in life was not predetermined and organizing *campesinos* in the countryside. Salvadoran elites viewed this as a dangerous intrusion into politics and especially as a challenge to their prerogatives and way of life. Several priests, notably Father Rutilio Grande, paid with their lives. According to a former U.S. adviser, the higher ranking Salvadoran military believed that if enough "peasants were killed along with the Jesuit priests who planted communist ideas in their minds everything would go back to as it had been."[98] During the war, members of the armed forces called UCA a "refuge of subversives." According to reports, Colonel Inocente Montano, Vice-Minister for Public Security, publicly declared that the Jesuits were "fully identified with subversive movements." Former Colonel Orlando Zepeda declared that the murder of a public prosecutor had been planned within the university's confines and referred to UCA as a "haven of terrorist leaders from which a strategy of attacks against Salvadoran citizens is planned and coordinated."[99]

Throughout the conflict, the Jesuit priests at UCA had maintained contact with the FMLN, especially Father Ellacuría, who had met several times with Villalobos, the leader of the ERP. The Salvadoran military viewed the continuing contacts between the two as suspicious, and as blatantly favoring the insurgents. Even if the Jesuits supported some of the FMLN's aims, they could be critical, especially over the kidnapping and killing of civilians and mayors. For example, the Jesuit magazine *Estudios Centroamericanos* published articles critical of the insurgents, including its lack of broad support. According to the magazine, "The growing misery is attributed more today to the war than structural injustice, and the war is attributed more to the

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[98] Col. James Hallums, email interview with the author, March 05, 2013.

[99] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States, "Report 136/99," copy available at http://www.cidh.oas.org/annualrep/99eng/Merits/ElSalvador10.488.htm; Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope.*

FMLN than to the armed forces or the United States."[100] Throughout the war, Father Ellacuría sought to persuade Villalobos to become more flexible toward a political settlement.[101] Beginning from 1985 onward, the priest harbored doubts over the possibility of a FMLN military victory.[102] Instead, he urged the head of the ERP to negotiate.

As the UN Truth Commission for El Salvador established, the decision to murder the Jesuits was reached at a meeting November 15. The unit chosen to carry out the order was the Atlacatl Battalion.[103] One of the participants in that meeting, Orlando Zepeda, flatly denied that any order was given to murder the Jesuit priests.[104] Despite the initial denials and cover-up, it was quickly discovered that the American-trained unit was behind the massacre.

In the aftermath of the murders, U.S. policy toward El Salvador underwent a fundamental reevaluation. Allegations of foot dragging and obstruction of justice within the country angered members of Congress. The accusations embarrassed the Bush administration and made it increasingly difficult to convince Congress to continue bankrolling El Salvador. Since Duarte's election as president in 1984 El Salvador had largely receded from the spotlight and U.S. aid and deliberations over Salvadoran policy had proceeded rather smoothly. During the second part of the Reagan administration, officials claimed that the Salvadoran military had made great strides in improving human rights and had halted the egregious violations of the early 1980s. Consequently, the Jesuit murders brought into question whether or not these allegations were

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[100] Quoted in Byrne, 161.

[101] Villiers-Negroponte, 52.

[102] Telegram, "Conversation with UCA Rector Ellacuría," February 22, 1985, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

[103] Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope.*

[104] Zepeda, 217.

true, and perhaps more importantly, it demonstrated to skeptical Congressmen and members of the public that despite all the U.S. aid, it had made a marginal impact.

Addressing the murder on Capitol Hill, Aronson declared that "many will try to exploit Father Ellacuría's memory and name," but the only "fitting memorial" was to "mobilize whatever resources and pressures can be brought to bear to negotiate an end to the conflict in El Salvador and guarantee safe space in the democratic process for all." As Cynthia Arnson noted, Aronson's statement marked the first time a U.S. official had explicitly acknowledged favoring a settlement to the war through political negotiations.[105] Such statements would have been unthinkable under the Reagan administration. Aronson's message indicated that the White House was not going to seek a military victory in El Salvador.

After the news of the murders reached Washington, Congress moved toward suspending aid, a move protested by the Bush administration, which claimed that it would send "the wrong signals."[106] As Congress debated reducing U.S. aid, administration officials tried to persuade members to avoid turning off the funding pipeline. Aronson argued against such moves, reminding skeptical members that U.S. aid had prevented "the FMLN from taking over the country and imposing a Marxist dictatorship." The consequences of suspending or reducing aid would also lead to a rapid and immediate escalation in violence as both "sides attempt to maximize their current resources." Aronson also echoed a claim that members of the Reagan

[105] Arnson, 248.

[106] Arnson, 253.

administration routinely offered: "the FMLN is responsible for much of the savagery" in El Salvador, a claim that was later disputed by the United Nations Truth Commission.[107]

Since 1984, Congress had consistently funded El Salvador's war effort. Initially it had condemned the insurgent offensive in strident terms. However, after repeated allegations of obstruction of justice and corruption over the murder and subsequent investigation of the case, the legislative body had seen enough. Further fuel was provided by *Barriers to Reform: a Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders*, a study written by the staff of the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus in May 1990. While the study did not have concrete evidence linking Salvadoran military leaders to a variety of human rights abuses, *Barriers to Reform* noted that fourteen of fifteen of El Salvador's military leaders had presided over commands implicated in a series of troubling actions, including murder, rape, torture, and forced disappearances. Of those fourteen, twelve had received U.S. training, "some for many years."[108] Ultimately, Congress passed an amendment that cut aid to El Salvador by half. However, it contained language that allowed the president to reinstate the other half of the suspended aid if the FMLN negotiated in bad faith or launched another offensive that threatened the Cristiani government's survival.[109] In January 1991, President Bush restored full aid to El Salvador based on events that will be discussed below.[110]

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[107] Information Memorandum, "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing on El Salvador—Information Memorandum," February 2, 1990, El Salvador Human Rights, OSD/RSA-IA, LOC.

[108] Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, *Barriers to Reform: a Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders* (Washington, U.S. Congress, 1990), Caleb Rossiter Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.

[109] LeoGrande, 573

In spite of launching a massive attack against the nation's capital, by the end of November the offensive had lost steam. While it had brought the war into the nation's most important city, and made its presence felt among the nation's elite, it also demonstrated something very important, and arguably disconcerting for the FMLN: there was not as much support for the armed struggle among the population as the rebels had hoped. Arguably, the offensive convinced all actors, the FMLN, Washington and the Salvadoran military and government that the only way to peace in the country was through dialogue.

Sober Conclusions

In a post-offensive analysis, the CIA reached sobering conclusions that contradicted the prognosis they had made months earlier. According to the assessment, while it failed to "inflict a crippling blow" and defeat the Salvadoran armed forces,

> …the fighting has probably caused many Salvadorans—particularly the elite, who previously were more insulated from the war—to question the government's ability to provide for their most basic requirement: security. …the rebels also have benefitted from apparent Army complicity in the Jesuit murders, which have damaged San Salvador's credibility and could threaten critical foreign support if the guilty are not brought to justice.

Comandante Raul Mijango also agreed with the CIA's analysis. As he noted, in the midst of the offensive, twelve members of the U.S. Special Forces staying at the Sheraton, as well as important international figures, were inadvertently involved in a hostage crisis when the FMLN took over the hotel. While all of those inside the Sheraton escaped unscathed, the incident had troubling implications for the Cristiani government. According to him, it demonstrated the

incapacity of the army to provide security to the social sectors it protected and important individuals.[111]

Even though the FMLN did not achieve their goal of overthrowing the government, and failed militarily, it scored a political victory. The CIA agreed, noting that

> The rebels' clearest victory was in the war of perceptions. They demonstrated a military prowess that has boosted their credibility and focused international attention on El Salvador. The FMLN probably believes its offensive helped to depict the war as 'unwinnable' bolstering the argument that U.S. assistance to the government has been ineffective and encouraging additional international pressure to make concessions during future negotiations. [112]

In particular, the CIA lamented the negative effects of the offensive, including that it had shifted attention away from the violence caused by the FMLN, and to the government, which altered Salvadoran domestic perceptions about the government's credibility and authority. Perhaps even more jarring, the government lost some of the legitimacy it had gained over the past few years. Beyond American domestic opinion, in the eyes of the international community, the Salvadoran military suffered a total loss of credibility.[113] The "rebels' seeming ability to operate with impunity throughout the capital shook the faith of many Salvadorans—particularly those directly affected by the violence—in the government's ability to provide security." As the memo

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[111] Mijango, 241.

[112] CIA, Intelligence Assessment, "El Salvador: The FMLN after the November 1989 Offensive," January 26, 1990, El Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, LOC.

