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## 'Drawing the line' in El Salvador: Washington confronts insurgency in El Salvador, 1979–92

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### ABSTRACT

The United States' intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War, 1979–92, represented the largest nation-building effort launched by Washington between the end of Vietnam and the second war with Iraq. Washington deployed US Special Forces advisers to El Salvador to prevent further human rights abuses, emphasise the importance of winning the affection of civilians, and professionalise and reform the Salvadoran military. Overall, the intervention produced mixed results, including a negotiated settlement. Despite reservations about the efficacy of US policy, lessons from El Salvador have been reapplied elsewhere, including most recently in Iraq.

### KEYWORDS

United States–El Salvador relations; Counterinsurgency; United States foreign policy; Ronald Reagan; *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN); Guerrilla warfare; Nation-building

Days before the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, insurgents in El Salvador launched a bold offensive to topple the United States supported regime. The prospect of an insurgent victory, according to the White House, posed a national security threat to the United States. Reagan thus initiated a robust response to combat the spectre of communist aggression in the tiny Central American country. Spanning the course of three presidents (1979–92), Washington spent approximately \$6 billion trying to defeat a popular-backed insurgency and establish a moderate democracy in Central America. For Washington, this meant holding elections in the middle of the war. The Reagan administration made no sincere effort to encourage the Salvadoran Left's involvement in elections, while tolerating the extreme right's participation under the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA). The establishment of political legitimacy had to wait until after the conclusion of the war.

The White House embraced a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that emphasised holding elections, carrying out reform, and the use of American Special Forces to professionalise the Salvadoran military. Unlike Vietnam, Washington never deployed combat troops. Overall, US military strategists in El Salvador had a sophisticated understanding of the insurgency they faced. Yet, their expertise did not help their allies inflict a decisive defeat against the enemy or convince them to take the necessary measures to address the socio-economic issues fuelling the conflict. Instead, the belligerents settled for a negotiated peace. Massive United States funds and training helped prevent an insurgent triumph, but at great cost to Salvadorans. The American intervention also prolonged the war and contributed to

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distortions in the country's socioeconomic landscape. United States aid greatly enlarged the size of the Salvadoran military and its arsenal, kept El Salvador's economy from collapsing and prevented the overthrow of Washington's preferred statesman, José Napoleon Duarte. It also undermined the political opening by reinforcing a commitment to military victory.<sup>1</sup>

Washington's approach to COIN in El Salvador reflected decades of accumulated experience fighting in the Philippines, Vietnam and Latin America. Strategies forged in these previous battle zones resurfaced in El Salvador, including the creation of intelligence and paramilitary forces which targeted alleged subversives. American security aid also recreated elite commando units as it had in Vietnam and elsewhere. These forces, often considered the most professional, committed numerous human rights abuses throughout the war. Decades of anti-communist ideology taught in US service academies also demonised the Left and reinforced the use of violence against supposed communists and progressive forces. Special Forces soldiers deployed to El Salvador during the conflict faced an uphill battle convincing senior officers to change their views.

The American intervention in El Salvador also unfolded amidst the Reagan administration's growing concern with international terrorism. Its response to the murder of American citizens also foreshadowed how the United States has reacted to the loss of United States lives in the Global War on Terrorism. On 19 June 1985, Salvadoran insurgents murdered 12 people at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of Zona Rosa in San Salvador, four of which were US embassy guards. The marines, who were frequent visitors, were the victims of a targeted assassination. Their deaths were not the first-time American servicemen had been targeted. Approximately two years earlier Salvadoran insurgents killed another US soldier, Colonel Albert Schaufelberger.

Administration officials, including Patrick Buchanan, the White House Communications Director, counselled swift and decisive retaliation. Other policymakers also encouraged the president to relax the assassination ban.<sup>2</sup> While Reagan did not directly retaliate, he signed a National Security Decision Directive authorising the head of the CIA to expand its intelligence gathering operations to 'locate terrorist organisations so they could be "neutralised by appropriate forces"'. These efforts included providing aerial photography to the Salvadoran Air Force; Salvadoran fighter jets bombed guerrilla base camps, causing 'increased rebel casualties'. CIA assessments believed the coordinated response persuaded the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) to abandon directly targeting US personnel 'primarily because of the price they were made to pay'.<sup>3</sup> Reports also surfaced that US Rangers attacked an insurgent base in retaliation, killing 83 guerrillas.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging that it provided intelligence to the Salvadoran military, the CIA also denied that it implemented or supported any direct reprisals against those suspected of committing the murder.

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<sup>1</sup>Cynthia McClintock, *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998), 245.

<sup>2</sup>William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: the United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: UNC, 1998), 270.

<sup>3</sup>Central Intelligence Agency, *Report of Investigation: Information Available to CIA Regarding the 1985 Attack on US Marines in the Zona Rosa*, 18 September 1996. Available at [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000147070.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000147070.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>This information is based upon journalist's interview with a former Ranger. LeoGrande and Russell Crandall's study of the Salvadoran Civil War mention the incident. See LeoGrande, 270 and Russell Crandall, *the Salvadoran Option: the United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Reagan also launched a new police training programme in El Salvador in the aftermath of the murders. The White House authorised US military advisers to train special counterterrorism units resembling SWAT teams within the notorious Treasury Police. Reagan's plan contravened a ban against training foreign policemen which had been enacted in 1974. The president defended his actions by proclaiming that the unit would be commanded by the Salvadoran armed forces chief of staff, and, as such was a military not a police unit. Congressional representatives soon proposed an amendment lifting the ban on police training.<sup>5</sup>

A robust literature about the Salvadoran Civil War already exists.<sup>6</sup> The conflict, however, has not elicited much attention from diplomatic or military historians. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the conflict's literature is critical of the United States' role, and for good reason. Many have emphasised the human rights abuses committed and the subterfuge used by the Reagan administration to support its policies. The intervention's defenders, however, have viewed it as a 'success' because it led to the establishment of democracy and improved El Salvador's human rights record.<sup>7</sup>

Using new evidence, including interviews with former insurgents and advisers, this essay confirms many earlier critical claims, especially that United States aid contributed to the country's devastation. Several of the solutions proposed by the North American advisers, including building a sophisticated intelligence network, creating elite commando units and rebuilding the Salvadoran Air Force, unleashed a level of unfathomable violence and contributed to seeking a military solution to end the war. Overall, the United States intervention in El Salvador did not represent a 'success'. Beyond producing a stalemate, it inflicted tremendous suffering on the Salvadorans for a limited set of foreign policy gains. Moreover, the various gains cited by defenders of the intervention did not occur as the result of the American COIN intervention but because the insurgents fought the state to a draw and forced it to allow them to participate in the nation's political system.

