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# AFTER THE BATTLE OF SAN SALVADOR

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“The stated purposes of the general uprising have failed,” President Lyndon B. Johnson said a few days after the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam launched the Tet offensive in 1968. “Communist leaders counted on popular support in the cities for their effort; they found little or none.”<sup>1</sup> Johnson was right; Tet was a military defeat for the Vietnamese guerrillas. But it was a political victory. The stunning scope and intensity of the offensive—especially the attack on the capital of Saigon—demonstrated that the war in Vietnam was not gradually being won, as Johnson had been assuring the American public. After Tet, Vietnam looked like a war without end.

The Bush administration’s public reaction to last November’s offensive in El Salvador by the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) was reminiscent of the hollow optimism voiced after Tet. “The FMLN failed totally in this offensive,” Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson said with assurance. “They lost between 15 and 20 percent of their forces.”<sup>2</sup> But here, too, the narrow military assessment of the battle was misleading. The principal effect of the attack was not to alter the military balance, but to shatter conventional wisdom in Washington about the course of the war.

Since 1984, U.S. policy toward El Salvador and the bipartisan congressional consensus behind it have rested on two key assumptions. The first was that the Salvadoran armed forces, bolstered by U.S. military aid, were gradually winning the war. The second was that the Salvadorans were building a democracy to replace the nation’s traditional military dictatorship. The strength and tenacity of the guerrilla offensive last November shattered the first illusion. The army’s response to the offensive shattered the second.

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The FMLN attacks began on November 11, when guerrillas occupied six poor neighborhoods along the northern rim of San Salvador. Simultaneously, other FMLN units launched assaults in seven more of the nation's 14 provinces. At first, the armed forces advanced cautiously against guerrilla positions in the capital, and government officials denied that air power would be used in such densely populated areas. But when the army was unable to dislodge the guerrillas by ground assault, the high command began to worry that it was losing control of the situation. The air force then unleashed its full firepower, producing over 1,000 civilian casualties and leaving thousands homeless. The guerrillas dug in, fought the army house to house in some neighborhoods, and after two weeks withdrew in an orderly fashion to their strongholds in the north.

The FMLN's offensive shocked Washington and thrust El Salvador back into the headlines, derailing the Bush administration's yearlong effort to keep it on the back burner. The fighting touched off a vigorous policy debate between congressional Democrats and the administration. It remains an open question, however, as to whether the trauma of the offensive will indeed provoke a serious reassessment of U.S. policy toward El Salvador—or whether, after the initial shock, the American position will remain fundamentally unchanged.

### **The Origins of Consensus**

Both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan had tried during their presidencies to build a stable, reformist regime in San Salvador based on the moderate political center—the Christian Democrats. As with President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, reform was to be the long-term antidote for revolution, while U.S. military assistance would eliminate any revolutionaries who might spring up in the meantime. Both Carter and Reagan resisted efforts by the extreme right, especially the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), to turn back the clock to the authoritarian past when politics were dominated by a partnership between oligarchs and officers. Carter believed the old order was inherently unstable and would simply pave the way for a guerrilla victory. Reagan was more skeptical of reform and more tolerant of what the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, referred to euphemistically as “moderately authoritarian regimes.” But Reagan was forced to embrace reform in El Salvador as a condition for continued congressional funding of the war.

By 1984, both the White House and Congress believed that the United



States had turned the corner in El Salvador. Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte was elected president that year on a platform pledging to improve human rights, raise the living standard of the poor, and negotiate an end to the civil war. Despite his role in the 1980–82 civil-military junta, which presided over the worst bloodletting since *La Matanza* (“the slaughter”) of 1932, Duarte nevertheless enjoyed great popularity in Washington.<sup>3</sup> His Christian Democrats had led the fight for reform in El Salvador in the 1960s, and Duarte would have won the 1972 presidential election if only the army had not stolen the ballot boxes. The oligarchy’s visceral hatred of Duarte seemed to validate his credentials as a democrat, and his inauguration as president in 1984 seemed to offer hope for a more peaceful future.

Duarte’s election was the most visible symbol of change in 1984, but it was not the only one. The number of death-squad killings declined significantly that year, largely as a result of the demarche that Vice President George Bush delivered to the Salvadoran military in December 1983. Bush was blunt: if the army expected to receive enough military aid from the United States to win the war, the death squads, most of which were run by intelligence units of the armed forces, had to be reined in. Although no military officers were ever punished for the 40,000 noncombatant civilians murdered over the previous five years, the armed forces did curtail death-squad operations and reassign some of the officers implicated in them.

In addition, the military situation in 1984 looked much brighter for the government than ever before. The hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military training and equipment delivered to El Salvador by the United States in the early 1980s had finally begun to have a noticeable effect. The FMLN’s annual offensives in 1981, 1982, and 1983 hurt the armed forces badly, leading some U.S. military analysts to worry that the guerrillas were near victory. In early 1984, Washington took the precaution of drawing up contingency plans for U.S. air strikes if the Salvadoran army began to crack during the expected FMLN offensive of 1984. But the 1984 offensive never materialized. The improved mobility of the government’s U.S.-trained troops and the heavy firepower of its rapidly expanding air force kept the FMLN off balance and prevented it from launching a sustained offensive. Adjusting to the army’s new capabilities, the guerrillas returned to small unit hit-and-run tactics.

Although the shift in FMLN strategy was effective, allowing the guerrillas to continue a war of attrition without exposing themselves to the government’s superior firepower, it also made the war less visible. At a



distance (i.e., from Washington), it appeared that the tide of battle had shifted in the government's favor. This assessment seemed to be confirmed with each passing year as the guerrillas mounted no major offensives.<sup>4</sup>

With Duarte committed to reform and negotiations, death-squad killings on the decline, and the FMLN losing the initiative on the battlefield, Washington's policy in El Salvador looked like a qualified success. No one doubted that there was still a long way to go, but few congressional Democrats were still willing to argue that the direction of Reagan's policy was fundamentally flawed. After 1984, the Reagan administration faced no significant congressional opposition to its massive aid program, which eventually poured \$4.5 billion into El Salvador during the 1980s. Indeed, Congress did not even hold a serious debate about El Salvador for the next five years.

In early 1988, however, the bipartisan consensus began to show signs of strain. In March, Duarte's Christian Democrats (PDC) suffered a stunning defeat in the National Assembly elections. Plagued by inefficiency and corruption, the PDC lost its legislative majority to ARENA, the far-right party founded by Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson and long linked to the death squads of the paramilitary right. A year later, ARENA's presidential candidate, U.S.-educated businessman Alfredo Cristiani, was swept to a first-ballot victory against the Christian Democrats and a small leftist coalition, the Democratic Convergence.<sup>5</sup>

The Christian Democrats lost their populist social base among the urban and rural poor because they had failed to live up to the "social pact" they made in 1984. Reneging on the social reforms he had promised, Duarte imposed an austerity program whose costs fell mainly on his own constituents. Instead of a negotiated peace, Duarte continued the war. Some disgruntled PDC supporters switched to ARENA, which in 1989 ran on a platform that echoed the 1984 program of the Christian Democrats as Cristiani made promises for an economic recovery and a quick end to the war. But most of the voters who deserted the PDC dropped out of the electoral system entirely. In the 1982 election, turnout was over 80 percent; by 1989 it had fallen to barely 50 percent.

