

# **American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador**

**The Frustrations of Reform and  
the Illusions of Nation Building**

Benjamin C. Schwarz

**RAND**

**NATIONAL DEFENSE  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

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## PREFACE

The research reported here was sponsored by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. It was carried out under the International Security and Defense Strategy Program of RAND's National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff.

This report assesses the political and social dimensions of American counterinsurgency policy in El Salvador, the site of the United States' most important and extensive low-intensity conflict since the Vietnam War. Part of a larger research effort on "Low-Intensity Conflict in the Year 2000," the report also attempts to evaluate the future efficacy and applicability of American counterinsurgency doctrine, a component of low-intensity conflict doctrine.

This study is based mainly on interviews with former U.S. military advisers and with current and former officials from the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, and Justice, the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the General Accounting Office, and the Agency for International Development. A special effort was made to confer with several American journalists who have been observing American policy toward and the situation in El Salvador for years. Political analysts, scholars, human rights researchers, and congressional committee staff members were also consulted. Those interviewed would be completely forthcoming only if assured of their anonymity. In addition, to fulfill security clearance requirements, the institutional affiliation of certain sources had to be obscured. The author, of course, is responsible for the views expressed—as well as any errors—in this report.



## SUMMARY

This report assesses the political and social dimensions of American counterinsurgency policy in El Salvador, the site of the United States' most prolonged and—until the Persian Gulf conflict—most costly military endeavor since the Vietnam War. American strategists have described the civil war in El Salvador as the “ideal testing ground” for implementing low-intensity conflict doctrine. The United States' effort there, however, has taken far longer—ten years—and cost far more—about \$6 billion—than anyone expected, and the insurgency of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has not been defeated. In fact, while negotiations toward ending the war in El Salvador may at last bear fruit (thanks mainly to external factors), America has failed to reach its goal there—a clear victory for the Salvadoran regime. The United States sought that victory by pressing for reform in El Salvador to deprive the FMLN of its appeal. This report attempts to explain why low-intensity conflict doctrine has not produced the desired results and, in the light of this appraisal, to reassess that doctrine's future utility. Research for this study was completed in September 1991.

In the view of counterinsurgency strategists, American involvement in Vietnam demonstrated that the key to defeating insurgents lies in the winning of popular support, not the annihilation of the enemy's forces. The key to winning the population's support, in turn, lies in redressing its legitimate grievances by carrying out fundamental reforms. Such action will neutralize support for the insurgents, and military victory should follow. Low-intensity conflict doctrine, therefore, places great emphasis on far-reaching political and social reforms, an approach that seemed to have been tailor-made for the situation that confronted the United States in El Salvador at the beginning of the 1980s. Fully aware that Salvadoran society was one of the sickest and most repressive in Latin America, American military advisers, diplomats, and policymakers recognized the necessity of a two-pronged policy: fortify the Salvadoran armed forces to wear down the rebels in combat, and bolster democracy so as to weaken the rebels' claim to political legitimacy. The so-called “Kissinger Commission report” of 1984 produced the most enduring and complete expression of this policy.

The Kissinger Commission report insisted that defeating the rebels in El Salvador depended upon building a legitimate social and political order based on social and economic reform, respect for human

rights, and the advancement of democracy. The report explicitly linked countering the insurgency to attaining political legitimacy, which dictated an end to human rights abuses. In essence, as a means of defeating the insurgency, America urged the government and armed forces of El Salvador to provide what the guerrillas could only promise: a just and equitable society. The United States thereby committed itself to ameliorating the pathology produced by centuries of abuse committed by the very governing elite and military that its policy supported, a Herculean task. To push El Salvador toward these radical changes, the United States' counterinsurgency effort has focused on accomplishing three principal goals: the reform of the Salvadoran armed forces, land redistribution, and democratization.

American advisers have met with some success in their attempts to persuade the Salvadoran military to adopt aggressive counterinsurgency tactics, but that institution continues to suffer from many of the ills that have plagued it since the war began: a disengaged officer corps, a "garrison mentality," forced service by conscripts with little will to fight, excessive reliance on firepower and helicopters for resupply rather than on ground troops to hold territory, and a highly motivated enemy. The *tanda* system, which promotes each graduating class from the Salvadoran military academy through the ranks together, regardless of ability, also hampers the armed forces' warfighting effectiveness since it thereby tolerates unprofessional, brutal, and criminal behavior. The corruption endemic to the Salvadoran armed forces has proved to be resistant to U.S. reform efforts and equally damaging to military capabilities. Such widespread practices as commanders collecting the salaries of nonexistent "ghost soldiers," selling goods at inflated prices to their men, siphoning funds from food and clothing budgets, and leasing their troops as guards and laborers have served to vitiate the morale and fighting effectiveness of the Salvadoran military.

As low-intensity conflict policy stipulated, American advisers recognized that convincing the Salvadoran armed forces of the importance of winning popular support by respecting human rights was at least as crucial as improving the army tactically. Believing that exposure to American ideas about human rights and democracy would have a positive effect on the military, advisers pinned their hopes upon the new generation of "professionalized" officers, many of whom had been directly trained by the United States. Sadly, however, American training does not imply a lesson in civics; it is precisely the young, aggressive, U.S.-trained officers who are most intoxicated by the extreme right's vision and most resentful of America's influence over the conduct of the civil war, and who commit many of the worst

atrocities. These atrocities, and generally the continued abuse of human rights, strengthen the cause of the very insurgents the armed forces are trying to counter, since many Salvadorans have become convinced that it is useless to try to change their authoritarian and stratified society through nonviolent efforts. This belief, and the reality that begets it, sustains the leftist rebels and drives the decade-old conflict.

Inextricably connected with the problem of the armed forces' abuse of human rights is the stubborn lack of judicial reform in El Salvador. The United States has placed considerable emphasis on this reform and on the punishment of human rights abusers because it recognizes that the rule of law is a cornerstone of democracy. The effective prosecution of offenders is a key to ending human rights abuse and encouraging the disaffected left to participate in the political system. Nevertheless, attempts to investigate and punish the abusers have been consistently blocked by the armed forces, death squads linked to those forces, and the rightist-dominated legislature and court system, which considerably undermines the effort to win hearts and minds.

Some of America's frustration in its efforts to stop official violence in El Salvador stems from the weakness of its only weapon against the recalcitrant military and government: conditionality. Although America states that it will withdraw assistance if it does not see reform, this threat is empty, since America's policy has continually affirmed its determination to prevent a rebel victory. Many U.S. efforts to induce the Salvadoran military to take action against human rights abusers in its own ranks have met not just with inaction, but scorn.

El Salvador's land redistribution program, largely designed and financed by the United States, has been, along with the attempt to improve the armed forces' respect for human rights, the heart of the American effort to still the siren call of the Marxist revolutionaries. Agrarian reform was undertaken to instill in the populace a belief in the governing regime's willingness and ability to produce positive change. Given a stake in the system, it was believed, the peasants would be far less inclined to join a revolutionary movement. Paradoxically, the land redistribution program—like much of the American-inspired reform program in El Salvador—was a revolutionary means to counteract revolution. In implementation, land reform in El Salvador has suffered because of the economic problems that plague the country, but it has also suffered from the unending hostility of the right, which first sought to prevent it and then succeeded in eviscerating it.

The most direct attempt to win popular support and thereby curb the insurgency in El Salvador has been the American-financed and inspired civil-military pacification programs, whose goal is to promote a benign image of the military and the central government. These programs have largely failed because the population refuses to trust the armed forces and turn to them as the solution to their insecurity, rather than flee from them as part of the problem.

Among everyone who describes the problems facing El Salvador and the solutions to those problems, the extent of agreement is as widespread as the frustration that permeates the efforts to achieve those solutions. All assessments agree that democratic institutions must be strengthened, a working judicial system must emerge, political violence must end, and the Salvadoran military must unequivocally submit to civilian authority. And everyone believes that if only the *United States* pushes hard enough, if only *Americans* act with sufficient dedication and commitment, the proper reforms will follow. The solutions proffered, however, are merely unattainable desiderata.

In tracing the frustration of the efforts to reform El Salvador, it would seem that the fault lies not in ourselves, but in the Salvadorans. El Salvador's rightists and its military have often rejected the reforms that America deems necessary to counter the insurgency, and the United States has time and again been met with frustration as El Salvador's armed forces adopt Washington's language even as they ignore its principles. The Salvadoran right, through its control of the legislature and judiciary, has gutted legislation that threatens its prerogatives, and it has been unable—or has refused—to try, convict, and punish those responsible for official and right-wing violence.

Despite the American near obsession with learning the lessons of Vietnam and applying them to low-intensity conflict doctrine and practice in El Salvador, perhaps U.S. officials once again allowed their efforts to be influenced by an assumption that had proved to be a principal source of our frustration in Vietnam: namely, that it is relatively easy to ensure that an ally does what American policymakers deem necessary to eliminate an insurgency. This assumption has once again proved false. In El Salvador, as in Vietnam, our help has been welcome, but our advice spurned, and for very good reason. That advice—to reform radically—threatens to alter fundamentally the position and prerogatives of those in power. The United States, with its “revolutionary” means of combatting insurgency, is threatening the very things its ally is fighting to defend. Those reforms that we have deemed absolutely essential—respect for human rights, a judicial system that applies to all members of Salvadoran society, radical land redistribution—are measures no government in El Salvador

has been able to achieve because they require fundamental changes in the country's authoritarian culture, economic structure, and political practices.

American counterinsurgency policy has assumed that democratization would redress many of the grievances that spawned the insurgency. The difficulty has been, however, that those very grievances have inhibited democratization. The "political space"—the tolerance of moderate and leftist elements that is needed to foster a political system that responds to the people—snaps shut consistently in a climate in which declaring one's support for a group identified with the left is a life-threatening act. Even though political intimidation has relaxed recently, violence is still an accepted—and employed—tool for quelling the voices that extremists do not wish to hear. As long as this is true, democracy in El Salvador will remain subject to the whims of those who cannot abide it.

Perhaps the most profound source of American frustration is the very nature of the society and political life we have sought to transform. America's awesome and problematical goal of democratizing El Salvador presupposes a working social consensus which that country has yet to achieve. Although American pressure has had some positive effects, El Salvador remains a chaotic and murderous environment, permeated by intimidation and the ever-present threat of terror. Such an environment has proved inimical to the propagation of the values of moderation and democratic fair play.

A country in which political intolerance and suspicion is a national characteristic has, predictably, an unimaginably polarized political life. In twelve years of bloodshed, both sides have succeeded, with what in retrospect appears to be an almost malicious purposefulness, in systematically destroying the political center. What has emerged is a Manichaeian struggle in which a rigidly authoritarian liberation movement remains locked in a life-or-death battle with a reactionary right animated by the most virulent anticommunist sentiment in Latin America.

Frustration with the failure to end the civil war is, paradoxically, increasing the number of those who believe that only the most radical policies and solutions can change Salvadoran society. Although the majority of Salvadorans want peace more than they want the political success of either contender, the constituency for peace is powerless, and, as in most civil wars, the powerful extremists on both sides regard politics as an all-or-nothing proposition, which leaves little room for compromise. Although surprising progress has been achieved on some issues negotiated in the continuing peace talks, neither side in the conflict will soon entrust its survival to the goodwill of

the other. Even if the current negotiations manage to achieve a lower level of violence in El Salvador, the conditions that spawned the civil war and the hatreds that have sustained it have not been ameliorated. Despite the prospect of an externally imposed settlement, too many Salvadorans remain all too eager to kill each other rather than to compromise in the Assembly. If the U.S. goal in El Salvador is still, despite the end of the Cold War, to alter this fundamental fact, the American project there is a long way from over.

Despite the hopes of low-intensity conflict doctrine, ten years of limited progress and great frustration have revealed the limits of American power. America's conviction that it can create democracy abroad is an illusion, at least in most lands at most times. Because of a well-intentioned, but misguided, assumption that techniques, technology, and programs alone could fundamentally transform a violent and unjust society into a liberal and democratic one, America perhaps did not consider sufficiently that human character, history, culture, and social structure are highly resistant to outside influence.

It seems a truism that if a regime is incapable of governing—controlling its own territory, imposing order among its population, winning popular support when it has been given reasonable assistance sufficient to compensate for help given to its internal enemies—it then becomes necessary to question not only whether that regime will survive but whether indeed it deserves to survive. If political development in El Salvador requires that the regime must be coached by foreigners in how to treat its own people, then perhaps low-intensity conflict doctrine's pursuit of its noble goal can only be described as quixotic.

In examining why American efforts in counterinsurgencies fail to deliver the results desired, proponents of low-intensity conflict policy exclusively discuss the United States' *implementation* of assistance. Failure is ascribed to inadequate integration among the military advisory group, CIA, AID, and the embassy; or inapplicable and inadequate training of American personnel; or unpredictable funding of security assistance, for instance. The solutions prescribed are invariably programmatic, while the premises upon which counterinsurgency doctrine are based remain inviolate. Rather than questioning and testing the assumptions that underlie the doctrine, there is a constant tinkering with techniques and organizational charts. Discussions of America's involvement in El Salvador or Vietnam become exercises in self-flagellation in which such straw men as the American military's "conventional mindset" or the State Department's parochial bureaucratic concerns are easily set up. The cures offered are as familiar and simplistic as the diagnoses: ensure that low-intensity

conflict is not relegated to the periphery of military education, or manipulate the organization of the "country team" to guarantee interagency coordination.

The creation of responsive, legitimate government and the winning of the voluntary support of the population through redistribution and reform—and not main-force military operations—were perceived to be the keys to success in the Vietnam conflict, just as they are today in El Salvador. But despite the perception, those keys, deemed most necessary to achieve success, proved the most elusive. Those complex and ambitious tasks whose fulfillment we have regarded as essential to defeat insurgencies in foreign lands are not, it appears, within our power to accomplish. It is one thing to have the key; it is an entirely different matter to force another to use it to unlock a door through which he does not wish to enter. A proper appreciation of this would, it is to be hoped, quiet the cries of "try harder" directed at those who have all along been trying their hardest; such appreciation could go far in explaining how the extraordinary energy and commitment applied by American officials and advisers to the construction of a just, equitable, and peaceful society in El Salvador achieved such blemished results.

If the counterinsurgency practices and programs proposed by low-intensity conflict doctrine are unable to build a democratic society and so defeat insurgency, two alternatives present themselves. Both, for obvious reasons, are unacceptable to the United States: one is unmitigated repression, the method the Salvadoran far right will not hesitate to employ if American aid—and constraints—are withdrawn; the other is American colonialism.

In assessing the success of America's policy toward El Salvador, U.S. policymakers should be clear-eyed about what they have tried to accomplish and why. For 12 years America has sought to secure the Salvadoran regime from the assault of the FMLN. Today some still maintain that despite tremendous changes in the international political environment, that goal remains in America's interest, arguing that the insurgency in El Salvador threatens the political stability of a U.S. ally. While true, that assertion fails to elucidate how this situation threatens intrinsic American interests. Rather, this argument—and similar ones concerning America's stake in defending other allies embroiled in low-intensity conflicts—implicitly identifies U.S. interests with the fate of particular governments; their fears become our fears, their enemies our enemies. This confusion, a relic of the global containment doctrine, if ever valid, is now outmoded.

Furthermore, since at least the time of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, an axiom—honored perhaps more often in the breach than

the observance—of America's policy toward allies threatened by insurgencies maintains that such conflicts are the local regime's to fight. An ability to deal effectively with internal unrest by the discriminate application of force and the amelioration of conditions that engender it is probably the best test of a regime's viability. Identifying America's interests with power structures that have proved incapable of this unnecessarily binds the United States to possibly unpopular, probably corrupt, and certainly ineffective governments. This hardly serves America's long-term interests.

While some maintain that the United States has an important commitment to El Salvador, still others, disgusted by the extreme right's virulent stranglehold on many facets of the Salvadoran polity and the military's barbaric lapses, argue that American aid to the Salvadoran regime is immoral and should end. Policymakers should face this question honestly. They should recognize that in the early years of the Reagan administration some officials had what could most charitably be described as a callous disregard of the sources, extent, and consequences of rightist violence in El Salvador. They must also recognize, however, that it is impossible to imagine any point in the past decade or in the future when El Salvador would not be a far more violent and unjust place, but for the American effort. Yet they should also face a cold question that has eluded close examination in the decade-long debate surrounding U.S. policy toward El Salvador: does America's national interest dictate a commitment to stanching internecine bloodshed in and civilizing that traumatized country?

Although many of the thorniest issues that have derailed past negotiations have yet to be resolved, the accords recently cobbled together in New York bring El Salvador closer to an end to its civil war than it has been for 12 years. This situation, however, is no occasion for the United States to congratulate itself, since such a settlement was anathema to the architects of U.S. policy toward El Salvador in the 1980s. Until 1990, America did not seek a compromise brokered by the United Nations but pressed for a clear victory through a combination of military and reform measures. In these terms, American policy failed.

In its unwavering support of the Salvadoran regime, however, the United States has succeeded in prolonging the war for a decade. In that time, although the ambitious goals of America's policy were never realized, the security concerns that impelled that policy have all but evaporated along with the East-West contest and El Salvador's perceived place in it. "Winning" in El Salvador no longer matters much. A negotiated solution, or even "losing," would no longer carry the same ominous significance it would have had for the Reagan administration at the beginning of the last decade. Of course, it is

merely fortuitous that in El Salvador the United States has waited out the communist threat. If America still sought victory there, U.S. statesmen and soldiers would now have to realize that their low-intensity conflict policy has merely achieved a prolonged and costly stalemate, and that only the stark alternatives of colonialism or repression could bring success.

Since 1981 policymakers believed instead that victory in El Salvador could be won by influencing the regime to do what was necessary to win its people's hearts and minds; and the United States believed that the \$6 billion in support it provided bought considerable leverage in that effort. But the Salvadorans had America trapped. They realized that the United States was involved in their war for its own national security interests. Salvadorans recognized, more so than most Americans, that the position of Republican presidents and their Democratic opponents in Congress was identical on the important issue concerning El Salvador: both were adamant, for domestic political and apparent 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 to cease aid if Washington repeatedly affirmed its determination to "draw a line" against communism in El Salvador? So while the ruling Salvadorans gestured appropriately in response to U.S. conditions, whenever the U.S.-imposed reforms threatened to alter fundamentally the status quo—their very object—they were emasculated.

In many instances, especially in the field of human rights, the Salvadoran far right and military remained remarkably immune to American blandishments. Washington often found itself forced to settle for less than it hoped, even less than the minimum improvement it thought absolutely necessary. Such capitulation left the United States supporting policies and practices that sustained the insurgency, while committing America's prestige to its defeat.

If the contestants in El Salvador negotiate an end to their present conflict, let alone a permanent peace, they will have done so because they are too weary to continue fighting—and because America can for the first time influence the Salvadoran right and press the military into making meaningful concessions to the FMLN. American leverage has vastly increased because the Salvadoran regime realizes that Washington no longer has pressing reasons to continue supporting it. Thus the same U.S. pressure for progress in human rights that was so fruitless in the past proved partially successful in the Jesuit case. With the end of the Cold War the regime finally saw some credibility in threats from the U.S. Embassy and Congress that aid would be withdrawn unless convictions were obtained.

That these conditions have proved necessary to bring murderers to justice and antagonists to the negotiating table sums up the history of America's involvement in El Salvador: First we devoted our political energy and national resources to prevent the defeat of our ally and to help institute reforms we deemed essential for democracy to triumph. We then endured a prolonged period of frustration, compelled to save Salvadoran "democracy" from its own undemocratic excesses and failing to prod our ally sufficiently to defeat the insurgency or reform radically enough. Finally, when El Salvador lost its importance, we left the settling of differences to a UN mediator.

Some American officials and policy planners have said that they look upon the "strategy" pursued in El Salvador as a model for future involvements in low-intensity conflicts. But this is dubious. If that strategy proves most effective when vital interests are not at stake, it will work best in situations that matter least.

In appraising the United States' involvement in El Salvador, policymakers are left confronting an inescapable fact: a chasm yawns between America's objectives and America's achievements there. For a decade, U.S. policy toward El Salvador tried to synthesize liberal and conservative aims: foster political, social, and economic reform, and provide security to a country whose freedom from communism the United States deemed essential. In attempting to reconcile these objectives, however, we pursued a policy by means unsettling to ourselves, for ends humiliating to the Salvadorans, and at a cost disproportionate to any conventional conception of the national interest.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

America's most prolonged and—until the Persian Gulf conflict—most costly military endeavor since the Vietnam War is taking place in the Central American republic of El Salvador, where ten years ago the Reagan administration saw the necessity of “drawing the line” against “communist aggression.”<sup>1</sup> Considering the civil war in El Salvador to be “an ideal testing ground”<sup>2</sup> in which to demonstrate the effectiveness of low-intensity conflict doctrine,<sup>3</sup> American strategists have implemented in that country policies developed over the last decade and informed by the United States' experience in the Vietnam War. They expect to display what is achieved in the Salvadoran

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase “drawing the line” in El Salvador was first used by then Secretary of State Alexander Haig when briefing the congressional leadership on the State Department's White Paper, *Communist Interference in El Salvador*. See LeoGrande, “A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador,” (1981), p. 27. For a chronology of events in El Salvador since 1979, see App. A.

<sup>2</sup>Lewis Tams and Lt. Com. Frank Aker, “Shattering the Vietnam Syndrome: A Scenario for Success in El Salvador,” unpublished manuscript, p. 11. Cited in Klare and Kornbluh (1988), p. 112. The Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project, whose *Analytical Review of Low-Intensity Conflict* is intended to provide a basis by which government agencies and the military can “develop the necessary policies and instruments” in regard to low-intensity conflict, specifically concentrates on the lessons learned from and objectives sought in U.S. involvement in Central American conflicts. Of all Central American conflicts that the *Analytical Review* examines, El Salvador's is the focal point. See Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986), “Acknowledgement”; pp. 3-5-3-9; App. A, “Charter”; and App. B, “Directive.” For a highly politicized discussion of the U.S. efforts to apply low-intensity conflict doctrine to the effort in El Salvador, see Debra Barry, Raul Vergara, and Jose Rodolfo Castro, “Low Intensity Warfare: The Counterinsurgency Strategy for Latin America,” in Hamilton et al. (1988), pp. 77-96. For a more balanced view of this subject, see Miles, “The Real War: Low Intensity Conflict in Central America,” (1986). See also Alvarez, “Notas de trabajo sobre la democratización y la contrainsurgencia en El Salvador,” (1988).

<sup>3</sup>U.S. low-intensity conflict activities are, according to the *Analytical Review of Low-Intensity Conflict*, divided into four “component categories”: “counterinsurgency/insurgency,” “terrorism counteraction,” “peacetime contingency,” and “peacekeeping.” Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986), p. 1-3. “Internal defense and development” is the strategy by which the United States and a host government attempt to implement counterinsurgency. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, (1988), p. 2-14. In the doctrinal literature, “counterinsurgency” and “internal defense and development” are usually used interchangeably. Beyond the fact that the *Analytical Review* defines “internal defense and development” as the implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine, the distinctions in the remaining literature seem nonexistent. The term “low-intensity conflict” is often replaced by its acronym, “LIC.”

laboratory as a positive example of how to approach a future low-intensity conflict.<sup>4</sup> This expectation has not come to fruition.

America has made an enormous investment in El Salvador. The conflict there has been the most expensive American effort to save an ally from an insurgency since Vietnam. El Salvador has absorbed at least \$4.5 billion, over \$1 billion of which is in military aid. When combined with over \$850 million in unsubsidized credits and an estimated CIA investment of over \$500 million, the total expenditure approaches \$6 billion.<sup>5</sup> Only five countries receive more American aid each year than El Salvador, a nation of 5.3 million people. But despite this huge effort, this "test case" has not met American strategists' forecasts. In 1981, General Frederick Woerner, commander of the 193rd Infantry Brigade, issued a report predicting the time and resources needed to defeat the rebel insurgency in El Salvador, detailing the reforms in the Salvadoran armed forces<sup>6</sup> and the level and type of American aid that he believed would be necessary. Reagan administration officials considered Woerner's report unnecessarily bleak, refusing to believe that defeating the rebels would cost nearly as much as the \$300 million in military aid that the general specified

<sup>4</sup>As Colonel John Waghelstein, former head of the U.S. military group in El Salvador, suggests, the lessons of the conflict in El Salvador "may be of use to future practitioners of counterinsurgency." Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, (1985), p. IV. For strategists' view of El Salvador as a "testing ground" for a low-intensity conflict doctrine, see also Krauss and Carrington, "U.S. Effort to Win 'Hearts and Minds' Gains in El Salvador: Tactics Will Get Next Test In the Nicaragua Conflict," (1986).

<sup>5</sup>Lane, "The War That Will Not End," (1989), p. 22; interview, U.S. diplomat, April 1991. For a detailed assessment of all aspects of American assistance to El Salvador since 1979, see Congressional Research Service, *El Salvador, 1979-1989: A Briefing Book on U.S. Aid and the Situation in El Salvador*, (1989), pp. 25-68.

<sup>6</sup>The 57,000-man Salvadoran armed forces comprise the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the three security forces: the National Police, Treasury Police, and National Guard. Future officers of the Army and security forces attend a single military academy, where they form loyalties based on graduating class, not future branches of service. (The Air Force—always regarded as the most independent service—has, since 1984, had its own academy.) It is common for an officer to serve part of his career in the security forces and part in the Army. For instance, the current defense minister (a post traditionally held by a military officer) served in the Treasury Police before he became a prominent field commander in the Army. A former defense minister served in the Army, then in the National Guard, then the Army again, then became head of the National Guard. A former chief of staff divided his career among two stints in the Army and one in the National Guard and one in the National Police. Thus there are no hard and fast distinctions, at least at the officer level, between the Army and the security forces. There are also no hard and fast distinctions in terms of function between the branches. The Army and the Air Force act against subversive groups in the cities, while the Treasury Police has its own combat unit. Throughout this report, the term "armed forces" refers to all of the military's branches, "Army" means that branch specifically.

or take nearly as long as the five years he anticipated.<sup>7</sup> Today, after ten years of fighting and the lives of 17 American officials and 75,000 Salvadorans, the rebels have not won the war. Nor, on the other hand, have they suffered the significant defeats, the large-scale defections, the weakening of their rural support, and the increase in active support for the government and armed forces of El Salvador that would signal the insurgency's decline. If the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has not gained victory, it has succeeded—especially after its November 1989 offensive<sup>8</sup>—in making the war, and itself, felt everywhere in El Salvador.

According to the controversial "Colonels' report" of 1988, "By most estimates, the war in El Salvador is stuck. Unhappily, the United States finds itself stuck with the war."<sup>9</sup> The report is perhaps too pessimistic, at least in its purely military assessment of the Salvadoran Army's capabilities and the quality of the U.S. Army's advice. And yet three years after its publication, the war in El Salvador is still a bloody, draining conflict with a clear victory for either side unimaginable. An April 1989 Congressional Research Service report reached conclusions very similar to those of the colonels:

At this point, the eight year civil conflict in El Salvador appears to be deadlocked; neither side shows signs of being able to defeat the other militarily or otherwise force an end to the war. Most observers believe that, barring an unexpected change in the circumstances supporting or causing the war such as a sharp drop in the level of U.S. military assistance or an unexpected improvement in the political or economic situation, both sides in the war appear capable of carrying on the fighting at the present pace indefinitely.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Interview, U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) analyst, November 1989. For a discussion of the Woerner report, see Raymond Bonner's impassioned *Weakness and Deceit*, (1984), p. 280. For comprehensive and predictable oral histories by most of the key participants in the American military effort in El Salvador, see Manwaring and Prisk, *El Salvador at War—An Oral History*, (1988).

<sup>8</sup>For a comprehensive and biased discussion of the political situation in El Salvador half a year after the offensive, see LeoGrande, "After the Battle of San Salvador," (1990).

<sup>9</sup>Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador*, (1988), p. 6. See Brook Larmer's series in the *Christian Science Monitor* for an excellent, comprehensive view of the situation in El Salvador, written at the same time as the Colonels' report: "Backsliding to the Bad Old Days," October 19, 1988; "The Shifting Battlefield," October 20, 1988; "Papering Over the Economic Divide," October 21, 1988; "The Politics of Polarization," October 24, 1988; and "Hard Lessons for the U.S. and the Region," October 25, 1988.