El Salvador also offers historians and scholars an excellent opportunity to scrutinise a major COIN effort in the post-Vietnam era. Even though American combat ground troops did not conduct COIN operations in the tiny country, many of the tactics implemented there have been reapplied elsewhere, including in Iraq. Studying Washington's intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War provides insight into understanding the US military's recent approach to combating insurgency in Central Asia and the Middle East. As was the case with El Salvador, allegations of torture and abuse committed by United States proxies surfaced. Contrary to the more recent pledges of its defenders, particularly General David Petraeus, United States COIN strategy prioritises the very thing it supposedly discounts: killing.

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<sup>5</sup>LeoGrande, 270.

<sup>6</sup>Some of the classic texts include Enrique A. Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982); Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982); Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: UNC, 1998); Benjamin Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: the Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>Robert Chamberlain, 'With Friends like These: Grievance, Governance, and Capacity-Building in COIN', *Parameters* (Summer 2008): 79–90; H. Hayden, 'Revolutionary Warfare: El Salvador and Vietnam: a Comparison', *Marine Corps Gazette* (July 1991): 50–54; Victor M. Rosello, 'Lessons from El Salvador', *Parameters* (Winter 1993–94): 100–108.

## Laying the groundwork

The United States did not create a unique strategy for the COIN intervention in El Salvador. Washington's doctrine was informed by American experiences combating insurgency abroad during the twentieth century, including in Vietnam and the Filipino-American War (1899–1902). Yet, it also reflects European imperialist practices, notably Malaya and Algeria. While the American military has held up the British policy of 'minimum force' as its guiding principle, it has also embraced the French counterinsurgent, David Galula, and his theories regarding *guerre révolutionnaire*.<sup>8</sup> European militaries did not rely on these strategies to foster good governance or promote reform; instead they sought to crush independence movements and retain control over their colonies. United States COIN doctrine thus includes policies consistent with imperialist practices that sanctioned the usage of terror and violence.

Even prior to the massive United States intervention, Salvadoran actors had shown a determination to resist outside interference in their internal affairs. American economic and military penetration of El Salvador before Second World War had largely been limited. Although Salvadoran elites may have viewed the United States as an example of the promises of modernity, they also viewed its large northern neighbour as a threat to their autonomy. United States meddling in the country's internal affairs to benefit short-term American economic benefits contributed to growing anti-Americanism. Unlike other countries in Latin America, the Salvadoran oligarchy retained control of the economy.<sup>9</sup> Thus, United States economic aid to El Salvador was inconsequential; it was not until after the Sandinistas assumed power in Nicaragua that the aid pipeline opened up.

The American COIN intervention in El Salvador began in earnest during the 1960s. Before then the relationship between the Pentagon and Salvadoran military had been far from cordial. Direct United States aid was minimal.<sup>10</sup> Originally, the Chileans and Spanish provided training for the country's military and *Guardia Nacional*. Even when the United States tried to forge an aid package, Washington's high prices and arrogant mission chiefs alienated their Salvadoran counterparts. For example, El Salvador was the only nation in Central America to welcome a non-US military mission after Second World War. Increasingly, the two sides forged a closer relationship after 1963.<sup>11</sup> As the spectre of the Cuban revolution hovered over Latin America and triggered Washington's paranoia, United States aid programmes emphasised the threat posed by internal revolution.

The Office of Public Safety (OPS), an organisation within the US Agency for International Development, played a key role in training Salvadoran policemen and paramilitary forces throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. American officials considered policemen as the first line of defence against internal subversion. The OPS trained policeman for practically every conceivable law enforcement function, ranging from detective work to paramilitary combat

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<sup>8</sup>The British military historian, David French, has disputed the notion of 'minimum force.' As he has aptly noted, British COIN experience was 'nasty not nice.' See French, *Nasty not Nice: British Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice, 1945–1967: Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23.4 (October–December 2012): 744–761. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Schoonover, *the United States in Central American, 1860–1911: Episodes of Social Imperialism and Imperial Rivalry in the World System* (Durham & London: Duke University Press), 165.

<sup>10</sup>Philip J. Williams and Knut Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarisation in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>11</sup>Robert H Holden, *Armies Without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 164.

operations.<sup>12</sup> As Jeremy Kuzmarov noted, these programmes fulfilled a less explicit agenda in securing the power base of local elites amenable to the American interests. Quite often, the agency's actions backfired politically, breeding anti-American sentiment, resentment and fuelling vicious cycles of violence.<sup>13</sup>

Between 1957 and its termination in 1974, the United States spent approximately \$2.1 million to train 448 Salvadoran police, provide arms, communication equipment, and riot-control gear and transport vehicles.<sup>14</sup> OPS agents also built a national police school, communications centres which housed computerised databanks of supposed subversives, provided weaponry and riot-control training. The OPS also trained the notorious National Guard, National Police and the Treasury Police, all of which were implicated in serious human rights abuses before and during the civil war. The leader of OPS, Byron Engle, believed that the programme improved the capabilities of these organisations.<sup>15</sup> In its final report in 1974, the agency claimed that under American tutelage El Salvador's police force had advanced from a 'non-descript group of poorly trained men to a well-disciplined and respected uniformed corps with good riot control and investigative capabilities, good records, and fair communications and mobility.'<sup>16</sup>

US military aid to El Salvador emphasised the threat posed by internal enemies, not just communists, but also those critical of the regime, from gaining power. The heavy indoctrination cadets received in American military schools increased their distrust of groups pursuing political reforms and reinforced conservatism with the military.<sup>17</sup> In El Salvador, as in the rest of Latin America, the term 'communist' was a catch-all phrase for anyone opposed to the government, from students to labour organisers to religious workers. These ideas were disseminated through the National Security Doctrine and at American service academies throughout the region, including the notorious 'school of assassins', the School of the Americas.

The National Security Doctrine, a paranoid anti-communist ideology, reinforced existing fears of communist paranoia and justified the use of any and all methods to defeat the enemy. It presented an invisible and menacing worldwide communist movement that threatened 'Western civilization and ideals' by uniting political, social, economic, psychological and military resources to mobilise a popular base to subvert the state.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the doctrine encouraged the military to view social actors as enemies and threats.<sup>19</sup> These policies led to the deliberate targeting of civilians and non-combatants, a practice which during the early years of the conflict increased insurgent support and filled their ranks.

<sup>12</sup>Douglas S. Blaufarb, *the Counterinsurgency Era: US Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 85.

<sup>13</sup>Jeremy Kuzmarov, 'Modernising Repression: Police Training, Political Violence and Nation-Building in the "American Century"', *Diplomatic History* 33.2 (April 2009): 191–221, 192.

<sup>14</sup>Cynthia Arson, 'Beefing the Salvadoran Military Forces: some Components of US Intervention', in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. by Marvin Gettleman, (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 222–3.

<sup>15</sup>Byron Engle to Earl Sears Chief Public Safety Officer, 13 April 1964, Box 59, IPS 1/General/El Salvador Folder, 1956–60, Records of AID, Office of Public Safety Latin American Branch Country File, El Salvador 1956–1972, RG 286, NARA.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernising Repression: Police Training, Political Violence and Nation-Building in the American Century* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 223.