[113] José Angel Moroni Bracamonte & David E. Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), 35.

cautioned, this could lead to further elite emigration, capital flight, and low investment, undermining the democratic process and hindering efforts to build political consensus.[114]

The offensive also demonstrated to Washington that the insurgents retained the capability to carry out a daring offensive when most analyses claimed they did not. The strength and tenacity of the offensive shattered the illusion that the Salvadoran Army was winning the war, and its response shattered the illusion "that the trappings of Salvadoran democracy constrained the men in uniform."[115] The military's subsequent cover-up and obstruction of justice also demonstrated to critics that the armed forces' progress under American tutelage of respecting human rights and adhering to the rule of civilian political institutions was illusory.[116]

For several *comandantes,* the 1989 offensive demonstrated that the FMLN still remained a powerful force.[117] It also changed the politico-military of the war by promoting negotiations.[118] For one former FMLN insurgent, the offensive marked the beginning of the end of the conflict.[119] While some may have continued to harbor visions of a military victory, the FMLN began to increasingly see the end of the war as resulting from a negotiated settlement. This sentiment was also echoed in the White House and among the ruling elite in El Salvador.

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[114] CIA, Intelligence Assessment, "El Salvador: The FMLN after the November 1989 Offensive," January 26, 1990, El Salvadoran Human Rights, Volume I, LOC.

[115] LeoGrande, "Our Own Backyard," 571.

[116] Benjamin Schwartz, "Dirty Hands," review of *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, by William LeoGrande, *The Atlantic Monthly,* December 1998, 114.

[117] José Medrano, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

[118] Raul Mijango, interview with the author, San Salvador. August 22, 2013.

[119] José Medrano, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

After the offensive, the U.S. military also harbored doubts. For the previous several years, senior U.S. military commanders publicly proclaimed that the Salvadoran military had made major strides in improving its battle prowess and that the war was heading in the right direction. While some of the comments were rosy, none of them approached General William Westmoreland's infamous quote in November 1967 that the U.S. had reached a point in El Salvador where "the end begins to come into view."[120] However, the offensive changed the message. The senior American military officer responsible for Latin America believed that negotiations were the only way to settle the conflict. During testimony on Capitol Hill, General Maxwell Thurman, head of Southern Command, was asked about the likelihood of the Salvadoran government defeating the FMLN. Thurman bluntly replied "I think they will not be able to do that."[121]

The 1989 offensive also changed the calculus in the White House. Rather than seeking a military victory, administration officials looked to the negotiating table to end the war.[122] Secretary Baker continued to view the offensive as a military defeat for the guerrillas. However, it was also in many ways a catalyst for negotiations. As he noted in his memoirs, "on the one hand, it ended any illusions among the guerrillas that the civilian population was ready to follow their call, but it also shattered the military's hopes that the guerrillas were a spent force. And, the Jesuit massacre galvanized Congress as never before to cut off aid."[123] In order to pursue

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[120] General William Westmoreland made this infamous remark in a speech he gave at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. The general had been asked to return to the United States by President Johnson to drum up domestic support for the war effort.

[121] Michael Gordon, "General Says Salvador Can't Defeat Guerrillas," *New York Times,* February 9, 1990.

[122] This view was confirmed by Ambassador Walker. William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

[123] Baker, 603.

negotiations, the U.S. government relied on Mexico, Venezuela, Spain and Colombia to relay messages to the guerrillas. The maneuvering also involved a delicate balance: sending signals to the Salvadoran military that they must support a negotiated peace—and purge its officers guilty of human rights violations—or risk losing support. At the same time, the administration also had to convince the more hard-line FMLN *comandantes* that if they continued the war, the U.S. would not abandon the government.[124] It was a formula that required a nuanced and balanced approach. Nevertheless, the message from the White House had changed.

One of the leading proponents for negotiations within the Bush administration was Aronson. As Aronson told the House subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs in January 1990, "El Salvador needs peace and the only path is at the negotiating table." Yet, during the same hearings he also supported the Salvadoran military, arguing that it had "cooperated fully" in the Jesuit investigation and downplaying the role of the Atlacatl Battalion.[125] In his words, "We don't think the country can afford the years of suffering that it will take for a military victory. We don't think that is what the Salvadoran people want."[126]

One of the most important individuals who wanted to end the conflict was President Cristiani. Unlike his predecessor, the new Salvadoran president had the requisite leverage to compel the recalcitrant military to negotiate. The military's poor handling of the offensive and the subsequent murder of the Jesuits strengthened Cristiani's hand. Another equally important

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[124] Baker, 603.

[125] See Bernard Aronson's testimony at the Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives, January 24, 1990 (Washington: U.S. GPO).

[126] Ibid.

factor was that Cristiani had the backing of the right.[127] According to the American Embassy, the Salvadoran president believed that further political economic and political progress required peace. An embassy telegram claimed that at this point Cristiani viewed a military victory as impossible, and quite possibly, his interest in ending the conflict could be the result of a desire within his party to lessen El Salvador's dependence on the United States.[128] Ending the war was also crucial to facilitate economic recovery and expansion. The Salvadoran president also grasped something else equally essential: there was also growing war-weariness within the country and desire for peace.[129] For a country that had endured a war for over a decade, there was simply not much of an appetite for continuing the conflict.

By 1989, actors in both the United States and El Salvador realized that neither side could achieve a military victory. The FMLN's foreign backers had also been applying pressure to negotiate, which along with the offensive's failure to spark a nation-wide uprising and topple the government, made the insurgents more amenable to negotiations.[130] International events also demonstrated that as the Cold War was slowly ending, so the need for a sustained and expensive U.S COIN effort to prevent the collapse of El Salvador was unnecessary. Or put another way, the basis of the previous years of U.S. policy toward the country now appeared anachronistic.

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[127] William Walker, interview with the author, Washington, DC, February 17, 1990.

[128] Telegram, "GOES-FMLN Negotiations: Where do we go from Here?" September 22, 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

[129] Byrnes, 173.

[130] Telegram, "GOES-FMLN Negotiations: Where do we go from Here?" September 22, 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

International Context

The end of the Salvadoran War occurred in the midst of far-reaching international events. By 1989, the Cold War was slowing moving toward its conclusion, as both sides worked to ratchet down the rhetoric and improve relations between the superpowers. When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the helm of the Soviet Union, he made improved relations with the West an important component of his efforts to restructure Soviet society. Gorbachev's "new thinking" also extended to the realm of international affairs. In particular, the Soviet leader stressed that U.S.-Soviet security must be mutual and be based on political, not military, instruments. Unfortunately for him, his actions unleashed a Pandora's Box neither he nor the leaders of the Soviet leadership could contain.

When the new chairman assumed command of the world's other superpower, the Soviet economy had stagnated and grumblings of discontent simmered beneath the surface. Gorbachev sought to relieve the burden facing his economy by reducing foreign aid, including military, to his country's various allies. His policy of *perestroika* redirected Soviet foreign policy, especially toward its allies in both Eastern Europe and the rest of the globe. Economic considerations also transformed Soviet policy in the region: instead of sending billions of rubles to revolutionaries in Cuba and Central America, Gorbachev pursued new ties with countries such as Argentina and Brazil, which could send food to the Soviet Union.[131] Nonetheless, Gorbachev did not move immediately toward distancing his country from his revolutionary allies in Latin America. As Daniela Spenser has noted, Gorbachev's "new thinking found it hard to take root in a sclerotic

[131] LaFeber, 340.

system."[132] For example, in 1987, Gorbachev brokered a full-scale rearmament with the FMLN and pledged "solidarity with the struggle waged by Nicaragua against the aggressive intrigues of imperialism." Nevertheless, economic and geopolitical realities forced the Soviet chairman to scale back involvement in the hemisphere.[133]

Gorbachev called on both superpowers to end their intervention in other countries' affairs, a practice which had caused considerable turmoil, especially in the Third World. Gorbachev's position also reflected the wishes of Central American elites, most notably Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, author of the Arias Peace Plan. In May 1988, at the Moscow Summit, Gorbachev asked Reagan to cosign an agreement, which among other statements disavowed military intervention in other nations' internal affairs. Faced with Reagan's refusal, Gorbachev acted unilaterally. In Odd Arne Westad's opinion, Gorbachev "developed an understanding of the significance of national self-determination that went beyond those of the leaders of any major power in the twentieth century." The Soviet leader shared a "firm and idealist dedication to letting the peoples of the world decide their own fates without foreign intervention."[134] These actions were indicative of the Gorbachev's interest in winding down the Cold War even if his ally in the White House proved hesitant.

Arguably, one of the most important events was Gorbachev's speech at the UN in December 1988. In his speech, Gorbachev announced an end for supporting National Liberation movements in the Third World. This provided the incoming Bush administration with an

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[132] Daniela Spenser, "Revolutions and Revolutionaries in Latin America and the Cold War," *Latin American Research Review,* 40.3 (2005): 377-389, 387.

[133] Brands, "Latin America's Cold War," 217.