<sup>10</sup>Congressional Research Service (1989), p. 101. In 1988, when Salvadoran Defense Minister Colonel Emilio Ponce was commander of the 3rd Brigade, he conceded that the war was far from over and that "the armed forces could be fighting the guerrillas for another 10 years." Miller, "No End in Sight in El Salvador's Civil War," (1988).

In February 1990, General Maxwell Thurman, then commander of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), appeared to concur with this pessimistic assessment. He admitted that since the government of El Salvador was still unable to defeat the rebels after ten years, the only way to end the fighting was through negotiation, a sharp reversal of past policy.<sup>11</sup>

If the conflict in El Salvador presents the ideal opportunity for implementing counterinsurgency doctrine, but after 11 years of effort that doctrine has not achieved its goals, then perhaps the doctrine is flawed. Through a close examination of American frustration in El Salvador, this report attempts to identify where that flaw lies, calling into question the political assumptions that form the bedrock of American counterinsurgency doctrine, and, in light of this analysis, it offers a reassessment of that doctrine's future utility.

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<sup>11</sup>Gordon, "U.S. General Says Salvadorans Cannot Defeat the Guerrillas," (1990).

## II. COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE AND THE SHADOW OF VIETNAM

The apparent lessons of the Vietnam War have informed present counterinsurgency doctrine. The most comprehensive critiques of American strategy in that war assert that the American military responded far too traditionally.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, the military fought the kind of war it knew how to fight best, making extensive use of mobility and firepower, and neglected "the other war,"<sup>2</sup> the war for popular support. Tactically, the Vietnam War should have been waged using pacification and counterinsurgency techniques, emphasizing population security to win popular allegiance, rather than search and destroy operations to annihilate the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army; the "center of gravity" in the Vietnamese conflict lay not in the enemy's military capability but in the country's populace. Enemy strength rested with the peasants' dissatisfaction with the government and their consequent support for the communists. This had become achingly clear by 1968, along with the unwelcome realization that the only way to achieve the political goal of an independent South Vietnam was to eradicate the fundamental causes of disaffection there.

The United States had been attempting to achieve this end since 1960, but with increasing frustration. The ousting of Diem, the Department of Defense's emphasis on the importance of pacification, the repeated American attempts to reform the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and to induce the South Vietnamese government

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<sup>1</sup>For arguments written during the war, see, for instance, then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's 1966 "Program Four" memorandum, which asserted that the strategy of attrition was not working and championed the pacification strategy, in *Pentagon Papers* (1971), Vol. 4, pp. 348-354; and the U.S. Army's "Program for the Pacification and Long Term Development of South Vietnam," of March 1966, *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, pp. 576-580. Other studies that support this point of view are Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, (1972); Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, (1978); and Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (1986).

<sup>2</sup>The "other war" was a term first used by members of the Johnson administration. It embraced all the noncombat aspects of the Vietnam conflict that were designed to win popular support. The small community in the U.S. government and military concerned with counterinsurgency had attached great importance to nonmilitary factors long before Vietnam. See Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present*, (1977), Chapters 1-6; Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American*, (1988); and Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy*, (1988), Chapter 8.

(GVN) to respond to the needs and legitimate grievances of the populace—all these were designed to remedy Vietnam's problems at their base by creating a government and armed forces that could command the respect and allegiance of the people. These measures did not serve their ends in Vietnam, to strategists' dismay. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara lamented in 1967,

In essence, we find ourselves—from the point of view of the important war (for the complicity of the people)—no better, and if anything worse off. This important war must be fought and won by the Vietnamese themselves. We have known this from the beginning. The discouraging truth is that, as was the case in 1961 and 1963 and 1965, we have not found the formula, the catalyst, for training and inspiring them into effective action.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their frustrated tone, McNamara's words harbored great hope. Clearly, he was convinced that a means to motivate the Vietnamese regime was waiting to be discovered, if American strategists could only find it.

It was, of course, never found. Nevertheless, America's failure in Vietnam reinforced the conviction that had the "other war" been properly emphasized by the rigidly conventional U.S. military, the conflict would have been won. The American military learned this lesson from Vietnam and (at least outwardly) embraced the idea, advocated by many of the best analysts and its own Special Forces during the war, that support of the indigenous population was crucial to success in counterinsurgency. That support could be won only through a combination of economic, psychological, political, and military operations, with military actions in fact subordinate to political actions. Present counterinsurgency policy differs from the course advocated by McNamara only in the increased conviction with which strategists pursue it. The belief in the military victory that will quickly follow as soon as a government is forced to remedy its people's grievances and thus win their allegiance has long been undoubted by counterinsurgency strategists, and their doctrine seems to describe the means for materializing this objective.

## CONTEMPORARY COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE

Counterinsurgency doctrine places considerable emphasis on political and social reform. As the Vietnam conflict appears to demonstrate, the nature of revolutionary warfare makes such efforts

<sup>3</sup>*Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 349.

essential. "The [host] government... must realize that the true nature of the insurgent threat lies in its political claims and not in the military movement," as the *Analytical Review of Low-Intensity Conflict* notes. "Although the armed elements must be dealt with, a concentration on the military aspects of the threat resembles the bull charging the matador's cape; it is a diversion masking the real danger." To address the "real" danger, counterinsurgency doctrine asserts that a determined leader of the host nation "must overcome the inertia and incompetence of his own political system" to push through "unpalatable reforms that must be taken at a time of crisis."<sup>4</sup> Political construction, then, is the cynosure of counterinsurgency. The U.S. Army and Air Force's joint doctrinal statement on low-intensity conflict asserts that the implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine consists of

the full range of measures taken by a nation to promote its growth and to protect itself from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. *The strategy focuses on building viable political, economic, military and social institutions that respond to the needs of society.*<sup>5</sup>

Such a strategy used to be called, ambitiously, "nation building."

The U.S. Army's 1986 Field Circular expresses the precept of counterinsurgency doctrine tersely: "The [host] government must clearly demonstrate that it is a better choice than the insurgent organization."<sup>6</sup> Popular support, in the words of Colonel John Waghelstein, former commander of the U.S. military advisory group in El Salvador, is the "*sine qua non* in counterinsurgency."<sup>7</sup> Recognizing that a host country facing an insurgency needs both defense and development, doctrine defines development as "the process by which government improves the quality of life for its people and strengthens its link to the population in order to gain support."<sup>8</sup> Thus, an insurgency is defeated by winning the allegiance of the people, and that allegiance is gained by implementing those reforms and changes—attempting

<sup>4</sup>Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986), pp. 4-12-4-13.

<sup>5</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, Department of the Air Force (1988), pp. 2-14-2-15. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *Low Intensity Conflict*, Field Circular 100-20, p. 3-7. This is an ambiguous goal. The most obvious sign of success in this endeavor would be an increase in the population's active support of the government and armed forces and a concomitant increase in the flow of intelligence regarding the rebels from the population to the military. As Colonel John Waghelstein comments, "In low intensity conflict there are three important words to remember, and they are intelligence, intelligence, and intelligence. The campesino must have confidence that there's a better deal if he goes with us, and that he won't be molested if he walks in with information." Quoted in Miles (1986), p. 37.

<sup>7</sup>Waghelstein, "Post-Vietnam Counterinsurgency Doctrine," (1985), p. 49.

<sup>8</sup>Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986), p. 11-1.

“to shape society”<sup>9</sup>—that redress the people’s grievances, which in turn destroys the guerrillas’ credibility as a viable political alternative.

The ultimate object of counterinsurgency, then, is to create a legitimate government that the people will support. As the *Analytical Review* explains,

The objective is control of the loyalty of the population—not towns or villages or bridges, but political allegiance of the population. . . . The struggle between the insurgent and the incumbent then, is over political legitimacy: who should govern and how they should govern. . . . Whoever succeeds at this will ultimately prevail.<sup>10</sup>

American counterinsurgents’ role, therefore, is to press and to help the host government to remedy the people’s grievances, so that it can attain legitimacy and thereby gain popular support.<sup>11</sup>

### LIC MEETS EL SALVADOR

Counterinsurgency doctrine’s sophisticated appreciation of the roots of conflict—lack of political, social, and economic freedoms, as well as economic disparities, corruption, and repression—seemed tailor-made for the situation confronting the United States in El Salvador at the beginning of the last decade.<sup>12</sup> Those involved in the American effort appreciated from the start that Salvadoran society was truly one of the sickest in Latin America and that the rebels had ample cause to lead a revolution. When the United States decided to intervene in El Salvador in 1980, principally because it feared the consequences of a victory there by Marxist rebels closely allied to Cuba, Vietnam, and the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, it found a society in shambles, in which a tendency toward schism and homicide verged on a national characteristic. Salvadoran society was polarized

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 4-8.

<sup>11</sup>For discussion of low-intensity conflict doctrine’s emphasis on political legitimacy and democracy to quell an insurgency, see “Washington Still Keen on LIC Strategy,” *Latin America Weekly Report*, October 29, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>Fully half of Waghelstein’s study, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, (1985), examines Salvadoran society, economics, and history for the root causes of the insurgency, indicating the multifaceted approach taken by U.S. strategists to understand and address the conflict. For an essay on the first six years of the U.S. involvement in El Salvador, see Diskin and Sharpe, *The Impact of U.S. Policy in El Salvador, 1979-1985*, (1985). For an early assessment of the Salvadoran civil war, see Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States*, (1982). For another history of the civil war, see Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus*, (1986), Chapter Eight, “El Salvador: The Long War.”

between a wealthy elite and an exploited labor force. Under a basically feudal structure, with the most skewed land tenure system in Latin America, a tiny elite ruled—but did not govern—an increasingly impoverished majority. The United States found a society with a completely unjust legal system and an unyielding upper class that, with the aid of the armed forces, consistently and brutally blocked reform. In this setting, those responsible for the American counterinsurgency advisory effort in El Salvador have waged the “other war” with a vengeance. Although some officials in the Reagan administration at first believed that the only important objective was to effect the quickest and most efficient annihilation of guerrillas,<sup>13</sup> El Salvador came to represent the most important effort to apply the lesson of Vietnam: namely, it takes development and democracy, not just military force, to root out revolution. If a war was needed to defeat the FMLN, just as essential was a campaign to reform the feudal institutions and redress the political, social, and economic inequities in El Salvador to quench the rebel fires forever.

From the beginning, American military officials and policymakers were anxious to avoid in El Salvador the overly conventional approach that they believed had led them astray in Vietnam. The first U.S. military advisers in El Salvador, believing that the advice America gave to the ARVN had concentrated too narrowly on traditional military matters, were convinced that a successful counterinsurgency program in El Salvador depended on the government’s ability to demonstrate to the average Salvadoran that it was fulfilling his hopes for a better life. These advisers, many who had themselves been active in Vietnam, attempted to persuade the Salvadoran government and armed forces that social reform and economic assistance to rally the people to their side were just as important as battlefield gains.<sup>14</sup> Among the recent

<sup>13</sup>Interviews, former assistant secretary of defense, March 1991; journalist, November 1989. The “conversion” of conservative policymakers to the belief that the pursuit of human rights and social justice was the best strategy for winning the war in El Salvador—culminating in then Vice President Bush’s delivering specific demands to the Salvadoran government and armed forces to curb rightist violence in December 1983—is described in “Attacking the Death Squads: In a Turnabout, the U.S. Pressures El Salvador to Crack Down—or Risk Losing Aid,” *Newsweek*, January 16, 1984, pp. 24–34; Preston, “What Duarte Won,” (1985); and Hammer, “President Reagan’s Policy Toward El Salvador: Success or Failure?” (1988). On American policy toward El Salvador and the lack of attention to human rights and political development there in the first six months of the Reagan administration, see LeoGrande, “A Splendid Little War,” (1981). For an analysis of the domestic political battles over El Salvador, see Arnsion, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America*, (1989).

<sup>14</sup>Chavez, “The Odds in El Salvador: Again the U.S. Army Faces an Elusive Enemy,” (1983).

American experts formerly posted to El Salvador who were interviewed for this report, all viewed the insurgency as the manifestation of legitimate grievances and all believed that the insurgency could be defeated only if those grievances were redressed through fundamental political, social, and economic reform.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, military leaders had become far more convinced of the importance of the "other war" in the period between the American involvements in Vietnam and El Salvador. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War, Army General Earle Wheeler, had espoused a rigidly conventional approach to that conflict, asserting that "the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."<sup>16</sup> In 1983, Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer urged attention to the political aspects of the conflict in El Salvador and the need for reform there to quell the insurgency: "Guerrilla war is based on the legitimate concerns of the people," he stated. "The better nations address the needs of the people, the better they will be able to prevent revolution."<sup>17</sup> This new approach was exemplified in the four interrelated principles of American strategy in El Salvador enunciated by President Reagan in December 1983: (1) "democracy"—supporting democracy, reform, and freedom against dictators of both the left and right; (2) "development"—promoting economic recovery, social growth, and equality; (3) "dialogue"—fostering a "dialogue of democracy" among competing factions within El Salvador as well as negotiations among Central American nations; and (4) "defense"—providing "a security against those who use violence against democratization, development, and diplomacy."<sup>18</sup>

#### **REFORM AS COUNTERINSURGENCY: THE KISSINGER COMMISSION REPORT**

On January 10, 1984, the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America issued its report, commonly known as the Kissinger Com-

<sup>15</sup>Interviews, November 1989, December 1990, and March 1991.

<sup>16</sup>Krepinevich, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>*Facts on File*, June 19, 1983, p. 448. The following passage well represents the views of innumerable articles in the military journals on the application of U.S. low-intensity conflict doctrine to the conflict in El Salvador: "The sociopolitical environment is the main battle area, and this is where victory or defeat will occur. . . . The long-range strategy is to assist in eliminating the 'causes' of insurgency. These strategies, coupled with a consistent political policy, should assist in developing democratic political systems and viable economies and in maintaining military forces capable of defending the Central American region." Johnson and Russell, "An Army Strategy Structure," (1986).

<sup>18</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Central America: Defending Our United Interests*, (1983), p. 4. Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986) describes the objectives of Reagan's comprehensive strategy toward El Salvador, pp. 3-5-3-6.

mission report; that document remains the most extensive and enduring policy statement on El Salvador.<sup>19</sup> In its advocacy of the thorough application of counterinsurgency principles to the conflict in El Salvador, the report marked the first time that "a comprehensive strategy for meeting the threat of instability and insurgency in the Third World had been given the status of national policy."<sup>20</sup> Although it discussed both the means to defeat the rebels militarily and the means to ameliorate the causes of the conflict, the report emphasized the political and economic basis of the civil war and advocated a strategy that relied heavily on political, social, and economic development as the key to defeating El Salvador's insurgency. Recognizing the horrendous conditions under which the majority of Salvadorans lived, the commission recommended an ambitious "human development program" to provide housing and universal access to primary education and health care and to reduce infant mortality, malnutrition, population growth rates, and illiteracy. "Development" would address socioeconomic problems to provide greater government legitimacy by cutting away structural inequalities; the report emphasized strongly, for instance, the need to continue the land reform effort begun in El Salvador in 1980. The report insisted that defeating the rebels in El Salvador depended upon building a legitimate social and political order there, based on social reform, respect for human rights, and the advancement of democracy through elections and the strengthening of basic institutions necessary for political development: specifically, labor unions, the judicial system, and the press.

Issued less than a month after then Vice President George Bush's visit to El Salvador to compel the Salvadoran government and armed forces to restrain the right-wing death squads, the commission's report explicitly linked countering the insurgency to attaining political legitimacy, which in turn dictated an end to human rights abuses. Thus the commission argued that no contradiction existed between the security interests of a great power and the generous motives of a

<sup>19</sup>National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, *Report*, (1984). The extent to which the Kissinger Commission report crystallized and defined U.S. policy toward El Salvador is borne out by the fact that the Congressional Research Service bases its assessment of the success of that policy on the degree to which the objectives enunciated in the Kissinger Commission report have been attained. Congressional Research Service (1989), "Summary" and p. 1. While many of the commission's recommendations were made in general, regional terms, its focal point was clearly the crisis in and U.S. policy toward El Salvador. For a harsh assessment of the Kissinger Commission report, see LeoGrande, "Through the Looking Glass: The Kissinger Report on Central America," (1984).

<sup>20</sup>Christopher M. Lehman, "Protracted Insurgent Warfare: Development of an Appropriate U.S. Doctrine," in Schultz et al. (1989), p. 127.

democracy; the two were indeed connected. The mechanism by which the two interests were to be linked was "conditionality." In a key passage of the report explaining specifically the goals of American counterinsurgency policy in El Salvador, the commission recommended that increased military aid

be made contingent upon the Salvadoran government's demonstrated progress toward free elections; freedom of association; the establishment of the rule of law and an effective judicial system; and the termination of the so-called death squads, as well as vigorous action against those guilty of crimes and the prosecution to the extent possible of past offenders.<sup>21</sup>

None of these recommendations, of course, was motivated by purely altruistic interest in the political and moral health of El Salvador; rather, these measures were regarded as essential for the Salvadoran government to gain the political legitimacy necessary for the support of the populace, which in turn was essential to defeat the insurgency.

The Kissinger Commission report is the fullest explication of the low-intensity conflict policy that the United States has pursued in El Salvador, a policy with two simultaneous tracks: fortify the Salvadoran armed forces to wear down the rebels in combat, and fortify civilian democracy to weaken the rebels' claims to political legitimacy. Because, as we shall see, the American effort has led to undeniable progress in El Salvador, some have viewed this policy as a successful "case study of a U.S. attempt to defeat an armed, leftist opposition through progressive reforms intended to build a democratic system and society."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, since America's intervention, El Salvador has held six free elections and has peacefully transferred power for the first time in its history from one political party to its opposition; the country has also seen a significant decline in political murders and in the armed forces' human rights abuses. But despite this progress, the policy detailed in the Kissinger Commission report has been, by its own definition, far less than a success. Reviewing nine years of effort,

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<sup>21</sup>National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), p. 102. This strong stand was vitiated by an endnote written by three of the authors—Henry Kissinger, Nicholas Brady, and John Silber—which declared, in effect, that since the survival of the Salvadoran regime was crucial to American security, the United States could not allow human rights abuse to stand in the way of its support of El Salvador (p. 130) and by statements elsewhere in the report emphasizing that the government of El Salvador needed assurance that it would not lose American aid. Kissinger, Brady, and Silber's note reflected the dichotomy of American interests in El Salvador: even though the United States believed that respect for human rights was the best means to defeat the FMLN, it did not become involved in El Salvador to make sure the regime conducted its war cleanly, but to serve its own national security interests.

<sup>22</sup>Hammer (1988), p. 90.

a State Department report concluded in January 1989 that “the present situation remains too unstable to qualify El Salvador as an institutional democracy capable of insuring respect for the human and civil rights of all its citizens.”<sup>23</sup> Given the presumed relationship between building democracy in El Salvador and winning popular support, it is not surprising that since the means have failed, the end has not been achieved. Attempts at developing democracy have failed to erode the guerrillas’ base of support—in fact, the insurgents retain enough support to sustain the war indefinitely<sup>24</sup>—and have failed to win the committed support of the majority of the population for the government of El Salvador. After over a decade of conflict, most Salvadorans are not politically engaged in the war and dislike both the armed forces and the guerrillas. It is estimated that 70 percent of the

<sup>23</sup>Pear, “Extremist Gains Seen in Salvador,” (1989). Since the strategy of internal defense and development attempts to induce the host government to become a viable institution capable of responding to society’s needs, then by definition, too, the U.S. counterinsurgency advisory effort in El Salvador has been far less than fully successful. As the Colonels’ report states:

“If you spend your time chasing guerrillas,” one senior U.S. officer told us, “you do it forever and never get to the root cause of the insurgency.” Attempts to address root causes during this same period enjoyed less success than did efforts to stabilize the military situation. American officers recognized . . . that victory required first redressing the grievances of the Salvadoran people. Behind a shield of security provided by ESAF [Armed Forces of El Salvador], *the government had to transform itself into an institution perceived as effective, impartial, and committed to bringing about genuine reform. Meaningful implementation of this concept has eluded the Salvadorans and their American advisers.*

Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 6. Emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup>Interview, journalist, November 1989. One of the most disturbing aspects of the November 1989 offensive for the government of El Salvador and the United States was the extent of collaboration with the population that was necessary for the FMLN to infiltrate over 1000 fighters and their materiel into San Salvador in the weeks prior to the attack. A U.S. administration official admitted that “there was a torrent of arms and ammunition into the capital. That couldn’t have taken place had not a lot of people helped, or at the minimum, kept quiet.” Quoted in Chivera, “The Sheraton Siege,” (1989), p. 51. On this point see also Preston, “The Battle for San Salvador,” (1990). Of course, the outcome of the November 1989 offensive also disturbed the FMLN, for even though it revealed a deep and highly organized base of popular support for the rebels, that support was not deep enough to provoke one of the guerrillas’ hoped-for goals, a general insurrection. The question of the depth of popular support for the rebels is discussed generally in Gibb and Smyth, *El Salvador: Is Peace Possible? A Report on the Prospects for Negotiations and U.S. Policy*, (1990); Preston (1990), p. 7; Congressional Research Service (1989), pp. 102–103; Larmer, “Rebels Thrive in Rural El Salvador,” (1989); Wickham-Crowley, “Understanding Failed Revolutions in El Salvador: A Comparative Analysis of Regime Types and Social Structures,” (1989), pp. 521, 524–525; Hatfield, Leach, and Miller, *Bankrolling Failure: United States Policy in El Salvador and the Urgent Need for Reform*, (1987), p. 2; and LeMoyné, “El Salvador’s Forgotten War,” (1989), p. 120, and “The Guns of El Salvador,” (1989), p. 57.

population is indifferent to the struggle;<sup>25</sup> clearly, in the fight for civilian sympathies, neither side has gained the upper hand.<sup>26</sup> But counterinsurgency doctrine is based on the general population's active support of and loyalty to the besieged government, not on its neutrality.<sup>27</sup> Despite efforts at democracy and development, the government of El Salvador has yet to demonstrate that it is a better choice than the insurgent organization because, as journalist James LeMoyné states, "the government has failed to demonstrate that it can improve life for the majority of Salvadorans."<sup>28</sup>

Writing in 1985, Waghelstein asserted that "without a Salvadoran government and its military being viewed as part of the solution and not part of the problem, little chance of long lasting progress and peace in El Salvador exists."<sup>29</sup> Six years later, there is no peace in this traumatized country. The project that the United States assigned itself, to transform the problematical Salvadoran government and military into the solution, has proved to be a very tall order. The immensity of the task dictated by counterinsurgency doctrine—the sweeping changes, the complete about-face of established patterns—was made alarmingly vivid by Seymour Deitchman:

There must be a determined effort to gain the support of the population through political, cultural and economic activity that, in the end, results in the *transformation of the entire society* in a way that brings general benefits and satisfactions more attractive than the gains offered by the original insurgents. . . . The people who

<sup>25</sup>Hazelwood, "El Salvador: Sleepwalking into Disaster," (1989).

<sup>26</sup>Interviews, State Department official, March 1991; U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) analyst, and journalist, November 1989; journalist, January 1990; military analyst, December 1990; Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 43; Gibb and Smyth (1990); Geoffrey Pyatt, "Trip Report on El Salvador," October 1988, unpublished; Gruson, "Soyapango Journal," (1990); LeMoyné, "El Salvador's Forgotten War," (1989), pp. 114 and 120; Wickham-Crowley (1989), pp. 516–517; Freed, "Rebels Target U.S.-Aided Programs in Rural El Salvador," (1989); Larmer, "The Shifting Battle Front," (1988); Volman, "Salvadoran Says U.S. Hasn't Learned Lessons of Vietnam," (1987).

<sup>27</sup>Drew, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: American Military Dilemmas and Doctrinal Proposals*, (1988), pp. 18–19. During the Vietnam conflict, the policy of "Vietnamization" failed, most observers have concluded, because although the Viet Cong lost a great portion of their hold on the population between Tet and the Paris Peace Accords, the South Vietnamese government, in spite of its programs, was not able to earn the position as the replacement recipient of the people's loyalty. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance*, (1977), pp. 261–272; Lewy (1978), pp. 190–195. Douglas Blaufarb, a former U.S. official involved in the pacification and Vietnamization efforts, asserts that the latter program failed because "the government . . . failed . . . to create among the peasantry a strong, positive motivation to engage in the struggle on the official side" (Blaufarb (1977), p. 272).

<sup>28</sup>LeMoyné, "El Salvador's Forgotten War," (1989), p. 120.

<sup>29</sup>Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, (1985), p. 32.

represent the insurgents' source of support must feel a quickening of progress, which they want, and which the insurgents suddenly seem to be threatening.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, counterinsurgency demands, as its exponents often assert, that the host government do nothing less than wrest the revolution from the revolutionaries. The Kissinger Commission report clearly advocated this course. To win the popular support it deems essential, the United States has urged and tried to help the government and armed forces of El Salvador to become more revolutionary than the guerrillas—by *providing* that which the FMLN can only *promise*, a just and equitable society.

America's policy toward El Salvador, then, has assumed that its advice and assistance are "key ingredients" in "achieving political change."<sup>31</sup> The United States has thus taken on a most daunting task: if its policy is to succeed, it must be able to persuade a foreign nation to transform itself. In committing its resources and prestige to the defeat of the FMLN, the United States committed itself to a large and complex project of political and social engineering; it assumed responsibility for ameliorating the pathology produced by centuries of abuse perpetrated by the very armed forces and governing elite that its policy now supported. Perhaps, in the enthusiasm generated by the coincidence of morality and expediency, the architects of American policy toward El Salvador did not carefully examine whether the strategy dictated by counterinsurgency doctrine—the political reconstruction of El Salvador, not by a colonialist endeavor, but by persuasion and exhortation—was within America's capability. The Kissinger Commission report alluded to, but did not fully examine, what has proved to be the crux of America's difficulty in implementing the policy it regarded as essential for success in El Salvador:

The U.S. cannot—and should not—impose its own administration, even for such laudable objectives as implementing political, social and economic reforms; it cannot place its own experts in each village and town to gather political intelligence; and it cannot supervise the conduct of each soldier and policeman in all dealings with the population. For all these goals, the U.S. Government must rely on the abilities and good faith of the government under attack.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Deitchman, *Limited War and American Defense Policy: Building and Using Military Power in a World at War*, (1969), p. 40. Emphasis added. Deitchman was then Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency in the Defense Department.

<sup>31</sup>Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, (1985), p. 60.

<sup>32</sup>The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), p. 94.

In El Salvador, the United States found that to create a just and liberal society it had to rely on a recalcitrant military with a murderous past and a government with feeble democratic traditions at best. America's only means to persuade the government and the armed forces to help themselves by helping the people was "conditionality." Counterinsurgency doctrine has assumed, but does not examine, the notion that the United States, with the means available to it—persuasion, plus offers of aid—could generate within host governments and militaries the enlightenment and breadth of view that are required to carry out a serious and effective internal defense and development program.

To push El Salvador toward these radical changes, American counterinsurgency policy focused on accomplishing three principal tasks: the reform of the Salvadoran armed forces, land redistribution, and democratization. The reform of the military was regarded as essential for two distinct reasons, exemplifying counterinsurgency doctrine's "multi-pronged" approach, which coordinates simultaneous responses to military and political challenges. First, only with increased military competence and professionalism would El Salvador gain a "shield" to protect itself from the guerrilla threat while it went about "the business of building democratic institutions, holding free and fair elections, and working to rectify historical patterns of injustice."<sup>33</sup> Second—and to reach this object, American advice and assistance were deemed particularly essential—the Salvadoran armed forces had to be trained, cajoled, and motivated to wean themselves from their traditional habit of responding to dissent, which they defined very broadly, with naked violence.<sup>34</sup> Only by respecting human rights, democracy, and reform, American diplomats and other experts reasoned, could El Salvador's military legitimize the regime it represented.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Senator Henry M. Jackson, April 29, 1983, quoted in U.S. Department of State, *The U.S. and Central America: Implementing the National Bipartisan Commission Report*, (1986), p. 22. See also Miles (1986), pp. 29 and 36.

<sup>34</sup>The assumption that U.S. military assistance necessarily makes for a more humane and therefore more effective armed force in the host country is an old one. As testimony to the Draper Commission in 1959 put it, "Where U.S. support allows us to exert a constructive influence . . . it may in time affect the oppressive character of the forces concerned." Institute for Defense Analysis, *Studies*, #2, "Military Aid" (1959), p. 10-35. On the importance low-intensity conflict doctrine attaches to the American attempt to reform client forces so that they don't alienate the population from the "nation building" effort, see Miles (1986), p. 20.

<sup>35</sup>Interview, GAO analyst, December 1990; Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency*, (1985), pp. 34 and 60-62.