<sup>17</sup>According to one account approximately 15–20% of cadets' studies were dedicated anti-communist indoctrination. Don Etchinson, *the United States and Militarism in Central America* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 109–110.

<sup>18</sup>Binford, 47; Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myth of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 231.

<sup>19</sup>J. Patrice McSherry, 'Operation Condor as a Hemispheric "Counterterror" Organisation', in *When States Kill: Latin America, the US, and Technologies of Terror*, ed. Cecilia Menjivar and Néstor Rodríguez (Austin: University of Texas, 2005), 29.



American Special Forces during the 1960s played a key role in creating the infamous Salvadoran paramilitary organisation, *Organización Democrática Nacionalista* (ORDEN), and the *Agencia Nacional de Seguridad de El Salvador* (ANSESAL). ORDEN provided internal security against alleged subversives in the Salvadoran countryside. These units were routinely condemned for their abusive behaviour toward peasants, including kidnapping and killing. The latter organisation assessed information provided from informants, *las orejas*, or ORDEN, which was passed along to the Salvadoran president. Green Berets supplied both organisations with intelligence and surveillance which was later used against individuals assassinated by death squads.<sup>20</sup>

The major concern for American and Salvadoran policymakers during the 1960s was *el Partido Comunista Salvadoreño* (PCS), the Salvadoran Communist Party. Since *la Matanza*, the brutal massacre which suppressed a peasant uprising in 1932, the PCS had closely adhered to the Soviet Union's emphasis on electoral politics. It largely focused on building political coalitions and organising labour unions. Thus, the PCS was not a militant organisation stockpiling arms and ammunition to overthrow the state. While the American embassy presented the tiny party as a potential danger, a Department of Defence study in 1963 demurred, accurately recognising it posed no mortal danger to the country's existence.<sup>21</sup> By the end of 1963, the threat posed by communist elements to the government of El Salvador sharply declined. According to the CIA in 1964, it was 'one of the hemisphere's most stable, progressive republics.'<sup>22</sup> By the early 1970s, El Salvador had state intelligence repressive capacities that might have seemed beyond any reasonable calculus of need, even considering the possibility of war with its neighbours. Indeed, the state was prepared and predisposed to confront an invisible enemy.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning in the late 1970s repression and violence in El Salvador spiralled out of control. Over the course of the decade the country's exclusionary and repressive political and socioeconomic system had increasingly come under attack from a broad coalition, including Roman Catholic clergy, intellectuals, students and a nascent guerrilla movement. As these actors challenged the elite's prerogatives, they, along with the hard-line officers within the Salvadoran military, unleashed a bloody purge. Mysterious death squads and Salvadoran security forces murdered without impunity.

US President Jimmy Carter attempted to restrain the violence but failed. The administration hoped to prevent a take-over from either the extreme right or left while trying to moderate the behaviour of the Salvadoran military. Carter officials also entertained the idea that United States aid could potentially reform a badly flawed actor by tying continued American support to its professionalisation. Salvadoran actors realised the flaws associated with such thinking. In February 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero composed a letter to the White House pleading with the administration to stop supplying the Salvadoran military with aid and, instead, support the promotion of social justice in El Salvador. Secretary of

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<sup>20</sup>Allan Nairn, 'Behind the Death Squads: an Exclusive Report on the US Role in El Salvador's Official Terror', *The Progressive* (May 1984): 20–29, 22.

<sup>21</sup>Department of Defence, 'Status of Military Counterinsurgency Programmes Part V', 18 September 1963, Archives Unbound.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: the United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 174.

<sup>23</sup>Aldo Laura-Santiago, 'The Culture and Politics of State Terror and Repression in El Salvador', *When States Kill: Latin America, the US, and Technologies of Terror*, edited by Cecilia Menjivar and Néstor Rodríguez (University of Texas Press, 2005), 94.

State, Cyrus Vance, ignored Romero's pleas and insisted that if any United States aid was used to repress Salvadorans the administration would reassess its options and potentially terminate aid.<sup>24</sup> Weeks later, death squads associated with Colonel Roberto D'Aubuisson, a notorious Salvadoran intelligence officer who received United States training, assassinated Romero during a Sunday mass.

### **'Drawing the line'**

Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, made a determined effort to thwart the emergence of another left-wing government in the region. El Salvador's importance to the Reagan administration did not lie in its economic resources. United States investments in Central America barely constituted approximately 9% of total United States assets abroad in the early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, El Salvador and the rest of Central America provided cheap labour for American offshore manufacturing firms, which would allow them to be more competitive against the United States' economic competitors, including Japan. Politicians across both aisles, as well as United States manufacturers and financial institutions, were unwilling to tolerate any actors deemed hostile to American commercial interests.<sup>26</sup> Recently, the region's importance has grown as a site of cheap labour and low production costs as part of the Central American Free Trade Agreements (CAFTA-DR).

Reaganites blamed Havana and Moscow for the region's woes. The administration also portrayed the Salvadoran insurgents – and especially the Sandinistas in Nicaragua – as Soviet surrogates who threatened American interests. The White House did not devote any significant efforts to engaging them diplomatically. According to the distorted rhetoric emanating from the White House, events in El Salvador imperilled United States national security. As the president noted, 'San Salvador is closer to Dallas than Dallas is to Washington, D.C. ... It is at our doorstep and it's become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua to install communism by force throughout the hemisphere.'<sup>27</sup> Reagan's policymakers believed that a failure to confront communism and defend its regional allies would trigger a domino effect.

Reagan routinely peppered his speeches with references to the perils international communism posed to Central America. It was inconceivable to the president or his hard-line advisers that the region's problems could be attributed to anything else other than Cuban, Soviet or Nicaraguan machinations. As Reagan famously declared in a radio address to the nation in 1984, 'Central America has become the stage for a bold attempt by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua to install communism, by force, throughout the hemisphere.' During the same speech he offered another dubious explanation, blaming El Salvador's turmoil on the Sandinistas: 'if it weren't for Nicaragua, El Salvador's problems would be manageable, and we could concentrate on economic and social improvements.'<sup>28</sup> His absurd and tortured logic also conveniently ignored decades of United States practices that contributed

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<sup>24</sup>Archbishop Romero to President Carter, 17 February 1980, Box 42, Part 21 C, El Salvador Human Rights Collection, NARA; El Salvador Human Rights Collection, NARA.

<sup>25</sup>See Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, editors, *The Politics of Intervention: the United States in Central America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup>Ronald Cox, *Power and Profits: US Policy in Central America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Current Documents: 1984* (Washington: Department of State, 1984).

