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Those killing fields are half empty, not half full.**SALVADOR'S SILVER LINING** BY MORTON M. KONDRACKE*San Salvador*

On Wednesday, February 15, one-time Communist guerrilla commander Miguel Castellanos sat in a room at the Camino Real hotel here and recounted—matter-of-factly, it seemed to me—how he had been targeted for assassination by various groups since his defection to the Salvadoran government in 1985. Some in the military and the far right, the stocky 40-year-old said, still considered him a Communist and were outraged that he and other defectors were allowed to take places in Salvadoran society—in his case, as a prominent political commentator—without being punished for their previous activities. His former comrades in the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front had marked him for death, he said, “for obvious reasons”—for defecting and for making a living by exposing the FMLN’s tactics in speeches, articles, and TV debates with leftist politicians.

Castellanos said he had quit the guerrillas because, with the elections of 1982 and 1984, “El Salvador was not a dictatorship any more,” because “the Communists want a dictatorship, not the betterment of the people,” because he believed in popular democratic political participation, and because he had been distressed at the 1983 murder and suicide of two FMLN leaders in Nicaragua in an ideological dispute.

Castellanos said that things have not been going well for the FMLN. Their front groups have not been able to put large crowds into the streets, and their fighters have had to resort to car bombings and the assassination of mayors and other local officials. “Terrorism is a sign of military weakness,” he said. As a result, they have come up with a clever new ploy, proposing a “peace plan” that would require abrogating the Salvadoran Constitution and postponing presidential elections scheduled for March 19 until September. The army has served notice it will stage a coup if the constitution is violated, and the only way to postpone elections legally is for the right-wing National Assembly to name a temporary president. “The guerrillas know the plan will be rejected,” Castellanos said. “They will use the rejection to justify insurrection. . . . They will incite violence during the election in hopes of producing repression. They will try to provoke the security forces to take actions that will result in a cutoff of [U.S.] military aid. That could restore the advantage to the FMLN.”

On the basis of interviews with politicians on the left, right, and center, with leaders of the FMLN’s labor front, with top military officers, democratic trade unionists, and foreign diplomats, Castellanos’s analysis seems right

on the mark. But no more will be heard from him. About 24 hours after I saw him, his car was stopped by FMLN guerrillas driving a yellow pickup truck, who then pumped dozens of machine-gun bullets into his body. The FMLN’s Radio Venceremos asserted that his murder was “revolutionary justice.”

This killing is the latest event in what everyone here regards as an upsurge in political violence over the past year. Tutela Legal, the Roman Catholic Church’s left-leaning human rights group, accuses the army and security forces and right-wing death squads of killing 145 civilians during the first 11 months of 1988, compared with 101 during the same period in 1987, while 41 were killed by guerrillas, compared with 30 in 1987. The government’s human rights office thinks that political killings may have doubled from 1987 to 1988, and it attributes most of the increase (as does the U.S. Embassy) to stepped-up activity by the FMLN.

What’s most important for the future is how this violence and the FMLN peace offer are interpreted in the United States, whose financial support is crucial for the Salvadoran government. It’s become the fashion in the American press to regard the violence as one of several signs that U.S. policy here has failed. On February 2, for example, ABC’s John Quinones reported that “eight years and \$3 billion after the U.S. first promised peace and democracy for El Salvador, the leftist rebels appear stronger than ever. . . . El Salvador’s moderate political forces have collapsed. . . . The right-wing ARENA party now controls the legislature, and their candidate is expected to win next month’s presidential elections. That would signal an even harder line against the guerrillas. . . . more fighting. Meanwhile, El Salvador’s economy is mired in an ever deepening crisis.”

ABC topped off its report by featuring an old lady in a market saying, “There’s no peace or democracy here. Things get worse every day. American money comes in, but it’s only for guns to be used against our own people.” According to a similarly gloomy forecast in the *New York Times Magazine* on February 5 by veteran correspondent James LeMoyne, “El Salvador may already have become the Northern Ireland of Central America: a permanent running sore, congenitally incapable of fully healing or being cured, short of the most radical measures,” such as a U.S.-imposed settlement or a U.S. withdrawal “that would leave the Salvadorans to fight it out among themselves.”

The pessimism rampant in the press plays nicely, if

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unintentionally, into the plans of the left to get Congress to slash or cut off U.S. military aid (which, contrary to the opinion of ABC's old lady, amounts to less than one-third of economic assistance) and force the government into negotiations with the FMLN. The guerrilla front, conveniently, has just taken steps to make itself more palatable to policy-makers and the American public. Not only has the FMLN promised to respect the results of elections if they are held six months from now, but top guerrilla commander Joaquín Villalobos wrote an article in the current issue of *Foreign Policy* declaring that the FMLN now believes in "democratic revolution." While still Marxist-Leninist intellectually, Villalobos claimed, the FMLN has concluded that "it is neither possible nor necessary to carry out a plan to eliminate totally the private sector, to establish a single-party system, to bar other parties from the media, to break with the Church, [or] to eliminate elections." The FMLN does reserve the right, however, to keep its weapons even after elections, until the Salvadoran army is reorganized to its liking.