### III. THE EFFORT TO TRANSFORM EL SALVADOR: MILITARY REFORM

#### TACTICAL PERFORMANCE AND CORRUPTION

The 1981 "Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team," commonly known as the Woerner report, concluded that only a dramatic restructuring and the adoption of more aggressive counterinsurgency tactics could turn the Salvadoran military into an effective fighting force. At the time, the Salvadoran armed forces lacked the doctrine, structure, ideology, and mentality to fight a counterinsurgency war. The high command clung to an ineffective, conventional warfighting strategy of indiscriminate air attacks and undisciplined sweeps through guerrilla-controlled territories. The United States undertook the task of converting El Salvador's "nine-to-five, five-day-a-week," garrison-bound army into an aggressive force.<sup>1</sup> This meant forcing the military to abandon ponderous large-unit sweeps in favor of small, lightly armed units, pinpointed operations assisted by "hunter-killer" squads, and imaginative psychological warfare operations. U.S. advisers encouraged the Salvadoran Army to mirror the guerrillas, carrying out surprise attacks, ambushes, night actions, and saturation patrolling in squads of five to ten men. American advisers also urged the employment of civil defense units, regarded as an indispensable aspect of counterinsurgency warfare. This effort has met with enormous frustration, as will be discussed later.<sup>2</sup>

The Colonels' report and other critics have charged that since American advisers are themselves products of a system that teaches conventional military skills and not counterinsurgency techniques, the U.S. military advisory effort is, as was often the case in Vietnam, teaching the wrong skills for a guerrilla war. However, those advisers are aware of this possible tendency and intend to avoid succumbing to it.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the Colonels' report probably overstates

<sup>1</sup>Interviews, American expert formerly posted to El Salvador, March 1991; GAO analyst, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, former political officer, U.S. Embassy, San Salvador, November 1989. See also Manwaring and Prisk (1988), pp. 111-116, and Bacevich et al. (1988), pp. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup>On the American effort to develop a more effective warfighting capability in the Salvadoran armed forces, see especially Bacevich et al. (1988), and Congressional Research Service (1989), pp. 16-19 and 101-107.

<sup>3</sup>Interviews, former American military advisers, November 1989; Chavez, "The Odds in El Salvador," (1983); Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989); Strasser with

its case. The Salvadoran armed forces are a far more effective fighting force than they were a decade ago. They are slowly beginning to reorganize into smaller combat units and carry out night patrols, even though they continue to suffer from many of the ills that have plagued them since the war began: a disengaged officer corps, a "garrison mentality," forced service by conscripts with little will to fight,<sup>4</sup> excessive reliance on firepower and on helicopters for resupply rather than on ground troops to hold territory, and a highly motivated enemy.<sup>5</sup> On the whole, the military organization remains stubbornly resistant to change.

One major obstacle that the United States has repeatedly tried to overcome in its efforts to reform the Salvadoran military is the *tanda* system. Under this system, each graduating class, or "*tanda*," from the military academy moves up the ranks together, regardless of ability. Members of the same *tanda* establish deep bonds of loyalty and reciprocity toward each other—often serving as godfathers to one another's children—and help shield fellow members from prosecution or punishment. Adding to the pernicious effects of the *tanda* system is the Salvadoran military's practice of operating not through a clear chain of command but through a complex system of consensus within and between *tandas*. The careers of high-ranking officers are made or broken more often by such political machinations than by their performance on the battlefield. The final consequence of the *tanda* system is that officers are not held accountable for their actions, no matter how egregious they may be; human rights abuses therefore go

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LeMoyné, "Teaching the ABCs of War: The American Advisors in El Salvador Struggle to Turn Raw Recruits into Soldiers," (1983).

<sup>4</sup>The Salvadoran Army forcibly enlists an estimated 12,000 youths a year; often the conscripts are as young as 14. See Gruson, "Salvadoran Army Fills Ranks by Force," (1989), and Massing (1989), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>Every official, former official, and journalist who was interviewed in regard to the military situation in El Salvador concurred in the above assessment of the Salvadoran military's weaknesses. For a discussion of those weaknesses, in addition to the Colonels' report and the Congressional Research Service report, see Arbuckle, "U.S. Co-In: El Salvador's Bad Example," (1990). See also Sheehan, "Comparative Counterinsurgency Strategies: Guatemala and El Salvador," (1989), pp. 127–154; Millman, "El Salvador's Army: A Force Unto Itself," (1989); Farah, "El Salvador's Civil War—New Tactics, Old Stalemate," (1989); Gruson, "With Training and New Tactics, Salvador's Army Gains on Rebels," (1989); Morello, "Caught Up in a War That Is Stuck," (1988); and Preston, "El Salvador: After Years of Anarchy, a Nation is Transformed," (1988). For discussions of specific aspects of the Salvadoran armed forces, see Millman, *IPSFA: Womb to Tomb*, (1989), and Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, *Barriers to Reform: A Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders*, (1990). For older but well-informed discussions of the Salvadoran military, see Christian, "El Salvador's Divided Military," (1983); pp. 73–76 of Richard Millet's "Praetorians or Patriots? The Central American Military" in Leiken (1984); and the relevant sections in Baylora, *El Salvador in Transition*, (1982).

unpunished, military incompetence is tolerated, and corruption runs rampant. Such toleration of unprofessional, brutal, and criminal behavior damages the armed forces' military effectiveness, demoralizes its younger officers, and diminishes its support among the Salvadoran people. The United States, despite its persistent efforts to promote a system based on merit, has had little success in transforming the *tanda* system, which, as one American analyst asserts, is "one reason the Salvadoran army can't win."<sup>6</sup>

American efforts to effect the necessary tactical reform of the Salvadoran military have been frustrated by both the self-serving interests and the institutional barriers of that organization. American advisers, for example, have devoted great energy and vast sums of money to create and strengthen an effective cadre of noncommissioned officers, something they believe to be indispensable to the small-unit operations that are the building blocks of counterinsurgency tactics. The extremely limited progress that has been achieved on so essential an action can be attributed in part to the Salvadoran adherence to a Latin American military tradition that views the structure of the armed forces as comprising only a commissioned officer elite and peasant conscripts who serve it.<sup>7</sup>

The thwarting of American goals is due above all, however, to the officer corps' jealous guarding of its pecuniary prerogatives. Every year, 20,000 pay slots for soldiers are divided among the Salvadoran Army's regional commanders. Since the Salvadoran armed forces have no central roster and hence no way to detect fraud, most commanders fill a portion of these slots with nonexistent soldiers, collecting the "ghost soldier" salaries themselves. Brigades generally have at least one 50-man "ghost" company that brings the brigade commander \$60,000 annually. The salary of a re-enlistee is nearly double that of a conscript. Imaginary re-enlistees are therefore quite profitable to an individual commander, and many actively discourage genuine re-enlistment because it would cut into their ghost soldier profits. Since an NCO corps would be made up of re-enlistees, the creation of such a body—regarded as critical by the United States—is sacrificed to individual greed.

Institutional avarice also militates against an NCO corps. A portion of every soldier's salary, matched by an equal contribution from the Salvadoran government, is paid into the armed forces' \$150 million social security fund, part of the military's social welfare arm, the *Instituto de Previsión Social de la Fuerza Armada* (IPSFA). This has

<sup>6</sup>Interview, December 1990.

<sup>7</sup>Bacevich et al. (1988), pp. 27–28.

allowed the military to become the single most powerful economic and social institution in El Salvador. Possessing the largest source of liquid capital in the country, the armed forces have their own commercial bank and invest heavily in real estate and other business ventures.<sup>8</sup> Although all members of the military contribute to the fund, the benefits of the fund are normally not available to conscripts. Only disabled conscripts or the families of dead conscripts receive any pension payments; all other conscripts are denied access to the pension fund and housing and personal loans. The only members of the armed forces eligible to receive these benefits are officers and a very small number of re-enlistees. The vast majority of the military subsidizes the benefits enjoyed principally by officers, and therefore it is to the advantage of officers to keep the pool of nondrawing members of the fund as large as possible. A large NCO corps would of necessity shrink that pool. The armed forces thus deny themselves the essential tools in a counterinsurgency campaign.

There are, unfortunately, too many other instances when what is good for the war effort is sacrificed to what is good for commanding officers' wallets. Such corrupt and ubiquitous practices as commanders selling goods at inflated prices to their men, siphoning funds from food and clothing budgets, and leasing their troops as guards and laborers to landowners and businessmen all vitiate the morale and fighting effectiveness of El Salvador's armed forces. For instance, since 1984 the United States has maintained a large training center in La Unión in which Salvadoran recruits can receive American basic military training. Although one might assume that Salvadoran commanders would eagerly seize the opportunity to have their new recruits undergo a comprehensive training program under the guidance of American military advisers, this is often not the case. If commanding officers relinquish their recruits to the training center, they also must relinquish the funds they control which are intended to provide for the recruits' salaries, food, and uniforms—funds that are often diverted to the commanders themselves. Preferring not to lose this income, many commanders do not send their troops to the

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<sup>8</sup>Relations between the military and the business community are highly strained. The recent wave of kidnappings of wealthy businessmen and members of their families by extremist members of the armed forces is presumably due to the anger the far right feels at the business community's pragmatic efforts to help effect a settlement between the government and the FMLN. For its part, the business community is infuriated at the military's inability or unwillingness to detect and punish the kidnappers. Businessmen have also complained of increasing acts of extortion carried out by the armed forces. With the growth in the military's economic activities and power, the tension between the armed forces and private business will intensify. Interviews, U.S. diplomat, April 1991, journalist, June 1991.

training center, electing instead to "train" their soldiers themselves. The Salvadoran military's own training would, of course, be far more effective if there were a working NCO corps to oversee it. Commanders thus often give greater weight to their financial interests than to the need to have the best-trained men possible under their command. The result is that the war remains militarily stalemated despite something better than a ten-to-one ratio in favor of the armed forces and that a far greater number of badly trained and led Salvadoran soldiers are killed than would otherwise be the case.<sup>9</sup> Finally, virulent corruption stymies efforts to investigate human rights abuses. Many officers have detailed knowledge of each others' questionable financial activities and can use this information to blackmail those officers who might otherwise cooperate with authorities in their efforts to bring human rights abusers to justice.

The greed and apparent tactical incompetence of Salvadoran officers has so exasperated American experts posted to El Salvador that all the individuals interviewed for this report who have served there in the past two years believe that the Salvadoran military does not wish to win the war because in so doing it would lose the American aid that has enriched it for the past decade. Salvadoran officers jokingly explain their apparent ineptness this way, and after repeated failures to alter the gross incompetence and corruption of the Salvadoran armed forces, observers stationed in El Salvador have begun to take this joke seriously. They find it difficult to explain otherwise, for instance, the Salvadoran military's performance during the November 1989 rebel offensive. In that battle, the guerrillas had firmly established themselves in areas of San Miguel and San Salvador. The armed forces, performing exceedingly well, extracted the rebels through intense air bombardment and aggressive, difficult street-to-street and house-to-house offensive operations. After the FMLN's combatants were finally routed, however, the armed forces failed to pursue and engage them, despite what observers considered favorable occasions to do so. Those experts believe that the Salvadoran military was in a position to deliver a crippling blow to the retreating guerrillas before those forces could disperse, and they believe that the Salvadoran military willfully let that opportunity slip away. While there may be other valid explanations for this failure, it is nevertheless alarming that those who work most closely with the Salvadoran military are so doubtful of its commitment, and so dismayed at its seeming unwillingness to make the sacrifices

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<sup>9</sup>Interviews, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990. For an account of the particularly corrupt—and brutal—practices of the former commander of the Salvadoran air force, Juan Rafael Bustillo, see Lane, "The Pilot Shark of El Salvador," (1990).

necessary to improve itself, that this unsavory motive for the armed forces' inaction is the first one they proffer. After 12 years of fighting, it is disturbing that Salvadoran officers appear to care less about winning their war than many Americans do.<sup>10</sup>

### THE SALVADORAN MILITARY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

American advisers recognized that persuading the Salvadoran armed forces of the importance of winning popular support was as at least as crucial as improving that army tactically. As Waghelstein described the concept, "the only territory you want to hold is the six inches between the ears of the campesino."<sup>11</sup> To a great extent, advisers have managed to change at least the Salvadoran military's outward attitude toward the importance of the political aspects of the war, as reflected in Defense Minister General Rene Emilio Ponce's often-quoted remark that "90 percent of the war is political, social, economic and ideological and only 10 percent military" and his fondness for paraphrasing Mao Zedong's aphorisms on the need to gain the support and confidence of the civilian population.<sup>12</sup> There is no

<sup>10</sup>Interviews, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990.

<sup>11</sup>Speech by Col. John Waghelstein, "LIC in the Post Vietnam Period," January 17, 1985, American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>12</sup>In nearly every journalistic account of Ponce as El Salvador's chief of staff, he was constantly emphasizing the "other war": "To catch fish, you must first dry the sea. It hurts the subversives far more to take away their civilian support than to kill their troops. If we just act militarily the war will never end." (Quoted in Gruson, "4 Killed, 38 Hurt in Rare Daytime Attack by Salvadoran Rebels," (1988).) While few dispute this point, many are surprised that the current defense minister makes it. Although he is presently regarded by many as the expectancy and rose of the fair state, Ponce served as chief of personnel and later as deputy director (essentially commander under an inactive director) of the Treasury Police—the unit of the Salvadoran armed forces most notorious for its sadistic and particularly extravagant crushing of dissent—from 1979 to 1982, the height of the period of political violence in El Salvador. Ponce did not, then, have a reputation as a particularly enlightened officer and was in fact denied a U.S. visa for years because of suspicion of human rights abuse. (Interviews: U.S. analysts, March 1991; American expert formerly posted to El Salvador, former U.S. Embassy political officer, and journalist, November 1989; journalist, October 1990; see also Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus (1990); and Preston, "Revitalizing Salvador's Army," (1983).) It would appear that the belief that the war in El Salvador is 90 percent political and only 10 percent military is a tradition among Salvadoran chiefs of staff. General Adolfo Blandon, Ponce's predecessor, evoked the same formula in 1986. (Miller, "Salvadoran Factions Try to Capture Hearts, Minds of War's Displaced," (1986).) For other accounts of the importance that the armed forces of El Salvador place on the "other war," see Gruson, "In Salvador, a New Battle for Hearts," (1988); Morello (1988); Lane, "El Salvador: Death's Democracy," (1989), p. 22, and "The War That Will Not End," (1989), p. 26; Shenk, "Can the Guerrillas Win?" (1988); Rosenberg, "El Salvador—Central America's Lebanon," (1987), p. 20; Tye, "Salvadoran Army Amassing Clout: Coup Talk Shunned as Political Role Grows," (1987); Ostertag, "El

doubt that the Salvadoran military has adopted to some degree the sophisticated, politicized approach to counterinsurgency warfare advanced by the Pentagon under the low-intensity conflict doctrine. Since the armed forces are increasingly willing to engage in civic action and psychological operations, and since elements within the military certainly recognize the importance of the war for hearts and minds, one would expect an end to the military's practice of abusing human rights, if only as a means of gaining popular allegiance. But human rights abuses continue in El Salvador, and even though their incidence has decreased significantly, the reasons behind that decline, and thus its ramifications, are debatable.

No topic concerning El Salvador is surrounded by more partisan obfuscation than that of human rights progress.<sup>13</sup> In 1981 over 10,000 political murders were committed by the Salvadoran military and death squads linked to it. In 1990 there were 108 such murders. This change is due almost entirely to the American effort in El Salvador. The progress made, however, has proved to be extraordinarily fragile. One hundred and eight murders committed by a state's armed forces and death squads connected with them is a record that no truly democratic and just society could tolerate. American counterinsurgency policy, with its consistent emphasis on winning popular support by achieving government legitimacy through fundamental reforms, has made respect for human rights an issue of the utmost importance.<sup>14</sup> The forceful demarches of Vice President George Bush

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Salvador: Disunited to Deconstruct," (1986); Congressional Research Service (1989), p. 105; Farah, "Younger Generation Takes Command of Salvadoran Military," (1988), and "El Salvador's Civil War—New Tactics, Old Stalemate," (1989); Lewis, "Salvador at a Crossroads," (1989); and Krauss and Carrington (1986).

<sup>13</sup>For a dated but still relevant assessment of the human rights situation in El Salvador, see the objective and thorough study, United Nations, Report of the Economic and Social Council, *Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador, Note by the Secretary-General*, (1987). It is to be hoped that the Economic and Social Council's 1989 report—which, according to one newspaper account, asserts that "the human rights picture in El Salvador has worsened markedly in 1989" (Schwartz, "El Salvador's Rights Picture Growing Worse, U.N. Says," (1989))—will be released to the public shortly. For another dispassionate study, see Congressional Research Service (1989), pp. 14 and 76–97. The reports of Americas Watch and Amnesty International, cited elsewhere in this report, are exhaustive and factually accurate, but they sometimes display a bias in the presentation of fact and tone of argument that unfortunately undermines both groups' claims to impartiality. See also the U.S. Department of State's discussion of human rights in its annual *Report on the Situation in El Salvador*, and U.S. Congress, Joint Committee Print, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1988*, 101st Congress, 1st Session, February 1989.

<sup>14</sup>All cadets from the Salvadoran military academy attend the U.S. Army School of the Americas Salvadoran Cadet Preparation Course. Since 1982, that course has included a block of instruction in human rights. Therefore, most Salvadoran junior officers have received human rights training from the United States.

in December 1983, U.S. Senator Paul Tsongas and Secretary of State George Shultz in 1988,<sup>15</sup> Vice President Dan Quayle in February 1989,<sup>16</sup> General Thurman and Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson in early November 1989,<sup>17</sup> and most recently Aronson in July 1990<sup>18</sup> were all efforts to compel the Salvadoran government and armed forces to stop human rights abuses and punish the abusers. The cessation of these abuses is considered a vital reform by those who understand that the Salvadoran regime will win the civil war only if it convinces the people that it is a better choice than the insurgents, a task that is consistently undermined by the taint of official political violence and human rights abuse.

Indeed, some elements of the Salvadoran armed forces recognize the importance of human rights violations as an obstacle to winning the war. Colonel Mauricio Ernesto Vargas, one of the more enlightened Salvadoran senior officers, has insisted that unless the causes of insurrection are attacked, the civil war will never be resolved, and he points out that one of the great causes of the insurrection has been official human rights abuse.<sup>19</sup> But despite the recognition of the problem in some quarters, the obstacle persists. Numerous assessments of the Salvadoran armed forces' efforts to win hearts and minds have concluded that these efforts continue to be undermined by the military's killing and brutalizing of civilians.<sup>20</sup> Although there has been a decline in recent years in the most flagrant human rights abuses, and death squad killings have become a sporadic rather than constant aspect of the conflict, the armed forces retain an almost uncanny ability to turn citizens into enemies. Continually reverting to their old ways, they commit abuses with a regularity that squanders whatever goodwill they manage to engender. The military still has no sense of a judicial response to a perceived

<sup>15</sup>McManus, "Shultz Warns Salvadoran Army on Human Rights," (1988).

<sup>16</sup>Freed, "Quayle Gives Salvador Ultimatum on Rights," (1989).

<sup>17</sup>Farah, "3 Salvadoran Politicians Found Dead," (1989); and Gruson, "A Left-Wing Party in El Salvador Accuses the Army of Killing Three," (1989).

<sup>18</sup>Smyth, "The Truth Will Out: Aronson Tells Salvadoran Military to Give Up Murderers of the Jesuits," (1990).

<sup>19</sup>Hammer (1988), p. 107; Tye (1987).

<sup>20</sup>Interviews, State Department official and GAO analyst, November 1989; and journalists, November 1989, January 1990, and March 1990. Hockstader, "U.S. Envoys Show Dismay at Salvadoran Failure to Rein in Army," (1990); Gruson, "Soyapango Journal: Why the Sandiggers Don't Protest Anymore," (1990), "Diplomats See Barriers to Trial of Salvador Military," (1990), and "In Salvador, a New Battle for Hearts," (1988); Morello, "Caught Up in a War That Is Stuck," (1988); Lane, "The War That Will Not End," (1989); Larmer, "The Shifting Battlefield," (1988); and Freed, "Rebels Target U.S.-Aided Programs in Rural El Salvador," (1989). See also comments of a former U.S. military adviser in Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989), p. 59.

threat. With rash and brutal strokes, the armed forces vitiate the careful build-up of government legitimacy as they equate the government's critics with the enemy, repressing trade unionists, campesino leaders, opposition politicians, and student protesters with the same or more force than they use on the real insurgents. As one former, high-ranking State Department official declared in frustration, the Salvadoran armed forces have "always found it a lot easier to kill labor leaders than guerrillas."<sup>21</sup> Such actions strengthen the cause of the very insurgents the armed forces are trying to counter, since many Salvadorans have become convinced that it is useless to try to change their authoritarian and stratified society through non-violent efforts. This belief, and the reality that begets it, sustains the leftist rebels, drives the decade-old conflict, and adulterates the best American efforts, as was recognized by U.S. Army Major Victor Rosello in his 1983 assessment of the efficacy of the American-inspired Salvadoran pacification program, the "National Plan," to win hearts and minds:

Any gains made by the National Plan are quickly offset by government linked or sponsored repression. Even if one were to assume that the government officials are not involved in unlawful detentions, arrests, tortures, or murders, the success of counterinsurgency is threatened by the fact that the government . . . cannot guarantee public safety. . . . *It is ludicrous to sponsor a counterinsurgency program under these conditions.*<sup>22</sup>

#### **The Pursuit of Justice as a Counterinsurgency Tool: Human Rights and the American Effort to Effect Judicial Reform**

Inextricably connected with the problem of the armed forces' abuse of human rights is the stubborn lack of judicial reform in El Salvador.<sup>23</sup> The United States has placed considerable emphasis on this reform and on the punishment of human rights abusers because it recognizes that the rule of law is a cornerstone of democracy. The effective prosecution of offenders is a key to ending human rights abuse and encouraging the disaffected left to participate in the politi-

<sup>21</sup>Interview, November 1989.

<sup>22</sup>Rosello, *An Assessment of the National Campaign Plan for El Salvador: Planning for Success or Failure?* (1984), p. 49. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup>On the American judicial reform effort, see the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, *Underwriting Injustice: AID and El Salvador's Judicial Reform Program*, (1989).

cal system.<sup>24</sup> The Kissinger Commission report, as already noted, called for conditioning military aid on punishment of past human rights offenders and the "establishment of a rule of law and an effective judicial system",<sup>25</sup> consistent with this emphasis, the United States has urged and helped El Salvador to strengthen its justice system and prosecute those responsible for human rights violations. In 1985 the Salvadoran National Assembly approved an American-funded judicial reform project to promote studies and revisions of the criminal code, to provide a witness protection unit, to develop effective criminal investigation capabilities, to provide training for judicial personnel, and to encourage prosecution of human rights offenders. These extraordinary American efforts, a General Accounting Office study has concluded, have helped provide the Salvadorans with the means necessary to investigate and prosecute crimes of political violence.<sup>26</sup> The question remains, however, whether the justice system can and will use these tools.

Shortly after his inauguration in 1984, Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte formed a unit financed by the United States to investigate the most notorious political killings: the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the 1981 "Sheraton murders" of two U.S. labor advisers<sup>27</sup> and the head of the Salvadoran land redistribution program, the massacres at Armenia in 1981 and at Las Hojas in 1983, and the 1980 killing of an American journalist. This move was welcomed as an important mechanism to reduce political violence by broadcasting the message that those responsible for such violence would be sought out and punished.<sup>28</sup> However, the commission was dismantled 15 months later without having achieved any of its objectives. In 1985, another commission was formed to investigate the above "symbolic" cases and other instances of political violence. Despite \$15 million in American aid for this body and its subsidiary

<sup>24</sup>Enrique Baylora, perhaps leaning too heavily on political science jargon, explains the connections among democratization, government legitimacy, and a working judicial system: "The endgame of a process of transition [democratization] requires the emergence of a credible, legitimate government able to proceed in concerted fashion to address substantive issues crucial to the resolution of the transition, such as judicial restoration. Ostensibly, the PDC [then-ruling Christian Democratic] government understands the need to resolve some major cases of human rights violations." Baylora, "Negotiating War in El Salvador: The Politics of Endgame," (1986), p. 128.

<sup>25</sup>The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), p. 104.

<sup>26</sup>General Accounting Office, *Efforts to Improve the Judicial System in El Salvador*, (1990), and telephone interview, GAO analyst, March 1990.

<sup>27</sup>The two advisers worked for the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development.

<sup>28</sup>U.S. Senate, *Political Violence in El Salvador*, (1984), p. 7.

technical units,<sup>29</sup> six years later none of the cases with which they have been concerned has been adequately resolved, and the commission has forgone investigations of human rights abuses, focusing instead on common crimes.

Although in the Sheraton case convictions were obtained of two enlisted men in the National Guard, the principal conspirators of the crime—then second-in-command of the Intelligence Section of the National Guard, Captain Eduardo Avila; Lieutenant Rodolfo Lopez Sibrán; and a right-wing Salvadoran businessman, Hans Christ—have escaped punishment, despite considerable evidence implicating them. In one of many examples of the rightist-controlled judiciary's thwarting of attempts to bring the perpetrators of right-wing violence to justice, Salvadoran courts—for what are generally considered to be political, not legal, reasons—refused several times to indict the two officers and businessman, despite testimony and evidence that, in the view of the American Embassy, was extremely convincing.<sup>30</sup> U.S. Embassy officials could only react, as they had so often in the past and would so often in the future, with dismay at the highly partisan nature of the Salvadoran judicial system.<sup>31</sup> The convicted enlisted guardsmen were released from prison under the 1987 political amnesty law.

This amnesty law itself dealt a serious blow to the American-backed effort to hold the Salvadoran military accountable for the tens of thousands of human rights violations that have helped define and fuel the civil war.<sup>32</sup> The Arias Peace Plan called for a political amnesty that was intended to apply to members of the political opposition as a means of achieving national reconciliation. But it was turned into something more: in addition to freeing more than 400 leftist prisoners—including the killers of six American military advisers—the law, apparently in response to the insistence of the armed forces,<sup>33</sup> absolved all military and paramilitary forces of politi-

<sup>29</sup>For a detailed report of a course funded by AID and taught by the U.S. Department of Justice designed to train a special investigative unit of the Salvadoran security forces, see the study prepared for AID by Miranda Associates (1985).

<sup>30</sup>Captain Avila's uncle served on the Supreme Court that, for what U.S. diplomats regarded as partisan reasons, threw out key parts of the case against the two officers. LeMoyné, "El Salvador Convicts Two in Slayings of Americans," (1986); Baylora, "Negotiating War in El Salvador," (1986), p. 142, note 10.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987), pp. 22-23.

<sup>33</sup>Blachman and Sharpe, "Things Fall Apart: Trouble Ahead in El Salvador," (1988-89), p. 118; Gruson, "Amnesty Law Passed in El Salvador," (1987); Shenk (1988), p. 38; Americas Watch, *Nightmare Revisited, 1987-1988*, (1988), pp. 6-7 and 91.

cal crimes attributed to them prior to October 1987.<sup>34</sup> In the weeks before declaration of the amnesty, the Salvadoran high command and civilian authorities were in intense conflict over the Christian Democratic attorney general's ordering the arrest of Colonel Araujo for his part in the 1983 shooting of 16 to 75 persons at the Las Hojas Farming Cooperative.<sup>35</sup> The amnesty very neatly ended this crisis by removing the possibility that Araujo could be prosecuted, and although the arrest warrant had been issued, the arrest was never carried out.<sup>36</sup> The amnesty, its critics argue, reinforced the military's sense of immunity from the law and undermined the government's legitimacy as it surrendered its duty to bring to justice those who act on its behalf and was perceived to succumb to pressure from the military.<sup>37</sup>

The amnesty law now under consideration by the National Assembly, proposing that current and former members of the military be pardoned for all past common crimes and human rights violations, will serve to reinforce the deleterious effects of the 1987 amnesty.<sup>38</sup> These amnesty laws are certainly not the only signs of a spineless justice system, unwilling or unable to prosecute those who subvert it. The following cases recount some of the more infamous failures of this system and the consequent frustration of American attempts to rectify the situation.