<sup>28</sup>Ronald Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Central America', 14 April 1984.



to the creation of revolutionary conditions, and, perhaps more importantly, discontent could have materialised even if communism did not exist.<sup>29</sup>

The Reagan administration also depicted the Salvadoran conflict as another Cold War confrontation between the East and West. Reagan presided over an intensification of the decade's long struggle during his first administration, especially in Central America. What informed observers viewed as a civil war, Reaganites portrayed as a concerted communist effort to install another Soviet beach head in the Americas. The White House largely ignored the socioeconomic context and focused on the 'irrational' behaviour of the insurgents and their ties to Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union. Even when US policy addressed popular grievances, including the lack of political space, American officials offered a narrowly defined vision of reform, including the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

El Salvador also served the administration's broader goal of restoring United States credibility. The administration searched for a quick and easy foreign policy victory to excise the ghosts of Vietnam and demonstrate the White House's resolve. American strategists favouring a more aggressive response to international communism believed that the 'Vietnam Syndrome' constrained the options available to the United States. Thus, acting decisively in an area within the nation's imperial orbit could demonstrate that Washington had regained its manly vigour after Carter. In the words of the historian Stephen Rabe, the White House 'wanted to send a message to others in the world that there was a new management in the White House.'<sup>30</sup> Central Americans quickly realised that the new administration did not hesitate to use force or flex American military muscle, including in El Salvador.

The White House's goals in Central America included preventing the further spread of communism and undermining the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Reaganites, such as Jeanne Kirkpatrick, emphasised the importance of El Salvador, as opposed to the Director of Central Intelligence, Bill Casey, who was preoccupied with undermining the Sandinistas.<sup>31</sup> Reagan demonstrated his commitment in February 1981 by approving \$25 million in military aid – more than El Salvador had received in total since 1946 and more than all the rest of Latin American and the Caribbean received in 1981. The following year Reagan requested an additional \$26 million in military aid, \$51.2 million in economic aid and \$40 million in Economic Support Funds.<sup>32</sup> For the first few years of his administration President Reagan made stopping the spread of communism in the hemisphere one of his most important foreign policy goals.

White House officials were also cognisant of the dangers escalation posed, especially if any American advisers were involved in combat. Secretary of Defence Casper Weinberger believed that American combat deaths could potentially lead 'to another Vietnam.'<sup>33</sup> Reagan's first National Security Adviser, Richard V. Allen, issued internal memorandums to other

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<sup>29</sup>This is one of LaFeber's central arguments in *Inevitable Revolutions*.

<sup>30</sup>Stephen Rabe, *the Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2011), 158.

<sup>31</sup>Minutes of a Meeting, 'Strategy toward Cuba and Central America', 10 November 1981, folder 'NSC 00024 11/10/1981: Strategy toward Cuba and Central America, El Salvador', box 3, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>32</sup>LeoGrande, 89, 131.

<sup>33</sup>Memo from Robert Schweitzer and Roger Fontaine to Richard Allen, NSC Meeting 25 February: SIG Paper on El Salvador, 24 February 1981, folder 'NSC 0004 27 February 1981 (Poland, Caribbean Basin, etc) 4/4', box 1, Executive Secretariat NSC: Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

administration officials including guidelines on how to handle comparisons between El Salvador and Vietnam.<sup>34</sup>

The continued poor performance by the Salvadoran armed forces against the Salvadoran insurgents led United States officials to rethink their overall war strategy. In November 1981, General Fred Woerner was dispatched to El Salvador as head of a military advisory group to study the Salvadoran army and write a report based on its observations. It did not offer a reassuring portrait; Woerner painted a picture of an incompetent military being led by officers who had no grasp of how to confront the insurgency they faced.<sup>35</sup>

The report noted a critical deficiency in the Salvadoran military's intelligence capabilities. According to the report, they were 'non-existent' and required building from scratch.<sup>36</sup> Government officials also agree with Woerner. United States policymakers stressed the necessity of creating an integrated national intelligence structure, including branches 'staffed by military and police special branch officers'.<sup>37</sup> The Salvadoran military eventually established an intelligence branch which compiled dossiers of suspected insurgents to identify them, their aliases, and social and political networks. An excellent example is the recently discovered Salvadoran military intelligence briefing book, the 'Yellow Book', which collected information about potential subversives, including the current president of El Salvador. According to a preliminary analysis conducted by the National Security Archive, this practice reflected American military advisers' efforts to construct a Salvadoran military intelligence apparatus that could identify and destroy subversive networks.<sup>38</sup> That such a capability existed should not come as surprise. Beyond the necessity of obtaining intelligence for military operations, this development, like many others used by the United States in El Salvador, reflected decades of practice both in Latin America and globally.

The fulcrum of Reagan's Salvadoran policy rested on the deployment of American Special Forces advisers to El Salvador. United States advisers disseminated key principles informing United States COIN doctrine, including the emphasis on the political, small-unit patrolling, and respecting the population and winning their affection. They also tried to stress the importance of focusing less on producing prodigious body counts and more on addressing the political aspect of the conflict. The United States message found a receptive audience among certain sectors of the Salvadoran military, however, not the senior officers who directed the war.

Confronted by United States political demands, Washington decided not to build a new army from scratch. Instead, it relied upon an actor that had repressed its people for decades and tried to convince its senior leadership to reform or risk losing United States aid. In addition to professionalising the Salvadoran military, American trainers also had to persuade the Salvadoran military to put its own country ahead of its own self-interests.<sup>39</sup> American policy-makers also worked with Salvadoran officers implicated in human rights abuses, including

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<sup>34</sup>Memo, 'Why El Salvador Isn't Vietnam', from Richard Allen to Ed Meese and James Baker, 25 February 1981, folder 'El Salvador' (02/27/1981), box 4, Roger Fontaine Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>35</sup>Report by the Comptroller General of the United States: US Military Aid to El Salvador and Honduras, 22 August 1985, folder 'US Military Aid to El Salvador (and Honduras)', box 1, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>36</sup>Information Paper, 'BG Woerner's Briefing on the El Salvador Military Situation', 18 November 1981, folder 'El Salvador', Oliver North, NSC, box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>37</sup>Report, 'Fighting the Insurgency in El Salvador', ND, folder 'El Salvador', Oliver North, NSC, box 12, Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>38</sup>National Security Archive, *the Yellow Book: Electronic Briefing Book No. 486*. Available at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB486/>.

<sup>39</sup>Dr. John Fishel, phone interview with the author, 10 May 2016.