Poorly organized, underfunded, and running a distant third, the Democratic Convergence was unable to capitalize on the erosion of the PDC's support. Closely identified with the FMLN, it suffered from unpopular guerrilla actions like the assassination of mayors in contested areas and the detonation of car bombs in the capital. But the Convergence also failed to attract many guerrilla sympathizers after the FMLN called for a boycott of the election.



In the wake of Cristiani's victory, Congress once again began to debate U.S. policy toward El Salvador. On the face of it, the triumph of ARENA seemed to mark the collapse of a decade of U.S. strategy. Even though Cristiani was said to represent a more moderate, less violent faction of ARENA than D'Aubuisson, the victors were still unquestionably the political representatives of the Salvadoran upper class. Once in power, ARENA was not likely to undertake economic and social policies that would address the deeper grievances that gave rise to the Salvadoran insurgency in the first place.

Moreover, officials in Congress and the executive branch worried that an ARENA government might lift the constraints imposed on the death squads in the mid-1980s. Political killings had never stopped entirely, and the harassment and persecution of trade unionists and other civic leaders continued throughout Duarte's presidency. But the wholesale slaughter that characterized El Salvador in the early 1980s did subside enough to allow a revival of the popular organizations that had been crushed during the 1980–83 *matanza*. In late 1987, Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora, the top two officials of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), a coalition of civilian organizations allied with the FMLN, felt secure enough to return from exile and openly engage in political organizing.

Hard-line army officers were antagonistic to the tolerant attitude the government displayed toward resurgent union activities and toward Ungo and Zamora, both of whom had refused to break their ties with the guerrillas. There was real concern in Washington that extremists in the army or in ARENA itself would see Cristiani's electoral triumph as a mandate for repression. Indeed, ARENA's victory in the 1988 legislative elections was followed by the first increase in death-squad killings since the early 1980s. Fearful that a surge in political killings would break the bipartisan consensus on El Salvador, President Bush dispatched Vice President Dan Quayle to San Salvador in June 1989 on a mission reminiscent of Bush's 1983 trip. Quayle warned the government and the army that Washington's continued support depended on the new government preventing any backsliding on human rights.

Last summer, growing congressional concern led to the first full debates on El Salvador since 1984. Liberal Democrats proposed making military aid conditional on the government's human rights performance and on its willingness to seek a negotiated end to the war. President Bush opposed any conditionality, arguing that Cristiani had won a free election and therefore deserved unqualified support. The administration prevailed in the House by the relatively close vote of 233 to 185.



In the Senate, Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), an early critic of Reagan's policy in El Salvador, surprised his colleagues by arguing the administration's case. Having met Cristiani, Dodd was convinced that the new president sincerely wanted to find a political solution to the war. He should be given a chance to make good on his pledge to reopen talks with the guerrillas, Dodd argued. As a result, the effort to condition aid was soundly defeated in the Senate by a vote of 68 to 32. The consensus on El Salvador had wobbled a bit, but in the end it held up—at least until November when the FMLN launched its offensive.

### **Why an Offensive?**

The FMLN's decision to launch its first major offensive in five years was motivated by a deadlock on the political front.<sup>6</sup> Ever since the failure of their "final offensive" in 1981, the guerrillas had been calling for a negotiated settlement of the civil war. To be sure, some factions of the FMLN, in particular the Popular Forces of Liberation, at times saw negotiations mainly as a tactical ploy aimed at setting the stage for an eventual military triumph. But others, like the Armed Forces of National Resistance and the People's Revolutionary Army led by FMLN military commander Joaquín Villalobos, doubted that victory was attainable so long as Washington was prepared to match every improvement in the FMLN's military fortunes with an escalation of aid for the armed forces. For those FMLN leaders, negotiations were "strategic" rather than "tactical"; a negotiated solution to the war was an acceptable outcome if it guaranteed the left a significant, secure role in politics.<sup>7</sup>

In 1984, Duarte opened a dialogue with the FDR and FMLN, meeting them at the Salvadoran towns of La Palma and Ayagualo. Almost immediately, the talks were deadlocked because neither side would accept any significant modification of its initial negotiating position. The FDR and FMLN demanded that an interim government that included their representatives be established prior to new elections, that the armed forces be "cleansed" of officers responsible for human rights abuses, and that the guerrilla army then be merged with the military. The government demanded that the guerrillas simply lay down their arms and join the existing political process. With neither side willing to countenance the other's proposal, the talks collapsed.

A new flurry of diplomatic activity followed the August 1987 signing of the Esquipulas agreement by the presidents of the five Central American countries. The presidents pledged to establish pluralist democratic



political systems with free elections and respect for human rights. They also pledged to strive for a cease-fire and national reconciliation through political dialogue in those countries that had armed insurgencies. In the spirit of Esquipulas, Duarte agreed to resume talks with the FDR and FMLN. Two meetings were held and no progress was made before the rebels withdrew to protest the assassination in October 1987 of Herbert Anaya, president of the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission.

At first, the FMLN thought that the Esquipulas agreement might signal a new flexibility on the part of the government. Even when the post-Esquipulas discussions collapsed, FMLN officials nevertheless hoped that public opinion, led by the growing popular movement of trade unionists and civic groups in San Salvador, would pressure the government to return to the bargaining table. An opinion poll taken in January 1989 found that 68 percent of the public favored a negotiated end to the war.<sup>8</sup> The whole purpose of the Democratic Convergence's participation in the 1989 presidential election was to capitalize on this sentiment by using the campaign as a forum for demanding serious negotiations.

The FMLN had a parallel strategy. In January 1989, at the height of the presidential campaign, it unveiled a new peace proposal. For the first time, the guerrillas agreed to participate in elections conducted under the auspices of the existing government and constitution, and to cease their armed struggle regardless of the result. The key condition attached to the offer was that the election be postponed for six months to allow the FMLN to mobilize its supporters for a campaign. With Cristiani widely predicted to win the balloting in March, ARENA had no desire to postpone the election. But since the popular desire for peace was so strong, both ARENA and the PDC felt compelled to react positively to the FMLN proposal and to open talks with the guerrillas about it. In the end, however, neither ARENA nor the army was willing to postpone the vote. Defense Minister Eugenio Vides Casanova went so far as to warn that the armed forces would overthrow the government if the constitution was abrogated by changing the electoral schedule. That settled the issue.