**The Kidnapping Ring.** In 1986, Salvadoran authorities, with the help of the FBI, cracked a kidnap-for-profit ring in which death squads posing as leftist rebels kidnapped some of the nation's wealthiest businessmen. The United States Embassy regarded this case as a "crucial" test of whether El Salvador's weak judicial system could bring powerful figures to justice and as a long-awaited demonstration of civilian control over the military. Those implicated included Lieutenant Sibrán, who subsequently evaded justice for his

<sup>34</sup>The murder of Archbishop Romero was the only political crime not forgiven by the amnesty.

<sup>35</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Report on the Situation in El Salvador*, October 1, 1988, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup>Americas Watch, *Nightmare Revisited, 1987-1988*, (1988), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup>Gruson, *ibid.*; Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup>The ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party apparently has the necessary votes to pass the law. The Jesuits' murder would be exempted from the amnesty, since charges in that case were not filed until after the amnesty petition was submitted to the Assembly. In absolving members of the military for common crimes, as well as political ones, the proposed amnesty would free the five National Guard enlisted men guilty of the rape and murder of four American churchwomen in 1980. These men were not freed under the 1987 amnesty law because theirs was not considered a political crime. Gruson, "Salvadorans Consider Sweeping Amnesty for Military," (1990); Americas Watch, *A Year of Reckoning*, (1990), pp. 197-208.

role in the Sheraton murders thanks to the 1987 amnesty law, and reputed death squad leader Colonel Mauricio Staben, the suspected mastermind of the kidnapping group, who was released without ever having to submit to a formal investigation after his military colleagues, including Ponce, his fellow *Tandona*<sup>39</sup> member, demanded that he be returned to active duty. Staben resumed—and retained for two years—the command of the elite U.S.-trained Arce Battalion. Two other officers accused of involvement in the kidnapping ring were warned by fellow officers and allowed to flee the country.<sup>40</sup> In April 1989, just 20 minutes before he ended his term at the third criminal court, Judge Juan Hector—at the behest of far-rightist Major Roberto d'Aubuisson, president of the National Assembly—ordered that the three remaining suspects in the case be freed unconditionally. Days later, though, a new judge—due to President Alfredo Cristiani's efforts—reinstated charges. Finally, however, this test case collapsed in April 1990, when charges against all but one of the remaining defendants were dropped.<sup>41</sup> A Salvadoran politician reports that “the kidnapers are going around the country bragging about d'Aubuisson's control of the courts and there's nothing Cristiani can do.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to its futility, this case graphically illustrates the grisly obstacles to achieving justice in El Salvador. In 1986 three key witnesses were killed, two while in security forces custody and a third in a suspicious shootout with the armed forces. In 1987 the house of Judge Miriam Aartaiga, who was handling the case, was machine-gunned twice in a span of three weeks, forcing her to quit the case. Her successor, Judge Jorge Alberti Serrano, was killed by three gunmen a year later.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Members of the *Tandona*, or “big class,” the Salvadoran military academy graduating class of 1966, hold most of the key positions in the Salvadoran high command. While members of the *Tandona* hold varying political views—from the pragmatic reformism of Vargas (whose father was a founding member of the Christian Democratic Party) to the right-wing extremism of Staben and General Juan Orlando Zepeda—the *Tandona* has jealously guarded the prerogatives traditionally held by officers and has consistently presented a united front against any pressure by the United States on the Salvadoran government to investigate or punish its members. “The *Tandona*,” a recent report avers, “at times shows more loyalty to its members than to the rule of law or even to the [Salvadoran] President.” (Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus (1990), p. 2); see also Bennett, “Salvadoran Army Amassing Clout,” (1987).

<sup>40</sup>LeMoyné, “Salvadoran Army's Abuses Continue,” (1986).

<sup>41</sup>McSwan, “El Salvador: Church Criticizes Kidnap Case Release Decision,” (1990).

<sup>42</sup>Gruson, “Party Backlash for El Salvador Chief,” (1990).

<sup>43</sup>Farah, “Key Salvadoran Case Thrown Out of Court,” (1989); LeMoyné, “Salvadoran Army's Abuses Continue,” (1986).

**The San Sebastian Massacre.** In September 1988, ten villagers in the hamlet of San Sebastian were killed. Despite extended and vociferous Salvadoran Army denials of involvement in the massacre, the American Embassy became convinced that the Salvadoran Army's Fifth Brigade was responsible for the killings. Extraordinarily strong American pressure was brought to bear on the Salvadorans, including Vice President Quayle's frank and forceful meeting with the Salvadoran high command, in which he stated that continued American aid was contingent on greater respect for human rights and said unambiguously that the United States wanted the three officers responsible for the massacre, whose names he listed, to be brought to trial. The American Ambassador to El Salvador, William Walker, seized on the case as another test of El Salvador's resolve to bring human rights violators to justice and called the arrests "a breakthrough."<sup>44</sup> Subsequent events, however, were not promising.

The commander of the Fifth Brigade, Colonel Jose Emilo Chavez Caceres, was on Quayle's list but was never arrested, and he continued to command troops until September 1990, despite substantial evidence of his involvement in the massacre.<sup>45</sup> Three officers, including one not on Quayle's list, were initially arrested, but charges were dropped against two of them and against all seven arrested enlisted men. Now only one major, under house arrest, and one enlisted man await trial.<sup>46</sup> The military's cooperation in this investigation has been most reluctant.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the initial unreasonable denials, it did not comply with court procedure by turning over evidence and balked at delivering the officers for questioning. As has too often been characteristic of such cases, the judge who originally investigated the incident has been forced to resign and go into hiding.<sup>48</sup> There has been little progress in the trial of the remaining defendants, and most observers doubt that they will ever be brought to jus-

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<sup>44</sup>Farah, "El Salvador Acts Against Army Officers: Three Linked to Killing Were on Quayle's List," (1989); Gruson, "Salvador Army Admits Massacre; Two Officers Held," (1989); Devroy, "Quayle Gives Salvadorans Human Rights Warning," (1988); Freed, "Quayle Gives Salvador Ultimatum on Rights," (1989), and "U.S. Plea Fails to Stem Salvador Killings," (1989).

<sup>45</sup>San Salvador Canal Doce Television, September 11, 1990, "Armed Forces Announce Military Leadership Changes," Foreign Broadcast Information Service, September 12, 1990; Farah, "Salvador: The Last Puzzle," (1990).

<sup>46</sup>*Central America Report*, "El Salvador: Justice Delayed, Justice Denied," May 11, 1990; Gruson, "Jesuit Inquiry in El Salvador Slowed by New Roadblocks," (1990).

<sup>47</sup>As one U.S. official said, "The San Sebastian case was such a large event involving so many people and bodies that if there had been a real will to get to the bottom of it early on it could have been done." Farah, "Salvadoran Courts Stalled," (1988).

<sup>48</sup>Freed, "U.S. Plea Fails," (1989).

tice.<sup>49</sup> Again, it has only been with the strongest of American pressure and with the Salvadoran military's most grudging cooperation that even this modicum of progress has been made.

**The Romero Murder.** In late 1988, it began to appear extremely doubtful that the perpetrators of yet another killing, the murder of Archbishop Romero—to Salvadorans the most heinous crime in their civil war—would ever be brought to justice. When El Salvador's then-Christian Democratic government announced that it was on the verge of solving the killing, the right-wing controlled Salvadoran Supreme Court ruled that key testimony, considered "convincing" by U.S. diplomats, implicating an army captain and retired Major Roberto d'Aubuisson—reputed death squad leader, president of the National Assembly, and founder, Executive Committee member, and honorary President for Life of the now ruling ARENA party—was inadmissible. The American Embassy indicated its strong dissatisfaction with what it regarded as the Supreme Court's highly politicized decision.<sup>50</sup>

**The Jesuit Murders.** The November 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests by a unit of the American-trained Atlacatl Battalion<sup>51</sup> shook El Salvador's political foundation as had no other crime since the assassination of Archbishop Romero.<sup>52</sup> While the case has resulted, for the first time, in the conviction of Salvadoran officers—Colonel Guillermo Benevides Moreno, former head of the Salvadoran military academy, and one of his lieutenants—this outcome marks only limited progress in democratizing and pacifying El Salvador. First, it is

<sup>49</sup>Farah, "Salvador: The Last Puzzle," (1990).

<sup>50</sup>A senior American diplomat expressed his consternation over the ruling: "This is totally unacceptable. Our views are clear. There should be no doubt at all that we're more than displeased." The attorney general, a Christian Democrat, who was prosecuting the case and who had previously been involved in the conflict with the military over his ordering the arrest of Colonel Araujo, was dismissed by the ARENA-controlled National Assembly apparently just when he was going to indict d'Aubuisson for the murder. See Gruson, "U.S. Warns Salvador on Rights Cases," (1989). For a discussion of U.S. diplomats' frustration with the recent unravelling of the San Sebastian prosecutions and other test cases, see Hockstader, "U.S. Envoys Show Dismay at Salvadoran Failure to Rein in Army," (1990).

<sup>51</sup>The unit's commander and second in command were graduates of the Salvadoran Cadet Preparation Course given at Fort Benning. The commander also attended the Special Forces Officer's Course at Fort Bragg. Two of the arrested enlisted men in the unit had also been trained at Fort Bragg. The entire unit had completed two days of a scheduled ten-day Special Forces training course, which was interrupted when the guerrilla offensive began.

<sup>52</sup>For a comprehensive assessment of the Jesuit case, see U.S. House of Representatives, *Interim Report of the Speaker's Task Force on El Salvador*, (1990); see also Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, *The Jesuit Case a Year Later: An Interim Report*, (1990).

only because of unprecedentedly intense and effective American pressure—specifically Congress’s unambiguous and, for the first time, credible threat to cut aid unless convictions were obtained—that the Salvadoran officers were even indicted, let alone found guilty. Second, it is extremely doubtful that Benevides was the key author of the crime. While the Salvadoran government has made it clear that no new arrests should be expected in this case, most diplomats and other observers are certain that Benevides did not order the killings without the complicity of primary commanders. The colonel simply did not enjoy the authority within the military inner circle to carry out such an act without prior agreement among more senior military officers.<sup>53</sup> The two former chief prosecutors in the case, in fact, assert that convincing evidence points to officers in the high command as the principal conspirators. There are also very strong indications that in an officer corps as small and tight-knit as that of El Salvador, many officers must have known of but did not report those responsible for the priests’ slaying.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, while the convictions are a small triumph for the rule of law, that triumph is vitiated by the power of the violent right, whose intimidation has forced the presiding judge to flee the country.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the Salvadoran military’s utter failure to express regret over the killings as well as its obstruction of justice in the case—in which officers have withheld, destroyed, and falsified evidence; intimidated the court; and have repeatedly perjured themselves—bode ill for its reform and for its subordination to civilian authority.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Interviews, diplomats, February 1991; Americas Watch, *A Year of Reckoning*, (1990), pp. 31–34; Norton, “Questions Surround Priests Killing: Many Salvadorans Are Unsure Who Actually Ordered the Murders,” (1990); Freed, “U.S. Decries Slow Pace of Priest-Slaying Inquiry,” (1990); Arana, “Salvadoran Officers Meet Before, After Jesuits Slaying,” (1990). In an affidavit he later retracted, a U.S. Army adviser asserted that the plan to murder the Jesuits was widely known within the high command for at least ten days before the actual killings. Gruson, “Retracted Affidavit Suggests a Conspiracy in Priests’ Killings,” (1990). See also Bennett, “Letter from El Salvador: Burying the Jesuits,” (1990), and Marquis, “Soldier’s Story Brings Nightmare: U.S. Major Who Linked Salvador Army to Killings Nearly Lost Job,” (1990).

<sup>54</sup>In a September 14, 1990, report on the Jesuit case not released to the public but made available to the *New York Times*, the House Special Task Force on El Salvador maintains that “a concerted effort has been made by the armed forces, including the High Command, to contain the investigation; to avoid implicating any individual except those charged; and almost certainly, to prevent the conviction of Colonel Benevides.” Quoted in Krauss, “Salvadoran Chief, in U.S., Vows to Solve Jesuit Case,” (1990).

<sup>55</sup>Lee Hockstader, “Judge in Jesuit Case to Flee El Salvador,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 1991.

<sup>56</sup>In January 1991, the two principal prosecutors in the Jesuit case resigned because, they asserted, the military and the attorney general’s office were preventing a broad investigation of the slayings. The “intellectual authors” of the murders, they stated, were to be found in the upper echelon of the military. The prosecutors main-

In 1983, in a then-classified report to the Secretary of State on the murders of four American churchwomen in El Salvador by National Guardsmen, Judge Harold Tyler wrote that

to an extent that is impossible to detail in this report, the criminal justice system in El Salvador is in a state of disrepair. A handful of inexperienced, undereducated, and occasionally corrupt prosecutors represent a society that seems to have lost its will to bring to justice those who commit crimes against it. Intimidation and corruption of prosecutors, judges and juries are widespread, and a rigid legal system renders successful prosecutions all the more difficult. The military exerts a pervasive influence over the nation and . . . has sought to shield from justice even those who commit the most atrocious crimes.<sup>57</sup>

Tyler concluded that the ability of the Salvadoran justice system "to prosecute this case will be seen by many as a test of the system's ability to right itself after too many years of lawlessness."<sup>58</sup> Since that time there have been all too many "test cases," the results of which have brought the United States only exasperation and frustration.

The particular case that provoked Tyler's comment was, within the prism of Salvadoran justice, a relative success. Four enlisted men of the National Guard were tried and convicted of rape and murder, although those who conceived the crime and the two officers who concealed it went unpunished, as did Colonel Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, then head of the National Guard and later the minister of defense, who undoubtedly was aware of and acquiesced in the cover up.<sup>59</sup> Eight years after his report, Tyler's description of El Salvador's justice system is still accurate. After years of intense American efforts to build the institutions supposedly necessary for a just society, a November 1989 United Nations study on the marked worsening of the human rights situation in El Salvador painted a picture of "a society descended to near lawlessness,"<sup>60</sup> and Aronson concluded

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tained that if they had been allowed to do so, they would have arrested officers from the Salvadoran Chiefs of Staff, the Defense Ministry, and the Atlacatl Battalion as well as officers from the military commission charged with investigating the murders. "Lead Prosecutors in Jesuit Case Resign," *El Salvador on Line*, January 14, 1991, and Gruson, "New Setback in Jesuit Case in Salvador," (1991).

<sup>57</sup>Tyler, *The Churchwomen Murders: A Report to the Secretary of State*, (1983), p. 4.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8; interview, American expert formerly posted to El Salvador, November 1989. In an interview before his brutal killing, Father Ignacio Ellacuria named then-Minister of Defense Vides Casanova as responsible for political assassinations in the early 1980s. Michael Massing, "Grave Thoughts: A Conversation with Ignacio Ellacuria," (1989).

<sup>60</sup>Schwartz, "El Salvador's Rights Picture Growing Worse, U.N. Says," (1989).

that the Salvadorans "do not have a justice system worthy of the name."<sup>61</sup>

A lack of political will is largely responsible for the failure to prosecute the most egregious political killings; on the other hand, certain features of the Salvadoran legal code also make prosecution in such cases exceedingly difficult. In 1986 the Salvadoran legal code, which had prohibited one defendant from testifying against another,<sup>62</sup> was amended, as part of the American-sponsored judicial reform effort, to permit the testimony of participants in certain crimes to be used against other suspects. The National Assembly, however, ignored the recommendation of the U.S.-funded revisory commission by specifically exempting the most relevant crime for human rights purposes, murder. Since 1985 the United States has tried to push the Salvadorans to further revise their legal code to admit co-defendant testimony in the most relevant cases. That effort has thus far been to no avail.<sup>63</sup>

It is difficult to exaggerate the magnitude and breadth of the obstacles to a just legal system in El Salvador. Indeed, while one American official long active in El Salvador has conceded—relatively optimistically—that the American effort to engender a working judicial system will take a generation,<sup>64</sup> another former official cannot ever envision a true reform of the justice system.<sup>65</sup> Attempts to investigate and punish human rights abuses have been blocked by the armed forces, death squads linked to those forces, and a rightist-dominated court system and legislature.<sup>66</sup> Such obstacles have continually frustrated the ends and means of American policy in El Salvador and are certainly counterproductive to an effort to win hearts and minds. The conviction of only two officers,<sup>67</sup> in a situation in

<sup>61</sup>Pear, "U.S. Policy in El Salvador Rouses Conflict in Congress," (1989). Ambassador Walker asserted in testimony before Congress that "if there is any area where this country [El Salvador] has made zero progress, that's the area of judicial reform and the administration of justice. There ain't no justice here." Ambassador William Walker, as quoted by Kornbluh, "Will Bush Keep His Word with the Death Squads?" (1989).

<sup>62</sup>This law is common to all countries whose legal system is based on the Napoleonic code.

<sup>63</sup>Interviews, State and Justice Department officials, November 1989; telephone interview, State Department official, March 1990.

<sup>64</sup>Interview, Justice Department official, November 1989.

<sup>65</sup>Interview, former State Department official, March 1991.

<sup>66</sup>Preston, "Salvadoran Left, Right Attack Duarte's Policies," (1987); Baylora, "Negotiating War in El Salvador," (1986), pp. 127 and 129; Wickham-Crowley (1989), pp. 515, 520, 528, and 530.

<sup>67</sup>Until the Jesuit case convictions, the only armed forces members of any rank convicted of human rights abuses were those whose victims were U.S. citizens. Even so, in the Sheraton case the United States was powerless to bring about the prosecution of

which up to 40,000 political murders have been attributed to the armed forces and death squads operating with or by them,<sup>68</sup> constitutes a violation of the state's obligation to investigate, prosecute, and punish crimes, particularly those committed by its agents.

### **Expedient Changes or Genuine Reform?**

The belief that United States training and military assistance to promote a disciplined and professional military would engender a concomitant improvement in respect for human rights has been a key American assumption regarding measures for reform in El Salvador. Forgetting that between 1965 and 1977 the United States had trained the majority of the Salvadoran officer corps and that it was precisely these officers who carried out the worst bloodletting in Central American history, the Kissinger Commission report argued that with increased training and funds supplied by the United States, El Salvador would pursue a "humane anti-guerrilla strategy" and thereby reduce human rights offenses. Viewing the manner in which the Salvadoran military treated its citizens as merely a technical problem, a matter of inadequate training, it was assumed that the problem was amenable to an American solution. The Jesuits' slaying dramatically brought that assumption into doubt. While the Salvadoran forces are undoubtedly more disciplined and professional and are, at least in appearance, more respectful of human rights than they were before the initiation of intensive American military advice, there seems to be little correlation between the first two qualities and the latter.<sup>69</sup> The very battalion whose members murdered the Jesuits had been created, trained, and equipped by the United States; it was, indeed, the first Salvadoran battalion designed to serve as a model of a clean, efficient weapon in the fight against the FMLN.<sup>70</sup> The Atlacatl Battalion has had a particularly ferocious history, massacring 700 peasants in El Mozote in 1981,<sup>71</sup> killing dozens of villagers from

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authors of that crime, and in the churchwomen case it could not engineer the prosecution of officers who had concealed the armed forces' involvement in the crime.

<sup>68</sup>Gruson, "Salvadorans Consider Sweeping Amnesty for Military," (1990).

<sup>69</sup>As political opposition leader Ruben Zamora asserted, "The U.S. equated a professional armed forces with democracy. They're not synonymous." Quoted in Millman, "El Salvador's Army," (1989), p. 96.

<sup>70</sup>McClintock, *The American Connection: State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador*, (1985), p. 307.

<sup>71</sup>Americas Watch/American Civil Liberties Union, *July 20, 1982 Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*, pp. 27-31.

Tanancingo and Copapayo in 1983,<sup>72</sup> and slaughtering 68 in the hamlet of Los Llanitos and 50 at the Gualsinga River in 1984.<sup>73</sup>

The checkered career of retired Colonel Siegfriedo Ochoa Perez presents a vivid example of the divergence between professionalism and tactical sophistication on the one hand and a respect for American ideals on the other. In the early 1980s, Ochoa was singled out for his considerable success in adopting the aggressive, small-unit counterinsurgency tactics favored by American advisers, and he was widely judged by those advisers to be the most able field commander in the Army.<sup>74</sup> Sadly, Ochoa has shown unstinting hostility to American-promoted political, social, and economic reform measures and has proved, with his 1983 coup attempt and his 1987 and 1988 calls for an insurrection against the democratically elected Christian Democratic government,<sup>75</sup> to have a view of democracy and civil-military relations very different from America's. The extraordinary tactical effectiveness of another field commander, Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, was matched only by his reputation for brutality toward the population.<sup>76</sup> Respect for human rights appears to be not the result of American teaching and example, but of constant American pressure, as indeed is the logic behind the concept of conditionality. Although there always have been enlightened members of the Salvadoran armed forces who genuinely respect human rights, a withdrawal of military aid would certainly lead to increased abuses from an unrestrained military. This is a grim picture of our ally and pupil, for the military's commitment to human rights is not very deep if that commitment is held in place by the trammel of American dollars. This point is not lost on the Salvadoran people; and since they believe that the armed forces' commitment to human rights is simply

<sup>72</sup>Americas Watch, *As Bad as Ever, Fourth Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*, (1984), pp. 18-22.

<sup>73</sup>Americas Watch, *Draining the Sea, Fifth Supplement to the Report on Human Rights in El Salvador*, (1985), pp. 3-18.

<sup>74</sup>See Waghelstein's praise of Ochoa in his *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences*, (1985), pp. 40, 55, 69, and 74-75; also Dickey, "El Salvador's Young Colonels Shun Politics: They Are Becoming a Force for Change Favored by the U.S.," (1982). Despite the hopes expressed by the title of this article, Ochoa has neither shunned politics nor been a force for change in El Salvador. See also Martin Diakin and Kenneth Sharpe, "El Salvador," in Blachman, LeoGrande, and Sharpe (1986), p. 66.

<sup>75</sup>LeMoyne, "Rightists in El Salvador Seek Backing of Army," (1987), and "Salvadoran Rightist Calls for Insurrection," (1988).

<sup>76</sup>Interview, former political officer, U.S. Embassy, San Salvador, American expert formerly posted to El Salvador, November 1989; interview, journalist, November 1989; Preston, "Revitalizing Salvador's Army," (1983).

based upon expediency, they fear those forces no less than they do the FMLN.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, the recent reduction in official and death squad political murders should not be perceived simply as an American success in changing the attitude of the armed forces and the rightists; the decline may be an expedient adjustment made for reasons other than the need for American aid. To some degree, this reduction may arise from the adoption of a more discriminating,<sup>78</sup> but no less chillingly effective, strategy for political killings and from the fact that because of past murders, there are simply fewer politically suspect persons alive and in El Salvador.<sup>79</sup>

The recent outcome of the Jesuit case is instructive when considering the extent to which America has succeeded in effecting meaningful change in El Salvador. In the past, some involved in the U.S. effort to aid El Salvador in punishing human rights violations have placed enormous importance on obtaining just a single conviction, for they believe that such a precedent would alter what the United Nations has described as a "harmful climate of impunity"<sup>80</sup> in which officers of the armed forces are currently allowed to act.<sup>81</sup> Some, therefore, have greeted the conviction in the Jesuit case as a momentous step. That only extreme American pressure forced the Salvadoran regime to fulfill its duty, however, greatly dilutes the significance of this first step. Punishing human rights violators in El Salvador can be considered a significant and permanent advance only when it is *not* a result of urgent demands by the United States.

<sup>77</sup>Lee Hockstader (1990) writes that "while the raw numbers of civilian deaths attributed to soldiers has declined from the days of wholesale slaughter . . . there are indications that the military has become sensitive not to human rights but to the public relations problem of international criticism of human rights abuses" ("U.S. Envoys Show Dismay at Salvadoran Failure to Rein in Army").

<sup>78</sup>Gruson, "With Training and New Tactics, Salvador's Army Gains on Rebels," (1989); Norton, "Specter of Terror in El Salvador: Political Violence Rises, Mainly Against Less Prominent Unionists," (1989); Amnesty International, *El Salvador: "Death Squads"—A Government Strategy*, (1988).

<sup>79</sup>Former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Robert White has made this last point. Interview, civilian military analyst, December 1990.

<sup>80</sup>United Nations (1987), p. 22.

<sup>81</sup>Interview, State and Justice Department officials, November 1989; telephone interview, State Department official, March 1990; interview, former staff member, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 1989.

**The Frustrations of Reform: American Intervention, Salvadoran Resentment, and the Problems of Leverage**

Assumptions guiding America's policy in its effort to reform the Salvadoran military were undermined by events after the arrest of those who killed the Jesuits. Reports stated that junior officers were bristling at the detention of fellow officers and were indeed contemplating a coup.<sup>82</sup> This, like Ochoa's extremist views, was especially disheartening for American advisers because they had long pinned their hopes for a reformed armed forces on the new generation of "professionalized" officers, who had been either directly trained by the United States or at least exposed to American ideas about human rights and the subordination of the military to civilian authority.<sup>83</sup> American military training, however, does not imply a lesson in civics. It is precisely this new generation of officers that has been most intoxicated by the extreme right's vision; thus it is the one that most resents American influence over the conduct of the Salvadoran civil war and that favors the most ruthless crushing of dissent.<sup>84</sup>

Neither the United States nor El Salvador are in any way happy with the pressure that America has had to bring to bear on the Salvadoran government and armed forces to achieve the limited progress in human rights. The military and significant elements in Salvadoran society have continually been outraged at what truly amounts to unacceptable American interference in their internal affairs.<sup>85</sup> As Ochoa, who resigned from the army in 1987 in protest over the ruling Christian Democrats' policies and then served ARENA and his country as vice president of the National Assembly, has complained, "If the United States does not want us to run the war, they should send their own troops and send a governor, instead of an ambassador to

<sup>82</sup>Gruson, "Tensions Rise in Salvador After Arrests," (1990), and "Cristiani Describes Colonel's Role in Killings," (1990).

<sup>83</sup>For American optimism regarding the Salvadoran military's "generational change," see Gastil and McColm, "Policies Toward El Salvador: Civilianizing El Salvador," (1984), pp. 30 and 34.

<sup>84</sup>Gruson, "Tensions Rise in Salvador After Arrests," (1990); Gruson, "Salvadoran Arms Aid: Will Congress's Tactic Work?" (1990), and "4 Killed, 38 Hurt in Rare Daytime Attack by Salvador Rebels," (1988); LeMoyné, "Rightists in El Salvador Seek Backing of Army," (1987); Millman, "El Salvador's Army," (1989); Farah, "Salvadoran Vote Result Could Mean Reversion to Concentrated Ownership," (1989).

<sup>85</sup>Freed, "U.S. Plea Fails to Stem Salvador Killings," (1989); Dillon, "Dateline El Salvador: Crisis Renewed," (1988-89), p. 161; Wickham-Crowley (1989), p. 520; Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989). A vitriolic critique of "U.S. interventionism" figured prominently in ARENA's 1988 campaign rhetoric; see *Central America Report*, March 31, 1989.

run the country."<sup>86</sup> The extreme pressure applied to make any progress on the San Sebastian case has, for example, especially irked the Salvadorans.<sup>87</sup> Many elements of the Salvadoran military and right resent what they believe to be the American view of the war, with its preoccupation with human rights. They believe that they are fighting for survival, and with the stakes so high, they do not appreciate what they regard as petty American concerns. As former military commander and present Deputy Defense Minister General Juan Orlando Zepeda asserted, "We have to seek our own conception of the war. The war may be low intensity for the United States. . . . But for us this is total conflict."<sup>88</sup> And Cristiani himself has criticized the United States for bogging down the war effort with its "human rights psychosis."<sup>89</sup>

The United States, for its part, is entirely uncomfortable with the role of proconsul. America does not regard itself as a colonialist power, and for purely pragmatic reasons, it believes that such a role will not bring the desired results. A foreign service officer who has served as ambassador to several Latin American countries described the American dilemma regarding applying pressure in the Jesuit case, explaining that such pressure could undermine the Salvadoran government:

If we use public blackmail, threatening to cut off aid, that robs foreign leaders of dignity. . . . We don't want Cristiani to look like a U.S. puppet, a knave or scoundrel who comes around to the correct view only because of U.S. pressure. . . . There is a practical reason not to be too loud or exigent [in demanding successful prosecution of the priests' killers].<sup>90</sup>

No matter how gamely the United States has played the uncomfortable "good colonialist" role, it has not brought the unalloyed success in curbing and prosecuting official and right-wing political violence or in promoting U.S.-backed reforms that American policymakers had hoped to attain. This leads one to question the efficacy of "leverage"

<sup>86</sup>*Washington Post*, March 22, 1988.