[134] Odd Arne Westad, *the Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 386-7.

opportunity to rethink U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union, as well as its contest with Moscow in Central America.[135] Gorbachev also made another extraordinary claim during his speech. He announced that the Soviet Union had made the unilateral decision to withdraw its forces from Eastern Europe and reduce the numerical strength of its forces by 500,000.[136] According to John Prados, Gorbachev's speech could mark the end of the Cold War.[137]

The following year, the Soviet Empire began slowly disintegrating. In dramatic and startling fashion, members of the Soviet Bloc collapsed one after another. Important Soviet allies such as Poland held elections and voted communists out of office. In other scenarios, people voted with their feet. These events culminated with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. By the end of 1989, the international arena was not favorable or conducive for the FMLN's interests. The following year, the situation actually worsened, and the FMLN could no longer count on support from either of its reliable patrons, Cuba and Nicaragua.

Regional events also loomed large. In January 1990, the FMLN received a jolt from neighboring Nicaragua. Under the terms of the Arias Peace Plan, Nicaragua was scheduled to hold elections, in which the Sandinistas had to allow opposition parties to participate. That month, the Sandinistas were voted out of power. The Nicaraguan leadership fully expected to win the election, in spite of a poor economy and the continuing covert war initially sponsored by the Reagan administration. As its interior minister, Tomás Borge, told a reporter, "the immense majority of Nicaraguans will choose their historic project…Here the people vote on the basis of

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[135] Villiers-Negroponte, 63-65.

[136] A copy of Gorbachev's speech is available at http://legacy.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/files/Documents/1988-1107.Gorbachev.pdf

[137] John Prados, *How the Cold War Ended: Debating and Doing History* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2011).

their political consciousness, not their stomachs." Events would later prove Borge mistaken. In a closely contested election, the opposition leader Violeta Chamorro, whose husband was murdered by Somoza and who received lavish funding from the U.S., defeated the Sandinistas. As one disappointed U.S. activist noted, "after nine years of what Pentagon strategists call 'low intensity warfare'" against the Sandinistas, the Nicaraguan people "cried uncle."[138]

The Sandinistas' defeat affected the FMLN in several ways, especially politically.[139] According to *Comandante Balta*, it represented more than a psychological loss; their loss at the polls removed the possibility of a revolutionary victory in El Salvador.[140] The failure of the FMLN's allies removed a significant political partner, one that provided sanctuary for the guerrillas' high command. Moreover, their defeat also left an even more important mark: it demonstrated to the FMLN that it needed to avoid the same mistakes made by the Sandinistas and be more inclusive politically.

Despite being voted out of power, the Sandinistas retained key posts within the Nicaraguan military and continued to support the FMLN clandestinely. For example, they provided deadly new weapons, especially SAMs—anti-aircraft missiles—to the FMLN to continue fighting.[141] Nevertheless, while the Salvadoran insurgents may have received military support from the Nicaraguan army, the loss of political support and a close ally demonstrated that the writing was on the wall.

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[138] Quoted in Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: the Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 238.

[139] José Medrano, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

[140] Comandante Balta, *Memorias de un guerrillero* (San Salvador: New Graphics, 2006), 388.

[141] Spencer, 282; José Medrano, interview with the author, August 22, 2013.

The winding down of the Cold War also meant that Washington was no longer as concerned about "winning" in El Salvador. As regional and international players moved toward ending the region's wars, the Bush White House abandoned its predecessor's goal of achieving a decisive victory. While an FMLN victory was still unacceptable, the administration was willing to tolerate a negotiated settlement under the changed international context.

Negotiations

For approximately the next two years, the Salvadoran belligerents worked toward negotiating an end to the stalemate. Essentially, the FMLN asked for a thorough reorganization of the Salvadoran army and the security forces, and purging officers accused or implicated in human rights abuses. The Salvadoran insurgents also demanded strengthening civilian control over the military and transferring "police functions out of the armed forces." Throughout the deliberations, tensions between the Salvadoran executive branch and the military existed. According to a State Department memorandum, it was crucial for the U.S. government to maintain the "confidence of the armed forces to help Cristiani persuade them to support difficult concessions at the bargaining table." This same document also characterized Cristiani's position as "far reaching and de-stabilizing." It noted that "no nation in Latin America has offered these kinds of concessions to end a guerrilla insurgency—particularly asking major reductions of its army in the middle of a war."[142]

In June 1990, Lawrence Eagleburger, Deputy Secretary of State, composed a telegram discussing the latest round of negotiations between the FMLN and Salvadoran government. While noting that no agreement had been reached on changing the military, one of the sticking

[142] State Department Memorandum, "Negotiations to End the War in El Salvador," April 1990, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

points in negotiations, both sides agreed to meet another time. Eagleburger stated that the U.S. fully supported the negotiations because "the USG believes that conditions internationally and in Central America are ideal for the resolution of the conflict, as called for in the Esquipulas Accords."[143]

In 1990, the ERP launched another offensive to change the calculus at the negotiating table. That year, the FMLN inflicted over two thousand casualties on the armed forces and police, an almost .5 percent casualty rate.[144] Unlike previous offensives, this one was solely aimed at improving the FMLN's negotiating stance. Its objectives were to search for a decisive battle and attack the morale of the army.[145] Launched in November 1990, the "Final Offensive" also featured the use of anti-aircraft missiles. According to the U.S. embassy, the introduction of these missiles

> Has all but neutralized the tactical advantage of the air force, affected the morale of the ground forces, and reduced the aggressiveness of ground operations. Additionally, aircraft modifications necessary to counter the threat are extremely costly and have diverted already scare security assistance funding from other much needed sustainment programs.[146]

Beginning in 1990, the FMLN received advanced anti-aircraft weapons such as the SAM-7, and the more deadly SA-16 from Nicaragua.[147] These weapons forced helicopters to fly lower to avoid the missiles making them susceptible to ground fire. They also reduced the number of sorties and limited air support to Salvadoran troops. One of the casualties included three

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[143] Telegram, "GOES/FMLN Negotiations," July 7, 1990, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

[144] James Corum, "The Air War in El Salvador," *Airpower Power Journal* (Summer 1998):27-44, 36.

[145] Mijango, 349.

[146] Quoted in Byrne, 184.

[147] David E. Spencer, *From Vietnam to El Salvador: The Saga of the FMLN Sappers and Other Guerrillas Forces in Latin America*. Praeger, 1996, 124.

American servicemen who were executed by FMLN insurgents after their helicopter was shot down.[148] U.S. concerns about these weapons falling into the hands of the FMLN dated back to at least 1985, when Nicaragua procured several missiles from the Soviet Union. As Ambassador Corr noted, if these weapons fell into the FMLN's hands, it would force the Salvadoran Air Force to "make major adjustments in air mobile and close-air-support tactics." This would negatively affect the war, because the government's growing air power had been a major factor in forcing the guerillas to switch tactics the previous year.[149]

Until 1989, the Salvadoran Air Force's best aircraft had been immune. Now, they were in striking distance.[150] The CIA worried that the introduction of these weapons could potentially "degrade the government's counterinsurgency effort" and "give the guerrillas freer control over larger areas of the country."[151]According to one former insurgent, the destruction of several A-37s severely impacted the army's morale. After the introduction of the anti-aircraft missiles, the military did not assume an aggressive posture for the remainder of the conflict and avoided contact.[152] According to a U.S. government fact sheet produced in January 1991, the introduction of the anti-aircraft missiles led to the FMLN becoming "more militant" and more importantly, affected the morale of the insurgents. As the document noted, the FMLN "felt that the ESAF

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[148] U.S. intelligence operatives blamed Villalobos for the incident, a claim he has denied. For a description of the events, see Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope.*

[149] Telegram, "El Salvador-Nicaragua: Anti Aircraft Weapons," May 11, 1985, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[150] Corum, 36.

[151] CIA Intelligence Analysis, "El Salvador: Assessing the Impact of Rebel Surface-to-Air Missiles," June 7, 1991, CIA FOIA website.

[152] Mijango, 349-351.

morale is down and theirs is up and that there is a chance for power-sharing concessions from GOES."[153]

In 1991, Secretary of State Baker authorized Aronson to make direct contact with representatives from the FMLN. One of the first contacts came when Ambassador Walker visited the Guazapa Volcano, an insurgent dominated area outside of the capital. Walker followed these efforts by visiting another insurgent camp, Santa Marta, the repatriation camp for guerrillas who sought refuge during the early years of war.[154] His visit to the insurgent stronghold was not proposed by either the Bush administration or his superiors in the State Department. Rather, it was the result of personal invitations and diplomatic protocol. The American ambassador visited the camp twice. During the second meeting, Walker and his entourage met with *Comandante Hercules*, a guerrilla commander of the RN. The talks between the enemies were very cordial and productive. It was also during this visit to Santa Marta that the ambassador came to believe that the war would end.[155] Such contacts would have been unthinkable years before. These visits changed the ambassador's, as well as the commander of the U.S. MILGP, Mark Hamilton's, opinions about the FMLN. Nevertheless, the former ambassador was not sure how Washington viewed his exploits.[156]

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[153] Fact sheet, "El Salvador Pol-Mil Situation as of 7 Jan. 1991," January 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[154] Villiers-Negroponte, 76.