Although Cristiani was elected on the first ballot and the Democratic Convergence was embarrassed by its poor showing in the election (only 3.8 percent of the vote), the FMLN nevertheless seemed to believe, naively perhaps, that the prospects for a negotiated settlement were auspicious. During the campaign, Cristiani had pledged to resume talks with the guerrillas if he won, a promise he reiterated the evening he was elected. Some FMLN officials reasoned that Cristiani would be more willing and able to negotiate seriously than Duarte had been precisely because ARENA



represented the oligarchy. The FMLN regarded the Christian Democrats as little more than a creation of Washington that faithfully reflected U.S. opposition to a negotiated settlement. ARENA, on the other hand, represented a real social base—a wealthy constituency historically less dependent on the United States and less willing to take orders from the U.S. Embassy. And businessmen, after all, were paying a heavy price as the ongoing war devastated the economy. Finally, the FMLN also calculated that Reagan's departure from the White House would mark the beginning of a less ideological policy in Washington and of a greater willingness to let Salvadorans find a negotiated solution amongst themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The FMLN had miscalculated what Cristiani was capable of offering at the bargaining table, however. No matter how well-intentioned, he could offer no concessions without the assent of the armed forces. The army, in turn, had never favored any sort of talks with the guerrillas and was not likely to change unless Washington pressed forcefully for a genuine dialogue. Washington, in turn, was not disposed to change policies because it was convinced that the military was gradually winning the war. The FMLN's seeming inability to launch a single major offensive in five years suggested that the guerrillas no longer had the capacity to seriously endanger the regime. Time was therefore on the side of the army. Thus, there was no need to make any significant concessions to achieve a negotiated peace.

Politically, the FMLN seemed to be in retreat as well. Despite FMLN opposition and sporadic efforts at disruption, Cristiani's election marked the sixth successful balloting since 1982. Moreover, the civilian politicians of the FDR had finally decided to participate in the 1989 election, thereby giving the process broader legitimacy. Their decisive loss undercut the FDR's and FMLN's claim to represent a significant sector of the population, since the Democratic Convergence was widely regarded as a surrogate for the insurgent coalition. Finally, the election itself crystallized the growing division between the politicians of the FDR and the combatants of the FMLN, when the Democratic Convergence decided to stay in the election even after the FMLN's peace proposal was rejected and the guerrillas had responded by calling on their supporters to boycott the vote.

With both military and political events apparently moving in its favor, the Salvadoran government was unwilling to make any concessions in the months following the election. When government and FMLN negotiators met for talks in September and October 1989, it was like a replay of the 1984 dialogue. The government position had not changed and was not negotiable; if there was to be a diplomatic settlement, it would have to be on the government's terms.



The FMLN therefore faced a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, an outright military victory remained out of reach. But a diplomatic solution was equally unattainable so long as the armed forces and the United States believed that the army was winning the war. To create conditions conducive to fruitful negotiation, the FMLN needed to demonstrate that it retained formidable military and political strength and that the only alternative to a negotiated compromise was a perpetual bloody stalemate. "A lasting political solution will become possible only when the insurgents are convinced they cannot win through force," Henry Kissinger said of El Salvador in 1984.<sup>10</sup> This logic held equally well for the government in 1989.

Despite its apparent quiescence on the battlefield, the FMLN had not been idle since halting major offensive operations in 1984, however. While continuing small-scale attacks in the countryside, the guerrillas had set about rebuilding their political and military apparatus in the cities. During the late 1970s, much of the FMLN's organized base of support was in San Salvador's popular organizations that could mobilize over 100,000 people for street demonstrations. These organizations were wiped out in the early 1980s by the *matanza*. Cadres who managed to elude the death squads fled to the mountains and took up arms. But without any effective urban apparatus to mount a popular uprising, the guerrillas' 1981 "final offensive" fizzled.

Thereafter, FMLN officials spoke often of the need to rebuild their urban base, but little was done before 1984. This was so because the terror of the death squads continued unabated, and because the FMLN general command was preoccupied with building a professional army capable of meeting the armed forces of El Salvador in the field and defeating them. Duarte's 1984 victory opened up some space for renewed political activity in the cities just as the FMLN's chances for a battlefield victory began to fade.

The result was a new emphasis by the FMLN on urban organizing. The guerrillas had concluded that the revolutionary movement in the cities had failed in the late 1970s due to the absence of an effective military arm to respond to state repression. Conversely, the failure of the revolutionary army in the 1980s was due to the absence of an effective urban movement that could spark a popular insurrection to tie down government troops in the cities. The FMLN strategy for the late 1980s, therefore, was to husband the strength of combatants in the countryside while rebuilding the urban movement.

The new popular organizations that grew up in the late 1980s were not mere tools of the FMLN. They developed spontaneously and had their

own agendas based on the interests of their members. But neither were they totally independent. The FMLN operated clandestinely within many of them, trying to influence their activities in ways that promoted the FMLN's political agenda. The revival of popular organizations on the left coincided with the alienation of pro-Christian Democratic trade unions from the Duarte government because of its economic policy. By 1989, the Christian Democratic unions were joining with their former rivals on the left in a united front against ongoing state repression and in favor of a negotiated end to the war.

At the same time, the FMLN established urban commando units capable of launching hit-and-run attacks against virtually any target, from general staff headquarters to the homes and families of high government officials. Actions like the kidnapping of Duarte's daughter, the killing of four U.S. marines in the Zona Rosa, and the assassination of several ARENA party officials just after Cristiani's election opened the FMLN to charges of terrorism. Guerrilla leaders defended the attacks as a way of making the Salvadoran elite feel the pain of the war, just as the poor had been feeling it for over a decade. The attacks also carried a more subtle message for hard-liners in the army and government. If they thought they could once again decimate the urban movement with a new *matanza*, the FMLN's attacks put them on notice that this time the bloodshed would not be one-sided. "An eye for an eye" was how FMLN Commander Villalobos described the new policy.<sup>11</sup>

In need of a dramatic show of strength to shock the government out of its intransigent position at the bargaining table, the FMLN decided to test its urban apparatus. It calculated that a major offensive centered on the capital could not be ignored, even in far away Washington. "We had to come to the heart of the enemy, because one block taken in the capital is worth 10 kilometers in the countryside," explained an FMLN commander during the offensive.<sup>12</sup>

While the deadlock at the bargaining table was the principal cause of the FMLN's offensive, increased repression against the popular organizations was the catalyst. Shortly after Cristiani's inauguration, he proposed an antiterrorism law that criminalized virtually all forms of political dissent, including the provision of information to international human rights groups. Death squads that had not been heard from since 1984 reappeared. The climate of violence escalated as the FMLN attacked urban military posts and assassinated ARENA party and government officials. Such attacks were invariably followed by mass arrests of activists, some of whom disappeared or were tortured. In June, the armed forces accused the Catholic



Church and its human rights office of being a front for the guerrillas. A few weeks later, someone bombed the print shop at the Catholic University of Central America, one of the first attacks on the UCA in several years. In September, the armed forces began arresting and deporting foreign missionaries engaged in refugee relief, accusing them of aiding the guerrillas.

By October, the level of violence prompted Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas to protest the “marked deterioration of the human rights situation” since Cristiani’s inauguration. After an FMLN rocket attack on the general staff headquarters, the homes of two leading members of the Democratic Convergence were bombed. On October 30, a death squad kidnapped and murdered three leaders of Rubén Zamora’s Popular Social Christian Movement in Sonsonate—the first activists of the party to be killed since the early 1980s.