<sup>87</sup>Freed, "U.S. Plea Fails to Stem Salvador Killings," (1989), and "Salvadoran Civil War Becoming Battle of U.S. Surrogates," (1989); Lane, "The War That Will Not End," (1989).

<sup>88</sup>Larmer, "The Shifting Battlefield," (1988).

<sup>89</sup>Larmer, "The Politics of Polarization," (1988). The attitudes of the Salvadoran right expressed above led writer Joan Didion in 1983 to express her exasperation at the right wing's "arresting assumption that trying to keep Salvadorans from killing each other constituted a new and particularly crushing imperialism." Didion, *Salvador*, (1983), p. 97.

<sup>90</sup>Pear, "Congress Skeptical as Ever on Aid to El Salvador," (1990).

and "conditionality," an essential aspect of our policy in El Salvador. These means have proved to be very problematical, perhaps even more than first assumed.

The leverage that the United States can exert over the conduct of a regime, even if that regime's very survival would appear to depend on American goodwill and material assistance, can easily be overestimated. Such leverage decreases dramatically when those whom the United States is attempting to influence perceive America to be constrained by its own national interests. For instance, Vice President Quayle's March 1989 threat to withdraw aid unless the military halted the abuse of human rights was met with barely veiled scorn, since the Salvadorans recognized the importance America attached to not "losing" El Salvador.<sup>91</sup> Whether the United States could have done more to link its efforts to improve the Salvadoran human rights situation with credible threats to withdraw U.S. support from the armed forces of El Salvador in their battle against the insurgents is beyond the scope of this report. The brutal question remains, however: How could the Salvadoran military take seriously U.S. threats to cease aid if Washington repeatedly made clear its intention to prevent a rebel victory? Unless the United States could have convinced the Salvadoran armed forces that it was willing to take drastic steps that would appear to be antithetical to America's interests, efforts to combat political violence with a policy of conditionality could not have achieved the success forecast by the Kissinger report. Since until very recently, at least, the United States has been unable to so convince the Salvadorans, its human rights policy has been characterized by the taking of bold stands and then retreating. With such equivocation, U.S. policymakers have found themselves condoning practices that they find deeply distasteful and which they know fuel the insurgency.

To date, in many instances the Salvadoran military has remained remarkably immune to American blandishments. The United States has often found itself forced to settle for less than it had hoped and less than it thinks is absolutely necessary in the field of human rights. Such capitulation has left the United States unwittingly supporting policies and practices believed to sustain the insurgency while committing American prestige to its defeat.

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<sup>91</sup>Freed, "Salvadoran Civil War Becoming Battle of U.S. Surrogates," (1989).

### The Problem of Death Squads

Any discussion of America's attempts to transform the human rights situation in El Salvador and of the character of those institutions that the United States deems essential to reform must address a most vexing question: the extent of armed forces and official involvement in or condoning of death squad activity. This issue is marked by confusion, controversy, and deliberate obfuscation. While many hold that death squad killings are the work of rogue extremist groups beyond the control of the government and armed forces of El Salvador,<sup>92</sup> there is convincing evidence of the deep involvement of some ARENA party officials and of officers and enlisted men in the Salvadoran armed forces. Amnesty International's assessments of such involvement<sup>93</sup>—the most detailed unclassified studies available—conclude convincingly that “the squads are made up of regular army and police agents, acting in uniform or plainclothes, under the direction of superior officers.”<sup>94</sup> Amnesty International is guilty of a leap of logic, however, when it asserts that because of evidence that *elements* of the Salvadoran military have participated in death squads, the squads must be “an integral part of the official security apparatus”<sup>95</sup> and that they are “simply used to shield the government from accountability for the torture, ‘disappearances,’ and extrajudicial executions committed in their name.”<sup>96</sup> Simply because members of the armed forces—especially its intelligence units—participate in

<sup>92</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports for Human Rights Practices for 1989*, (1990) attributes much political violence in El Salvador to “individual acts of right-wing vigilantism” (p. 572).

<sup>93</sup>Amnesty International USA, *El Salvador: Killings, Torture and “Disappearances,”* (1990); Amnesty International, *El Salvador: “Death Squads”—A Government Strategy* (1988), and *Extrajudicial Execution in El Salvador: Report of an Amnesty International Mission to Examine Post-Mortem and Investigative Procedures*, (1984). Amnesty International's 1990 report asserted that there were 45 death squad killings in El Salvador between January and August 1990. The report concludes that “military and police are still flouting the rule of law, and no effective measures have been taken to control the activities of ‘death squads’ widely believed to be linked to the armed forces.” See also the discussion on the level at which decisions are made concerning political killings by the right and security forces in U.S. Congress, *U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central America: Achievements and Selected Instances of Concern*, (1982). According to this report, a U.S. Embassy study found that “both on and off duty members of the security forces are participants” in the death squads and that it was “unofficially confirmed by right-wing spokesman Roberto d'Aubuisson . . . that security force members used the guise of the death squad when a potentially embarrassing or odious task needed to be performed” (p. 11).

<sup>94</sup>Amnesty International, *El Salvador: “Death Squads”—A Government Strategy* (1988), p. 9.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

death squad activity is not in itself convincing evidence, as the title of an Amnesty International report asserts, that death squads are a "government strategy." Those individuals participating could be unrestrained extremists in no way carrying out policy directives. Of course, Amnesty International's assertions regarding "official policy" are not necessarily false; as of yet, however, there is no "smoking gun" directly linking death squad activity to the policy of the Salvadoran armed forces' high command.<sup>97</sup> While there has been suspicion that, as Christopher Dickey wrote, "if the web of complicity tying the armed forces to death squad violence ever did unravel, you have to ask yourself who would be left to fight the war,"<sup>98</sup> Amnesty International does its cause a disservice by asserting as fact that which is only informed speculation.

In examining death squad activity, one must consider those who condone it as well as those who participate. It could be argued, for instance, that Colonel Benevides, accused of ordering the slaying of the Jesuit priests, did not reflect the high command's policy in doing so—although most observers argue that Benevides did not have the authority to order such action without a consensus of highly placed officers. On the other hand, it is nearly impossible that Colonel Carlos Armando Aviles, who apprised an American military adviser of Colonel Benevides' supposed involvement in the Jesuit slaying, was the only high-ranking officer to have known of Benevides' involvement. Aviles is not a member of the influential *Tandona*, as is Benevides and most members of the high command. If he was aware of Benevides' involvement, it is undoubtable that other senior officers were as well but sought to keep that information secret. "Aviles," one official close to the investigation stated, "wasn't part of the inner loop. If he knew, others knew."<sup>99</sup> In the 40,000 other murders, many officers must have known.

Questions continue to nag regarding the level of complicity in and knowledge of death squad activity among the Salvadoran armed forces. If unauthorized bands of outlaws were responsible for the majority of right-wing violence, then applying pressure to the government and armed forces to curb such violence would presumably have

<sup>97</sup>In 1984, former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Robert White, in hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives, asserted that there were American Embassy reports which detailed "the intimate collaboration which exists between high military commanders and death squads." Quoted in Leiken and Rubin (eds.), *The Central American Crisis Reader*, (1987), p. 566.

<sup>98</sup>Dickey, "Behind the Death Squads: Who They Are, Why They Work, and Why No One Can Stop Them," (1983), p. 21.

<sup>99</sup>Gruson, "Washington Criticized for Identifying Army Informant in Salvador Killings," (1990).

little effect, since the activities would be beyond their control. When, however, the United States has been especially concerned about the level of such violence, it has applied pressure directly to the Salvadoran armed forces for a reduction in that violence. That pressure has resulted in the (sometimes only temporary) removal of certain officers from command positions and a concomitant decline in the level of political violence. If death squad activity is in no way officially condoned, presumably the perpetrators of these crimes would be regularly identified and punished. In this light, the utter failure of military prosecutors to bring charges and the courts to proceed in the many cases of political murder attributed to armed forces personnel is most disturbing. It indicates at best an inability—and at worst an unwillingness—to bring the most pernicious elements in El Salvador to heel.

In April 1989 a Congressional Research Service study concluded that

the fourth goal of the Kissinger Commission recommendations was to strengthen democratic institutions and processes, and to encourage respect for human rights. U.S. assistance in this area has focused on the encouragement of elections, the prosecution of human rights offenders, and improvements in the criminal justice system. El Salvador seems to have experienced considerable progress in terms of the conduct of elections. In the human rights area, however, the noteworthy progress in reducing abuse is clouded by the government's seeming inability to firmly establish the rule of law for dealing with perpetrators of human rights violations.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the Kissinger Commission's hope, the Salvadoran justice system has not bolstered government legitimacy and hardly succeeds in creating the impression of a just and equitable order when such men as d'Aubuisson and Colonels Staben and Araujo freely walk the streets.

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<sup>100</sup>Congressional Research Service (1989), p. 12.

## IV. THE EFFORT TO TRANSFORM EL SALVADOR: CIVIC MEASURES

### LAND REFORM

El Salvador's land redistribution program, designed by American experts, financed by American economic aid, and largely implemented by American organizers and technicians, has been, along with America's attempt to improve the armed forces' respect for human rights, the heart of the U.S. effort to transform the conditions that motivate the insurgency. In 1980 the need for radical land reform in El Salvador was glaring. Over 70 percent of the land was owned by only 1 percent of the population, while over 40 percent of the rural population owned no land at all and worked as sharecroppers on absentee owners' land or as laborers on large estates. This highly concentrated pattern of ownership caused a gross maldistribution of wealth—any rise in national income was enjoyed by a dismally small number of Salvadorans—and hence appalling poverty for the majority of the population and gross political inequality.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, land reform, initiated by the reformist civilian-military junta that prevailed briefly in 1979 to 1980, was seen primarily as a *political* tool. Even American advisers who doubted its economic utility stressed that it was a political necessity in the war against the guerrillas for the peasantry's hearts and minds.<sup>2</sup> Agrarian reform, then, was an attempt to instill in the populace a belief in the governing regime's willingness and ability to produce positive change. Given a stake in the system, it was believed, the peasants would be far less inclined to join a revolutionary movement. Described by the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador at the time, Robert White, as "the most revolutionary land reform in Latin American history,"<sup>3</sup> the land redistribution program—like much of the American-inspired reform program in El Salvador—was paradoxically a revolutionary means to counteract revolution.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For a clear exposition of the relationship of land ownership patterns to poverty and inequality see Sheahan (1987), Chapters 1, 6, and 12.

<sup>2</sup>Bernstein and Waghelstein, "How to Win in El Salvador," (1984), p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Gruson, "Land for Salvador's Poor: To Many, Bitter Victory," (1987).

<sup>4</sup>For an early, optimistic assessment of the land redistribution program in El Salvador by one of its designers, see Prosterman, Riedinger, and Temple, "Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis," (1981); Barry and Preusch, in contrast, provide too bleak a view of land reform in "The War in El Salvador: A Reassessment," (1987). See the

The reform was designed in three phases. In Phase I the largest land holdings—those in excess of 1235 acres—were expropriated and distributed to peasant cooperatives. Phase II, which originally subjected land holdings of 247 to 1235 acres to expropriation, was the most important part of the program, affecting the largest number of properties, the most productive acreage, and the agricultural base of the coffee oligarchy. Phase III, sometimes called the land-to-the-tiller program, involved no further land redistribution, but allowed renters and sharecroppers to purchase title for the land that they had been working.<sup>5</sup> As initially intended, the program in its entirety scheduled almost half the country's farmland for redistribution to one-half to two-thirds of poor rural households.

While even the program's critics acknowledged that it has prevented far greater radicalization of the peasantry,<sup>6</sup> land reform has been far less successful than originally hoped. It is a measure of the obstacles that have confronted the initial promise of reform in El Salvador that most of those Salvadorans in the Christian Democratic-reformist military junta, who began the program, have been killed, exiled, or have joined the rebel movement. While the armed forces were responsible for expropriating the estates affected under Phase I, the state of siege that the military declared to accompany Phase I also enabled it to conduct operations against peasants in areas with a tradition of leftist sympathy and to intimidate peasants into abandoning the cooperatives or not applying for title to them in the first place.<sup>7</sup> The number of peasants killed by security forces in 1980 was highest in those areas affected by Phase I; over 500 peasant leaders, dozens of land reform officials, and hundreds of peasant

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analyses of this issue in Agency for International Development, Office of Central American Affairs, *El Salvador: An Overview of Current Political, Social and Economic Conditions*, (1989); Browning, "Agrarian Reform in El Salvador," (1983); Strasma et al., *Agrarian Reform in El Salvador*, (1983); Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987), pp. 24–25; Congressional Research Service (1989), pp. 9–10; Gruson's lengthy and balanced assessments, "Land for Salvador's Poor: To Many, Bitter Victory," (1987) and "For the Peasants of El Salvador, Promised Land Seems to Recede," (1989); Mason, "Land Reform and the Breakdown of Clientist Politics in El Salvador," (1986); Kincaid, "Peasants into Rebels: Community and Class in Rural El Salvador," (1987); Deere and Diskin, *Rural Poverty in El Salvador*, (1984); and John Strasma, "Unfinished Business: Consolidating Land Reform in El Salvador" and Martin Diskin, "El Salvador: Reform Prevents Change," in Thiesenhusen (1989).

<sup>5</sup>Phase III was entirely a U.S. creation. The law enacting it has been described as the only piece of legislation in the history of El Salvador that had to be translated into Spanish. Diskin (in Thiesenhusen, 1989), p. 434.

<sup>6</sup>Gruson, "Land for Salvador's Poor: To Many, Bitter Victory," (1987).

<sup>7</sup>This state of siege was renewed every 30 days from March 1980 until January 1987.

union and cooperative members were assassinated.<sup>8</sup> The military also rampantly demanded extortion payments from the newly formed cooperatives.<sup>9</sup> These efforts were so effective that by 1982, 78 cooperatives had been abandoned or had reverted to their former owners.<sup>10</sup> Intense intimidation of cooperatives by the military and civil defense forces, often directed by the oligarchy, continued until 1983, by which time thousands of cooperative workers had been killed.<sup>11</sup>

Although less frequent, violent repression of the beneficiaries of the land reform program continues, as the harassment of the San Cayetano farming cooperative illustrates. Since its founding in 1980, the cooperative has been under constant intimidation directed by the previous owner and carried out by local civil defense forces and the National Guard. In December 1989, six members of the cooperative—which belongs to a leftist cooperative association—were kidnapped and killed. According to the State Department, credible evidence suggests that Army soldiers and civil defense forces were responsible. The local Army commander at the time of the abduction was none other than Colonel Staben, who has been accused of a number of other abuses in the area. While the colonel has denied any involvement, a diplomat involved in the investigation of the incident maintains that Staben kept very tight control in the area through a paramilitary network of informants and “given that Colonel Staben prides himself on knowing everything, and I mean everything, that happens in his region, it is hard to believe he isn’t in some way involved.” The State Department has asserted that it is most unsatisfied with the Salvadoran investigation of the case thus far.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1983, efforts that have undermined the program have by and large been less sanguinary. The story of the diminishing promise of land reform reflects the political history of El Salvador since the program’s inception. The reformist junta that took power in 1979 began with a highly progressive vision of reforming the agrarian structure of the country. By mid-1980, however, military hardliners and the traditional agrarian oligarchy supplanted most of the

<sup>8</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Situation in El Salvador, Hearings*, (1981), pp. 240–241. Paul Shiras, “The False Promise—and Real Violence—of Land Reform in El Salvador,” in Gettleman et al. (1981).

<sup>9</sup>Martin Diskin, “1982 Supplement,” in Simmons and Stevens (1982), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup>Strasma et al. (1983).

<sup>11</sup>Hedges, “Salvadoran Land Reform Plowed Under by Rightists,” (1983).

<sup>12</sup>Gibb, “Salvadoran Army Suspected in Disappearance of Six; Land Tenure Feud Distant from War,” (1990); “U.S. Pressures El Salvador in Investigating Disappearances,” Reuters, May 14, 1990. In February 1991 four members of the civil defense forces were charged with the murders. Interview, human rights researcher, March 1991.

reformers; land reform thus fell under the control of those who had historically opposed it. Phase I was fully implemented in 1980. While it expropriated the largest landed estates in the country, these estates comprised only 14.7 percent of El Salvador's arable land and many of them encompassed the least fertile farm acreage in the nation. Of the land affected by Phase I, 69 percent had been used for cattle grazing rather than crop cultivation and only 9 percent was coffee acreage, the richest type of agricultural land in El Salvador.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the 1982 legislative elections gave the ARENA-backed rightist coalition preponderance in the new Assembly. The party of the traditional enemies of land reform was thus able to win control of the apparatus for administering Phase I: the Ministry of Agriculture, the *Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria* (Salvadoran Institute for Agrarian Transformation, or ISTA), and the agrarian bank. Through its control of ISTA, ARENA cut training and technical assistance to the cooperatives, and through its control of the agrarian bank it reduced credit delivery to them. Phase II, the centerpiece of the program, was gutted by ARENA in 1983. The rightist-controlled Assembly inserted a compromise into the 1983 constitution calling only for the takeover of farms larger than 605 acres, thus reducing the number of farms affected from 1700 to less than 700 and the total acreage to just over 11,000 hectares. The legislature allowed owners to then circumvent the law by dividing their farms into smaller, ineligible parcels which were then transferred to family members. *No Phase II land has been redistributed.*<sup>14</sup> Under the land-to-the-tiller program, 52,000 families were allowed to buy about 24,000 acres. By 1984, however, a General Accounting Office audit found that one-third of the applicants for Phase III land "were not working the land because they had been threatened, evicted, or had disappeared."<sup>15</sup> The lands slated for Phase III redistribution were concentrated in El Salvador's four most conflictive departments and marked by the country's poorest and most exhausted soils. Many of those who did

<sup>13</sup>Strasma et al. (1983), and "Land Reform Marches Backward," *Central America Report*, April 20, 1990.

<sup>14</sup>Cristiani Begins 'Privatizing' Agrarian Reform," *Central America Report*, August 11, 1989; Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987). Since a significant portion of Phase II land is devoted to coffee production, Salvadoran plantation owners argue that their holdings should not be redistributed because there are great production economies of scale in coffee growing, justifying large units. Neither Colombia nor Costa Rica, however, is dominated by large production units; yet both produce excellent coffee very efficiently on plots that are, on average, small enough to be tended by one or two families.

<sup>15</sup>"Salvadoran Land Program Is Criticized," *New York Times*, February 15, 1984.

benefit received too little land to feed their families, or land only marginally suitable for farming.<sup>16</sup>

Land reform in El Salvador has suffered not only because of the recalcitrance of the right. Agrarian reform has sustained blows due to insufficient technical assistance, the high debts acquired by new land owners to compensate their former landlords, and the unavoidable economic problems plaguing the country, many of which have been exacerbated by the FMLN's campaign of economic sabotage. No land reform program, moreover, will solve El Salvador's fundamental economic problem: too many people and too little land. Land reform, however, was designed primarily to address political and economic inequity. The redistribution program has highlighted, rather than alleviated, this problem. Instead of regarding land reform as a means to defeat the insurgency, the right has attacked the program with tenacious hostility, first seeking to prevent it and then succeeding in eviscerating it. At its peak, Salvadoran agrarian reform benefited an estimated 23 percent of the rural population. According to a UN study, that figure has now dropped to 17 percent,<sup>17</sup> and despite a decade of reform, 80 percent of farm land still belongs to its original owners.<sup>18</sup> The rightist-dominated court system has issued over 100 decisions awarding lands to previous owners,<sup>19</sup> and many more rulings in favor of the landed gentry are expected. President Cristiani, asserting that the land reform program is inefficient and too costly, has taken steps to alter it radically. ARENA is breaking up farming cooperatives by awarding land titles to their individual members, which allows cash-hungry peasants to sell their land back to wealthy farmers eager to reamass their large holdings. Mr. Cristiani is motivated in his efforts to stymie the land redistribution program purely by orthodox economics. Nevertheless, the large estate owners<sup>20</sup> welcomed his election as the opportunity to reaffirm their dominance, and there are many within his party, which has always had undisguised contempt for the program—describing it as “U.S.

<sup>16</sup>Gruson, “For the Peasants of El Salvador, Promised Land Seems to Recede,” (1989).

<sup>17</sup>“Cristiani Begins ‘Privatizing’ Agrarian Reform,” *Central America Report*, August 11, 1989.

<sup>18</sup>Diskin (in Thiesenhusen, 1989), p. 443.

<sup>19</sup>Lane, “The War That Will Not End,” (1989); Gruson, “For the Peasants of El Salvador,” (1989); see also “Agrarian Reform Rollback Continues,” *Central America Report*, October 13, 1989.

<sup>20</sup>Cristiani himself is a millionaire landowner and former president of the coffee growers association and has never made a secret of his contempt for land reform.

imposed socialism"<sup>21</sup>—who wish to “perfect” land reform by using it as a means to effect a sweeping return to old patterns of concentrated land ownership.<sup>22</sup> Yielding to the pressure of ARENA’s right, Cristiani has recently created a Land Bank; the upshot of this act will indeed be a massive transfer of holdings from indebted peasants back to larger landowners. Not only will land ownership become even more highly concentrated, but as more peasants sell their land they will join the ranks of the estimated 1.8 million peasants who are already landless. This will greatly intensify the competition for agricultural wage labor that threatens to become the dominant rural activity in El Salvador. The “perfection” of land reform thus will likely result in greater impoverishment of the poorest peasants and intensified inequality.<sup>23</sup>

In the 11 years since the program began, wealth has become more concentrated in El Salvador, and the disparity between rich and poor has grown.<sup>24</sup> The United States pushed land reform so vigorously as an essential part of the counterinsurgency program because it recognized that it was impossible for the Salvadoran regime to win legitimacy unless the land tenure system, which was at the root of the basic inequities in the Salvadoran polity, was altered. Although at its height the beneficiaries of land reform included less than a fifth of El Salvador’s peasants, even the eviscerated program represented a surviving desire to redress historic inequalities. By reviving old economic patterns, ARENA’s policies add to the sense among poor Salvadorans that the system is biased against them. At a time when many look forward to peace in El Salvador, ARENA’s economic agenda threatens to exacerbate the conditions that originally impelled the insurgency.

<sup>21</sup>Rosenthal, “Salvadorans Want an End to Their ‘Prolonged’ War,” (1989). Cristiani, it must be noted, has done a far better job than his critics expected in keeping the government separate from his party.

<sup>22</sup>Kandell, “Conservatives’ Victory in El Salvador Signals End to Land Reform,” (1989); Farah, “Salvadoran Vote Result Could Mean Reversion to Concentrated Ownership,” (1989); “Agrarian Reform Rollback Continues,” (1989); and Freed, “In Salvador, Land Reform Sows Conflict,” (1989).

<sup>23</sup>“After Peace an Old Problem to Solve: Agrarian Reform After the Cristiani Policy Reversal,” *Latin American Weekly Report*, April 18, 1991. Concentration of land ownership does not necessarily have any great effect on inequality if rural labor is scarce, and especially if opportunities for productive employment outside of agriculture make it possible to move to alternative work. A decreasing number of workers depending on agriculture would be a good sign of alternative opportunities; unfortunately, in El Salvador that number has increased by 62 percent since 1960. (Sheahan (1987), p. 56.)

<sup>24</sup>“El Salvador: Decade of Economic Straits,” *Central America Report*, May 17, 1991.

## CIVIC ACTION

The most direct attempt to win popular support and thereby curb the insurgency in El Salvador has come about in the American financed and inspired civil-military pacification programs. An outgrowth of America's experience in Vietnam and the strategy of internal defense and development, pacification programs in El Salvador have sought to reorient the Salvadoran military's emphasis away from simply fighting the guerrillas and toward the war for civilian sympathies. The ultimate goal of these programs is to erase the population's perception of the military as an oppressive force and to promote a more benign image of the central government. Only when the armed forces are viewed in a favorable light and the government is perceived as legitimate, it is reasoned, will the insurgents' base of support erode as the rural populace welcomes government protection and helps the military find and disable insurgent forces.<sup>25</sup>

The first pacification program launched was the 1983 National Campaign Plan. Under development in Washington and the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador and at SOUTHCOM for nearly two years, the plan was implemented with reluctance by the Salvadoran high command, who regarded it—correctly, of course—as an American-imposed program.<sup>26</sup> The plan was modeled loosely on the coordinated military-civilian pacification program in Vietnam, the CORDS Program. It was regarded as the first program that would put the Salvadoran government and military on the offensive, instead of merely preventing a rebel victory. Designed to win the hearts-and-minds of the people, the plan was perceived as the key to winning the war. "This strategy," Waghelstein said plainly at the time, "is the turning point of the war. We will win or lose on this operation."<sup>27</sup> The Kissinger Commission report, too, placed great significance on the National Campaign Plan, regarding it as the focal point of American military

<sup>25</sup>Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences*, (1985), pp. 49–50. The most comprehensive evaluations of civic action programs in El Salvador are Research Triangle Institute, *CONARA Impact Evaluation*, (1988), and *Impact Evaluation: Special Programs in Chalatenango and the Eastern Region*, prepared for USAID, San Salvador, in 1990. In a 1983 document captured by the Atlacatl Battalion, the FMLN displays a sophisticated appreciation of the U.S.-inspired pacification program. See the translation "Principal Elements of the New Strategy of the United States: Pacification Operations" in "Concerning Our Military's Plans: The Military Strategy of the FMLN," in Marcella and Marcella (1987), pp. 43–45.

<sup>26</sup>Interviews, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, November 1990 and May 1991; Rosello (1984), p. 3; Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 44; Chavez, "The Odds in El Salvador," (1983), pp. 16–17; and Rivard and Moreau, "Losing Hearts and Minds," (1984).

<sup>27</sup>Watson with LeMoyné, "A Plan to Win in El Salvador: The Administration Gambles on a New Blend of Military and Civic Action," (1983).

assistance and as the means to break the stalemate in El Salvador.<sup>28</sup> The actual outcomes of the plan, however, have proved far less decisive.

The plan's first phase, "Operation Well-Being," concentrated the Salvadoran military's resources on clearing the guerrillas from the economically vital southern half of El Salvador, principally the Department of San Vicente. The operation then called for a massive civic action campaign, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) and coordinated by the newly created National Commission for Restoration of Areas (CONARA), a Salvadoran inter-ministerial agency. CONARA concentrated on reconstructing damaged housing and infrastructure, implementing the land reform program, and providing basic services such as water and electricity. Regarded as crucial to the program's ultimate success was the establishment of local civil defense units in the area. The purpose of these units was to consolidate government control of the rural population, to actively involve the people in the government's cause, and to provide the local security forces with an intelligence network. While "Operation Well-Being" met with initial success—the guerrillas temporarily withdrew from the area, a number of schools and clinics were opened, and vaccination programs were implemented in many communities—the program failed in its ultimate goal of clearing the guerrillas out of San Vicente and extirpating the guerrillas' base of support.<sup>29</sup>

Almost every American participant interviewed in this research gave a different explanation for the failure: flushed with initial success, the Salvadoran military failed to consolidate the gains in San Vicente and moved too quickly to implement the program in Usulután; or, the notoriously corrupt CONARA swallowed American aid funds, depriving the plan of many of its hearts-and-minds programs; or, the American agencies involved did not cooperate fully enough with each other and their Salvadoran counterparts.<sup>30</sup> But no matter what the problems were in the plan's mechanisms, the plan ultimately failed because it could not convince the population that the military was "part of the solution and not part of the problem," its very object.<sup>31</sup> Eight years after the implementation of the plan, guer-

<sup>28</sup>National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), pp. 101–102.

<sup>29</sup>Chavez, "U.S. Pilot Program in Salvadoran Area in Danger of Failing," (1983).

<sup>30</sup>Interviews: U.S. State Department officials, November and December 1989; former U.S. intelligence official, December 1990; and American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, November 1990.