[155] William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

[156] William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014.

This was a crucial event in retrospect, because in the minds of the FMLN, it established a link with the U.S. embassy, with which they previously had no contact.[157] According to ERP head Villalobos, the ambassador's trips signaled a willingness to treat the rebels as legitimate participants in Salvadoran life.[158] The ambassador's visit strengthened the hand of those who favored a unilateral cease-fire. In Villalobos's words,

> We were discussing the possibility of a unilateral cease-fire, a key step to push negotiations forward…Some were opposed to taking such a definitive step, but when we saw Walker in Santa Marta, we felt conditions were really different. We knew the trip made the military furious, but we were impressed. But had we known it was an individual gesture, not a policy statement, I doubt we would have called the cease-fire.[159]

As the ambassador noted, he did not learn about the importance of his visit to Santa Marta until after the conflict.[160] These actions also impacted events at the UN, where according to one U.S. official, "the FMLN started treating us as part of the solution."[161]

The negotiations that ended the conflict often took a winding and sometimes tortuous path.[162] By May 1991, the FMLN and Salvadoran government had agreed on establishing a UN Human Rights monitoring group, a package of constitutional reforms strengthening civilian control of the military, transferring police functions out of the armed forces and reforming the electoral and judicial systems, and establishing a Truth Commission to study and report on

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[157] Villiers-Negroponte, 76.

[158] Arnson, 261.

[159] Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran Ex-Rebel, Key to Peace Pact, Tries Centrist Politics," *Washington Post,* November 12, 1992. This account was also confirmed during an interview with Ambassador Walker.

[160] William Walker, interview with the author, February 17, 2014

[161] Arnson, 261.

[162] For an excellent discussion of the various intrigues and how peace was achieved, Villier's-Negroponte's book offers one of the most thorough accounts.

outstanding human rights cases.[163] The most troubling agreements related to civilian control of the military and reform of the armed forces. In September 1991, talks that involved Cristiani and all five of the FMLN's general command broke the deadlock over military reform. Under significant pressure from Washington, Cristiani agreed to reduce the armed forces by half and create an independent civilian commission to investigate human rights abuses. In return, the insurgents accepted participation in the newly created civilian police force, rather than the armed forces. By the end of September, all the significant issues between the two sides had been resolved. However, the implementation of these agreements, especially the cease-fire, still required further discussion.[164] Nonetheless, both sides continued to talk and by December 1991, their efforts finally paid off.

In spite of delays and disagreements over particular negotiating points, on January 16, 1992, representatives of the Salvadoran government and the FMLN signed a peace agreement that officially ended the war. The announcement was celebrated heavily throughout El Salvador. The end of the Salvadoran Civil War also occurred as the region's various other conflicts ended. For approximately twelve years, Salvadorans committed horrific violence against each other, causing at least 70,000 deaths and large-scale emigration. The following month, an official cease-fire was established, which although there were several tense moments in the FMLN's demobilization effort, was never broken. Now, instead of fighting each other, the former enemies had to resolve their differences peacefully and take up the task of rebuilding and governing the country.

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[163] Briefing Paper, "Negotiations to End the War in El Salvador," May 1991, El Salvador Online Collections, NSA.

[164] LeoGrande, 576.

Since the end of the conflict, El Salvador continues to move forward with its experiment in democracy and free-market capitalism. In some instances, former enemies have stopped viewing each other as such, particularly between former FMLN *comandantes* and Salvadoran officers. However, political reconciliation lags far behind. After the most recent election, the ARENA candidate Norman Quijano protested the results claiming that the FMLN had committed electoral fraud and demanded a full recount, which was rejected by the electoral authorities. The frustrated candidate also raised the specter of intervention by the Salvadoran Armed Forces, putting the nation on edge.[165] Quijano subsequently denied he ever made such claims.[166] Fortunately, the Salvadoran Armed forces issued a statement supporting the electoral results.[167] As the recent election demonstrates, fears of civil war and military intervention still exist in polarized El Salvador.

Victory?

After the signing of the Chapultepec Accords, all sides in the conflict claimed victory. Nearly every actor claimed some sort benefit from the termination of hostilities. The list included peace, the establishment of democracy and reconciliation. While all the belligerents could claim victory, some actors were more successful than the others.

Arguably, the FMLN emerged from the conflict as a victor. Several FMLN *comandantes* viewed the end of the war in such terms. However, none of the insurgents interviewed

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[165] Tracy Wilkinson, "Salvador Sanchez Cerén wins El Salvador's Presidential Election," *LA Times,* March 13, 2014.

[166] "Quijano niega haber llamado a Fuerzas Armadas a intervenir elección," *El Diario,* March 12, 2014. The article is available at http://diariolatino.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15882:quijano-niega-haber-llamado-a-fuerzas-armadas-a-intervenir-eleccion&catid=34:nacionales&Itemid=53.

[167] "Fuerza Armada respectará resultados de elecciones presidenciales," *La Prensa Grafica,* March 12, 2014. A clip of the statement is available at http://mediacenter.laprensagrafica.com/videos/v/fuerza-armada-respetar-resultados-de-elecciones-presidenciales.

characterized it as a military success for their side. During the civil war, the FMLN had created the most effective guerrilla army in the region's history.[168] For twelve years the Salvadoran insurgents had battled the government to the verge of collapse, and then to a stalemate, yet it never inflicted a decisive defeat against its enemy. Nevertheless, there were other notable, and more tangible gains. For example, according to Joaquín Villalobos

> If looked at from the point of view of the dreams, we lost. However, being realists we clearly won. We generated constitution changes in justice, in the police, in the electoral system, and we were able to get the army to return to the barracks. Furthermore, the Front is now the second political force in the country.[169]

That was before the FMLN became the first political force in El Salvador and captured the presidency in 2009. To paraphrase the former *comandante*, while the FMLN may not have achieved all of its goals, especially overthrowing the government, all was not lost. In fact, there were several important results that the former guerrillas could take pride in.

Several *comandantes* remarked on the political gains achieved by not only the FMLN, but for the Salvadoran people as well. For Facundo Guardado, the struggle instituted political changes in El Salvador, including ending the government's previous exclusionary policies. In pre-war El Salvador, political space was extremely narrow and tightly controlled. Subsequently, political parties that had been denied access to political life were allowed to organize and run for office. In his opinion, the war was responsible for these improvements. He also characterized the war as creating the first social pact in the country's history signed between the government and its people.[170] The accords created a new Salvadoran government that required it to be responsive to its citizens. Arguably, the end of the conflict marked the beginning of political legitimacy in

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[168] Longley, 324.

[169] Quoted in Spencer, "External Resource Mobilization," 242.

[170] Facundo Guardado, interview with author, August 22, 2013.

El Salvador. Another former guerrilla concurred with Guardado's assessment, and noted that it was also a victory for the nation's political structure by providing a mechanism to resolve disagreements peacefully.[171] In particular, the ability of the FMLN to participate legally in elections was heralded among former guerrillas.

One of the institutions most affected by peace was the Salvadoran military. One of the FMLN's demands during the peace negotiations was to reduce the military's size, reeducate or reorient its central mission and redefine it as an institution. For most observers, the peace treaty accomplished those very goals. Moreover, it not only reduced the size of the Salvadoran military, but it also abolished *Los Batallones de Infantería de Reacción Inmediata* (BIRIs). While these units had been considered by the U.S. military advisers as essential for American style counterinsurgency, their role and notoriety for committing human rights abuses during the conflict meant that they were no longer necessary in post-war El Salvador. For one former guerrilla, peace broke the power of the most powerful institution in the country—the Salvadoran military.[172] Nevertheless, not all scholars agree with such rosy pronouncements. Knut Walter and Philip Williams have noted that the several dimensions of the military's power were not addressed or touched: the military's position within the state; the network of social control in the *campo*; and the military's institutional and political autonomy. While they praised the accords for laying the groundwork for a significant reduction of the military's prerogatives, Walter and Williams argue that they did not go far enough in ensuring civilian supremacy over the armed

[171] José Medrano, interview with the author, San Salvador, August 22, 2013.