Colonel Domingo Monterossa and Eugenio Vides Casanova.<sup>40</sup> Even more concerning, in the early 1980s many of Salvadoran garrisons had death squads operating out of them.<sup>41</sup>

The United States' connection with death squad abuses during the conflict remains murky. D'Aubuisson established these notorious units with the help of a group of wealthy businessmen.<sup>42</sup> Certain agencies, such as the State Department, opposed their activities. American ambassadors from Robert White until William Walker despised these groups and tried to avoid any connection with them.<sup>43</sup> They also perceived that if death squads benefitted from American security aid it would compel Congress to terminate funding. Yet, others in the United States had no qualms about associating with individuals involved with death squads, including the archconservative Senator Jesse Helms. The senator from North Carolina was among D'Aubuisson's most ardent supporters in the United States. Supposedly, Helms' chief of staff travelled across the globe and informed United States allies not to worry about human rights under Reagan, and instead, kill with impunity.<sup>44</sup>

The Pentagon's hands, however, are not completely clean. Advisers during the 1960s established intelligence and paramilitary networks in El Salvador (and especially in neighbouring Guatemala) that deliberately targeted subversives. Salvadoran officers who attended American service academies – such as the School of the Americas – including Roberto D'Aubuisson and Nicolás Carranza, have been implicated in serious human rights abuses. *Barriers to Reform: a Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders*, a study written by the staff of the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus in May 1990, noted that 14 of 15 of El Salvador's military leaders had presided over commands implicated in a series of troubling actions, including murder, rape, torture and forced disappearances. Of those 14, 12 had received United States training, 'some for many years'.<sup>45</sup> And, as the United Nations Truth Commission Report makes clear, at least 85% of the human rights atrocities committed during the war are attributable to the Salvadoran military and its security forces.<sup>46</sup>

Linking American advisers to the death squad abuses committed during the war remains tenuous. Former advisers have adamantly denied any involvement. From their perspective killing civilians was counter-productive and only served to invite more sympathy for the rebels.<sup>47</sup> The former head of the United States advisory mission, Colonel John Waghelstein, also emphasised that the Military Group (MILGP) had no contact with any death squads, or agencies affiliated with them, including the notorious Treasury Police.<sup>48</sup> Journalists critical of the war effort have also disputed American military links to the death squads.<sup>49</sup> No firm evidence linking United States advisers to death squads exists. Nonetheless, what can be

<sup>40</sup>Vides Casanova has been associated with the disappearance, rape and murder of four US churchwomen in El Salvador in 1980. In April 2015, a US federal judge deported the former Salvadoran general to El Salvador. Julia Preston, 'US Deports Salvadoran General Accused in '80s Killings', *New York Times*, 8 April 2015.

<sup>41</sup>Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defence Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 160.

<sup>42</sup>Christine Wade, *Captured Peace: Elites and Peacebuilding in El Salvador* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), 25.

<sup>43</sup>Ambassador William Walker, interview with the author, 17 February 2014.

<sup>44</sup>Edwin Corr, interview with the author, Norman Oklahoma, 11 April 2014.

<sup>45</sup>Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, *Barriers to Reform: a Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders* (Washington: US Congress, 1990), Caleb Rossiter Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.

<sup>46</sup>United Nations, *From Madness to Hope: the Twelve Year War in El Salvador, Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, Available at: <https://www.usip.org/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup>General Fred Woerner, phone interview with the author, 15 May 2014; John Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, 1 April 2014; Dr. John Fishel, interview with the author, 11 April 2014.

<sup>48</sup>Colonel John Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, 25 October 2016.

<sup>49</sup>Chris Hedges, phone interview with author, 31 May 2016; Clifford Krauss, email interview with author, 9 June 2016.

said is that the Pentagon created a killing machine that unleashed havoc in El Salvador. Some high profile participants in El Salvador, most notably Colonel James Steele, reappeared decades later in Iraq, and also created units complicit in human rights abuses.

### Constructing an aggressive force

For many American COIN practitioners, the Salvadoran military required more than a cosmetic makeover. Supposedly, the Salvadoran military maintained a ‘garrison’ and 9–5 mentality that refused to take the fight to the insurgents. According to American COIN strategists, the Salvadoran army lacked the essential training to successfully implement United States pacification efforts. For those familiar with American military aid programmes to the region during the Cold War, this is a curious assertion. The Salvadoran military had received decades of United States schooling provided at the School of the Americas or in the United States, military hardware, and collaboration between the Green Berets and Salvadoran intelligence agencies such as ANSESAL. As one adviser acknowledged, the problem was not a lack of United States COIN training, it was ‘getting them [the Salvadorans] to actually use these tactics.’<sup>50</sup> Critics of US policy in El Salvador viewed the matter quite differently: as the Salvadoran military had been practicing American COIN strategy for decades, it was responsible for the devastation of the country.

The Salvadoran army suffered from several deficiencies. According to a Salvadoran general, its strategy was inappropriate and incoherent, and they failed to grasp how to respond to the enemy.<sup>51</sup> One of the primary goals of the American COIN effort aimed at improving the Salvadoran military’s operational performance. It proved to be a difficult challenge. Throughout the conflict, even though the United States established a large army blessed with superior weaponry and a sophisticated COIN strategy, it still could not inflict a decisive victory against the insurgents.

In 1980, the US army created the first of several aggressive Salvadoran units designed to hunt down and destroy the insurgents, *Los Batallones (de Infantería) de Reacción Inmediata* (BIRI). Modelled along with the lines of the US Ranger battalions, BIRIs were trained to avoid committing further human rights abuses and causing further damage to the Salvadoran government’s legitimacy. These forces were capable of quickly deploying across the country and conducting the small-unit and long-range reconnaissance patrols that are the foundation of COIN strategy. BIRIs received the best equipment available and were trained by the US military at a variety of locations, including in the United States. By the end of the conflict, there were five rapid reaction battalions; however, all of them were disbanded after the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992 at the behest of the FMLN.

The first and most important unit was the Atlacatl Battalion, a name derived from a mythical figure in Salvadoran history. Unlike the rest of the BIRIs, the unit was trained in-country. Most of those who served were volunteers, although after 1983 they began accepting conscripts.<sup>52</sup> The Atlacatl Battalion was considered to be the most professional and aggressive unit in the entire Salvadoran army. In a British diplomat’s opinion, the

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<sup>50</sup>Quoted in Michael Childress, *The Effectiveness of US Training Efforts in Internal Defence and Development: the Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1995), 31.

<sup>51</sup>Juan Orlando Zepeda, *Perfiles de la guerra en El Salvador* (San Salvador: New Graphics, 2008), 175.

<sup>52</sup>Herard von Santos, email interview with the author, 20 October 2016.

battalion was unlike the rest of the army. As he noted, 'they are different, they, like the Irish Republican Army (IRA), enjoy killing.'<sup>53</sup>

Despite being labelled as the most elite and professional unit of the army, the Atlacatl Battalion was implicated in numerous human rights abuses throughout the war, including the massacre at El Mozote, in which approximately 1,000 civilians were exterminated. After rounding up the villagers the following day Salvadoran soldiers separated the males from the females and children, interrogated, tortured, and finally murdered them in an orgy of violence. What makes the carnage the village suffered so striking is that its inhabitants were not militants.<sup>54</sup> United States advisers also noted the battalion's brutality and penchant for macabre war trophies; an American adviser witnessed an Atlacatl soldier transforming a human skull – reported to have belonged to a FMLN insurgent killed in action – into a desk lamp.<sup>55</sup> One of the more egregious examples occurred near the end of the war, when members of the unit assassinated six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter at the *Universidad Centroamericana* in 1989; an act that would have severe ramifications for United States aid. The United Nations Truth Commission examined these atrocities after the termination of the conflict and noted that over 80% of all the atrocities committed during the war were the result of state sponsored or extra-state violence.