<sup>31</sup>Waghelstein, quoted in Chavez (1983).

rilla activity as well as support for the guerrillas in San Vicente is at about the same level as it was before the program began.<sup>32</sup>

The National Campaign Plan's failure to decrease the peasants' distrust of the military and government is evident in their refusal to form civil defense units. Certainly some of their reluctance to form such units arose because a member of the civil defense would automatically become a rebel target. But time and time again, State Department officials and others assert that much of the disinclination stemmed from the legacy of the *Organización Democrática Nacionalista* (ORDEN), the ruthless paramilitary groups formed in rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s to root out broadly defined "subversives." Remembering ORDEN, the peasants perceived civil defense units to be ugly symbols of uncontrolled repression. Their persistence in associating civil defense with repression rather than protection indicates that the Salvadoran peasants did not trust their government and military, and perhaps also that they regarded those bodies as irredeemably repressive.<sup>33</sup>

The National Campaign Plan was followed by the substantively very similar civic-action program "*Unido Para Reconstruir*" (UPR). Disgusted by civilian inefficiency and corruption, the Salvadoran military made itself responsible for administering this program, implementing it in all 14 of El Salvador's provinces so that each of the regional military commanders would get a piece of the pie. The Duarte government resisted UPR precisely because the military dominated it. The Christian Democrats regarded the plan as a thinly veiled effort on the armed forces' part to eclipse civilian leadership in general and the especially tenuous civilian control over rural areas in particular.<sup>34</sup> Civilian hostility to the program was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that the military, not the civilian leadership, stood to benefit from the opportunities for theft and fraud that such a vast program offered.<sup>35</sup> UPR, like the National Campaign Plan, failed to turn the tide in the war for civilian support and met with very much the same frustration in its attempts to organize civil defense units.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Interview, State Department officials, November 1989.

<sup>33</sup>Interviews, present and former State Department officials, November 1989; see also Rivard and Moreau (1984) and Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987), p. 15.

<sup>34</sup>Research Triangle Institute (1988); Gruson, "In Salvador, a New Battle for Hearts," (1988); Ostertag, "El Salvador: Disunited to Deconstruct," (1986); Hatfield, Leach, and Miller (1987), pp. 9-10.

<sup>35</sup>AID stood by the Duarte government and refused to channel funds through the military.

<sup>36</sup>Miller, "Salvadoran Factions Try to Capture Hearts, Minds of War's Displaced," (1986).

A very different program is the current "*Municipos en Acción*" (MEA), widely considered to be the most effective civic action program implemented in El Salvador.<sup>37</sup> Conceived and funded entirely by AID, MEA provides funds directly to mayors so that the local communities themselves may decide how to spend them. This has better results than pacification programs that place authority in the hands of the armed forces or central government;<sup>38</sup> indeed, one study has characterized MEA as "the most effective counterinsurgency strategy" in El Salvador.<sup>39</sup> There are, however, strict limits to MEA's success. Since the program is conceived and financed by the United States, and since its orientation is specifically local, it establishes little loyalty toward the government and armed forces of El Salvador.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as an exhaustive evaluation of pacification programs in El Salvador concluded, even if the Salvadoran government manages to present a new face to its population through an effective civic action program, it will not be easy to overcome the distrust and cynicism that is the legacy of centuries of neglect and oppression.<sup>41</sup> Any change in attitude that civic action engenders will develop very slowly. The failure so far to change the population's attitude is reflected in its continued reluctance to form the civil defense units, which, as one former American military advisor asserts, is "the one solution that can turn the reconstruction program around and save the country."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Interview, CIA analyst, November 1989; Research Triangle Institute (1988).

<sup>38</sup>The Army's grip on MEA is tight, however, according to many reports. In practice, many decisions on the use of MEA funds are made by municipal officials and the local army commander in tandem. Interview, U.S. analysts, March 1991. See Larmer, "AID Strategy Targets Salvadoran Villages," (1989). The effectiveness of MEA was somewhat diminished by the FMLN's strategy of threatening to kill mayors who administer the program unless they resigned; see Norton, "Army Targets Rebel 'Sympathizers,'" (1990); and Farah, "El Salvador's Mayors Quit in Droves: Leftist Guerrillas Frighten Authorities," (1989).

<sup>39</sup>Research Triangle Institute (1988), p. 11.

<sup>40</sup>See the comments of Gerardo Le Chevallier, a leading Christian Democrat, in Larmer, "AID Strategy Targets Salvadoran Villages," (1989).

<sup>41</sup>Research Triangle Institute (1988), pp. 2-3. The same point is made in Americas Watch, *Nightmare Revisited, 1987-1988*, (1988), p. 70. For an illustration of the mutual suspicion between the populace and the military plaguing the civic action projects, see Gruson, "Santa Marta Journal: A Road Unpaved, Despite Good Intentions," (1990).

<sup>42</sup>Hazelwood, "El Salvador: Sleepwalking into Disaster," (1989); Hazelwood served as a military adviser in El Salvador for seven years. The crucial importance of civil defense was emphasized repeatedly by former U.S. military advisers in interviews in November 1989 and December 1990. A former MILGROUP commander describes civil defense as "the one solution that would save the program." Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 40; see also the Kissinger Commission report's emphasis on civil defense, pp. 95-96.

The Colonels' report explains the vital importance attached to civil defense units in a counterinsurgency campaign. The goal is both to foster and demonstrate the population's commitment to the established polity:

In a conflict the essence of which revolves around population control, civil defense not only supplements efforts by regular forces to secure the countryside but also provides a mechanism inducing the people to support the government. In committing himself to protect his village through civil defense, the individual casts his lot in favor of the existing order and rejects revolution.<sup>43</sup>

An effective civil defense program has not been formed in El Salvador despite the tremendous emphasis placed on and energy committed to this goal by American advisers. There are three main reasons for this failure. First, as mentioned in the discussion of the failure of the National Campaign Plan, much of the populace still regards the civil defense forces as devices of repression rather than security. This perception is partially justified. In many areas where civil defense units have been formed, those units are armed instruments of the local power structure rather than democratic instruments for community protection.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, one American expert involved in attempting to establish Salvadoran civil defense forces in the 1980s complained bitterly that the envisioned progressive civil defense program had soon "return[ed] to little more than a system of paid right-wing mercenaries."<sup>45</sup> A second reason for the program's failure is the Salvadoran military's refusal to support it. Americans' vociferous requests for such support have been repeatedly, and apparently perversely, ignored by the Salvadoran armed forces. The stated reason for this lack of support is the Salvadoran military's anxiety that weapons provided to civil defense units will end up in the guerrillas' hands. Some American observers, however, question this rationale. They note that remarkably few of the weapons and supplies that are so distributed suffer such a fate. These experts regard as more plausible two other explanations for the Salvadoran armed forces' refusal to support the program. One reason—reflecting both the absence of a

<sup>43</sup>Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 40. Ochoa similarly described the importance of civil defense: "We must obtain the support of the people in our effort. Formation of self-defense units is a way to get them involved" (Williams, "Salvador Villages Resist Army's Call for Militias," (1985)). The view found in the Colonels' report, that civil defense forces both engender and demonstrate popular support for the existing system, was also expressed in numerous interviews with former military advisers and in Fishel and Cowan, "Civil-Military Operations and the War for Moral Legitimacy in Latin America," (1988), pp. 42-43.

<sup>44</sup>Interview, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990.

<sup>45</sup>"Compromised Standards in El Salvador," unpublished manuscript.

sense of common purpose in Salvadoran society and the contempt with which the peasantry is regarded—is the armed forces' deep reluctance to share what it regards as *its* assets with the campesinos it despises. The other explanation these observers offer is more disturbing. The Salvadoran military, they assert, hoards weapons and supplies in anticipation of the time when American aid is withdrawn and when the armed forces may feel compelled to transform the war in El Salvador into a quick, bloody, and final high-intensity conflict. A diminution of its materiel now will render it less able to conduct what it sees as the important war looming in the future.<sup>46</sup>

Yet a third difficulty surrounding the formation of crucial civil defense forces is that this goal is a catch-22. Although forming civil defense units is perceived as a means to a successful end to the war, if the population were willing to form these units the end would, in effect, already be reached. The peasants' cooperation would indicate that they actively supported the government, and this means victory in a war in which he who gains the allegiance of the people wins.

Civic action programs have thus far failed to persuade the mass of people freely to choose the existing order in preference to those who would destroy it.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the ultimate reason for this failure can be discerned in the following account of a civic action operation:

Clowns, a mariachi band and skimpily clad dancers perform between speeches by Salvadoran army officers and social workers calling on peasants to reject the guerrillas. Meanwhile, army barbers cut hair, and soldiers pass out rice, dresses and medicine. . . . "You see the army winning hearts and minds," he [a U.S. adviser] says, "This is low-intensity-conflict doctrine in action."<sup>48</sup>

Most American-sponsored civic action and psychological operations are not so obviously superficial.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, many analysts argue that the hearts-and-minds campaigns in El Salvador are better designed to manipulate people's behavior than to change fundamentally the miserable conditions that perpetuate the war. Civic action's emphasis on pep talks and charity assumes that the rural populace is either ignorant of political issues or that its loyalty can somehow be purchased. Failure to recognize the real issues at the root of the insurgency is a failure to follow one of counterinsurgency's principal

<sup>46</sup>Interview, experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.; Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 43.

<sup>48</sup>Krauss and Carrington, "U.S. Effort to Win 'Hearts and Minds' Gains in El Salvador," (1986).

<sup>49</sup>One observer, however, recalled with derision several Salvadoran civic action operations in 1988 and 1989 that were extraordinarily similar (complete with clown and barber) to the one described above. Interview, March 1991.

maxims: Apply revolutionary strategies and principles in reverse. Civic action in El Salvador has thus far failed to uproot either poverty or mistrust.<sup>50</sup> While internal defense and development strategy seeks to effect far-reaching changes to address the much-discussed root causes of the insurgency, civic action assumes that a population will respond with gratitude to short-term and cosmetic changes in the level of benefits from the government. Such efforts may be irrelevant to peasants seeking a redistribution of power and prestige. Douglas Blaufarb, active for years in the pacification effort in Vietnam, discriminates between superficial and genuine civic action:

Efforts to improve standards of living in the countryside were irrelevant unless they also reduced the villager's sense of insecurity that came from feeling defenseless in a hostile world, whereas the desired feelings could be produced by means which did little to improve the standard of living. Thus, if a villager whose daughter had been abused or whose chickens had been stolen . . . could report the matter to company headquarters and receive restitution or see the culprit punished, his personal sense of worth and his respect for the system that defended it were strengthened.<sup>51</sup>

With the pervasive sense of immunity that the military in El Salvador enjoys, such an ideal situation is still far in the future for El Salvador. The means employed by civic action will not—cannot—accomplish the goals desired. Those goals will be reached only when El Salvador transforms itself from an unjust, corrupt, brutal, and divisive society into a decent one. The FMLN wins its support and recruits by promising not an incremental change in the peasants' standard of living, but a redistribution of power and status.<sup>52</sup> The American counterinsurgency effort's ideal, as exemplified in the Kissinger Commission report and the initial revolutionary land reform program, could perhaps steal the guerrillas' thunder, but given the obstacles to fundamental change in El Salvador, civic action programs have not succeeded in doing so.

<sup>50</sup>Colonel Vargas's assertion in his discussion of the importance of civic action that "you don't kill guerrillas with rifles but with structural change" (Ostertag (1986), p. 12) is absolutely true. But structural change is just what civic action does not provide.

<sup>51</sup>Blaufarb (1977), p. 219.

<sup>52</sup>Jeffrey Race's assessment of peasants' reaction to civic action in one South Vietnamese province illustrates how the failure of those programs to redress the basic conditions that spawned the insurgency led to their failure to alter peasants' attitudes and behavior: "Those unsympathetic to the government were glad to have dispensaries, roads, loans, and farmers' associations, but they went right ahead and cooperated with the revolutionary movement for the same groups were still going to be at the bottom no matter how much assistance the government provided." Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, (1972), p. 176. Emphasis in original.

## V. SOURCES OF AMERICAN FRUSTRATION

### A CLEAR VISION

In November 1989, a former high Salvadoran official surveyed the history of the American effort in his country and concluded that "the U.S. wanted to achieve three things: a measure of peace, the respect for human rights, and the institutionalization of democratic processes. All three objectives have failed."<sup>1</sup> While not everyone would agree with his conclusion, the extent to which most everyone connected with the American effort agrees with his articulation of the fundamental objectives is remarkable. But even though agreement is widespread on the problems facing El Salvador and the needed solutions to those problems, equally rampant is the frustration that permeates all efforts to achieve those ends.

An amazing consistency characterizes the various prescriptions, suggestions, and proposed solutions put forth for American policy in El Salvador over the past decade. All agree that the human rights situation and the judicial system must improve and that democratization must continue. To accomplish this, no one doubts that the United States must "reaffirm a long-term commitment to a democratic, pluralistic government" in El Salvador;<sup>2</sup> the "administration will have to . . . use aid more effectively as leverage for change";<sup>3</sup> and "should seek specific commitments from the military and the . . . Salvadoran president to protect the judiciary and submit to its rulings. . . . Pressure on the Salvadoran government to remove the police from army command should be redoubled";<sup>4</sup> America must "even more strongly pressure the army to stop killing and torturing civilians and suspected guerrillas" and "should press its current program of judicial reform."<sup>5</sup> In 1990, a State Department official long involved in the efforts to transform Salvadoran affairs echoed the Kissinger Commission report and countless other assessments when she asserted that the key to success in El Salvador was a working judicial system and strong democratic institutions, specifically labor unions

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<sup>1</sup>Larmer, "Extremists Gain the Upper Hand," (1989).

<sup>2</sup>Dillon (1988-89), p. 166.

<sup>3</sup>Larmer, "Hard Lessons for the U.S. and the Region," (1988).

<sup>4</sup>Dillon (1988-89), p. 170.

<sup>5</sup>LeMoyné, "El Salvador's Forgotten War," (1989), p. 123.

and the press.<sup>6</sup> In November 1989, an Administration official described how the American approach to El Salvador had to be reenergized. He explained that this time Cristiani “really” had to be pressed to find, try, and punish the killers of the Jesuit priests,<sup>7</sup> implying that previous attempts in similar cases lacked only the requisite seriousness from the United States.

All of the above solutions and all of the above means have, of course, been recognized and tried again and again over the past decade. Everyone agrees that Salvadoran society must be reformed, a just legal system must emerge, political violence must end, the military must unequivocally submit to civilian authority, and peasants must be given a better life; and everyone believes that if only the *United States* pushes hard enough, if only *Americans* act with sufficient dedication and commitment, the proper reforms will follow. This conviction has led to unfair recriminations when these efforts fail, for these reforms in truth are unattainable desiderata posing as solutions. And all such “solutions” have foundered when confronted by the complexities of the Salvadoran tangle.

Recognizing the elements necessary for success, America has believed that it need merely find a catalyst to set them in motion. This search has led only to frustration.<sup>8</sup> The Colonels’ report concludes that “despite their appreciation that winning popular support remains the ultimate strategic goal in a counterinsurgency, American officials have yet to devise adequate mechanisms to achieve that aim.”<sup>9</sup> Officials have not devised those mechanisms because they cannot—they simply do not exist. It is neither within America’s power nor its right to contrive the means for a foreign state to win the support of its population. Such an endeavor involves at once the most basic and the most complex political relationships in a society. In the midst of the November 1989 offensive, General Woerner acknowledged that “the issue in El Salvador is fundamentally political and social. But the political side doesn’t lend itself [to solution] as easily as the military.”<sup>10</sup> The problems endemic to finding that political solution must be explored to appreciate the difficulties inherent in counterinsurgency.

<sup>6</sup>Telephone interview, State Department official, March 1990.

<sup>7</sup>Friedman, “After Salvadoran Killings U.S. Reexamines Role,” (1989).

<sup>8</sup>Colonel Robert Herrick, former director of SOUTHCOM’s Small Wars Operations Research Directorate, reflected this frustration when he said that “we’ve had ‘progress’ every year since the war began. The war should have been over a long time ago.” Quoted in Millman, “El Salvador’s Army: A Force Unto Itself,” (1989), p. 95.

<sup>9</sup>Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>Lane, “A Murderous Cross-Fire,” (1989).

### A FLAWED INSTRUMENT: THE OBDURATE RIGHT

The Kissinger Commission report predicted one of the main sources of frustration for the American effort in El Salvador, one that the United States had also experienced in Vietnam: America would have to rely on the abilities and good faith of the host government and its armed forces.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it seems that in tracing the frustration of our efforts to reform El Salvador, the fault lies not in ourselves, but in the Salvadorans. El Salvador's right and its military have often rejected the very reforms America deemed necessary to counter the insurgency, and El Salvador's armed forces readily adopt Washington's language even as they ignore its principles. The Salvadoran right, through its control of the legislature and judiciary, has eviscerated legislation that threatens its prerogatives and has been unable—or has refused—to try, convict, and punish those responsible for official and right-wing violence.

In this way, the democratic process itself has served to thwart American plans and hopes for reform in El Salvador. The far right, from 1980 to 1982, managed to delay the emergence of a government committed to democratization. While the 1982 legislative elections gave the centrist Christian Democrats more seats than any other single party, ARENA formed an alliance with other rightist parties to easily outnumber the Christian Democrats in the Assembly. Under rightist control, the legislature drafted a new constitution, appointed judges and other court officials, and effectively blocked all of the substantive measures the Christian Democrats believed essential to legitimize the government. This situation did not change with Duarte's election in 1984, since rightists controlled the Assembly until the 1985 elections, when the Christian Democrats won an absolute legislative majority and a centrist government was at last in power. The rightists' obstructionist parliamentary tactics, however, severely curtailed the Christian Democrats' ability to enact reforms,<sup>12</sup> and the right cooperated with the government only to the extent its members believed essential to maintain American economic and military assistance. Moreover, despite the centrists' majority in the legislature, the rightists retained control of the courts, resulting in the frustrating failures to punish human rights violators, as discussed above.<sup>13</sup> In May 1985, for instance, the Assembly managed to vote to

<sup>11</sup>National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), p. 94.

<sup>12</sup>Preston, "Salvadoran Left, Right Attack Duarte's Policies," (1987).

<sup>13</sup>ARENA deputies in the Assembly first charged that the investigation of the kidnapping ring [see above, pp. 28-29] was part of a series of repressive acts directed against their party. ARENA later reversed itself, however, and demanded a thorough investigation. See Baylora, "Negotiating War in El Salvador," (1986), p. 129.

oust Attorney General Jose Francisco Guerrero—a founder of ARENA and one-time personal lawyer to d'Aubuisson—who had been more than lethargic in his attempts to investigate human rights abuses. When, three months later, his successor filed documents to reopen the investigation of the murder of Archbishop Romero—the prime suspect in the case was, of course, ARENA Deputy d'Aubuisson—the rightist Supreme Court ordered Guerrero reinstated.<sup>14</sup>

By 1987 the Christian Democratic government was rendered impotent by the disastrous state of the economy and by allegations of its own corruption. In the 1988 elections, ARENA regained control of the Assembly, enabling it, among other things, to determine once again the composition of the Supreme Court, since the terms of the justices previously appointed by the right expired in that year. The victory of moderate ARENA candidate Cristiani in 1988 meant that the party that has always shown unstinting hostility to what it regards as, at best, officious American reform efforts has complete control of the government. In eleven years of massive intervention in Salvadoran affairs, and in nine years of electoral democracy, the one group receptive to American notions of centrist reform has managed to hold power—and ineffective power at that—for only three years.<sup>15</sup>

In its efforts to effect reform in El Salvador, the United States has found itself working in an environment where words and promises are expected to substitute for realities and where institutions, laws, and constitutions are often little more than facades.<sup>16</sup> Despite the United States' near obsession with learning the lessons of Vietnam and applying them to low-intensity conflict doctrine and practice in El Salvador, perhaps American officials once again allowed their efforts to be influenced by an assumption that had proved to be a principal

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>15</sup>For a balanced discussion of elections and democracy in El Salvador, see Jose Garcia, "El Salvador: Recent Elections in Historical Perspective" in the quite unbalanced Booth and Seligson (1989), pp. 60–92.

<sup>16</sup>Didion (1983) eloquently describes American dismay when confronted with this situation:

That we had been drawn, both by a misapprehension of the local rhetoric and by the manipulation of our own rhetorical weaknesses, into a game we did not understand, a play of power in a political tropic alien to us, seemed apparent, and yet there we remained. In this light all arguments tended to trail off. Pros and cons seemed equally off the point. At the heart of the American effort there was something of the familiar ineffable, as if it were taking place not in El Salvador but in a mirage of El Salvador, the mirage of a society not unlike our own but "sick," a temporarily fevered republic in which the antibodies of democracy needed only to be encouraged, in which words had stable meanings north and south ("election," say, and "Marxists") and in which there existed, waiting to be tapped by our support, some latent good will. (p. 96.)

source of our frustration in Vietnam: namely, that it is relatively easy to ensure that an ally does what American policymakers deem necessary to eliminate insurgency. This assumption has once again proved false.

There are inherent limits on the ability of one nation, no matter how powerful, to influence the direction and character of another. It is not self-evident whether the interests of America's instrument and necessary reforms are reconcilable. In El Salvador, as in Vietnam, our help has been welcome, but our advice spurned, and for very good reason. That advice—to reform radically—threatens to alter fundamentally the position and prerogatives of those in power. The United States, with its “revolutionary” means of combatting insurgency, threatens those very things that its ally is fighting to defend. In El Salvador, as was the case in Vietnam, the inspiration for revolt arose in the first place from the resistance of those in power to political, social, and economic reform.<sup>17</sup> Those reforms that we have deemed essential—the absolute subordination of the military to civilian control, respect for human rights, a judicial system that applies to all members of Salvadoran society, radical land redistribution—are measures no government in El Salvador has been willing or able to achieve because they require fundamental changes in that country's authoritarian culture, economic structure, and political practices.<sup>18</sup>

Not only is an ally often unwilling to make the necessary reforms, it often feels no compulsion to do so. The problem the United States encounters in its efforts to compel progress in human rights through conditionality has recurred in all its endeavors to pressure El Salvador with threats to withdraw support. Committing American prestige and influence by vowing to “draw a line” against communism is not the best way to ensure leverage over an ally. As Salvadoran officials assert, throughout the 1980s they did not “take the [American] threats to punish the military by cutting off aid seriously because they believed the U.S. stake in stopping Marxist expansionism was so

<sup>17</sup>See Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences*, (1985), p. 32, for a discussion of this reason for the civil war.

<sup>18</sup>One of the great flaws of current American counterinsurgency doctrine, maintains a U.S. diplomat who served as a political officer in the embassy in San Salvador, is that it fails to recognize that the changes it proposes usually amount to a fundamental alteration of the class structure of the affected society. (Interview, November 1989.) In an influential article in 1962, U. Alexis Johnson noted that “to bring about some degree of social, economic and political justice . . . will invariably require positive action by the local government. In some cases only radical reforms will obtain the necessary results. Yet the measures we advocate may strike at the very foundations of these aspects of a country's social structure and domestic economy on which rests the basis of the government's control.” (Johnson, “Internal Defense and the Foreign Service,” (1962), p. 23.)

great that help would continue."<sup>19</sup> Perversely, in many counterinsurgency campaigns in which the United States has involved itself, the more critical the situation is perceived to be, the less leverage America can muster and the less likely nominal clients will be to undertake needed reforms.<sup>20</sup>

### POLITICAL VIOLENCE, POLITICAL SPACE

The limits of American influence in El Salvador lie still deeper than the difficulties inherent in pressuring those in authority to relinquish some of their power. In addition to pursuing the military defeat of the rebels, American policy has sought to foster a "dialogue of democracy"<sup>21</sup> among contending groups in El Salvador to promote political development and thus remove the motivation for the rebellion. A democratized El Salvador would offer vast opportunities for reform. Unfortunately, however, "democratization," like the formation of civil defense units, to be effective needs to be introduced into an environment that is already changed, that is far different from the one that El Salvador presents today. In a "democratized" El Salvador, the disaffected left could be absorbed into the political system and have a rational alternative to armed insurgency, and those bulwarks of democratization that the Kissinger Commission report identified—labor unions and a free press<sup>22</sup>—could also aid in the political development of the country. But while democratization is perceived as the means to redress the population's legitimate grievances, those very grievances—lawlessness, disappearances, political killings and arbitrary arrests, a military that will not bow to civilian control—inhibit democratization. Hence, while a strong labor movement would greatly help Salvadoran democracy, this does not alter the fact El Salvador is, according to the International Labour

<sup>19</sup>Farah, "Salvadoran Death Squads Called Back-Burner Issue for U.S.," (1988). As an ARENA politician responded in 1982 when asked if ARENA did not fear losing American aid by trying to shut the reformed Christian Democrats out of the government: "Congress would not risk losing a whole country over one party. That would be turning against a U.S. ally and encouraging Soviet intervention here. It would not be intelligent." Quoted in Didion (1983), p. 95.

<sup>20</sup>As Constantine Menges observed in a RAND Paper, "The United States can exert significant influence on allied governments only if it can make credible to an ally regime that it has alternatives to collaboration. Such explicitly outlined alternatives are necessary . . . to preserve the capacity of the U.S. government to bargain with, and if necessary, coerce allied governments in a counterinsurgency effort." Menges, *Democratic Revolutionary Insurgency as an Alternative Strategy*, (1968), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project (1986), p.3-5.

<sup>22</sup>National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (1984), pp. 50-51.

Organization, the third most dangerous country in the world for trade union activity.<sup>23</sup> As long as these threats exist, little "political space"<sup>24</sup> can be created that would allow for moderate and leftist elements (often regarded by the right as one and the same) to help form a political system that could solve them. Paradoxically, only when the security of the democratic arena is guaranteed can democracy flourish; the Kissinger Commission report, and American internal defense and development strategy generally, envision a process of reform that can only be accomplished in a reformed El Salvador.

Political space and democracy have been particularly elusive elements in El Salvador, thanks largely to the lingering—if no longer so pervasive—shadow of political violence. Political space in El Salvador is an elastic element and has an unsettling tendency to snap shut with little warning. The repression of 1980 and 1981, which decimated the guerrillas' political and military organizations in the cities, was followed by a resurgence of union activity and organizing in San Salvador in early 1983. Rather than leading to political reforms, however, this activity provoked a new onslaught from the death squads.<sup>25</sup> Despite undeniable progress in curbing right-wing and official political murder, El Salvador is still oppressed by a climate that makes public support for groups identified with the left a life-threatening act.

Indeed, many Salvadorans and foreign observers believe that the rate of killings in El Salvador is directly related to the level of left-wing activity. "When there are 120,000 people demonstrating in the streets of San Salvador, as there were in 1980, you might find you need to kill 500 a month," a West European diplomat observed in 1989. "When there are only 5000–6000 demonstrators, then you might find you need to kill only five or six a month."<sup>26</sup> D'Aubuisson offered what could be construed as a disturbingly similar explanation for a decline in rightist political violence in El Salvador: "There was a time when we had to be hard, against a tremendous leftist aggression. Now we're adjusting to circumstances."<sup>27</sup> Circumstances can change again, of course, making "political space" a feeble quality at best. And while the armed forces' human rights performance and obeisance to

<sup>23</sup>Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report—El Salvador*, No. 4, 1990.

<sup>24</sup>An often used term among critics and proponents of the Salvadoran regime, "political space" means the amount of political dialogue and activity that will be tolerated without intimidation and violence. It is a prerequisite for democracy.

<sup>25</sup>Dickey, "Behind the Death Squads: Who They Are, How They Work, and Why No One Can Stop Them," (1983).

<sup>26</sup>Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989), p. 59.

<sup>27</sup>Allen, "Rightists Favored for Salvador Presidency," (1988), p. 18.

civilian authority have unquestionably improved since their nadir in the early 1980s, there are very definite limits to what political developments the military will tolerate. The armed forces still murder their opponents, if they cannot respond to them in any other way.<sup>28</sup> During the 1988 election campaign, Vides Casanova, the defense minister at the time, stated that the military would not tolerate a strong showing by the Democratic Convergence (a coalition of three leftist parties associated with the guerrillas). In El Salvador it is assumed that the armed forces would never allow the Convergence, or any of the individual parties under its umbrella, to assume power, no matter how legitimately elected.<sup>29</sup> If political space is as tenuous as it would appear, it would be very difficult for a nascent democratic left, or indeed most reformist groups, whose unencumbered existence is essential for the political development and democratization of El Salvador, to emerge and thrive.<sup>30</sup>

Despite an upsurge in incidents of political violence and terror attributed to the military and death squads in 1987 and 1988, which occurred despite repeated American admonitions,<sup>31</sup> political space had indeed expanded considerably in El Salvador from the signing of the Arias Peace Plan in 1987 until November 1989.<sup>32</sup> Alliances had been built among major popular organizations, small business associations, universities, and churches representing a broad spectrum of centrist and leftist groups. Labor unions and agrarian and religious groups enjoyed considerable room to maneuver. Of course, the greatest evidence of expanding political space was the participation of

<sup>28</sup>Interviews, journalist, November 1989, and journalist, May 1990.

<sup>29</sup>Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989), pp. 59-60.