[172] Balta, 404.

forces. In spite of the changes, the Salvadoran armed forces emerged from the conflict with its much of its autonomy intact.[173]

In spite of the supposed successful application of U.S. counterinsurgency in El Salvador, the conflict produced several negative consequences as well. First, it generated a massive emigration of Salvadorans across the border to Honduras and to the United States. For example, in 1987, Salvadoran and American officials believed more than 400,000 had fled to the United States since 1982. As the *New York Times* noted, the migration represents one of the most determined and concentrated migrations of any national group to the U.S. in recent history.[174] The conflict also poisoned relations between the Executive and Congressional branches of the U.S. government, especially under Reagan, that led the president to circumvent Congress. There are also moral concerns as well, especially with the large-scale violations of human rights that occurred during the conflict. As with other cases of the fear of communist expansion during the Cold War, one could reasonably ask if the fear of communism justified U.S. support of a corrupt and brutal government. Blaming the various human rights abuses on wartime exigencies is not only mistaken, but a distortion. During the conflict, violence was a fundamental aspect of the Salvadoran approach to battling the FMLN, and for some critics, approved of by the Reagan administration. Of course, this does not absolve the Salvadoran insurgents for killing civilian government officials and fellow rebels, kidnapping wealthy businessmen or sabotaging the nation's electrical supply. However, when compared to the human rights violations committed by the government, the number is small. The United Nations Truth Commission attributed at

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[173] Philip J. Williams & Knut Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), pp. 163 & 169.

[174] James LeMoyne, "Salvadorans Stream into U.S., Fleeing Poverty and Civil War," *New York Times,* April 13, 1987.

least eighty-five percent of the violent acts investigated to the Salvadoran government, including the military, the security forces and their allies, the death squads.

Since the end of the conflict, El Salvador has held numerous presidential elections. Initially, the first several of these contests were dominated by ARENA. Nevertheless, Mauricio Funes' election in 2009 represented the first transfer of political power from ARENA to the FMLN. Recently, the FMLN's candidate and former Vice-President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, won a closely contested presidential election over his ARENA rival. Prior to his election, Reaganite Elliot Abrams sounded the alarm should the former guerrilla win.[175] Sánchez Cerén's victory not only marks the first time that his party has won two consecutive presidential elections, but also that a former high-ranking insurgent was elected. The closely contested nature of the election also demonstrates the continuing political polarization existing in El Salvador. While it is too early to predict how the new Salvadoran president will govern, or if he will move El Salvador closer to Venezuela, one can imagine that American and Salvadoran statesmen who tried to defeat the FMLN, including President Reagan, Senator Jesse Helms and Roberto D'Aubuisson, are rolling in their graves.

The Salvadoran Civil War left a very bloody and troubling legacy, not only from a moral standpoint but as a model for defeating insurgency. American tacticians have not only argued that El Salvador represents a successful application of counterinsurgency, but that it should be used a case model for similar contingencies. A meticulous study of the conflict should give pause for concern.

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[175] Elliot Abrams, "Drug Traffickers Threaten Central America's Democratic Gains," *Washington Post,* January 3, 2014

The U.S. experience in El Salvador confirms that outside intervention in civil wars exacerbates an already volatile situation and extends the bloodshed. American aid prolonged the conflict by encouraging a military solution to defeating the FMLN, not a political or diplomatic resolution. The majority of U.S. funding prioritized the military dimension instead of addressing the root causes of discontent. Even if the White House supported Duarte's negotiations with the FMLN, it continued to hold out for a decisive military victory. The generous funds provided by the United States government buoyed the Salvadoran government and military and fueled the notion that they would eventually wear down their enemy and destroy them. American military support, especially combat aircraft, also further contributed to the devastation of El Salvador by destroying the countryside and depopulating its inhabitants. Arguably, the FMLN's external supporters, Cuba and Nicaragua, could also be faulted as well, although relevant sources from these countries are necessary to fully evaluate the significance of their support.[176] If anything, this dissertation confirms the necessity of an international approach to the topic.

The Salvadoran Civil War caused an appalling level of destruction, especially for a country its size. In General William Tecumseh Sherman's words, "war is cruelty." However, COINdinistas have portrayed counterinsurgency interventions differently from their conventional counterparts. Recently, they have been presented to the American public as thoughtful and humane affairs that respect the lives and rights of civilians. Proponents such as Colonel John Nagl, have characterized COIN as a more sophisticated form of warfare. As an inane epigraph in

[176] Dr. David E. Spencer's research has focused on external support for rebel groups including the FMLN. Using captured documents and interviews with defectors, Spencer argues that aid and support from Cuba and Nicaragua prolonged the war and allowed the Salvadoran insurgents to become and remain a powerful rebel army. See Spencer, "External Resource Mobilization."

FM 3-24 informs its readers, "counterinsurgency is not just thinking man's warfare—it is the graduate level of war."[177]

Counterinsurgency is often used interchangeably with winning "hearts and minds." In El Salvador, government forces attempted to woo the population through traveling fairs, giving pep talks, providing dental and medical care, and implementing grassroots development efforts. Typically, the Salvadoran military played the leading role instead of the appropriate civilian agencies. Their involvement in civic action programs and other pacification efforts not only led to a militarization of aid, but also designated civilians as targets for retaliation and retribution. The historical record provides several examples of the use of brute force and coercion to acquire the civilians' allegiance or to provide protection. As El Salvador and other American experiences with battling insurgency demonstrate, COIN interventions are often as destructive as conventional conflicts.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have traced the destructiveness of the conflict to the theoretical underpinnings of American counterinsurgency doctrine. Often referred to as the National Security Doctrine, its tenets were disseminated at American military academies throughout the western hemisphere, especially after Fidel Castro's victory in 1959. Included among these countries was El Salvador, which with the United States help, established a formidable intelligence apparatus and paramilitary organization that targeted people with "questionable" political affiliations. More importantly, the threat posed to the Salvadoran state by communist insurgents in the 1960s was minimal; the military machinery created was designed to tackle an invisible enemy. The doctrine's broad and general language stretched the definition of a "subversive" to include individuals and organizations that were involved in political

[177] U.S. Army & Marine Corps, *FM 3-24.*

opposition or even ecclesiastical activities deemed hostile to the state. While U.S. advisors probably did not overtly urge their patrons to murder, torture and commit human rights abuses, the various methods and doctrine taught by U.S. military personnel to their clients and the security apparatuses they created were often used to commit the very acts that the United States supposedly abhorred. Nonetheless, they also contributed to the ferocity of the conflict and the no-holds-barred approach taken by the Salvadoran military during the early stages of the civil war.

Throughout the conflict, U.S. policymakers and military strategists attempted to convince their Salvadoran counterparts to reform or potentially face the possibility of a reduction or suspension of aid. These efforts included ending human rights abuses, curbing the power of the right, and reforming El Salvador's judicial system. In El Salvador, American political and military policymakers assumed that massive aid and support gave the United States leverage over its client. However, as the conflict demonstrated, when it is apparent that the donor is committed to the survival of its client, the recipient nation is more unlikely to carry out the necessary reforms. Even though Congress restricted the White House's policy in El Salvador, it did not want to, or have the courage to fundamentally alter it out of fear of a FMLN victory. Even though members of the legislative body may have had serious reservations about supporting the Salvadoran government, they were unwilling to cut off aid and face the possibility of an insurgent triumph. Potentially, Democrats feared the political damage associated with "losing" another ally to communism.

U.S. COIN strategists, tried to change the Salvadoran military's behavior and convince them of the necessity of focusing less on body counts and technology, and more on addressing the root causes of the conflict. They faced a formidable opponent in the Salvadoran high

command, who was not interested in applying American COIN tactics. Among the junior officer corps, the MILGP made more progress. The older and more conservative officers had their own reservations about U.S. advice. The high command believed that not only was their strategy sound, but that it had worked successfully for decades. Conceivably, they could have distrusted American advice because quite simply it was very similar to the strategies used by the United States in Vietnam. In the end, while the Salvadoran military accepted military aid, they pursued their own strategy to defeat the FMLN which minimized the importance of civilians.

From a strategic and military perspective, the expensive and resource-intensive COIN operations envisioned by American tacticians were impractical and unrealistic. It would have been difficult even in the best of times for a country confronted by an insurgency, high unemployment and a deteriorating economy to launch a nation-wide civic action program for several months. The entire effort was dependent on U.S. funding—Duarte's government did not have the appropriate funds. Compounding these matters, the Salvadoran bureaucracy was both unwilling and unable to share the burden. In other words, the government infrastructure and its lack of inadequate funds assured their failure. Even more importantly, the various policies used to woo popular support-civic action and development efforts—never altered the strategic or political balance. They were based on the premise that people wanted a simple alteration in the existing socio-economic political system, not a drastic reformation. In spite of their failure in both El Salvador and other conflicts, such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, these practices continue to be fundamental elements of American COIN strategy.

In many ways, supporters of the United States' counterinsurgency strategy have also drawn the wrong lessons. The ability to keep the number of Americans low, or maintain a "light footprint" is often portrayed as positive outcome. In reality, there was nothing low-key about the

U.S. effort in El Salvador, including its massive and heavily fortified embassy in San Salvador. Keeping a minimal military presence was mandated by Congress; however, the the fifty-five man limit was routinely abused, but not in such an egregious fashion to warrant congressional intervention. Another key factor keeping American ground troops out of El Salvador included opposition from the broader public and the nation's top military brass. The latter was unwilling to risk its massive budget increase on another messy and protracted war. Instead, its priorities were focused on a fighting an enemy and a battle that (thankfully) never took place.