The catalytic event, however, was the October 31 bombing of the headquarters of the National Federation of Salvadoran Workers (FENASTRAS), a leftist trade-union federation. The blast killed 10 people, including General Secretary Febe Elizabeth Velasquez, and wounded 29 others. The same day, another bomb went off at the offices of the Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared, injuring four people. These attacks were so reminiscent of the murderous campaign against the popular organizations in the early 1980s that the FMLN could not allow them to go unavenged.

### **The Battle of San Salvador**

The FMLN offensive clearly demonstrated that the guerrillas were a long way from being defeated. Indeed, they seemed stronger than ever. Never before had they launched sustained attacks simultaneously on all the country’s major cities. Although they failed to capture any of them, the military was only able to regain control of occupied neighborhoods by virtue of its overwhelming firepower and its willingness to strafe and bomb guerrilla positions regardless of civilian casualties. Even then, the FMLN was neither routed nor overrun, but fell back in an organized withdrawal, preserving its capacity to launch such an offensive again in the future.

This demonstration of military prowess did not come cheaply, however. In San Salvador, much of the urban infrastructure painstakingly built up by the FMLN over the preceding few years was exposed when clandestine cadres took up arms. Government reports that over 2,000 guerrillas were killed and many more wounded were widely regarded as exaggerations, but the guerrillas themselves admitted that 401 of their combatants had



died in the offensive. The highest toll, however, was among the inexperienced “revolutionary militia” rather than the seasoned guerrillas who had infiltrated the capital from rebel strongholds in the countryside.<sup>13</sup>

The battle of San Salvador also revealed a greater degree of political support for the FMLN than many observers thought they had, but less than the guerrillas themselves expected. The offensive did not spark a massive popular insurrection among the war-weary populace; the instinct of most civilians was to flee the combat zones any way they could. But the FMLN did manage to secretly move hundreds of combatants and tons of arms into the city and conceal them until the offensive was launched—operations that could not have been carried out without significant civilian collaboration. During the initial days of the offensive, people in some of the poor barrios were unmistakably supporting the guerrillas.

The offensive also demolished the facade of democracy so laboriously constructed over the past decade. The military’s brutal disregard for civilian casualties and its tolerance for death-squad killings demonstrated that not much had really changed since 1980. The cold-blooded murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her teenage daughter at the Central American University evoked memories of the murders of the four U.S. churchwomen, the FDR national leadership, the AFL-CIO land reform advisers, and Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980 and 1981.

Two days after the six Jesuit priests were murdered, Cristiani’s attorney general, Mauricio Colorado, who was responsible for investigating the slayings, called on the Pope to withdraw some of the Catholic bishops from El Salvador because they were preaching the “questionable ideology” of liberation theology. Otherwise, Colorado warned, the bishops might be in personal danger.<sup>14</sup> Over the next few weeks, government security forces raided churches and refugee relief offices of all denominations, ransacking files and arresting dozens of staff members (including foreign missionaries), on the grounds that the churches were outposts of guerrilla activity.

The murder of the Jesuits and the wave of persecution against the religious community demonstrated that the human rights improvements made in El Salvador after 1984 were largely instrumental, and therefore ephemeral. The armed forces had gone through no change of heart, no revelation regarding the value of democracy and free expression. They had simply reduced the killing because that was what they had to do in order to get more military aid from the United States. Nor had they surrendered real power to civilian parties; they had simply adorned the regime with a civilian facade because Washington had insisted on it. Amidst the crisis of the FMLN offensive, the armed forces made a mockery of any notion of



pluralism or democracy; they went back to killing “subversives” and arresting dissidents wholesale.

### **Washington’s Reaction**

The Bush administration’s instinctive reaction to the FMLN offensive was to denigrate it as a “desperation move” and to proclaim that the armed forces had everything under control.<sup>15</sup> “I think [the guerrillas] are on the brink of both a military and political defeat,” said U.S. Ambassador William Walker a few days after the offensive began.<sup>16</sup> The self-assurance faded a bit as the offensive wore on far longer than U.S. officials predicted, but the basic theme remained the same: the attacks were not serious, the army was coping with them, and the government was still winning the war. Administration officials would not criticize Cristiani’s government for the air attacks against rebel-held neighborhoods. Instead, they accused the FMLN of using the civilians as a “shield” and blamed the guerrillas for the heavy civilian casualties. It remained to be seen whether the population would blame the guerrillas for bringing the war to the cities or the armed forces for bombing them.

The killing of the Jesuits brought forth an immediate condemnation from the State Department and demands for a full investigation. But even then, the administration denied that the murders revealed any fundamental flaw in the Salvadoran regime. At first, the White House implied the priests might have been killed by the guerrillas, but that was untenable. The murders occurred during a dawn-to-dusk curfew in a neighborhood controlled by government troops who had ransacked the Jesuit residence two days earlier. The priests were killed by high-powered rifles of the sort used by the army, and at least one witness saw 20 to 30 armed, uniformed men enter the residence just before the killings. U.S. intelligence sources later identified “rogue elements” of the armed forces as the killers, and Ambassador Walker acknowledged that the Cristiani government had a “management control problem” with the military.<sup>17</sup> In early January, Cristiani himself admitted that the killings were the work of the army.

As in the early 1980s, the administration stuck doggedly to the claim that such atrocities were not the government’s responsibility, but were committed by “extremists” on the right, some of whom happened to be in the armed forces. President Bush absolutely rejected any suggestion that military aid to El Salvador be reduced or subjected to conditions because of the Jesuit killings and the ferocity of the aerial attacks on poor neighborhoods. On the contrary, when Cristiani requested emergency military



aid to replenish depleted stocks, the administration pledged its support and announced it would speed up weapons deliveries.

If the administration evinced relatively little public concern over the implications of the offensive, the same was not true for Congress. Legislators were stunned by the intensity of the FMLN attacks. Some began to wonder whether the picture of political and military success painted by the State Department since 1984 was anything more than a Potemkin village. The fear that El Salvador might deteriorate into another Vietnam was suddenly resurrected.

Congress was especially horrified by the murder of the Jesuits. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) was so disgusted at the military's actions that he called for the United States to simply withdraw and leave the Salvadorans to fight it out among themselves. "The war in El Salvador has been reduced to the level of street thugs butchering each other," Cranston charged. "There is no U.S. national security interest in using taxpayer dollars to bankroll such a conflict."<sup>18</sup> Even Republicans who opposed placing any conditions or limits on aid to the Cristiani government demanded a full and rapid investigation of the murders.

Although many members of Congress raised their voices in bitter protest over the slayings and over the deadly air attacks, neither the House nor the Senate was willing to take any immediate punitive action. Legislators were too angry at the guerrillas for launching the attacks, and too fearful that the army might be tottering. As the offensive was winding down in late November, the House narrowly refused (by a vote of 215 to 194) to even consider a proposal for temporarily withholding 30 percent of the \$85 million in military aid approved for El Salvador in fiscal 1990. A similar move to withhold aid pending an investigation of the murders also failed in the Senate.