<sup>30</sup>An American expert formerly posted to El Salvador and a GAO analyst both regard the power and capabilities of the death squads as diminished but not nearly eradicated. They see the radical right as so inveterate a part of El Salvador's political landscape that it will constitute a serious threat to the building of democracy there until it is absolutely—and perhaps extralegally—eliminated. (Interviews, November 1989.)

<sup>31</sup>The most infamous acts of this period were the slaying of human rights advocate Herbert Ernesto Anaya Sanabria and the San Sebastian massacre. Death squads and military forces were in particular targeting members and organizers of the labor movement. See Americas Watch, *Nightmare Revisited, 1987-1988*, (1988); Amnesty International, *Death Squads—A Government Strategy*, (1990); Gruson, "Terror's Toll Builds Again in El Salvador," (1988), and "Soyapango Journal," (1990); and Norton, "Specter of Terror in El Salvador," (1989)."

<sup>32</sup>Terry Karl, "Exporting Democracy: The Unanticipated Effects of U.S. Electoral Policy in El Salvador," in Hamilton et al. (1988), pp. 198-199; and Blachman and Sharpe (1988-89), pp. 113-115.

the Democratic Convergence in the 1989 election<sup>33</sup> and the return from exile since 1987 of the leaders of the groups within that alliance: Guillermo Ungo, Hector Oqueli, Ruben Zamora, and Hector Silva. That space, however, was effectively closed beginning with the October 31, 1989 bombings of the FENASTRAS and COMADRES offices,<sup>34</sup> followed by the Army killings of two activists in Zamora's Popular Social Christian Movement party.<sup>35</sup> During and after the November offensive, the armed forces with disturbing alacrity searched the offices of opposition political parties, labor unions, cooperatives, and church groups, and it arrested, threatened, and attacked their members. After receiving death threats, the Christian Democrats' ex-Secretary General, Ungo, and other opposition leaders fled the country, while the other centrist and leftist leaders were forced into hiding. Oqueli, Ungo's deputy, was assassinated in Guatemala after fleeing El Salvador, apparently by a death squad linked to the Salvadoran right.<sup>36</sup> Since low-intensity conflict policy attempts to foster democracy as a means to counter insurgency, the dramatic closing of political space was as much a defeat for that policy in El Salvador as it is for the Salvadoran people.<sup>37</sup> Former Salvadoran President Alvaro Magana no doubt echoed the sentiments of U.S. policymakers

<sup>33</sup>Congressional Research Service (1989), p. 13; and Gruson, "A Fingerhold for Dissent in El Salvador," (1989).

<sup>34</sup>Gruson, "Bombing at Salvadoran Leftists' Office Kills Eight," (1989). On October 19, the houses of Ruben Zamora and Aronette Diaz, the leader of the Opposition of Democratic Union party, were bombed, following the murder two days earlier of Anna Maria Casanova, daughter of an Army colonel and cousin of former defense minister Vides Casanova.

<sup>35</sup>Interview, journalist, May 1990; telephone interviews, State Department official, Director of Americas Watch's San Salvador office, and Americas Watch researchers in Washington, D.C. and New York, March 1990. Farah, "3 Salvadoran Politicians Found Dead," (1989); Gruson, "A Left-Wing Party in El Salvador Accuses the Army of Killing Three," (1989).

<sup>36</sup>See the Congressional Research Service's translation of the Guatemalan government's report on the kidnapping and murder of Oqueli and Flores Arevalo, *Case: Oqueli Colindres, Flores Arevalo, Report on the HFOC/GAFA Case*, (1990); "Who Killed Oqueli?" *Central America Report*, June 29, 1990; "Salvadoran Extremists Blamed in Oqueli Death," *Central America Report*, October 26, 1990; Miller, "Rebels See Leftist's Murder as Warning," (1990); Larmer, "Salvadoran Offensive Slams Door on Fragile Political Opening," (1989), and "Church Is No Longer a Sanctuary," (1989); "Political Left Squeezed Out," *Central America Report*, December 22, 1989; Americas Watch, *A Year of Reckoning*, (1990), pp. 167-194; Norton, "Army Targets Rebel 'Sympathizers,'" (1990); and Preston, "The Battle for San Salvador," (1990).

<sup>37</sup>Of course, the only groups to benefit from the closing of political space are the far right, whose opponents are stifled, and the far left, one of whose motivations for launching the November offensive was the hope that it would result in just such a military crackdown, which in turn, they hoped, would radicalize the populace.

when he lamented, "How many years did it take to create that climate of confidence? The progress we made in the political area is lost."<sup>38</sup> While political intimidation has relaxed somewhat in the year since Magana's complaint, violence is still an accepted—and employed—method for quelling those voices that extremists do not wish to hear. As long as this is true, democracy in El Salvador will remain subject to the whims of those who cannot abide it.

### THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD: A NATION POLARIZED

Perhaps the most profound source of America's frustration is the very nature and character of the society and political life it has sought to transform. America's goal has been nothing less than to convert El Salvador into a democracy. This presupposes a working social consensus, which that country has yet to achieve. El Salvador has never possessed a liberal democratic society. Centuries of feudal repression, the right wing's profound fear of reform, the peasantry's deep suspicion of the government and armed forces, exacerbated by the *matanza*,<sup>39</sup> the brutal legacy of ORDEN, and the terrible normalcy of violence in a country wracked by a decade of bloody civil war have all served to lock El Salvador firmly in the embrace of mutual enmity. As James LeMoyné, one of the most sensitive observers of Salvadoran society, writes, El Salvador has "become the Northern Ireland of Central America: a permanent running sore, congenitally incapable of fully healing or being cured, short of the most radical measures."<sup>40</sup> Despite undeniable progress, El Salvador remains a chaotic and murderous environment, permeated by intimidation and the ever-present threat of terror. Such an environment has proved inimical to the propagation of the values of moderation and democratic fair play, essential ingredients in America's recipe for the defeat of the insurgents.

A country in which political intolerance and suspicion is a part of the national temperament has, predictably, an unimaginably polarized political life. In 12 years of bloodshed, both sides have succeeded,

<sup>38</sup>Larmer, "Salvadoran Offensive Slams Door on Fragile Political Opening," (1989).

<sup>39</sup>Many Salvadorans date the beginning of the civil war in their country not to 1980 but to 1932, the year of the *matanza* (massacre), when between 7000 and 30,000 peasants, mostly Indians, who had revolted against the oligarchy, were massacred. The name of the peasants' martyred leader, the communist Agustin Farabundo Martí, was appropriated by the current rebel umbrella organization. The name of the general who ruthlessly directed the *matanza*, Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, was appropriated by one of the more infamous death squads.

<sup>40</sup>LeMoyné, "The Guns of El Salvador," (1989), p. 20.

with what in retrospect appears to be an almost malicious purposefulness, in systematically decimating the political center. Applying the most liberal definition to the word subversive, death squads and the armed forces killed in the early 1980s "anyone with an idea in his head."<sup>41</sup> The Christian Democrats, the paragons of centerism, have been weakened by the splintering of their party in the early 1980s, when many of their members moved into the ranks of the left-wing opposition and occasionally into that of the guerrillas. Many of those who remained in the party were murdered, and those who were left after these plagues have since been demoralized by their own avarice that sprouted when they finally gained power. The reformist elements of the officer corps have largely been eliminated: some were killed, some left the country, some joined the guerrillas. The military and death squads' killing spree of the early 1980s had an even more tragic impact on Salvadoran political culture than the obscene toll of approximately 40,000 killed would indicate. Those victims were the very people among whom the United States searched for a political center: El Salvador's bureaucrats, office workers, labor organizers, professionals, politicians, priests, and progressive military officers.<sup>42</sup> The FMLN, for its part, chose as its first assassination victims not the most retrograde members of the oligarchy, but the most moderate and enlightened members of the upper class and business community.<sup>43</sup> Democratization, the creation of a liberal society, in such a world is nearly impossible. What has emerged instead is a Manichaeian struggle completely alien to members of a secure and tolerant society. At a time when many believe that history has ended, and when the dogmas of the Cold War world are fast becoming obsolete, Salvadorans continue to die for anachronistic ideas. In El Salvador, a rigidly authoritarian liberation movement remains locked in a life-or-death struggle with a reactionary right animated by the most virulent anti-leftist sentiment in Latin America.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup>U.S. diplomat, quoted in "Why Death Squads Still Spread Terror," *U.S. News and World Report*, February 27, 1984.

<sup>42</sup>Dickey, "Behind the Death Squads," (1983), p. 17.

<sup>43</sup>Interview, journalist, November 1989. Abraham Rodriguez, for instance, a businessman and a founder of the Christian Democrats, described by *Washington Post* reporter Douglas Farah as "one of the most decent and respected men in the country," was forced to flee El Salvador when the FMLN threatened his life. Farah, "Salvador: The Last Puzzle," (1990).

<sup>44</sup>Wickham-Crowley (1989), p. 520.

### THE CHIMERA OF COMPROMISE

It is a measure of El Salvador's extremist political culture that d'Aubuisson, a man described by former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Robert White as a "pathological killer," is the most popular political figure in the country.<sup>45</sup> Many observers believe that extremism in the Salvadoran polity is ascending as fast as tolerance is declining. Frustration with the failure to end the civil war is, paradoxically, increasing the number who believe that only the most radical policies and solutions—of the left or right—can change Salvadoran society.<sup>46</sup> Political extremism is frequently exacerbated by attempts at moderation. Cristiani's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement with the guerrillas and to impose limited and justifiable reforms on the military have been countered by the growing power and assertiveness of ARENA's extremist right wing,<sup>47</sup> led by d'Aubuisson, which remains the backbone of the party, and by the reemergence of shadowy far-rightist groups that have threatened those who advocate compromise. In a new twist in the murderous political environment of El Salvador, attempts on the lives of Cristiani's key aides have originated not from the extreme left but from the far right.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the most ominous sign of intensifying extremism provoked by what is perceived to be American-imposed moderation is the growing number of extremist officers advocating a campaign of assassination directed against leftist civilians, a campaign apparently already well-planned that could once again plunge El Salvador into terror.<sup>49</sup>

Ineradicable hatred and intolerance form a quicksand foundation on which to build a nation. El Salvador thus seems barren soil in which to plant the seeds of an equitable, open society and an unlikely environment—despite the ongoing negotiations—for cultivating the

<sup>45</sup>Gruson, "San Salvador Journal: He's a Rightist (No Doubt About It)," (1989).

<sup>46</sup>Interview, journalist, January 1990; Gruson, "San Salvador Journal."

<sup>47</sup>ARENA, founded in 1981 as an ultra-right party of reaction with a paramilitary arm, has been divided in recent years between a small circle of moderate financiers and industrialists, represented by Cristiani, and its original constituents—the reactionary oligarchy and tens of thousands of fiercely anticommunist peasants, petty landowners, and rural businessmen—represented by d'Aubuisson.

<sup>48</sup>Gruson, "Party Backlash for El Salvador Chief," (1990), and Farah, "Salvador: The Last Puzzle," (1990). Soon after Benevides' arrest, the bodyguards of Saul Shuster—the telephone company director and a moderating influence on Cristiani—were killed by suspected right-wing extremists. Cristiani himself has said that he assumes that if he were murdered his killers would be on the right, not the left. (Interview, Salvadoran political figure, October 1990.)

<sup>49</sup>Gruson, "Salvadoran Arms Aid: Will Congress's Tactic Work?" (1990).

new goal of American policy: a compromise solution to the civil war.<sup>50</sup> Although the majority of Salvadorans want peace more than they want the political success of either contender, the constituency for peace is powerless, and the powerful extremists on both sides regard politics as an all-or-nothing proposition. As in most civil wars, this leaves little room for compromise. Although surprising progress has been achieved on some issues negotiated in the continuing peace talks, there appears to be a very wide gulf to bridge between the FMLN on the one hand and the far right and military on the other, for the latter seeks to preserve the country's traditional social and economic structures, and the former is fighting to establish what is in the Salvadoran context a revolutionary state; as Ochoa plainly recognizes, "We are involved in a war and somebody has to win. I never heard of a war that was a draw. One side or another wins in a war. Communism will win in El Salvador or we will defeat communism. A decision must be made."<sup>51</sup> American policy in El Salvador has perforce added immeasurably to the Salvadoran armed forces' political weight and resources. The military is larger, stronger, richer, and more autonomous than at any time in its history, and it has not relinquished its self-appointed role as a bulwark against subversion.<sup>52</sup> Any negotiated solution would have to stipulate a tremendous diminution of the armed forces' strength and influence.<sup>53</sup> Those

<sup>50</sup>Gordon, "U.S. General Says Salvador Cannot Defeat the Guerrillas," (1990). On the Bush administration's contemplation of "Lebanizing" the war in El Salvador by "pulling out and waiting to see what happens," see Gruson, "Party Backlash for El Salvador Chief," (1990), and "Salvadoran Arms Aid: Will Congress's Tactic Work?" (1990). Important evaluations of the peace talks can be found in GAMA Corporation, *Implications of El Salvadoran Negotiations*, (1990), and in Gibb and Smyth, *El Salvador: Is Peace Possible? A Report on the Prospects for Negotiations and U.S. Policy*, (1990).

<sup>51</sup>Ochoa, "A Voice of Dissent from the Salvadoran Military," (1987). "It must be remembered," William Olson writes of insurgencies in general, "that the insurgency is an effort by a counterelite to seize power—sort of an armed referendum—and that the goal being sought is not divisible. The insurgents want power and have a social program fundamentally different from the prevailing system. This means, in terms of goals, that the confrontation between the incumbent and the insurgent is total." William J. Olson, "Guerrilla Warfare and Counterinsurgency," in Schultz et al. (1989), p. 26.

<sup>52</sup>For an insightful assessment of how U.S. assistance increases a foreign military's technical competence, improves its specialized training, and encourages complex bureaucratic structures, and how these improvements in turn strengthen the corporate military identity of the foreign officers, which then manifests itself in the military's tendency to assert its greater autonomy from the civilian leadership, see Fitch, *The Political Consequences of U.S. Military Assistance to Latin America*, (1977).

<sup>53</sup>The FMLN has made reform of the Salvadoran armed forces the critical issue of the continuing negotiations. The rebels have demanded the following: the prosecution of six notorious human rights cases in which the military is implicated, purging the armed forces of officers involved in human rights abuses, the removal of the security forces from military control, a reduction in the size of the military to its peacetime level of 12,000

forces, sadly but not surprisingly, are not enthusiastic about willing themselves into what they believe will lead to self-destruction and submitting to what they interpret as the decimation of the Salvadoran polity.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the insurgency in El Salvador got underway in part and was fueled in part by the armed forces' repressive activities. Those activities are in abatement, but they are not crushed and are certainly not under rigid civilian control. In the final as well as the initial analysis, it is unlikely that either side will soon entrust its survival to the goodwill of the other. Even if the current negotiations manage to achieve a lower level of violence, the conditions that spawned the civil war and the hatreds that have sustained it have yet to be ameliorated. Despite the prospect of an externally imposed settlement, too many Salvadorans remain all too eager to kill each other rather than compromise in the Assembly. If the U.S. goal in El Salvador is still, despite an end to the Cold War, to alter this fundamental fact, the American project there is far from over.

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men (some FMLN proposals demand a merging of the Salvadoran armed forces with its guerrilla force), and the appointment of a civilian defense minister. The goals of the FMLN and the United States coincide on a number of points. America has sought unsuccessfully to "civilianize" the Defense Ministry. The United States has always advocated the removal of the security forces from military control, and the armed forces have, surprisingly, softened their long-held stand and are willing to transfer the security forces to civilian ministries. America has also demanded action in the same human rights cases that are of special concern to the rebels, and it has favored greater civil control of the military and the purging of human rights abusers from the officer corps. (The United States has demanded that those guerrillas responsible for human rights violations and political murder be punished as well.) The Salvadoran military has unstintingly maintained that it alone is responsible for its modernization and evolution. The difference of opinion between the armed forces and the guerrillas regarding most issues of military reform appears uncompromisingly disparate. See "Government Agrees to Reform Military Commands," Paris AFP in Spanish, *FBIS-Latin America*, September 10, 1990, p. 16.; "Peace Depends on the Army," *Central America Report*, July 6, 1990; Hockstader, "Hope for Peace in El Salvador," (1990); "A Highly Conditional Accord," *Central America Report*, August 3, 1990; Gruson, "Salvador Peace Talks End in Bitterness," (1990); Hackel, "Salvadoran Peace Talks Deadlock over Military Reform," (1990).

<sup>54</sup>The military has thus far stood by Cristiani's peace efforts because it recognizes that a willingness to at least negotiate with the guerrillas is necessary to ensure the continuation of American aid. No faction within the officer corps, however, actively favors peace talks, and a powerful cabal of far-rightist officers strenuously opposes them. Recently, a group of young, combat-experienced "reformist" officers has emerged that is critical of the incompetent and corrupt practices of its superiors. This group should be embraced with great caution. Its dissatisfaction with the high command stems at least as much from its frustration that the *Tandona* dominates the plum command positions—thus stymieing the upward mobility of younger officers—as from its unhappiness with the high command's conduct of the war. Regarding the conduct of the war, this group of reformers is allied with the extreme political right, and it greatly resents what it regards as the meddling and moderating influence of the United States on the high command's policy. It advocates the aggressive prosecution of the conflict and what it considers to be the concomitant of that policy: a "gloves off" approach and a ruthless crushing of dissent.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS: THE ILLUSIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS OF NATION BUILDING

Writing from El Salvador in October 1988, reporter Brook Larmer stated that "nearly everyone here, from conservative Army colonels to leftist political leaders, openly criticizes the U.S. 'project,' questioning whether it can produce genuine change or end the war."<sup>1</sup> As the United States confronts the forbidding realities of its mission in El Salvador, it finds itself in agreement with the Salvadorans. Despite the hopes of low-intensity conflict doctrine, ten years of small progress and great frustration have revealed the limits of American power. Just as Marlow was confronted in *Heart of Darkness* with the tragic absurdity of Kurtz's claim that "by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," so the United States has become disillusioned with the role it has chosen to play in El Salvador. America's conviction that it can create democracy abroad is a pretense, at least in most lands at most times. Because of a well-intentioned, but misguided, assumption that techniques, technology, and programs alone could fundamentally transform a violent and unjust society into a liberal and democratic one, the United States perhaps did not consider sufficiently that human character, history, culture, and social structure are highly resistant to outside influence.

America's effort to build democracy has too often assumed that democracy requires merely the imposition of democratic institutions. Building a democratic nation in El Salvador, however, requires altering fundamentally a most undemocratic culture. While ten years of American pressure have sharply reduced the number of murders committed by the Salvadoran armed forces, for instance, that pressure has not altered the belief that peasants exist to be abused by those with greater power nor the attitude that the military is subject to no law except its own. Until the U.S. involvement, a favorite pastime of the young men of the oligarchy was to drive through the countryside shooting campesinos.<sup>2</sup> Although this practice has abated, the attitude

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<sup>1</sup>Larmer, "The Shifting Battlefield," (1988). After Cristiani's March 1989 presidential victory, d'Aubuisson revealed, "the American experiment with us is over. We have our own history to make. Nationalism is the guide of our experiment." (Quoted in Massing, "Sad New El Salvador," (1989).)

<sup>2</sup>Interviews, GAO analyst, November 1989, and American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990.

that underlay it has not; the killing, disappearance, or mistreatment of peasants still fails to elicit the outrage that would signal the true democratization of El Salvador. American advisers can tell the Salvadoran military that it must apply revolutionary principles in reverse to win popular support, but Salvadoran soldiers continually behave like an army of occupation, violating Mao's cardinal tenets. They feel no compulsion to pay for what they take from storeowners and street vendors, for example, and have no fear that their strong-arm tactics will be punished.<sup>3</sup> A decade of American prodding cannot arouse concern where none exists; as a highly placed source involved in the early attempts to reform the Salvadoran military remarked in disgust, that body "remains a bunch of murderous thugs."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, while the United States has exported the tools and administrative capacity necessary to improve the rule of law and to subject the military to civilian government, Salvadoran civil society has never prized these democratic principles.<sup>5</sup> It is thus not surprising that some investigators, prosecutors, soldiers, and judges faced with intimidation and death threats have been unwilling to risk their lives in pursuit of ideals alien to the Salvadoran polity.

Many officials involved in America's effort in El Salvador have recognized and been stunned by the awesome dimensions entailed by such a commitment. "We say we are here to fortify democracy," said one American diplomat, "Well, hell, we could be doing that forever."<sup>6</sup> In fortifying democracy, we have found ourselves in ludicrous positions. The United States spent between \$6 million and \$8 million to organize the 1982 Salvadoran legislative elections. When those elections resulted in the prospect that ARENA and the other radical right-wing parties that controlled the Assembly would elect the undemocratic d'Aubuisson as president, clearly an unacceptable candidate to Washington, the United States exerted intense pressure on the democratically elected Assembly to select a more progressive president.<sup>7</sup> In the 1984 presidential elections, which cost the United States at least \$10.4 million, AID paid organizers to encourage

<sup>3</sup>Interviews, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990.

<sup>4</sup>Interview, March 1991.

<sup>5</sup>Interview, former State Department official, March 1991.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in LeMoyné, "The Guns of El Salvador," (1989), p. 55. A former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador told reporters off the record that to accomplish the mission it set for itself, the United States would have to be involved in El Salvador for one hundred years. Interview, November 1989.

<sup>7</sup>Hammer (1988), p. 100. In the U.S.-induced compromise, d'Aubuisson was elected president of the National Assembly and centrist Alvarado Magaña was elected interim president of El Salvador until 1984.

workers and peasants to vote for Duarte over d'Aubuisson, and the CIA channeled funds to the Christian Democrats to prevent what was considered to be a likely d'Aubuisson victory.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in their effort to build a democratic society, Americans have found themselves saving El Salvador's democracy from itself. The United States has also been forced to watch the Salvadoran right use the democratic institutions that America has tried to strengthen—the legislature and the judiciary—to subvert the very reforms deemed essential. The Salvadoran right, for its part, wants none of America's democratization, complaining that El Salvador has “been a guinea pig for a socializing experiment that has only served to ruin the nation.”<sup>9</sup> Before the 1989 election, Ochoa, ironically, presented himself as the patriot and protector of the Salvadoran democratic process. He warned that any American attempt to rob ARENA of its presidential victory and impose the progressive Christian Democrat Chavez Mena as president would be met with “right-wing guerrillas.”<sup>10</sup>

If a regime is incapable of governing—controlling its own territory, imposing order among its population, winning support when it has been given reasonable assistance sufficient to compensate for help given to its internal enemies—it then becomes necessary to question whether that regime will survive and whether it deserves to survive.

<sup>8</sup>*New York Times*, May 13, 1984. American efforts to bring about electoral reform in El Salvador are discussed in Zak, “Assisting Elections in the Third World,” (1987).

<sup>9</sup>Ochoa, “A Voice of Dissent from the Salvadoran Military,” (1987). Former SOUTHCOM commander and present commander of SACEUR, General John Galvin, unwittingly supported the Salvadoran right's assertion that America's attitude toward El Salvador is colonialist when, in a 1987 interview, he recalled the impact of U.S. pressure on Salvadoran policies: “The message was becoming clear. The Salvadoran government was viewing it in its best interest to *pursue those policies created in Washington.*” (Quoted in Hammer (1988), pp. 102–103; emphasis added.) Forty-eight hours after his electoral victory, Cristiani declared, “We will not permit direct U.S. involvement in Salvadoran internal affairs.” *Central America Report*, March 31, 1989. In 1987, after resigning from the Salvadoran armed forces, Ochoa, then described by the *Wall Street Journal* as “the most important figure in El Salvador's democratic opposition,” complained bitterly: “I ask myself, why the U.S., the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, the major defender of human rights and individual integrity, has imposed a series of socialist measures on us. Why didn't they experiment on a small state like Vermont or Maine? I would like to know how the U.S. landowners would react when the first lands were taken from them, or their factories, or their banks.” (Ochoa, *ibid.*)

<sup>10</sup>Larmer, “The Politics of Polarization,” (1988). In 1988 there was a significant increase in death squad activity and reports of efforts by powerful members of ARENA to reorganize and rearm the death squads, this after a marked diminution of their power and activity since their apex in 1983. A primary aim of rebuilding the death squads was to enable the far right to resist any Christian Democratic government attempt to deny an ARENA victory in the March 1989 presidential elections. See Farah, “Salvadoran Death Squads Threaten Resurgence; Ex-Members from Period of Mass Killings Say Extremist Forces Are Regathering,” (1988).

It is one matter to teach an army to break down into small units and patrol at night, but quite another to give it a reason to fight. While American pressure has helped eliminate some of the Salvadoran military's worst abuses, the armed forces remain thoroughly incompetent, ineffective, and unpopular. It is beyond our power to alter this. Furthermore, if political development in El Salvador requires that the regime must be coached by foreigners on how to treat its own people, then counterinsurgency doctrine's pursuit of its noble goal is quixotic.

### **VIETNAM, EL SALVADOR, AND THE FUTURE OF LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT**

Since 1980, for better or worse, a specter has haunted the U.S. involvement in El Salvador: the specter of Vietnam. American strategists have insisted that they have absorbed the lessons of the Vietnam War and that therefore low-intensity conflict doctrine can be made to work in El Salvador.<sup>11</sup> Facile historical analogies must be avoided, but since the lessons of the earlier conflict have been proclaimed as guiding policy for the latter, an examination of the sources of American frustration common to both can illuminate problems likely to arise for the United States in future low-intensity conflicts.

In both Vietnam and El Salvador, policymakers had remarkably similar perceptions of the means needed to achieve strategic goals. Whether termed "internal defense and development," "counterinsurgency," "pacification," "the other war," or fundamental reform, the creation of responsive, legitimate government, the winning of the voluntary support of the population through reform and redistribution—and not main force military operations—would in both conflicts, it was believed, be the key to success. Under Secretary of Defense Alain Enthoven's assertion in 1967 that success in Vietnam depended upon "political and economic progress rather than military victories"<sup>12</sup> is vividly echoed in the assertions of military advisers in El Salvador that victory there could only be won through political, social, and economic reform.<sup>13</sup>

A more disturbing similarity also presents itself. McNamara's earlier quoted statement, in which his certitude in regard to what constituted the "important war" was matched by his consternation at

<sup>11</sup>"The precedent has been set in El Salvador," declared Waghelstein, "to allow us to use this doctrine [LIC] without looking over our shoulder at Vietnam." Quoted in Krauss and Carrington (1986).

<sup>12</sup>*Pentagon Papers* (1971), Vol. 4, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup>Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 12.

America's inability to inspire the South Vietnamese to wage it, reverberates in the Colonels' report when it asserts that, despite America's appreciation of the goal of the "important war," it has yet to divine the means to achieve it. In both conflicts, what the United States has deemed most necessary has proved the most elusive.

In a misplaced fit of breast-beating and out of an overestimation of America's ability to heal foreign nations, the Colonels' report does for the American involvement in El Salvador what Robert Komer did in his RAND report for American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> They both explore how what the most sensible policymakers agreed *should* be done was not done. They both primarily explain this failure by citing the institutional constraints impinging upon the American military's ability to fight—or train others to fight—an unconventional war, the object of which is not territory but popular support. The American military, both Komer and the Colonels argue, approached both conflicts unmindful of what these wars truly demanded, instead determining its strategy as seen through the prism of the sort of war it was trained, equipped, and organized to fight.<sup>15</sup> There is undoubted truth in these interpretations. But even allowing for a high degree of irrationality—let alone institutional inertia—it is extraordinarily difficult to believe that *all* the advisers the Colonels interviewed recognize the importance of the other war<sup>16</sup> yet perversely

<sup>14</sup>Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, (1972).

<sup>15</sup>The belief that the American military still embraces the use of conventional tactics in its training of Third World armed forces facing insurgencies and the concomitant belief that these wars would be won by America's allies if only U.S. advisers would cease this inappropriate infatuation and instead teach their charges the social, political, and economic elements of low-intensity conflict is asserted repeatedly in the literature on American policy concerning these conflicts. See, for instance, Schultz, "Low-Intensity Conflict: Future Challenges and Lessons from the Reagan Years," (1989), p. 362.