The United States reapplied the concept of elimination to El Salvador. This should not have come as a surprise. Throughout the twentieth century the US military established elite commando forces, including 'hunter-killer' teams in the Philippines and the Phoenix Programme in Vietnam. In both cases, these units targeted high profile insurgents and either arrested or killed them. Human rights abuses, including torture and political assassinations, were common. Questions also remain regarding their overall effectiveness.<sup>56</sup> According to one estimate the program victimized thirty-eight innocents for every insurgent.<sup>57</sup> In Vietnam, American intelligence officials and their South Vietnamese counterparts used the latest technology – they fed dossiers into an IBM-1401 computer – to compile lists of targets. As analysts accumulated more names, pressure mounted to achieve quotas. Programmes such as Phoenix also served as models for the American programme in El Salvador, and later in Iraq, which was known as the 'Salvadoran option'.

David Kilcullen, a prominent COIN enthusiast, recently reaffirmed the need for a 'dis-aggregation strategy', resembling the 'unfairly maligned (but highly effective) Vietnam-era Phoenix Programme.'<sup>58</sup> The US military has recently targeted high-level insurgent leaders in both Afghanistan and Iraq. While it has produced a massive body count, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the insurgents have replenished their leadership. Quite often, the slain

<sup>53</sup>Memorandum, 'The Atlacatl Battalion and Alleged Human Rights Abuses, Section: Atlacatl's Record and US Policy', 'Barriers to Reform', El Salvador, box 2, folder 'Barriers to Reform-Research', Records of the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus, Caleb Rossiter Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.

<sup>54</sup>Mark Danner, *the Massacre at El Mozote: a Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 53.

<sup>55</sup>Greg Walker, *At the Hurricane's Eye: US Special Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm* (New York: Ivy Books, 1994), 93.

<sup>56</sup>Douglas Valentine depicts the effort as a massive assassination programme and instrument of torture. Phoenix has its defenders, such as Mark Moyar, who argue that depictions such as Valentine's are mistaken. Dale Andrade has claimed the programme decimated the VCI leadership. One of the more routinely cited quotations offered is from General Tran Do, Communist deputy commander in the South, who admitted that Phoenix was 'extremely destructive'. See Douglas Valentine, *the Phoenix Programme* (New York: Morrow, 1990); Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997); Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Programme and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1990).

<sup>57</sup>Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, 'How 'Free' is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem,' *World Politics* 59.2 (January 2007): 177–216.

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Andrew Cockburn, *Kill Chain: the Rise of the High-Tech Assassins* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), 88.



leader's successor has been more ruthless than their predecessor, including Abu Ayyub al-Masri.<sup>59</sup> In spite of General David Petraeus' musings about protecting civilians, current American COIN doctrine, continues, and probably always will, emphasise the necessity of killing.<sup>60</sup> Instead of referring to the practice of elimination in these terms, military parlance uses sterile euphemisms such as 'disaggregation' to obfuscate the emphasis on eliminating insurgents.

The United States advisory effort also created new conventional military forces, including *Batallones de Infanteria Antiterrorista* (BIAT) and *Batallones de Infanteria para Contrasubversion* (BIC). These units, which provided security at dams, bridges and key roads, were comprised mainly of conscripts. Generally, it is assumed that they lacked the will to fight. Their fighting prowess and willingness to sustain combat, of course, also depended upon their leadership. While finding desertion rates is difficult, several commentators have argued that the rate is likely low.<sup>61</sup> Unlike in South Vietnam where the United States had difficulty convincing its allies to stand and fight, American security assistance seems to have avoided recreating the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in El Salvador.<sup>62</sup> As a former adviser noted, the issue was not convincing Salvadorans to fight; rather, it was getting them to do it 'correctly'. For him, this meant stop 'screwing around with the civilians', i.e. killing or abusing them, and focus on conducting small-unit patrols.<sup>63</sup>

United States security assistance also completely rebuilt the Salvadoran Air Force. Increasingly, the Salvadoran military used airpower and its new weapons to pulverise the countryside. The Salvadoran Air Force also reportedly used napalm and white phosphorous munitions against civilians.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, these practices increased civilian displacement. The number of individuals uprooted by the war spiked dramatically, creating an exodus 'unprecedented in the hemisphere'.<sup>65</sup> By 1987, approximately 500,000 Salvadorans had been displaced – 10% of the population.<sup>66</sup> Two years later, that figure had increased to 600,000 and another 1.5 million had fled the nation's borders.<sup>67</sup> Besides fleeing across the border to Honduras, tens of thousands of Salvadorans illegally immigrated to the United States. Consequently, the Salvadoran population in the United States increased from approximately 100,000 to half a million in 1990.<sup>68</sup> As they entered the United States,

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<sup>59</sup>Whether it is Afghanistan, Colombia, or Iraq, the American infatuation with assassinating insurgent leadership has failed to produce dividends. See Cockburn, 149–150 and 246–247.

<sup>60</sup>See US Army and Marine Corps, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington: Department of the Army, 2006).

<sup>61</sup>John T. Fishel, email interview with the author, 21 September 2016; Herard von Santos, email interview with the author, 20 October 2016.

<sup>62</sup>Robert Brigham's study of the South Vietnamese Army offers a critical reappraisal of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). As Brigham notes, the South Vietnamese military's issues were partly the result of poor training and doctrine promoted by the United States. He also notes that William Westmoreland's decision to relegate the institution to static defence after 1965 and the transition toward Vietnamisation also severely impacted the ARVN's morale. See, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

<sup>63</sup>Colonel John Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, 25 October 2016.

<sup>64</sup>Charles Clements reportedly treated civilians with wounds consistent to the injuries produced by these bombs. See Clements, *Witness to War*.

<sup>65</sup>This figure was cited by Sylvia Rosales-Fike during her testimony before the US Senate committee. United States Senate, *Central American Migration to the United States*, 21 June 1989, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 101 Cong., 87.

<sup>66</sup>Elisabeth Wood, 'Civil War and Reconstruction: the Repopulation of Tenancingo', in *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador*, Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford, eds (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004). 126–146, 128.

<sup>67</sup>United States Senate, *Central American Migration to the United States*, 21 June 1989, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 101 Cong., 87.

<sup>68</sup>David Haines and Karen Roseblum, editors, *Illegal Immigration in America: a Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1999), 234.



the American government refused to admit them as refugees displaced by war, despite the fact that many fled for that very reason. Accepting that San Salvador had persecuted its own people – with substantial United States support – would have contradicted US government policy toward the country.<sup>69</sup>

In spite of these advancements and sustained US security funding, the Salvadoran military was no closer to victory after 4 years of war than it was when Reagan entered the White House. Perhaps even more concerning, concerns continued to exist in late 1983 over the possibility of a right-wing or leftist coup d'état. As a handwritten memo by Oliver North explained, the CIA Operations Directorate and head of Southern Command, General Paul Gorman, both believed 'the situation in El Salvador has deteriorated to the point that the country could be gone to an extremist right wing coup or a left wing take-over as early as Christmas.'<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the White House continued to publicly exude confidence.