U.S. aid not only greatly increased the size of the Salvadoran military, but it also helped prevent the likelihood of an FMLN military victory. Even though American aid may have built a larger and more professional force, it could not overcome the government's inability to end the war and improve the majority of the nation's well-being. Simply put, American counterinsurgency doctrine in El Salvador did not end the war or result in a decisive victory. What emerged was a negotiated settlement, in which the belligerents realized that they could not feasibly continue the war indefinitely.

American policymakers continue to view the United States in the words of former Secretary of State Madeline Albright's as the "indispensable nation." A recent manifestation of this view can be glimpsed in Hillary Clinton's farewell speech as she stepped down from her position as the president's top diplomat. In Clinton's words, "we are the force for progress, prosperity and peace."[178] Throughout the Cold War, and indeed until present, the United States government has not only fashioned itself as a force for good, but asserted that it has the right to intervene globally and that when it does, its actions are not only positive but central to the resolution of the crisis. As this chapter has demonstrated, the end to the conflict had very little to

[178] Jules Witcover, "Should we Continue to be the Indispensable Nation?" *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 2013.

do with American COIN doctrine, its tactics or U.S. funding. Nonetheless, the fiction still survives.

CODA

"THE SALVADORAN OPTION" IN IRAQ

Shortly after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the security situation rapidly deteriorated. It quickly became evident that the George W. Bush administration and U.S. military's postwar occupation plans were not only insufficient, but it was also apparent that both actors had failed to adequately plan for the aftermath of the invasion. Within months of the termination of major combat operations an insurgency quickly developed, exploiting the existing security vacuum. Officials in Washington originally dismissed the attacks and the perpetrators, labeling them "regime dead-enders." Then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld downplayed the level of violence, equating the casualties with everyday violence in American cities.[1]

As American fatalities in Iraq continued to mount, violence between Kurds, Shia and Sunnis threatened the disintegration of the Iraqi state. Grisly reports of sectarian killings, kidnappings and beheadings of foreigners, including journalists and aid workers, large-scale relocation of Iraqis to relatively ethnically homogenous neighborhoods and suicide bombings dominated the headlines. By the end of 2004, Iraq was sliding toward the precipice of disaster. Unable to halt the escalating violence or secure order, American policymakers became increasingly desperate for solutions.

In early 2005, officials from the Pentagon and the Bush administration met in the nation's capital to devise a strategy to defeat the insurgency in Iraq. To address the deteriorating security situation, they proposed what became known as the "Salvadoran Option." According to reports, this policy advocated using American Special Forces commandos to train either Shia militiamen or Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to target Sunni insurgent leaders. In addition to assassinating

[1] *USA Today*, "Rumsfeld Blames Iraq Problems on Pockets of 'Dead-Enders'," June 18, 2003.

insurgents, the plan also raised the possibility of launching raids into Syria to capture high-profile individuals.[2]

There was another side to the Salvadoran Option that was also based on the American experience in El Salvador. To move forward with the supposed democratization of Iraq, the Bush administration decided to hold parliamentary elections in 2005. Elections were also meant to diminish the appearance that U.S. forces were illegitimate occupiers of Iraq and provide a veneer of legitimacy to the floundering Iraqi government. As in El Salvador, critics claimed that holding elections in the midst of violence amounted to little more than a propaganda charade. However, General John Abizaid, head of U.S. Central Command, made the case while appearing on *Meet the Press*. As he told the show's host, "I can't predict 100 percent that all areas will be available for complete, free, fair and peaceful elections…That having been said, if we look at our previous experiences in El Salvador, we know that people who want to vote will vote."[3]

During a vice-presidential debate between Vice-President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards, Cheney also discussed the 1982 constituent elections held in El Salvador.[4] Cheney had visited El Salvador as an electoral observer on behalf of Congress. The Vice-president recounted how fearless Salvadorans had defied the "terrorists" who shot up polling stations because they would not be denied the right to vote. According to Cheney, the U.S. should conduct elections in both Iraq and Afghanistan—as it did in El Salvador, approximately twenty-two years earlier—despite the violence that continued to ravage the nations. Holding elections, Cheney argued,

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[2] Roland Watson, "El Salvador 'Death Squads' to be Employed by U.S. Against Iraqi Militants," *Times of London*, January 10, 2005, Overseas News.

[3] Quoted in David Pedersen, *American Value: Migrants, Money, and Meaning in El Salvador and the United States* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 237.

[4] Todd R. Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008); Mark Peceny and William D. Stanley, "Counterinsurgency in El Salvador," *Politics and Society* 38.1 (2010): 38-67.

would result in a decisive defeat for the insurgents and demonstrate that democracy was on the march.

Not everyone was enamored with the portrayal of El Salvador offered by administration and defense officials. Critics alleged that these units were modeled after the Salvadoran death squads which were groups composed of members of El Salvador's security and paramilitary forces. The death squads were especially active during the first four years of the conflict, murdering suspected insurgents and sympathizers, leftists, members of trade unions and even the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Among the most vociferous critics were former journalists who covered the civil war. To one nationally syndicated magazine, returning to El Salvador style tactics should be repudiated, not encouraged.[5] Former journalists who covered the civil war saw eerie parallels between the proposed Iraqi units and the Salvadoran death squads that operated largely with impunity in the civil war. As Christopher Dickey, a journalist from *Newsweek,* remarked:

> when I hear talk of a Salvador Option**,** I can't help but think about *El Playón*…one of the killers' favorite dumping grounds. I've never forgotten the sick-sweet stench of carnal refuse there, the mutilated corpses half-devoured by mongrels and buzzards, the hollow eyes of a human skull peering up through the loose-piled rocks, the hair fallen away from the bone like a gruesome halo.[6]

When asked about the Salvadoran Option, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stopped short of categorically denying the plan's existence, and refused to comment further.[7] Weeks after Rumsfeld's denial, the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published an essay in the *New Yorker* which contradicted the Secretary of Defense's claims. According to the

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[5] *The Nation*, "Death Squads-They're Back!" January 31, 2005.

[6] Christopher Dickey, "Death-Squad Democracy," *Newsweek,* January 11, 2005.

[7] Jonathan D. Tepperman, "Salvador in Iraq: Flashback," *The New Republic,* April 5, 2005.

interviews conducted by Hersh this policy had ramifications beyond Iraq. Several months before, President Bush had recently authorized secret commando groups and Special Forces units to conduct covert operations in the Middle East. As an unidentified intelligence source informed Hersh,

> The new rules will enable the Special Forces community to set up what it calls 'action teams' in the target countries overseas which can be used to find and eliminate terrorist organizations. Do you remember the right-wing execution squads in El Salvador? We founded them and we financed them… The objective now is to recruit locals in any area we want. And we aren't going to tell Congress about it. [8]

Prior to the January 2005 meeting described above, the United States had arguably already implemented various aspects of the Salvadoran Option. As early as 2003, officials in Washington realized the need to do something drastic—and quickly. An unidentified neoconservative official explained how to tackle the problem to the investigative journalist Robert Dreyfuss. "It's time for 'no more Mr. Nice Guy.'"…"All those people shouting 'Down with America' and dancing in the street when Americans are attacked? We have to kill them."[9] Beginning in May 2004 Washington initiated the creation of paramilitary forces to hunt down remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime and target Sunni insurgents.[10]

Journalists viewed the appointments of former officials involved in the various "dirty wars" in Latin America during the Cold War as evidence that Washington had implemented the Salvadoran Option. They also viewed them as an ominous harbinger of dark times ahead. These individuals included Colonel James Steele, commander of the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador (1984-1986), and John Negroponte's appointment as ambassador to Iraq. Both of these

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[8] Quoted in Pedersen, 239.

[9] Robert Dreyfuss, "Phoenix Rising," *The American Prospect*, December 10, 2003.

[10] Peter Maas, "The Salvadorization of Iraq?" *The New York Times Magazine,* May 1, 2005. David Corbett also makes this point on his website. See "The Salvadoran Option (Part 3): Lending Money to the Gambler," June 18, 2007, http://www.davidcorbett.com/commentaries/commentary_salvador_option3.php.

individuals had checkered pasts that included alleged support for death squads, or in Steele's case, had been involved in activities prohibited by American law.