Nevertheless, congressional Democrats were no longer willing to meekly accept the status quo. When Congress returned in January, leading liberals immediately took up the El Salvador issue again. Democratic Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry of Massachusetts introduced a bill to cut off military aid entirely—an "end the war" bill, Kennedy called it.<sup>19</sup> Senator Dodd, repentant for his earlier opposition to making aid conditional on the government's human rights record and its willingness to negotiate, introduced a rival bill designed to bring both sides to the bargaining table.

Dodd proposed to withhold 50 percent of El Salvador's military aid if the FMLN agreed to negotiations, and to withhold the other 50 percent as well if the government refused to enter such talks. Full aid would be



restored only if the FMLN launched another major offensive that threatened the government's survival. All aid would be cut off if Cristiani was overthrown by the army or if the government failed to move forward on a number of human rights issues, foremost among them the investigation and prosecution of the Jesuit case. By making the level of military aid dependent upon the behavior of both parties, Dodd's proposal was regarded as more evenhanded than the usual congressional human rights requirements, which in most cases made demands solely of the government. Though the bill had little chance of passing in an undiluted form, it quickly became the focal point of the debate.

### The Jesuit Case

Within Congress, the Jesuit case immediately took on enormous symbolic importance, much like the case of the four U.S. churchwomen killed by the National Guard in 1980. The longer it took Cristiani to deliver the perpetrators to justice, the greater the danger that his aid program would fall victim to a congressional revolt. Consequently, the Bush administration pushed the Salvadorans hard, through both civilian and military channels, for a real investigation.

The guerrilla offensive and the subsequent pressure from Washington over the Jesuit killings crystallized divisions within the government and the armed forces between the moderate right, led by Cristiani and Chief of Staff Col. Emilio Ponce, and the extreme right, led by D'Aubuisson and former air force commander Gen. Juan Raphael Bustillo.<sup>20</sup> Since the early 1980s, the officer corps has been divided between those who accepted Washington's counterinsurgency strategy of "low intensity conflict" with its emphasis on winning hearts and minds, and those who resented Washington's meddling, especially with regard to human rights. This latter group, long associated with D'Aubuisson and ARENA, advocated a strategy of "total war," an all-out military campaign against not only the FMLN, but also against peasants and urban activists suspected of supporting the guerrillas—that is, anyone demanding social reform and an end to human rights abuses. Even if 100,000 people had to be killed, the hard-liners reasoned, at least the war would be over quickly. Less fanatical officers, on the other hand, recognized that the carnage of "total war" would likely provoke a cutoff of U.S. military aid, without which the armed forces could not sustain their operations.

At first, the intensity of the guerrilla offensive seemed to strengthen the hand of the hard-liners. General Bustillo and the air force operated



autonomously from Cristiani during the worst of the fighting, and perhaps autonomously from the general staff as well. On December 4, the air force dropped leaflets urging "Salvadoran patriots" to kill "FMLN terrorists and their internationalist allies" in order to defend the homeland. But the international revulsion prompted by the murder of the Jesuits weakened the far right and halted the surge in death-squad operations. In January, Cristiani and Ponce won a key victory against the far right, forcing Bustillo into diplomatic exile as a military attaché in Israel. A few days later, Cristiani ordered the arrest of five enlisted men and four officers—including Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides—for the murder of the Jesuits.<sup>21</sup>

Winning convictions in the case is another matter. Many members of the officers corps believe that the Jesuits were the spiritual fathers of the insurgency and hence deserved to die. When the killings were reported to a meeting of senior intelligence officers a few hours after they occurred, the assembled group let out a spontaneous cheer. There is such bitterness among Salvadoran officers over the arrests that relations with U.S. military advisers are severely strained. (After his arrest, Benavides was "detained" in a luxury apartment at police headquarters and was permitted to travel freely around the country.)<sup>22</sup> The Salvadorans blame Washington for coercing Cristiani and Ponce into ordering the detentions.<sup>23</sup>

Without the threat of an aid cutoff, there probably would not have been any arrests—not because Cristiani is evil-minded, but because even moderate officers like Ponce would not have been willing or able to surrender one of their own to civil justice. Solidarity is too high within the Salvadoran officers' caste to allow the sacrifice of a brother officer except under severe duress. And thus far, even the threatened loss of aid has not been enough to push the investigation beyond the men already arrested, even though circumstantial evidence suggests that Colonel Benavides would not have undertaken such an operation on his own authority.<sup>24</sup>

U.S. pressure will have to be intense and sustained to achieve justice in the Jesuit case. Despite the expressions of outrage heard in the halls of Congress, and the warnings that aid will be cut off unless the priests' killers are brought to justice, the Salvadorans have little reason to take such threats seriously. Similar speeches were made before—after the murders of the churchwomen in 1980; the AFL-CIO advisers in 1981; and the Salvadoran peasants at Las Hojas in 1983, at Los Llanitos in 1984, and at San Francisco in 1988. There was always a fresh atrocity for Washington to be outraged about, yet U.S. military aid kept flowing. None of these cases was fully investigated and none of the military officers involved was



ever punished. Over the years, the Salvadorans have learned that Washington is easily mollified by the imprisonment of a few enlisted men or the temporary reassignment of guilty officers to "gilded exile" in a foreign diplomatic post. They have no reason to think that the case of the Jesuits will be any different.

Washington's past tolerance for political murder in El Salvador thus weakened its ability to press for military reform. If the threats of sanctions were really empty, then the killers had no reason to desist and their fellow officers had no incentive to rupture the canons of the corps by holding the killers accountable.

### **Why is the U.S. in El Salvador?**

In 1981, Ronald Reagan invoked national security as the rationale for committing the United States to El Salvador, arguing that the indigenous civil conflict there had been transformed by Cuba and the Soviet Union into a case of "indirect communist aggression." Washington had an overriding security interest in preventing a guerrilla victory, Reagan argued, regardless of El Salvador's far-from-perfect human rights record. If the guerrillas won, they would establish a communist regime, ally themselves with Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, and export violence to their neighbors. Dominoes would topple north toward Mexico and south toward the Panama Canal, Reagan warned, and the United States itself was "the last domino." Liberals regarded Reagan's apocalyptic rhetoric about the consequences of a guerrilla victory as hyperbole. They simply did not believe his refurbished domino theory. Reagan spoke as if the stakes in El Salvador were so high that Washington should pay any price in order to prevail. The liberals regarded the stakes as limited, and thought the commitment should be, too.

As the debate over El Salvador resumes, the Bush administration is having an even harder time convincing Congress that U.S. national security justifies its commitment. El Salvador is now remote from Soviet concerns. Guided by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking," the Soviets have been disengaging from Third World commitments as fast as they can. They refused to finance a Nicaraguan experiment with socialism, and Gorbachev has called for "stability" in Central America — not very auspicious signs for guerrilla movements.