<sup>16</sup>Bacevich et al. (1988), p. 12. Waghelstein, who served two years in Vietnam and five tours of duty in Latin America, recognized and endlessly emphasized the enormous importance of both counterinsurgency tactics—small-unit operations and night patrols—and counterinsurgency strategy—waging the economic, political, and social war needed to defeat the insurgency in El Salvador. While the Colonels' report calls into question the degree to which U.S. military advisers have embraced counterinsurgency warfare, arguing that they reflect the conventional warfighting bias of the army in which they serve, in 1983 the American advisers in El Salvador were described as mostly Vietnam veterans and as "a highly qualified group, half of them officers, many with advanced degrees, most of them Green Berets with an expertise in counterinsurgency augmented by subsequent experience in Latin America." (Chavez, "The Odds in El Salvador," (1983), p. 16.) While special forces soldiers continue to form the majority of American military advisory personnel in El Salvador, there has been since the mid-1980s a greater proportion of conventional U.S. Army advisers there. For another discussion of the importance the United States and MILGROUP attached to fighting an unconventional war in El Salvador, see Strasser with LeMoyne (1983). Although they

insist upon training the Salvadoran armed forces in a rigidly conventional manner.<sup>17</sup>

In El Salvador there would seem to be enough energetic Americans imbued with the courage of their convictions on the importance of the other war to overcome at least any American institutional constraints. In Vietnam, Komer brilliantly, if irascibly, led the pacification effort from 1968 to 1972, seemingly signifying the enormous importance that senior policymakers—if not most generals—placed on the other war.<sup>18</sup> The successes and failures of the post-1968 American pacification effort point to explanations other than that of an inappropriate military approach. Between the Tet offensive and the Paris Peace Accords, the United States and South Vietnam were winning the counterinsurgency war, *tactically defined*.<sup>19</sup> This success was meaningless, however, because even though more of the population was insulated from the Viet Cong's political control, Saigon failed to fill the political void. Without good government, the government of South Vietnam could not hope to attract the voluntary support of the people, and without that support, no purely military measures could win the war.<sup>20</sup> Simply put, the political system of South Vietnam was incapable of transforming itself into a viable counterrevolutionary alternative to the Viet Cong. The crux of the failure of the other war in Vietnam—the absence of any political foundation for a program purporting to engage the population on the side of the government—was immedicable by American influence. There is reason to criticize the United States' militarily orthodox approach to the war in Vietnam. But to focus exclusively on this issue is to miss a more

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constituted a smaller sampling than that of the Colonels, *all* the former military advisers—and most everyone else connected with the U.S. effort in El Salvador—whom the author interviewed also stressed both the primacy of the “other war” and the necessity of employing unconventional counterinsurgency tactics against the FMLN.

<sup>17</sup>To maintain that the Salvadorans themselves are wedded to a conventional military view of the conflict from which we have been unable to divorce them—as the Colonels do at points in their study—is an entirely different argument.

<sup>18</sup>The Army's own PROVN study argued forcefully for the substantial revision of priorities away from large-unit operations and toward pacification. Conventional U.S. military operations, its authors argued, were not only failing to win the war, they were actually counterproductive. Pacification, the report stated, “must be designated unequivocally as the major U.S./GVN effort.” (*Pentagon Papers* (1971), Vol. 2, pp. 576–580. For other statements emphasizing pacification over conventional military strategy, see Vol. 2, pp. 527–533, 542–545; Vol. 3, pp. 666–673; and Vol. 4, pp. 327–332.) Written in 1966, PROVN noted that its ambitious goal, providing “necessary social reform” in order to induce the population to support the GVN, “would take years—perhaps well into the 1970s—to carry out.”

<sup>19</sup>Lewy (1978), pp. 190–195; Blaufarb (1977), pp. 261–268.

<sup>20</sup>As PROVN declared, “Victory” can only be achieved through bringing the individual Vietnamese to support willingly the GVN.” *Pentagon Papers* (1971), Vol. 2, p. 576.

important truth, one that has profound significance for America's future involvement in the Third World: South Vietnam was not a nation that could be "built" by American intervention.

In examining why American efforts in counterinsurgencies fail to deliver the results desired, proponents of low-intensity conflict policy exclusively discuss the United States' *implementation* of assistance. Failure is ascribed to inadequate integration among the military advisory group, CIA, AID, and the embassy; or inapplicable and inadequate training of American personnel; or unpredictable funding of security assistance, for instance. The solutions prescribed are invariably programmatic, while the premises upon which counterinsurgency doctrine are based remain inviolate. Rather than questioning and testing the assumptions that underlie the doctrine, there is a constant tinkering with techniques and organizational charts. Discussions of America's involvement in El Salvador or Vietnam become exercises in self-flagellation in which such straw men as the American military's "conventional mindset" or the State Department's parochial bureaucratic concerns are easily set up. The cures offered are as familiar and simplistic as the diagnoses: ensure that low-intensity conflict is not relegated to the periphery of military education, or manipulate the organization of the "country team" to guarantee interagency coordination.

Perhaps in Vietnam we were and in El Salvador we are being too hard on ourselves. Fulfillment of such complex and ambitious tasks that it has regarded as essential to defeat insurgencies in foreign lands is not within the United States' power to accomplish. It is one thing to have the key; it is an entirely different matter to force another to use it to unlock a door through which he does not wish to enter. A proper appreciation of this would, it is to be hoped, quiet the cries of "try harder" directed at those who have all along been trying their hardest; such appreciation could go far in explaining how the extraordinary energy and commitment that American officials and advisers applied to the construction of a just, equitable, and peaceful society in El Salvador has achieved such blemished results. There is a dangerous tendency to blame America first for failures in counterinsurgency, and a concomitant belief that in such endeavors the United States has the formula for success and merely has to employ it correctly for the desired results to follow. This belief may lead policy-makers to commit American lucre and prestige to causes that might, in fact, be chimerical.

## UNPALATABLE ALTERNATIVES

### A Campaign of Terror

If the United States cannot build a democratic society in a foreign country that will rally the people behind its ally and so defeat an insurgency, then the Salvadorans' counterinsurgency efforts present an alternative of unmitigated repression.

Describing the motivations behind a population's behavior in an insurgency, Charles Simpson writes,

In the dirty and dangerous business of revolutionary war, the motivation that produces the only real long-lasting effect is not likely to be an ideology, but the elemental consideration of survival. Peasants will support [the guerrillas] . . . if they are convinced that failure to do so will result in death or brutal punishment. They will support the government if and when they are convinced that it *offers them a better life*, and it can and will protect them against the [guerrilla] . . . forever.<sup>21</sup>

If, however, the goal for both the guerrilla and the government is to win support, voluntary or otherwise, why will threats and repression not work equally well for the government? While such a choice is morally repugnant, if the single, overriding objective is to suppress an insurgency, there are alternatives to winning hearts and minds for gaining the population's cooperation. Many of the more extreme elements in ARENA and in the Salvadoran officer corps speak admiringly of Guatemala's horrific counterinsurgency effort, while deriding the U.S.-imposed low-intensity conflict fought in their country. They recognize that at least Guatemala's campaign has been more effective than El Salvador's and that while it brilliantly employed counterinsurgency *tactics* of small-unit operations, it eschewed a liberal or reformist counterinsurgency *strategy*.<sup>22</sup>

These men know that the left's penetration of Salvadoran society is far deeper than in Guatemala; that the FMLN acts as a de facto local government in about 30 percent of the country; that the rebels enjoy some sympathy from over half a million Salvadorans; that working along with an estimated 6000–7000 extraordinarily tough and committed guerrillas is a clandestine militia force of up to 40,000, which gathers intelligence, carries out sabotage, stages hit-and-run attacks, and joins the regular guerrilla forces when needed;<sup>23</sup> and that the militia serves as a link between the rebel fighters and those active

<sup>21</sup>Simpson, *Inside the Green Berets: The First Thirty Years*, (1982), p. 62.

<sup>22</sup>Ochoa, "A Voice of Dissent from the Salvadoran Military."

<sup>23</sup>Freed, "Weekend Warriors' Aid Salvador Rebels' Strategy," (1988).

supporters who make weapons and print leaflets for the guerrillas, tend their wounded, and regularly attend their political meetings. In short, these men know that the FMLN's infrastructure is so dense that only a massacre could uproot it. These men speak ominously of "total war" as an alternative to the Pentagon's imposed doctrines, a view that enjoys considerable sympathy among the Salvadoran Army's field commanders.<sup>24</sup> These men know that there is only one course to follow if American aid—and constraints—are withdrawn.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps most important, these men remember that in 1980 the goal of both the Salvadoran armed forces and the United States was to prevent a takeover by the leftist-led guerrillas and their allied political organizations. At this point in the Salvadoran conflict, the military resources of the rebels were extremely limited and their greatest strength by far lay not in force of arms but in their mass organizations that could be mobilized by the thousands in El Salvador's major cities, thus shutting down the country through strikes. The immediate goal of anyone interested in stopping the advances of the left, then, had to be the elimination of the guerrillas' urban bases. This was accomplished. Some claim that land reform initiated in March 1980 played a major role in undercutting the guerrillas' support. They argue that the same organizations that could assemble marches of hundreds of thousands in San Salvador in January 1980 could not by August of the same year mount a successful general strike and by the time of the abortive final offensive of January 1981 showed almost no popular support. But the extremists in ARENA and the military know that if land reform did, in fact, undermine popular support, it would have had its greatest impact in the countryside. This was not the case. These men know that the guerrillas' great setback in 1980 came in the cities, not as a result of reform but because the armed forces and death squads murdered 10,000 people and so deracinated with lavish brutality the guerrillas'

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<sup>24</sup>Interviews, American experts formerly posted to El Salvador, December 1990; LeoGrande, "After the Battle of San Salvador," (1990), p. 345; Gruson, "Salvadoran Arms Aid: Will Congress's Tactic Work?" (1990) and "Party Backlash for El Salvador Chief," (1990); and Lane, "Death's Democracy," (1989), p. 19.

<sup>25</sup>Interviews, U.S. diplomat, American expert formerly posted to El Salvador, journalist, November 1989. The diplomat questioned whether, as is usually asserted, the Salvadoran armed forces would lose if U.S. support were withdrawn. The "Pol Pot" solution that would then be adopted by the armed forces, he argued, could be brutally effective. On the support for a "Guatemala solution" among Salvadorans, see Lane, "The War That Will Not End," (1989) and "Death's Democracy," (1989); Freed, "Week-end Warriors' Aid Salvador Rebels' Strategy," (1988); McAllister, "No Place to Hide," (1989); and Blachman and Sharpe (1988-89), p. 122.

political and military infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> These men, then, have their own conception of counterinsurgency, one that has nothing to do with American policy.<sup>27</sup>

### Colonialism

If America still finds it in its interest to counter an insurgency in a foreign land, but if it also wishes to avoid the moral stain of galloping after security on the backs of indigenous monsters, an only somewhat less repugnant alternative presents itself. If American security and other interests demand nothing less than the democratization of El Salvador, for instance, and if the Salvadorans are not up to the task themselves, the United States could use its overwhelming military strength to occupy that country for as long as it takes to build democratic institutions. In this way, America could control the political, administrative, and military machinery and thus replace diplomatic exhortation with real authority. Of course, the FMLN's and the far right's assertions to the contrary, the United States is not a colonialist power.<sup>28</sup> If, however, our highly ambitious goals remain constant, as does the frustration that surrounds them, imperialism, or a less extreme version of it, might be the only way to achieve those goals.

<sup>26</sup>For the faith that many Salvadoran officers put into the cold efficacy of the death squads, see Dickey, "Behind the Death Squads," (1983), p. 20. The Philippines counterinsurgency campaign, too, has shunned hearts and minds in favor of unalloyed repression, which has apparently been effective. See "May the Hearts and Minds Will Follow," *Economist*, September 9, 1989, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup>"We don't like to admit it," an American expert posted to El Salvador reflects, "but the horrible lesson of the early eighties is that terrorism works" as a counterinsurgency tool. He notes that a high-ranking Salvadoran military official told him that respect for human rights is a luxury that could now be afforded, thanks to the efficiency of the death squads. "We cleaned up San Salvador for you," the officer told the expert, "So now you can go to parties at night." Interview, November 1989.

<sup>28</sup>In a cable assessing the ramifications of PROVN's ambitious plan, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) perspicaciously noted the internal contradictions of an American "good colonialist" role in Vietnam. MACV's admonition could easily apply to a similar effort in El Salvador: "The direct involvement and leverage envisioned by PROVN could range from skillful diplomatic pressure to U.S. unilateral execution of critical programs. MACV considers that there is a great danger that the extent of involvement envisioned could become too great. A government sensitive to its image as champion of national sovereignty profoundly affected by the pressure of militant minorities, and unsure of its tenure and legitimacy will resent too great involvement by U.S. Excessive U.S. involvement may defeat objectives of U.S. policy: development of free, independent non-communist nation." (*Pentagon Papers* (1971), Vol. 2, p. 579.)

## EVALUATING AMERICAN POLICY

In assessing the success of America's policy toward El Salvador, U.S. policymakers should be clear-eyed about what they have tried to accomplish and why. For 12 years America has sought to secure the Salvadoran regime from the assault of the FMLN. Today some still maintain that despite tremendous changes in the international political environment, that goal remains in America's interest, arguing that the insurgency in El Salvador threatens the political stability of a U.S. ally.<sup>29</sup> While true, that assertion fails to elucidate how this situation threatens intrinsic American interests. Rather, this argument—and similar ones concerning America's stake in defending other allies embroiled in low-intensity conflicts—implicitly identifies U.S. interests with the fate of particular governments; their fears become our fears, their enemies our enemies. This confusion, a relic of the global containment doctrine, if ever valid, is now outmoded.

Furthermore, since at least the time of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, an axiom—honored perhaps more often in the breach than the observance—of America's policy toward allies threatened by insurgencies maintains that such conflicts are the local regime's to fight. An ability to deal effectively with internal unrest by the discriminate application of force and the amelioration of conditions that engender it is probably the best test of a regime's viability. Identifying America's interests with power structures that have proved incapable of this unnecessarily binds the United States to possibly unpopular, probably corrupt, and certainly ineffective governments. This hardly serves America's long-term interests.

While some maintain that the United States has an important commitment to El Salvador, still others, disgusted by the extreme right's virulent stranglehold on many facets of the Salvadoran polity and the military's barbaric lapses, argue that American aid to the Salvadoran regime is immoral and should end. Policymakers should face this question honestly. They should recognize that in the early years of the Reagan administration some officials had what could most charitably be described as a callous disregard of the sources, extent, and consequences of rightist violence in El Salvador. They must also recognize, however, that it is impossible to imagine any point in the past decade or in the future when El Salvador would not be a far more violent and unjust place, but for the American effort. Yet they should also face a cold question that has eluded close examination in the decade-long debate surrounding U.S. policy toward El Salvador:

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<sup>29</sup>See, for instance, Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Army's Role in Counterinsurgency and Insurgency*, RAND, R-3947-A, November 1990, p. 5.

does America's national interest dictate a commitment to stanching internecine bloodshed in and civilizing that traumatized country?

Although some of the thorniest issues that have derailed past negotiations have yet to be resolved, the accords recently cobbled together in New York bring El Salvador closer to an end to its civil war than it has been for 12 years. This situation, however, is no occasion for the United States to congratulate itself, since such a settlement was anathema to the architects of U.S. policy toward El Salvador in the 1980s. Until 1990, America did not seek a compromise brokered by the United Nations but pressed for a clear victory through a combination of military and reform measures. In these terms, American policy failed.

In its unwavering support of the Salvadoran regime, however, the United States has succeeded in prolonging the war for a decade. In that time, though the ambitious goals of America's policy were never realized, the security concerns that impelled that policy have all but evaporated along with the East-West contest and El Salvador's perceived place in it. "Winning" in El Salvador no longer matters much. A negotiated solution, or even "losing," would no longer carry the same ominous significance it would have had for the Reagan administration at the beginning of the last decade. Of course, it is merely fortuitous that in El Salvador the United States has waited out the communist threat. If that threat still existed and if America still sought victory in El Salvador, U.S. statesmen and soldiers would now have to realize that their low-intensity conflict policy has merely achieved a prolonged and costly stalemate, and that only the stark alternatives of colonialism or repression could bring success.

Since 1981 policymakers believed instead that victory in El Salvador could be won by influencing the regime to do what was necessary to win its people's hearts and minds; and the United States believed that the \$6 billion in support it provided bought considerable leverage in that effort. But the Salvadorans had America trapped. They realized that the United States was involved in their war for its own national security interests. Salvadorans recognized, more so than most Americans, that the position of Republican presidents and their Democratic opponents in Congress was identical on the important issue concerning El Salvador: both were adamant, for domestic political and apparent 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 to cease aid if Washington repeatedly affirmed its determination to "draw a line" against communism in El Salvador? So while the ruling Salvadorans gestured appropriately in response to U.S. conditions, whenever the U.S.-

imposed reforms threatened to alter fundamentally the status quo—their very object—they were emasculated.

In many instances, especially in the field of human rights, the Salvadoran far right and military remained remarkably immune to American blandishments. Washington often found itself forced to settle for less than it hoped, even less than the minimum improvement it thought absolutely necessary. Such capitulation left the United States supporting policies and practices that sustained the insurgency, while committing America's prestige to its defeat.

If the contestants in El Salvador negotiate an end to their present conflict, let alone a permanent peace, they will have done so because they are too weary to continue fighting—and because America can for the first time influence the Salvadoran right and press the military into making meaningful concessions to the FMLN. Paradoxically, American leverage has vastly increased because the Salvadoran regime realizes that Washington no longer has pressing reasons to continue supporting it. Thus the same U.S. pressure for progress in human rights that was so fruitless in the past proved partially successful in the Jesuit case. With the end of the Cold War the regime finally saw some credibility in threats from the U.S. Embassy and Congress that aid would be withdrawn unless convictions were obtained.

That these conditions have proved necessary to bring murderers to justice and antagonists to the negotiating table sums up the history of America's involvement in El Salvador: First we devoted our political energy and national resources to prevent the defeat of our ally and to help institute reforms we deemed essential for democracy to triumph. We then endured a prolonged period of frustration, compelled to save Salvadoran "democracy" from its own undemocratic excesses and failing to prod our ally sufficiently to defeat the insurgency or reform radically enough. Finally, when El Salvador lost its importance, we left the settling of differences to a UN mediator.

Some American officials and policy planners have said that they look upon the "strategy" pursued in El Salvador as a model for future involvements in low-intensity conflicts. But this is dubious. If that strategy proves most effective when vital interests are not at stake, it will work best in situations that matter least.

In appraising the United States' involvement in El Salvador, policymakers are left confronting an inescapable fact: a chasm yawns between America's objectives and America's achievements there. For a decade, U.S. policy toward El Salvador tried to synthesize liberal and conservative aims: foster political, social, and economic reform, and provide security to a country whose freedom from communism

the United States deemed essential. In attempting to reconcile these objectives, however, we pursued a policy by means unsettling to ourselves, for ends humiliating to the Salvadorans, and at a cost disproportionate to any conventional conception of the national interest.

## Appendix A

### A SUMMARY AND CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT IN EL SALVADOR: 1979-1991

Between 1979 and 1981, El Salvador descended into civil war. Motivated in large measure by the increasing violent repression carried out by successive military governments and by the success of the Sandinista revolution in neighboring Nicaragua, Salvadoran rebel groups formed, each dedicated to the violent overthrow of the existing political system. Responding to this state of crisis and the existing regime's inability to redress it, reformist elements in the Salvadoran armed forces staged a coup d'état in October 1979. The new junta linked the major opposition parties, business interests, and the reformist military faction in an effort to implement major structural reforms and curtail the violence committed by the armed forces and extreme right. Within weeks, however, rightist elements gained ascendancy within the junta. Because the junta failed to control human rights abusers, most political moderates withdrew from the government. These moderates set aside their differences with radical political groups to form the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR); this political coalition in turn allied itself with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), itself a loose alliance of five separate Marxist guerrilla groups. By late 1980, FMLN troops had seized control of large areas of three of El Salvador's 14 provinces. A badly overstretched and incompetent Salvadoran military seemed near collapse. The rebels' "final offensive" of January 1981, however, failed to overthrow the government.

While President Jimmy Carter's administration had become so disgusted with the abysmal human rights performance of the previous Romero regime that it cut off military aid to El Salvador, it also deeply feared "another Nicaragua" and thus renewed military assistance to the Salvadoran armed forces. President Reagan continued and accelerated the Carter administration's policy of support of the beleaguered Salvadoran government against the FMLN. With the financial, political, and military backing of the United States, the government of El Salvador embarked upon a dual strategy of building the Salvadoran military's counterinsurgency capacity while promoting a broader counterinsurgency effort of reforms and "democratization" to increase the regime's legitimacy at home and abroad. This

strategy has thwarted a rebel victory which seemed to be within reach in the early 1980s; but it has been able to achieve no more than a military stalemate in the continuing conflict with the FMLN.

### 1979

October 15 A group of young military officers overthrows the government of General Carlos Humberto Romero and forms a ruling junta with prominent civilian politicians.

### 1980

January 3 Two of three civilian members of the junta resign, along with all the civilian cabinet members, after the military rejects civilian control. The first junta dissolves. A new Christian Democratic Party-military junta is formed.

March 6 The junta promulgates an agrarian reform law; it plans to expropriate all properties over 500 acres and form cooperatives to be owned by the families working them.

March 24 Archbishop Oscar Romero is assassinated.

April The Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) forms and begins to operate as the political arm of the revolutionary opposition.

October 11 The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) is formed by the union of five insurgent groups.

November 27 Six leaders of the FDR are kidnapped and killed as they prepare for a news conference.

- December 2 Four U.S. churchwomen are abducted, raped, and killed by members of the National Guard.
- December 5 U.S. economic and military aid is suspended in reaction to the churchwomen murders.
- December 17 U.S. restores economic aid.

### 1981

- January 4 Two American labor leaders and the head of the Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Reform are assassinated at the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador under orders from two National Guard majors. The majors escape punishment; their henchmen, two enlisted men, are convicted in 1986 but are freed by the 1987 general amnesty.
- January 10 Insurgent forces launch "final offensive."
- January 14 U.S. restores military aid and sends three advisory teams to El Salvador.
- May Major Roberto d'Aubuisson founds the ARENA party.
- December 11 Massacres occur in the hamlet of El Mozote and nine surrounding villages. 700 noncombatants are killed by government troops.

### 1982

- January The first 1500 Salvadoran soldiers arrive at Fort Bragg and Fort Benning to receive training.
- March 28 Election held for Legislative Assembly.
- April 22 D'Aubuisson elected president of Legislative Assembly.

April 29 Due to U.S. pressure, the presidency of El Salvador is denied to d'Aubuisson. Alvaro Magana is named instead.

### 1983

January–June The FMLN murders at least 43 civilians. In early May the FMLN summarily executes captured government soldiers.

February 22 Army soldiers kidnap and kill approximately 70 men from the Las Hojas farming cooperative.

March The National Campaign Plan—a comprehensive pacification effort—is begun in San Vicente and Usulután.

December 11 Vice President George Bush visits El Salvador and makes specific threats to end U.S. aid unless death squad activities are curbed and certain officers strongly suspected of human rights violations are relieved of command. Officers are transferred and death squad activities diminish significantly.

### 1984

May 6 Christian Democratic leader Jose Napoleon Duarte is elected president of El Salvador, defeating ARENA party leader d'Aubuisson.

August 29–30 The Atlacatl Battalion kills civilians in and around Las Vueltas, Chalatenango, culminating in a massacre on the Gualsinga River. At least 50 die.

December 31 Insurgent forces take over the Fourth Brigade Headquarters at El Paraiso.

**1985**

- Early 1985      The FMLN begins to change tactics from relatively large-scale, conventional attacks to smaller-unit action. Economic sabotage becomes a major component of insurgents' arsenal.
- March 31        The Christian Democratic Party wins a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly and a majority of municipal councils.
- June 19         FMLN members attack several nightclubs in San Salvador's Zona Rosa, killing 13 unarmed people, including four off-duty U.S. Marines.
- September 10   Ines Guadalupe Duarte, the president's daughter, is kidnapped by the FMLN. She and several mayors, who had been kidnapped in previous months, are released on October 24 in exchange for political prisoners held by the government.
- November        The United for Reconstruction civic action campaign is inaugurated.

**1986**

- January 8        Salvadoran armed forces initiate "Operation Phoenix," designed to drive out insurgents from strongholds on the Guazapa Volcano. It lasts until mid-1987.
- June 1            FMLN accepts Duarte's proposal for a resumption of peace talks.
- October 12      Earthquake strikes San Salvador, killing over 1000 and causing extensive damage.

**1987**

- August 7 Duarte signs the Central American Peace Plan, obligating the government to negotiate with the FMLN, to allow FDR leaders to return to El Salvador, and to declare amnesty for political prisoners.
- October 22 A broad amnesty for all crimes—except the Romero murder—connected with the civil war is passed by the Assembly. FMLN combatants must apply within 15 days for amnesty; no such time limits are applied to death squad or military operatives.
- October 26 Herbert Anaya, head of the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission, is murdered.
- November Ruben Zamora and Guillermo Ungo, respectively vice president and president of the FDR, return from exile and resume political activity.

**1988**

- March 16 ARENA supplants the Christian Democrats as majority party in municipal and legislative elections.
- July 7 U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz visits El Salvador and presses Salvadoran military officials to curb human rights violations.
- September 21 Soldiers of the Fifth Military Detachment murder ten villagers from San Sebastian. The Army first asserts that the villagers were subversives who were killed in a fire fight; it then claims the FMLN killed the villagers.

**1989**

- February 3 Vice President Dan Quayle visits El Salvador, issuing a tough warning on human rights violations and declaring the need to solve the San Sebastian case.
- March 19 Alfredo Cristiani, of the ARENA party, is elected president.
- April 19 The FMLN kills Attorney General Jose Roberto Garcia Alvarado.
- June 9 Jose Alejandro Antonio Rodriguez Porth, newly appointed minister of the presidency, is killed. Although it denies involvement, the FMLN is the prime suspect.
- October 17 Ana Isabel Casanova, daughter of the commander of the military academy and cousin of a former defense minister, is assassinated.
- October 19 Zamora's home is bombed.
- October 31 Bombs explode at the office of COMADES (the Committee of the Mothers of the Disappeared) and the FENASTRAS labor federation, killing ten persons and wounding over 35.
- November 2 FMLN breaks off peace talks.
- November 11 FMLN launches biggest offensive in the history of the conflict.
- November 16 Soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion kill six Jesuit priests—including the rector and vice-rector of the Central American University and the director of its Human Rights Institute.
- November 29 The FMLN kills five journalists after capture at the headquarters of the government news agency.

**1990**

- January 13      Cristiani identifies nine Army soldiers as those responsible for the Jesuit murders.
- May 16          The government and the FMLN begin the first round of the most recent peace talks.
- July 17         U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson visits El Salvador to deliver a scathing lecture to the Salvadoran High Command regarding its suspected involvement in the Jesuit murders.

**1991**

- January 2        The FMLN shoots down a U.S. military helicopter carrying three U.S. servicemen. Two of the servicemen survive the crash but are murdered by the FMLN.
- March 10        Legislative and municipal elections are held. ARENA emerges as dominant party but loses outright majority.
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## Appendix B

### A GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ARENA	<i>Alianza Republicana Nacionalista</i> (Nationalist Republican Alliance). The right-wing political party currently in power.
COMADRES	<i>Comité de Madres</i> (Committee of Mothers [of the "disappeared"]). A left-wing human rights group in El Salvador.
CONARA	<i>Comisión Nacional de Restauración de Areas</i> (National Commission for Restoration of Areas). Salvadoran government agency overseeing civic action and development projects.
FDR	<i>Frente Democrático Revolucionario</i> (Revolutionary Democratic Front). Political coalition of left-wing and radical opposition groups; the political arm of the FMLN.
FENASTRAS	<i>Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños</i> (Salvadoran Workers National Union Federation). Large, politically active labor union.
FMLN	<i>Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional</i> (Farbundo Marti National Liberation Front). An alliance of five separate Marxist guerrilla groups.
IPSFA	<i>Instituto de Previsión Social de la Fuerza Armada</i> (Armed Forces Social Security Institute). The Salvadoran military's social welfare agency.
MEA	<i>Municipios en Acción</i> (Municipalities in Action). A municipally based Salvadoran civic action program.
ORDEN	<i>Organización Democrática Nacionalista</i> (Nationalist Democratic Organization). The acronym spells the Spanish word "order." A rightist paramilitary organization formed in the late 1960s.

- PDC *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (Christian Democratic Party). A left-of-center political party, the largest opposition party to the currently ruling ARENA party.
- UPR *Unido Para Reconstruir* (United for Reconstruction). A Salvadoran military civic action program.

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