Negroponte has been accused of covering up human rights violations committed by the Honduran military during his tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Honduras. As a 1995 article in the *Baltimore Sun* described, "hundreds of [Honduran] citizens were kidnapped, tortured and killed by a secret army unit trained and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency." That unit, Battalion 316, supposedly operated with his connivance. His predecessor in Honduras, Ambassador Jack R. Bins, claimed that Negroponte discouraged reporting to Washington regarding abductions and other abuses. As Bins told the *New York Times,* his successor "…tried to put a lid on reporting abuses" and "was untruthful to Congress about those activities."[11] The former ambassador has denied all of the accusations leveled against him. In 2004, Negroponte told the *Washington Post* that these claims "were old hat" and snidely added: "I want to say to those people: Haven't you moved on?"[12]

In October 2003 Steven Casteel, a former Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operative involved in the hunt for the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, arrived in Iraq as the senior advisor to the Iraqi Minister of the Interior. According to the journalist Max Fuller, Casteel laid the foundation for the creation of Iraqi paramilitary units.[13] To oversee their training, Rumsfeld

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[11] Negroponte's tenure as American Ambassador to Honduras in the middle of the 1980s was marred by disappearances and death squad killings. Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 283; Dahr Jamail, "Managing Escalation: Negroponte and Bush's New Iraq Team," January 9, 2007, http://www.antiwar.com/jamail/?articleid=10289. Jamail's account is derived from the Honduras Commission on Human Rights' report.

[12] Duncan Campbell, "Bush Hands Key Post to Veteran of Dirty Wars: Written off by Many After his Role in Central America, John Negroponte's Revived Career Hits a New High," *Guardian*, February 18, 2005.

[13] During Casteel's hunt for Escobar, the DEA also allegedly collaborated with the paramilitary organization *Los Pepes,* which later transformed into the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (*AUC). The AUC is a right-wing paramilitary force that has links to the Colombian military and is heavily involved in drug trafficking. Max Fuller, "For Iraq, 'The Salvadoran Option' Becomes Reality," June 2, 2005, http://globalresearch.ca/articles/FUL506A.html.

deployed Colonel James Steele—as a civilian—to Iraq in 2003.[14] These paramilitary units played a prominent role in the American COIN strategy by acting as "force multipliers" and arresting, interrogating, or killing suspected insurgents. In the process they also created a climate of terror. One of the groups created by U.S. advisers, the Special Police Commandos headed by Adnan Thabit, carried out night-time raids that inspired fear and terror among their fellow countrymen.[15] From May 2004, Washington increasingly recognized the utility of using these unconventional forces to destroy the insurgency.

Similar to El Salvador, the commando units either funded or trained by the American military advisors were accused of perpetrating human rights violations, political murder and torture. Critics also accused the Iraqi Interior Ministry of allowing death squads to operate with the connivance of senior Iraqi officials.[16] According to an investigation launched by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Col. Steele and another American, Colonel James H. Coffman, trained and oversaw Iraqi units who conducted some of the worst acts of torture during the U.S.

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[14] Guardian, "James Steele: America's Mystery Man," http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/mar/06/james-steele-america-iraq-video.The *Guardian's* documentary used classified information provided by Wikileaks, as well as interviews, to highlight Steele's important role. The documentary also strongly argues that this particular segment of U.S. policy contributed to ethnic cleansing and sectarian war. According to an account published in David Pedersen's *American Value,* Paul Wolfowitz initially had suggested the deployment of Steele to Iraq not because of his military background, but because of his experiences as president and CEO of TM Power Ventures, based out of Houston, Texas. Wolfowitz believed that Steele's electrical power and energy development credentials would be useful in Iraq. Pedersen, 240.

[15] Peter Maas, "The Salvadorization of Iraq?" *The New York Times Magazine,* May 1, 2005.

[16] In 2006, Stephan Hadley, President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor, prepared a memo for administration officials. In the document, Hadley assessed Nouri al-Maliki's tenure as Iraqi Prime Minister. One of Hadley's recommendations included shaking "up his cabinet by appointing nonsectarian, capable technocrats in key service and (security) ministries." American military commanders had heavily criticized Maliki's performance, including his commitment to reconciliation. Throughout the rest of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, American policymakers continued to pressure Maliki to broach the sectarian divide—with limited results. See Document 5.6, "Stephen Hadley, Iraq Memo, November 8, 2006." The memo can be found in John Ehrenberg et al, eds., *The Iraq Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243.

occupation. Several eyewitnesses claimed that Steele and Coffman were either aware or present during these violations.[17]

The creation and usage of paramilitary forces by the United States should not have come as a surprise. Throughout its history of battling guerrillas in the twentieth-century, dating back to the Filipino Insurrection, Washington and its regional allies have relied on these forces to defeat their enemies and prevent internal subversion. From the a counterinsurgent's prospective, they have successfully accumulated prodigious body counts, disrupted insurgent networks and severed their links with the population. However, these formations also have a proven track record of complicity in human rights abuses. They have routinely been associated with disappearances, grisly acts of murder, and torture including in the El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines and South Vietnam.

Terror and violence remained an integral component of the war used by the Salvadoran security forces, the Treasury Police, National Guard, as well as the Salvadoran military. One common thread linking the conflict to the various other guerrilla wars in Latin America is the prevalence of paramilitary units, as well as official conventional soldiers, combating revolution through terror. The intensity of violence can be traced not simply to the ideology of the left or its supposed revolutionary extremism, but because the various revolutionary movements in the hemisphere, including the FMLN threatened traditional interests.[18] In El Salvador, death squads

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[17] Mona Mahmood, Maggie O'Kane, Chavala Madlena & Teresa Smith, "Exclusive: General David Petraeus and 'Dirty Wars' Veteran Behind Commando Units Implicated in Detainee Abuse," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2013. The article is available on the Guardian's website at http://m.guardiannews.com/world/2013/mar/06/pentagon-iraqi-torture-centres-link.

[18] Greg Grandin and Gil Joseph's edited volume on terror and counterinsurgent violence in Latin America barely mentions the two superpowers, and instead focuses more on Latin American actors. As chapters in this edition have shown, the various insurgent and revolutionary movements threatened the power and structure of the elites in the region. The brutal violence employed by the region's governments was not simply a response to the perfidy and ideological extremism of the rebels, but that they attracted support that threatened the elites' interests and

and paramilitary units such as *ORDEN* attempted to destroy insurgent networks and their sympathizers throughout the country. Besides killing individuals, state sponsored violence (or that committed by private groups sanctioned by the government) has also been aimed at instilling a climate of fear. The ultimate goal is to make citizens discontinue supporting or tolerating insurgents out of fear for their own personal safety or that of their family.

The brutal violence unleashed by the Salvadoran death squads and the government's security forces attempted to terrorize civilians and destroy the revolutionary challenge. While these units were notorious human rights abusers, the Salvadoran military's strategies of indiscriminate aerial bombing against rebel areas and large military sweeps also accomplished the same feat in the Salvadoran *campo* uprooting tens of thousands of *campesinos* and instilling an environment of fear. The terror unleashed during the late 1970s and early 1980s (including the vicious response after the 1981 "Final Offensive"), decimated the FMLN's urban networks. This policy of brutality killed thousands of insurgents, members of their affiliated popular fronts, or people sympathetic to their aims. Innocent civilians were also caught in the death squads' crosshairs as well. For the first several years of the Salvadoran Civil War, a maelstrom of murder and repression engulfed the country's urban population centers.

Neil Livingstone, a former consultant to Oliver North, unsuccessful candidate for governor of Montana in 2012, and "counterterrorism expert," claimed that "as many as half of the approximately 40,000 victims in the current conflict in El Salvador were killed by death squads…In reality, death squads are an extremely effective tool, however odious, in combating

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prerogatives. Greg Grandin & G. M Joseph, eds, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

revolutionary challenges."[19] RAND analyst Benjamin Schwartz also reached similar conclusions, noting that "U.S. military advisers and intelligence officers" that served in the conflict understood that the murder of thousands of people, not reform, prevented an FMLN victory.[20]

Paradoxically, the FMLN enjoyed their greatest success when death squad violence and massacres were at their peak. Correspondingly, between 1980 and 1983 the insurgents were at the height of their power. The military's approach of *tierra arrasada* strengthened the FMLN's links with *campesinos* in the countryside and caused considerable outrage in the United States. Faced with congressional and public opposition, the Reagan administration in certain instances blatantly lied to Congress and the American people to continue providing aid. This policy ultimately poisoned relations between the Executive and Legislative branches. Lastly, it enabled the rebels to fill their ranks with new recruits from among the victims' relatives and others who lost what little faith they had in the government's legitimacy.

While killing the enemy is central to warfare, history provides examples of counterrevolutionary forces trying to out-terrorize the insurgents and losing or achieving only a stalemate. Once rebels have established themselves as a legitimate force or make an effective use of international forums as the FLN in Algeria, it becomes extremely difficult for counterinsurgent forces to destroy their enemies simply through brute force and murder. Perhaps even more importantly, the likelihood is diminished that an infusion of token political reform and development will reverse their gains—or convince a skeptical population that their former abusers are now their friends—and result in a decisive victory.

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[19] Quoted in McClintock, 429.