At the Malta summit, Bush complained that Central America was the "single most disruptive factor" in the superpower relationship. But he blamed the Cubans and the Nicaraguans rather than the Soviets, and urged



Gorbachev to rein in his wayward allies. The Soviet response was positive. "The Soviet Union has told us they are leaning on Nicaragua and Cuba not to send weapons to the FMLN, but that has not worked, so we are encouraging them to lean even harder," said Secretary of State James A. Baker III after the summit.<sup>25</sup> It was a far cry from the not-so-distant past when our main complaint against Havana and Managua was that they were Soviet pawns. If the Soviet Union is no longer exploiting instability in Central America, it is hard to imagine how events in El Salvador, regardless of their outcome, could endanger the national security interests of the United States.

Of course, national security has not been the only rationale for Washington's commitment. Early in the Reagan administration, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas O. Enders recognized that anticommunism was inadequate for rallying domestic support for the policy. The United States needed to be *for* something, and Enders argued it should be for democracy. Beginning with the 1982 constituent assembly elections, the theme of supporting incipient democracy in El Salvador received equal billing with national security as a justification for U.S. policy. After Duarte's election as president in 1984, democracy became the dominant theme and the cornerstone of the bipartisan consensus. It remains the principal rationale for U.S. policy. "I will not accept, as president, a cutoff of aid to El Salvador," Bush flatly declared during the November offensive. "We are supporting El Salvador because it had certifiably free elections. President Cristiani is trying to do a job for democracy."<sup>26</sup>

But is it really democracy that we have been building in El Salvador over the past decade? Or have we merely erected electoral institutions on the swampy foundation of a political culture and social system that remain as intolerant and repressive as ever? Over the past year, the "democracy" Washington constructed in San Salvador has rapidly decayed to the point that even the most basic human rights and political liberties are no longer safeguarded. The antiterrorism law proposed by Cristiani mimics, almost exactly, the infamous Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order imposed by the dictatorship of Gen. Humberto Romero in 1979—a law that was a license for state-sponsored repression and a prelude to the collapse of public order inaugurating the civil war.

American foreign policy has always had an element of missionary zeal. Pride in our democratic institutions has often manifested itself in efforts to propagate those institutions in other lands. At the turn of the century, when the United States sent the marines to occupy half a dozen countries in the Caribbean basin, we invariably tried to build democracies before



withdrawing. We invariably failed. In Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the professional, nonpartisan armies we created as bulwarks of democracy metamorphosed into instruments of brutal military dictatorship. Not coincidentally, these same countries have been among the most unstable in subsequent decades.

Under the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s, we tried to promote progressive social change and democratic political reform in Latin America. But by arming existing regimes to enable them to defeat guerrilla insurgencies, Washington ended up strengthening the very elites who were the major obstacles to change. Once armed, incumbents had little incentive to accept even modest reforms. The 1960s proved to be a decade not of democracy, but of military coups.

The democratic institutions that developed naturally out of the social and political history of the United States cannot be so easily transplanted to very different societies in the Caribbean and Central America. Salvadorans are as capable of building democracy as anyone, but effective democratic institutions cannot be rooted in a social order and political culture that favor authoritarianism. The Salvadoran military treats peasants as subhuman because the social order treats them that way—paying them starvation wages, leaving them uneducated and without adequate housing or health care. When daily life conveys the message that the lives of the poor have little value, it should come as no surprise that soldiers kill poor people without compunction or remorse.

Since 1982, the Salvadoran elite, under pressure from Washington, has held elections that have shuffled civilian seats in government back and forth between the Christian Democratic center and the reactionary right. But the fear of revolution has discouraged the United States from trying to tear out the roots of authoritarianism in El Salvador. These roots are deeply embedded in the political domination of the armed forces and the economic domination of a small land-owning elite whose wealth depends on a docile labor force. To fight the war, Washington built the Salvadoran armed forces up from 12,000 to 55,000 men armed with modern weaponry and schooled in civic action and counterinsurgency. Is it any wonder that the military's political power has not diminished?

Washington has opposed any negotiated settlement that would give the left a significant share of political power. Instead, U.S. policy has aimed at stabilizing a truncated political system encompassing only the center—the PDC—and the right-wing—ARENA—of the ideological spectrum. Is it any wonder that such a system is incapable of producing significant social reforms?



A negotiated settlement of the war will not end El Salvador's problems or turn it into a democracy overnight, but it is the necessary first step. Only when the war is ended and the undemocratic habits of the armed forces broken will it be possible for Salvadorans with political preferences to the left of the Christian Democratic Party to organize freely to contend for political power at the ballot box. Only when the security of the democratic arena is guaranteed will it be possible for Salvadorans to choose between the supply-side free-market program of the right and the social reform program of the left.

### **What Next?**

The FMLN's offensive demonstrated that the war remains stalemated. There will be no military solution in the foreseeable future unless Washington undertakes a massive escalation of its commitment — an option that even the Bush administration has not suggested. A negotiated settlement is therefore all the more urgent. Cristiani and the moderate right may be seriously interested in reaching such a settlement. They represent a “modernized” segment of the private sector that, unlike the traditional oligarchy, believes that its economic interests can be safeguarded in a democratic system. ARENA's resounding victories in the past two elections seem to have proven them right. But the consolidation of ARENA's electoral majority requires, first and foremost, reactivation of the economy. That is impossible without peace. If Cristiani could manage to both end the war and begin economic recovery, ARENA's political fortunes would be bright indeed. If the war goes on, ARENA risks the same fate as Duarte's Christian Democrats — continued economic crisis and eventual defeat at the polls.

Cristiani's allies in the officer corps are less sanguine about negotiations, however. Thus far, they have stood by him because the continuation of U.S. aid depends on the maintenance of civilian rule and on the government's willingness to at least begin talking again with the guerrillas. But there is no major faction within the military that actively favors negotiating an end to the war, and there is a powerful group on the far right that vehemently opposes it.

Although the FMLN has made major concessions in its bargaining position over the past year, it continues to insist on major changes in the armed forces. The FMLN demands a reduction in the size of the military from 55,000 to 12,000 men, approximately its original size. A cutback of that dimension would require the retirement of a large number of officers. It



demands separating the security forces (the Treasury police, National Guard, and national police) from the military and placing them under civilian control.

This would deprive the armed forces of primary responsibility for internal security and also take away the instruments often used in the past for the violent repression of dissent. And, most important, the FMLN demands that the armed forces "cleanse" themselves of officers guilty of human rights abuses and place them on trial. Then, and only then, are the guerrillas willing to lay down their arms.<sup>27</sup> These demands, especially the last one, are unacceptable to the vast majority of Salvadoran officers.<sup>28</sup> If Cristiani were foolish enough to agree to them in negotiations, he would almost certainly provoke a coup d'état. He faced a near revolt in the military simply for arresting a senior officer in the Jesuit case.

In the wake of the Nicaraguan elections, Cristiani was under heavy pressure from the far right not to resume negotiations at all. He quibbled over whether U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar would be a mediator or simply the convener of talks, and, as a precondition, he insisted that the FMLN halt attacks affecting the civilian population. In mid-March, the FMLN offered to stop attacks on most nonmilitary targets, but it was doubtful that the guerrillas would agree to Cristiani's demand for what amounted to a unilateral cease-fire.