### Boots on the ground

Unlike the American advisers in Vietnam, those who served in El Salvador either spoke Spanish, or had extensive experience interacting with Latin American soldiers. They also seem to have avoided offending their Salvadoran allies' cultural sensitivities, a key issue in Vietnam.<sup>71</sup> All of them, including the MILGP commanders, had the requisite language skills and extensive experience in the region prior to serving in El Salvador. The trainers included Puerto Ricans, Cubans (including veterans from the Bay of Pigs), Mexican-Americans and gringos.<sup>72</sup> United States advisers appear to have avoided the pitfalls that plagued previous United States advisory experiences, including racism, paternalism and a lack of empathy. They, however, maintained a colonial mindset that the US had to teach the Salvadorans how to behave properly and avoid killing civilians. The assumption that the Salvadorans could not reach such conclusions on their own is not only absurd but ironic; their senior officers received training at US military academies—an institution with its own long history of committing abuses toward civilians during war time. Yet, while advisers may have developed a better relationship with their Salvadoran peers, they still could not overcome the failure of the Salvadoran government and the hostility of the elites to offer significant reforms to undercut the insurgency.

Colonel John Waghelstein, head of the US MILGP, tried to impart the political dimension to his Salvadoran colleagues. Rather than trying 'to kill them all', he emphasised the necessity of solving popular grievances.<sup>73</sup> The Salvadoran military's early usage of scorched-earth tactics had failed to defeat the insurgents, alienated civilians and outraged United States public opinion. Even though US commanders may have emphasised the importance of a political solution, US military aid continued to be predicated on supplying high-tech equipment and building a force that relied on technology, such as helicopters to use for

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<sup>69</sup>Haines and Rosenblum, 240.

<sup>70</sup>Memorandum from Oliver North and Constantine Menges, 'El Salvador: Undoing What has been Done', Unknown Date, folder 'El Salvador-Death Squads Oliver North (2)', box 18 Oliver North Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>71</sup>Particularly galling for ARVN troops was the United States' decision to import rice and soy sauce from South Korea. According to numerous soldiers, such actions demonstrated American contempt and a profound lack of cultural awareness. Brigham, 59–60.

<sup>72</sup>Dr. John T. Fishel, phone interview with the author, 5 May 2016.

<sup>73</sup>Colonel James Waghelstein, phone interview with the author, 1 April 2014.

search-and-destroy missions.<sup>74</sup> Thus, a disconnect existed between the boots on the ground and those who designed the military aid programmes for El Salvador.

In spite of the collegiality between the United States and Salvadoran militaries, differences existed between their respective views over the root causes of the war. Some American advisers believed that senior Salvadoran officers were not interested in addressing the political and social aspects of the insurgency. As one recalled, they viewed the ‘insurgency as a Liberation Theology inspired communist effort to change the status quo and the solution was to eliminate the priests and the rural population that embraced these ideas.’<sup>75</sup> Throughout the war, the Salvadoran military proved hesitant to adopt the strategies promoted by their trainers.<sup>76</sup> The Salvadoran High Command believed that ‘their situation was unique and that United States operational advice did not apply.’<sup>77</sup> This should not have been entirely surprising, because as a former US adviser who worked with senior Salvadoran officers noted, they were much ‘too nationalistic to allow the gringos to run them.’<sup>78</sup>

Arguably, Salvadoran officers implemented key tenets of United States COIN and the National Security Doctrine, especially its emphasis on identifying and eliminating ‘subversives.’<sup>79</sup> Thus, some of the fault must lie with the message and the messenger. The intervention floundered not because of incompetent locals who refused to heed United States advice but because the principles themselves were inadequate. Even more importantly, the policies the United States devised did not address the root causes – socioeconomic inequalities and a lack of political space – of the insurgency.<sup>80</sup> Thus, even if the Salvadoran high command accepted United States advice it is unlikely that the war would have ended differently.

Successive political administrations believed that providing generous aid to El Salvador would give Washington leverage over its clients. The intent was to threaten the withdrawal of United States aid if the Salvadorans failed to reform. Some former officials have claimed that the Salvadorans readily understood what would happen if they did not improve their image and human rights records.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, it has yet to be proven that the Salvadoran military and government ever took Washington’s threats seriously. Given the administration’s commitment to military victory it is doubtful that any threats to suspend aid were credible to Salvadoran officers.<sup>82</sup> How then could the Salvadoran armed forces and far right

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<sup>74</sup>Andrew Bacevich et al, *American Military Policy in Small Wars: the Case of El Salvador* (Cambridge & Washington: Pergamon Brasseys, 1988).

<sup>75</sup>Colonel James Hallums, email interview with the author, 10 March 2014.

<sup>76</sup>William Stanley and Mark Peceny, ‘Counterinsurgency in El Salvador’, *Politics & Society* 38.1 (2010): 67–94; Benjamin Schwartz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: the Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1991); Bacevich et al.

<sup>77</sup>Col. James Hallums, email interview with author, 5 March 2014.

<sup>78</sup>John T. Fishel, email interview with the author, 21 September 2016.

<sup>79</sup>Joaquín Chávez, ‘El Salvador – The Creation of the Internal Enemy: Pondering the Legacies of US Anticommunism, Counter-insurgency, and Authoritarianism in El Salvador (1952–1981)’, in H. Gurman, ed., *Hearts and Minds: a People’s History of Counter-insurgency* (New York, 2013).

<sup>80</sup>This also includes agrarian reform and other development projects such as *Unidos para Reconstruir*. Tommy Sue Montgomery, ‘Fighting Guerrillas: the United States and Low-Intensity Conflict in El Salvador’, *New Political Science* 9.1 (Fall/Winter 1990): 21–53, 21–23; Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: the US Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998), 132–133.

<sup>81</sup>Colonel Waghelstein reminded his Salvadoran counterpart, Colonel Eugenio Vides Casanova, that ‘unlike Vietnam, where we’d committed 450,000 troops it would not take me long to put the 55 trainers on an airplane’. Quoted in John Waghelstein, ‘Military-to-Military Contacts: Personal Observations—The El Salvador Case’, *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement* 10.2 (Summer: 2003), 22.