[20] Schwartz, 79.

The continued reliance on paramilitary forces represents an example of short-sighted policymaking. Junior and senior policymakers are often under considerable pressure from their superiors and the American public to produce dramatic results in a remarkably short period of time. In such a demanding and tense environment, moral considerations or long-term ramifications are often secondary; what is more important is to produce results—fast. Jonah Goldberg, a journalist from the *National Review*, aptly summed up this line of reasoning. As Goldberg attested, "I have no principled problem with the U.S. doing whatever it can to capture and, preferably, kill the terrorists in Iraq. The El Salvador Option sounds like the Chicago way to me, and that's fine. If American-trained Kurds and Shia can do it better than the Americans, that's cool with me."[21]

Whether for reasons of economic, political, or even professional expediency (or because these units are believed to be effective), supporting clandestine forces that act with decisiveness and speed, but also with great brutality is a hallmark of U.S. third world foreign policy and its response to insurgency. Even though this policy may succeed in the short term, the reliance on such shadowy units typically produces more damaging long-term effects, including the development of a fractured civil society, an increasingly intractable opposition, and political polarization; none of which of course bode well for establishing good governance. In Iraq, these schisms are the direct consequence of the U.S. invasion and the Bush administration's disastrous policymaking after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

As former Vice President Cheney acknowledged, another similarity between El Salvador and Iraq is the practice of holding elections in the midst of a civil war. The United States also supported elections in Afghanistan as well, where several presidential elections (including the

[21] Jonah Goldberg, "Going El Salvador," *The National Review Online,* January 13, 2005, http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/213371/going-el-salvador/jonah-goldberg.

most recent) have been marred by electoral fraud. Washington has repeatedly relied on this strategy to convince skeptical congressional representatives to continue funding the war effort, demonstrate that the United States is consolidating democracy and establishing a legitimate government, and demonize the participants who did not vote as illegitimate actors.

In several instances, such as the Salvadoran Constituent elections in 1982 and parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2005, voter turnout was high. Insurgent threats to disrupt the elections and retaliate against civilians who participated in voting were mostly prevented. However, in El Salvador and Iraq, significant segments of the population refrained from voting. The Iraqi parliamentary elections to draft a new constitution in January 2005 featured a Sunni boycott and the rise of Shia political parties that were not only religious, but allied with Iran.[22] Rather than uniting the country, the parliamentary elections of 2005 demonstrated the sectarian nature of Iraq and the deep political divide that existed between the various religious and ethnic groups. Technically, Iraq is a democracy that provides its citizens with more opportunities for political expression than had existed under Saddam Hussein. However, none of the governments elected in subsequent years have created a legitimate and politically viable central government that can overcome sectarian distrust (or one sincerely committed to political reconciliation).

Unfortunately for Washington, in Afghanistan and Iraq voters have more recently elected candidates such as Hamid Karzai and Nouri al-Maliki that lack legitimacy or have failed to produce political reconciliation and stability. Former U.S ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who opposed a U.S. troop increase to bolster Karzai's government, registered his

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[22] As Douglas Feith claimed before the House International Relations Committee on May 15, 2003, "Some Iranian influence groups have called for a theocracy on the Tehran model. But it appears that popular support for clerical rule is narrow, even among the Shia population. The Shiite tradition does not favor clerical rule—the Khomeini'ites in Iran were innovators in this regard…the Iranian model's appeal in Iraq is further reduced by the cultural divide between Persians and Arabs." Quoted in Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 89.

disapproval with the policy and his lack of faith in the Afghan president's leadership by infamously remarking in a leaked cable that the Afghan president was not "an adequate strategic partner."[23] As these governments entrenched themselves in power, the United States' leverage over them diminished. In spite of billions of American aid to these countries, and heralding them as paragons of democracy, neither government is closer to achieving political reconciliation or stability. In the case of Iraq, the Islamic State's (IS) (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIS) recent gains have not only caused substantial consternation over the implosion of Iraq, but forced President Barack Obama to deploy U.S. advisers to Iraq and initiate air strikes against IS in Iraq and Syria.[24] These recent events have prompted the eminent historian of the Vietnam War, Frederik Logevall, to inquire, "Will Syria be Obama's Vietnam?"[25]

It is beyond doubt that U.S. aid and training affected the Salvadoran civil war, but it was primarily from a military standpoint, not political. For former FMLN *comandantes,* the massive infusion of U.S. funds and adoption of American tactics improved their enemy's effectiveness and fighting prowess. In particular, the BIRIs, PRALs and helicopters caused considerable damage to the Salvadoran insurgents' military capabilities.[26] Nevertheless, there was divided opinion among former *comandantes* whether or not U.S. aid prevented an FMLN victory. Even though there may be a lack of consensus on this issue, none believed that the American counterinsurgency effort ended the conflict.

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[23] Erik Schmitt, "U.S. Envoy's Cables Show Worries on Afghan Plans," *New York Times,* January 25, 2010.

[24] Mark Landler & Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. to Send up to 300 Military Advisers to Iraq," *New York Times,* June 19, 2014.

[25] Frederik Logevall, "Will Syria be Obama's Vietnam?" *New York Times,* October 7, 2014, editorial.

[26] Juan Ramón Medrano, interview with the author, August 19, 2013.

Conversely, the socioeconomic reforms inspired or supported by San Salvador or Washington failed to alter El Salvador's inequitable economic and political system. The various programs enacted, including agrarian reform and elections, were meant to address the roots of the conflict. However, they had an even higher aim—establishing a moderate democracy in the heart of Central America. To cite one example, agrarian reform (promulgated by the first Salvadoran junta) did not circumscribe the power of the elites because its most important phase was cancelled out of fear its effects would be too far-reaching. Essentially, this act ripped the guts out of agrarian reform, because the program and organizations created to implement it lacked the capability to dramatically transform land ownership in the country, one of the most pressing issues in El Salvador.

Overall, the various socioeconomic grievances that fueled discontent have not been satisfactorily resolved, despite approximately twelve years of war, billions of U.S. aid, and the establishment of peace. In El Salvador today, access to opportunity and wealth remains concentrated in the hands of the few—as it has historically. The economic measures enacted by ARENA and the Christian Democrats with support from Washington, both during the war and after, have created more inequality. These disparities have important consequences, including a continuing exodus of Salvadorans to the United States, the economy's reliance on their remittances, and the rising number of young people involved in *las maras*.

Gang related violence has also plagued El Salvador since the termination of the conflict. The country's homicide rate continues to be among the highest in the region and the world.[27] Murder statistics in El Salvador dropped in 2012 after the country's two leading gangs signed a

[27] For several years, El Salvador had the highest murder rate in the world. Recently, Honduras supplanted El Salvador with this dubious honor. For recent statistics, see the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Global Study on Homicide 2013," available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/GSH2013/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf.

truce. According to observers, the central government brokered the deal; the details of the agreement remain a closely guarded secret. Two years later, the murder rate is again on the rise. In May 2014, the country recorded 356 murders compared to 174 for the same month the previous year. In one weekend alone, a staggering eighty-one people lost their lives.[28] As the country's security situation deteriorates, the Salvadoran government's ability to provide essential services and address the conditions that make gang membership desirable or inevitable will become increasingly difficult. Thus, the state's inability to tackle these issues will arguably pave the way for the cycle of violence to continue.

From a political standpoint, the results are more ambiguous. The frequent elections held in the midst of the civil war have been heralded by Washington as a dramatic turning point in the conflict. The White House repeatedly claimed credit, insisting that U.S. aid had allowed democracy to take root. However, none of the left-wing political parties participated in any of the elections, either out of fear for their lives or because they viewed them as illegitimate. Moreover, to ensure the election of its ally, the CIA funneled millions of dollars to prevent ARENA's candidate from winning. Instead of American aid, the spread of democracy in El Salvador happened as the direct consequence of the FMLN's war against the Salvadoran state. Even though it may have been prevented from overthrowing Duarte and Cristiani, its efforts forced the state to allow *all* political parties to participate, not only those favored by Washington or its allies in San Salvador.

In the future it is very likely that an outbreak of insurgency will again threaten an American ally somewhere in the world. It is also entirely conceivable that U.S. policymakers may once again turn to the American COIN intervention in El Salvador for solutions. As this

[28] Nelson *Renteria*, "Murders in El Salvador Spike to Record High for May," *Reuters*, May 26, 2014.

dissertation has demonstrated, the notion that El Salvador represents a "successful" model for pacifying insurgency rests on shaky ground. When Washington's efforts are viewed from a holistic perspective—and not from a short-term military vantage point—such claims are not only historically inaccurate, but wrong. Rather than being heralded as an exemplar of U.S. nation-building, Washington's efforts in El Salvador should be viewed as an expensive effort that prolonged the conflict, led to the further devastation of the country, and failed to address the roots of the insurgency, which still reverberate in El Salvador today.

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