Ironically, the FMLN's demands for military reform do not conflict fundamentally with stated U.S. policy aims. On the contrary, if civilian democracy is what Washington truly wants in El Salvador, these reforms are essential to achieving it. In addition, Washington has a vested interest in reducing the size of the military once the war is over, since the United States has to foot the bill for it. The idea of reorganizing the security forces and removing them from military control actually originated in Washington back in 1982 as a way to reduce human rights abuses and thereby quiet congressional objections to military aid. And the removal of officers guilty of human rights abuses has also been a recurring theme in U.S. policy, at least since Bush's visit to San Salvador in 1983.

The problem, of course, is that the armed forces have bitterly resisted such reforms. In the midst of the war, Washington has never been willing to precipitate a major internal struggle within the officer corps by forcing the issue. The army would be demoralized by it, so the argument went; the command structure might even collapse, paving the way for a guerrilla victory. But if the changes in the armed forces demanded by the FMLN were the only obstacle to a negotiated peace, Washington would have no logical reason to resist them.



With the ending of the Cold War, El Salvador no longer has much geopolitical importance. Winning a decisive victory there against the rising tide of international communism does not have the symbolic value it had for Ronald Reagan. Washington could easily settle for a negotiated peace without fear of damaging the credibility of its global foreign policy. In fact, the continuing war in El Salvador has become an albatross for the United States. Each year it consumes several hundred million dollars in foreign aid that is desperately needed elsewhere. It diverts the attention of policymakers from hemispheric issues of greater consequence. It remains a sore point in relations between the administration and Congress, frustrating efforts to build a bipartisan foreign policy. And it shows no prospect of ending.

If victory is beyond reach, and a perennial stalemate too costly to endure, a negotiated settlement of the war in El Salvador is Washington's best hope for disposing of the issue. Behind the public facade of confidence displayed by administration officials at the time of the November offensive, some seemed shaken enough by events to seriously contemplate negotiations as a way out. In February, Gen. Maxwell R. Thurmond, head of the U.S. Southern Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Salvadoran army would not be able to achieve a military victory over the FMLN. It was a significant admission, coming from the architect of the invasion of Panama.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the State Department began voicing support for a resumption of negotiations between the Cristiani government and the FMLN through the offices of U.N. Secretary General Pérez de Cuéllar.<sup>30</sup> Although the United States has officially favored talks between the two sides ever since Duarte proposed them in 1984, the Reagan administration actively discouraged Duarte from making any significant concessions to the guerrillas.

Since the offensive, however, the Bush administration seems more open to the possibility of a settlement that is not merely a disguised FMLN surrender. "El Salvador needs peace, and the only path to peace is at the negotiating table," Assistant Secretary of State Aronson told the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs in January. "[L]et both sides commit to come to the bargaining table . . . and to stay and negotiate in good faith until the war is over."<sup>31</sup> But Washington's declaration of support for negotiations will not be enough to actually produce a settlement. The United States will have to exert real pressure on the military to accept concessions that are not in its institutional interest.

A policy of actively forcing reform on the Salvadoran military is not one that is likely to emanate spontaneously from the cautious Bush adminis-



tration. Though some officials seem to recognize the need for a negotiated end to the war, the administration as a whole remains unwilling to make the hard decisions necessary to actually bring one about. The Republican right, most strongly represented in the National Security Council staff and the office of the vice president, refuses to believe that the November offensive was a significant setback to the policy Washington has followed for the past decade. It remains confident that the armed forces are winning the war and that persistence is all that is required for victory. Consequently, the right in the United States sees no pressing need for negotiations, other than to pacify a meddlesome Congress. It is likely to block any internal initiative to alter administration policy.

Congress, however, can break the deadlock. To begin with, it should impose strict conditions on any further military assistance. Unless the government demonstrates a willingness to negotiate seriously and to punish military officers guilty of human rights abuses, not just in the Jesuit case, but across the board, no further aid should be forthcoming. But that alone is not enough. In the past, such conditionality proved ineffective because it was largely a bluff. The Reagan administration had no intention of cutting aid, regardless of whether or not the Salvadoran government lived up to the conditions, and the officer corps knew it. Because the threat to cut aid was never credible, \$4 billion bought very little leverage.

Therefore, the first step of a new policy toward El Salvador should be to make the threat credible by cutting military aid significantly at the outset. Senator Dodd's proposal to reduce aid by 50 percent is a good beginning. Perhaps the Salvadoran armed forces will prefer to fight on alone rather than accede to the kinds of democratizing reforms that the FMLN is demanding — and that Washington ought to support. If the military is impervious to basic change, we should follow the advice of the conservative London *Economist* and cut off aid entirely.<sup>32</sup> There are more pressing and more productive places for us to spend our scarce foreign aid dollars.

After five years of passive consensus on El Salvador, is Congress now ready to spring to life, forcing the Bush administration into a more activist role than it wants to assume? At first glance, it seems unlikely. House Speaker Thomas Foley and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell are cautious leaders who abhor issues like El Salvador that divide Democrats along ideological lines (southern conservatives vs. northern liberals). Both were quick to applaud the invasion of Panama, and both were happy to sign a bipartisan agreement with Bush back in 1989 in order to dispose of the bitterly divisive issue of Nicaragua. The defeat of the Sandinistas in the February



elections has probably reinforced their inclination to let the executive branch take the initiative in Central America. Without the support of their leadership, liberal Democrats in the House and Senate will have difficulty mustering the votes to impose any major restrictions on aid to El Salvador.

Nevertheless, discontent with the status quo is growing on Capitol Hill, and could soon reach such proportions that the reluctant leaders can no longer ignore it. The real lesson to be drawn from the Nicaraguan experience is not that congressional passivity produces sound policy. On the contrary, Washington finally embraced the Central American peace process, which in turn led to the February elections in Nicaragua, because Congress refused to acquiesce in the Reagan administration's strategy of seeking military victory through proxy war.

When Congress cut off military aid to the contras, thereby eliminating the military option, conservative Republicans yelped that the Democrats were tying the hands of the president and fatally damaging U.S. interests. Without the contras, they insisted, Nicaragua would disappear into the black hole of totalitarianism, never to emerge. We should recall how mistaken the Republicans were about Nicaragua when they repeat the same arguments in opposing limits on military aid to El Salvador. Sometimes, the most sensible policy is a product not of consensus but of conflict between Congress and the executive—conflict that the framers of the Constitution intentionally built into our structure of government precisely for that reason.

The Tet offensive was a turning point in the Vietnam War because it forced U.S. decision-makers to rethink the basic premises of their policy. If the battle of San Salvador, bloody and militarily pointless though it was, has a similar effect, it will have had some redeeming value. If hard-line conservatives in the Bush administration continue to insist that nothing fundamental has changed and block other efforts in the executive branch to reassess U.S. policy and draft a new approach, Congress will then have to supply the impetus for a new course.