<sup>82</sup>McClintock, 224.

be pressured to reform by threats if Washington had affirmed its determination to draw the line in that country?<sup>83</sup>

## Lessons learned?

In January 1989, the FMLN launched a major offensive in San Salvador, *Hasta el Tope*, or *Ofensiva fuera los fascistas, Febe Elizabeth vive* (named for the murdered FENASTRAS secretary general, Febe Elizabeth Velásquez). Even though the nationwide uprising never occurred it shook the Salvadoran government's confidence. It also produced a 'panic stricken' mood among the Salvadoran high command, whose paranoia and fear led it to authorise the murder of six Jesuit priests.<sup>84</sup> The 1989 offensive also changed the calculus in the White House. Rather than seeking a military victory, the White House under George H.W. Bush looked to the negotiating table to end the war.<sup>85</sup> One of the leading proponents for negotiations within the Bush administration was his Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Bernard Aronson. As Aronson told the House subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs in January 1990, 'El Salvador needs peace and the only path is at the negotiating table.'<sup>86</sup>

By 1989, actors in both the United States and El Salvador realised that neither side could achieve a military victory. The FMLN's foreign backers had also been applying pressure to negotiate, which along with the offensive's failure to spark a nationwide uprising and topple the government, made the insurgents more amenable to negotiations.<sup>87</sup> International events also demonstrated that as the Cold War was slowly ending, so the need for a sustained and expensive United States COIN effort to prevent the collapse of El Salvador was unnecessary. Or put another way, the basis of the previous years of United States policy toward the country now appeared anachronistic.

In spite of delays and disagreements over particular negotiating points, on 16 January 1992, representatives of the Salvadoran government and the FMLN signed a peace agreement that officially ended the war. The announcement was celebrated heavily throughout El Salvador. The end of the Salvadoran Civil War also occurred as the region's various other conflicts ended. The following month, an official ceasefire was established, which although there were several tense moments in the FMLN's demobilisation effort, was never broken. Now, instead of fighting each other, the former enemies had to resolve their differences peacefully and take up the task of rebuilding and governing the country.

The FMLN's war against the state ultimately resulted in important political gains for the Salvadoran people, especially by terminating the government's previous exclusionary policies. The conclusion of the conflict also provided a mechanism to resolve disagreements peacefully.<sup>88</sup> In pre-war El Salvador, political space was extremely narrow and tightly controlled. Subsequently, political parties that had been denied access to political life were

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<sup>83</sup>Schwartz, 82.

<sup>84</sup>William Walker, interview with the author, 17 February 2014; Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador. *From Madness to Hope: the 12 Year War in El Salvador*. Last modified 15 March 1993. Available at <https://www.usip.org/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>

<sup>85</sup>This view was confirmed by Ambassador Walker. William Walker, interview with the author, 17 February 2014.

<sup>86</sup>See Bernard Aronson's testimony at the Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States House of Representatives, 24 January 1990 (Washington: US GPO).

<sup>87</sup>Telegram, 'GOES-FMLN Negotiations: Where do we go from Here?' 22 September 1989, El Salvador Online Collection, NSA.

<sup>88</sup>José Medrano, interview with the author, San Salvador, 22 August 2013.

allowed to organise and run for office. The FMLN has won the last two presidential elections in El Salvador, and its current president, served as the head of the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* (FPL) during the conflict. In Facundo Guardado's opinion, the war created the first social pact in the country's history signed between the government and its people.<sup>89</sup> The accords created a new Salvadoran government that required it to be responsive to its citizens. Arguably, the end of the conflict marked the beginning of political legitimacy in El Salvador.

The war also contributed to the devastation of the country. For approximately 12 years, Salvadorans committed horrific violence against each other, causing at least 70,000 deaths and large-scale emigration. Two of the more frequented destinations included neighbouring Honduras, where they settled in refugee camps, and the United States. While former enemies on the battlefield have reconciled, political polarisation continues to exist, as evidenced by the last presidential election. The deportation of former Salvadoran immigrants from the United States also formed the nucleus of *las maras*, which continue to plague the country. Unfortunately, many of the issues which produced the conflict have not been resolved and continue to bedevil El Salvador.

In spite of massive United States aid, sophisticated American military leadership, construction of a large military and overwhelming favourable conditions, the Salvadoran military never decisively defeated its enemy. Instead, all sides settled for a negotiated settlement. It is especially curious to emphasise the positive outcome of the United States' efforts in El Salvador as the war ended in stalemate and a negotiated settlement – which could have possibly been achieved several years earlier had recalcitrant forces, including the US government and Salvadoran military and its right-wing allies, not fiercely resisted.

El Salvador's legacy has also been extended to Iraq. Beginning in 2003, the Pentagon began deploying veterans of the conflict, including Colonel James Steele, to Iraq to create and train Iraqi police forces. As Iraq unravelled, officials from the Pentagon and Bush administration also proposed creating elite commando units to combat the Sunni insurgents, a plan which journalists labelled the 'Salvadoran option.'<sup>90</sup> While these units resembled the BIRIs more closely than the death squads, the proposal reflected the military's emphasis on elimination. These units were later charged with committing human rights abuses and torturing suspects, allegedly with United States advisers present.<sup>91</sup>

The Salvadoran war also offers an antidote to the sanitised histories provided by the most prominent defenders of COIN – General David Petraeus and Colonel John Nagl. Their distorted narratives fulfilled an important political agenda: transforming the way the US military waged war. Nagl and Petraeus emphasised the benign nature of COIN by highlighting reform, providing security for civilians and promoting human rights. In the process, they downplayed the role of coercion, elimination and threats in combating insurgency. These principles found a very receptive audience, including among liberal commentators. Their efforts resulted in the creation of *Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency*.

*FM 3-24* largely addresses how US combat troops should combat insurgency instead of the indirect approach applied in El Salvador. Although the manual does not discuss El Salvador overtly, it is easy to identify the traces of the American COIN effort within its

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<sup>89</sup>Facundo Guardado, interview with the author, 22 August 2013.

<sup>90</sup>Peter Maas, 'The Salvadorization of Iraq?' *The New York Times Magazine*, 1 May 2005.

<sup>91</sup>Mona Mahmood, Maggie O'Kane, Chavala Madlena and Teresa Smith, 'Exclusive: General David Petraeus and "Dirty Wars" Veteran Behind Commando Units Implicated in Detainee Abuse', *The Guardian*, 6 March 2013.

pages. Nevertheless, the conflict's omission is especially striking because it was the largest armed nation-building effort between the end of Vietnam and the second war in Iraq. A closer inspection also highlights the various ethical and moral dilemmas associated with the United States' COIN strategy.

The United States intervention in El Salvador offers a sobering reminder that counterinsurgencies are often as destructive as their conventional counterparts, especially for civilians, and pay lip service to reform and protecting civilians. As the war continued, the Salvadoran military increasingly adopted more aggressive tactics and focused less on securing the allegiance of civilians. Events in Iraq followed a similar pattern as the United States embraced the 'kill or capture' strategy, which Nagl positively described as 'an almost industrial-scale counter-terrorism killing machine.'<sup>92</sup> In both countries, war and the United States intervention contributed to political polarisation, destroyed the country's social fabric, and, not to mention, left psychological scars that will haunt generations.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

*Brian D'Haeseleer* is an assistant professor of History, Lyon College. The author's research interests are US–Latin American relations during the cold war, and the author's upcoming book is *The Salvadoran Crucible: US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979–1992* (University Press of Kansas, 2017).

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<sup>92</sup>This quote is derived from an interview conducted with John Nagl on 'What is the Secretive US "Kill/Capture" Campaign?' *Frontline*, PBS, 17 June 2011. Available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/kill-capture/transcript/>.