No legitimate U.S. interest is served by continuing the current policy. Our national security is not at risk and Salvadoran "democracy" is not worthy of the name. Washington has been financing the war in El Salvador partly out of hubris—a belief that we have the right and the power to preserve a dominant position in "our own backyard"—and partly out of inertia. It is foolish to expend billions of dollars on such a policy; it is unconscionable to expend thousands of Salvadoran lives. If the Soviet Union can repudiate the Brezhnev Doctrine that prescribed limited sovereignty for Eastern Europe, surely the United States can do the same for Central America.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 155.
- <sup>2</sup> ABC World News Tonight, November 22, 1989.
- <sup>3</sup> Estimates are that 10,000 to 30,000 peasants were killed by the armed forces in 1932. The Catholic Church reported over 20,000 noncombatant civilians killed by government security forces and paramilitary death squads in 1980 and 1981.
- <sup>4</sup> The FMLN continued to launch spectacular assaults on individual garrisons every six months or so by quickly massing several hundred combatants, attacking, and then dispersing before the air force could respond. But there were no broad, sustained offensives of the sort that rocked the army in previous years.
- <sup>5</sup> The Democratic Convergence was made up of the newly organized Social Democratic Party, the National Revolutionary Movement (affiliated with the Socialist International), and the Popular Social Christian Movement. The last two were also members of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), the civilian allies of the FMLN.
- <sup>6</sup> See, "The General Situation in El Salvador: An Assessment," *Spotlight: International MNR Bulletin*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (September-December 1989), pp. 1–28.
- <sup>7</sup> Documents captured from the guerrillas in early 1988 suggested that the FMLN was still dubious about the viability of a negotiated solution, but by 1989 the guerrillas had reportedly concluded that military victory was unlikely. The captured documents are described by James LeMoyné in "El Salvador's Forgotten War," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1989, pp. 105–125. The shift in FMLN thinking is reported in Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran Rebels Apologize for Civilian Deaths," *Washington Post*, May 25, 1989; and Frank Smyth, "El Salvador's Revised Revolution," *In These Times*, February 28–March 13, 1990.
- <sup>8</sup> Terry Karl, "El Salvador: Negotiations or Total War; an Interview with Salvador Samayoa," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 1989, pp. 321–355.
- <sup>9</sup> See the interview with Joaquín Villalobos in Marjorie Miller, "Rebels Start New Offensive: Diplomacy," *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1988.
- <sup>10</sup> Joanne Omang, "Latin Unit Asks \$8 Billion Aid Tied to Rights," *Washington Post*, January 12, 1984.
- <sup>11</sup> Douglas Farah, "El Salvador's Rebels Vow to Escalate Their Attacks," *Washington Post*, March 30, 1988.
- <sup>12</sup> Douglas Farah, "Guerrilla Gamble Proving Costly," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> Chris Norton, "Salvador Rebels: Defeated or Just Bruised?" *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 1990. The armed forces admitted to 1,000 casualties of their own, in a ratio of three to one of wounded to killed. Mark A. Uhlig, "Salvadoran Security Forces Raid Episcopal Church, Arresting Seventeen," *New York Times*, November 21, 1989.
- <sup>14</sup> Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran Guerrillas Withdraw Under Fire," *Washington Post*, November 19, 1989.
- <sup>15</sup> Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney, quoted in Douglas Farah, "127 Deaths in Salvadoran Rebel Drive," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1989.
- <sup>16</sup> Lee Hockstader, "Air Attacks Counter Salvadoran Rebels," *Washington Post*, November 16, 1989.
- <sup>17</sup> Douglas Farah, "San Salvador Revives; Another Church Raided," *Washington Post*, November 21, 1989; NBC Nightly News, November 20, 1989.
- <sup>18</sup> Robert Pear, "U.S. Official Links Salvadoran Right to Priests' Deaths," *New York Times*, November 18, 1989.
- <sup>19</sup> *Congressional Record*, February 6, 1990, p. S895–S897.



- <sup>20</sup> Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran President comes to U.S. Bearing Heavy Domestic Burden," *Washington Post*, January 30, 1990.
- <sup>21</sup> The far right has hardly been beaten, however. On January 12, as if in response to the detention of soldiers in the Jesuit killings, a rightist death squad in Guatemala kidnapped and murdered Hector Oqueli, the number two official of the Salvadoran social democratic National Revolutionary Movement (MNR). Oqueli was one of the MNR's most effective spokesmen and a respected official of the Socialist International. His murder attracted little attention in the United States, where he was not well known, but it was just as destructive to the prospects for peace as the killing of the Jesuits.
- <sup>22</sup> Douglas Farah, "Colonel Charged in Jesuit Killing Lives in Luxury," *Washington Post*, February 22, 1990.
- <sup>23</sup> Ana Arana, "Salvador Officers Met Just Before Jesuit Massacre," *Baltimore Sun*, February 4, 1990; Douglas Farah, "U.S. Pressure in Jesuit Probe Said to Alienate Salvadoran Officers," *Washington Post*, February 6, 1990.
- <sup>24</sup> Brook Larmer, "New Evidence Points to Coverup," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 1990. Washington's ability to determine whether or not there was a wider conspiracy to kill the Jesuits was severely damaged when one of its better intelligence sources in the officer corps, Col. Carlos Armando Aviles, was "burned" by the U.S. Embassy. It was Aviles who tipped off the embassy that the Jesuits had been killed by the army's Atlactl battalion. The embassy then passed this information along to Chief of Staff Ponce, and inexplicably told him that Aviles was the source. Aviles was then arrested. James A. Goldston and Anne Manuel, "Are We Shielding the Killers of Salvador's Priests?" *New York Times*, January 21, 1990.
- <sup>25</sup> David Hoffman, "Bush and Gorbachev Hail New Cooperation," *Washington Post*, December 4, 1989.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Pear, "House Rejects Curb on Salvador Aid," *New York Times*, November 21, 1989.
- <sup>27</sup> "Position of the FMLN Toward the New ARENA Government and Proposal to Achieve a Real Democracy, Peace and a New Society," April 6, 1989 (mimeograph, 1989). Other demands are listed in this negotiating position, but the three regarding military reform are the most politically sensitive. Slightly modified versions of these proposals were put forward by FMLN representatives in their meetings with government officials in September and October 1989. For these proposals, see "FMLN Proposals for Negotiating a Just and Lasting Peace in El Salvador," *Envio* (Managua, Nicaragua), Vol. 9, No. 102 (January 1990), pp. 8-12.
- <sup>28</sup> Frank Smyth, "El Salvador's Revised Revolution," *In These Times*, February 28-March 13, 1990, reports that Cristiani and Ponce have told visiting delegations from the United States that the military reforms demanded by the FMLN are negotiable, but moderates in the government do not have a very good record of being able to force such changes on the military right.
- <sup>29</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "General Says Salvador Can't Defeat Guerrillas," *New York Times*, February 9, 1990.
- <sup>30</sup> A role for the United Nations was first urged by the five Central American presidents at their summit meeting in Costa Rica on December 12, 1989. "U.S. Supports U.N. Effort to Arrange Salvadoran Peace Talks," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1990.
- <sup>31</sup> Testimony of Bernard W. Aronson, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, to the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives, January 24, 1990 (mimeograph, 1990), p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup> "Sad Salvador," *The Economist*, November 25, 1989.