PESSIMISTS are correct in saying that Salvador has dire troubles and could—by any one of several scenarios—collapse into repression and chaos. The likeliest, as envisioned by Castellanos and other analysts, is that ARENA would win the presidential election, the Communists would launch attacks to provoke the military into reprisals, ARENA's extremist element would launch renewed death squad atrocities, Congress would cut off U.S. aid, the army would then stage a coup and return to its "dirty war" tactics of the early 1980s, and this would increase popular support for the FMLN and lead eventually to a Communist victory.

On the other hand, there is good reason for Americans to think that U.S. policy has achieved important results in this violent, poverty-ridden, once-feudal country, and for us to persevere in trying to foster democracy, economic development, respect for human rights, military professionalism, and a negotiated settlement on the government's terms, not the Communists'.

After centuries of dictatorship, peasant massacres, rigged elections, and torture, El Salvador has held five reasonably fair and democratic elections during the past eight years. It has a constitution calling for President José Napoleón Duarte to transfer power to an elected successor on June 1, and Duarte, who is dying of liver cancer, is determined to do so. FMLN sympathizers are running for office and openly participating in public debates, even as they call for the vote to be postponed. Like Castellanos, Duarte regards the FMLN's proposal as "a trick to disrupt the institutionality of the country."

Notwithstanding last year's disturbing numbers, over the long haul of the past eight years there has been a dramatic reduction in the rate of political killing. The average was 20 per month in 1988 (up from ten in early 1987)—not a pleasant number, but far below the carnage level of 800 per month in the early 1980s. It's true that 70,000 people have been killed in the past ten years

(many times the number in Northern Ireland, though half the toll in Lebanon). It's true that army troops still commit atrocities, such as the execution of ten peasants in the village of San Sebastian last September. And it's true that no military officer has ever been jailed for killing a civilian.

But it's also true that at least the top level of the Salvadoran army has become convinced through U.S. pressure that defeating the Communists requires respect for civilian rights. In late January, Defense Minister Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova had to spend more than six hours on his feet arguing this point in a tense meeting with top air force officers fed up with American-imposed restrictions. The next week, Vice President Dan Quayle came to town to renew the pressure on behalf of the Bush administration. He told the army, ARENA, and the judiciary that American support depended on sustained human rights improvements, starting with prosecutions in the San Sebastian case.

While both the government and the left have been killing peasants believed to be cooperating with the other side, the FMLN has far exceeded the right in killing prominent figures. In fact, not a single major leftist politician, student leader, or labor official has been murdered during the past year, while the FMLN has claimed credit for assassinating nine mayors and one governor, and for driving 80 other mayors from office. Vides Casanova says his worst fear is that the FMLN will murder a prominent left-wing politician such as Guillermo Manuel Ungo or Rubén Zamora and try to blame it on the right or on the government. The FMLN is believed responsible for the death of one prominent human rights worker and has been accused by Tutela Legal of committing a rural massacre while wearing army uniforms.

PESSIMISTS ARE right when they note that despite U.S. aid, the Salvadoran economy is stagnant and that some social indicators, such as availability of clean water, are declining. From 1979 to 1983, economic output in El Salvador fell by 28 percent. Without U.S. aid it would have continued to plunge. Over the past ten years, it's estimated that FMLN guerrillas—"the G's," as they're called by the press—have done \$1.8 billion worth of damage to Salvador's infrastructure. The devastating earthquake of 1986 did another \$1 billion worth. U.S. economic aid, totaling \$2 billion over the past decade, has not even covered these losses. Bad as conditions are here, though, El Salvador gives the impression of far more construction, traffic, and overall economic liveliness than desolate Nicaragua.

Part of the blame for El Salvador's economic stagnation rests with Duarte, who for all his democratic heroics has not been a good economic manager. A Christian Democrat with a socialist outlook, he has been hostile to private business—confusing potential entrepreneurs with old-style oligarchs—and has favored collectivized land reform, nationalized banks and export industries, as well as an overvalued currency, all of which has discouraged

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investment and created opportunities for corruption. Both leading contenders to succeed Duarte—Christian Democrat Fidel Chavez Mena and ARENA nominee Alfredo Cristiani—favor free market economics. ARENA is accused of planning to reverse land reform entirely, dispossess the peasantry, and restore the oligarchs to their vast holdings, but Cristiani denies this, claiming he would decollectivize large farms and give peasants individual title to the land.

THE BIGGEST unanswerable question in El Salvador at the moment is what ARENA really will do if Cristiani wins. American journalists, Christian Democrats, and left-wingers of the Democratic Convergence (the third force in the upcoming elections) all contend that ARENA is controlled not by conservative democrats such as businessman Cristiani, but by right-wing extremists led by former army major Roberto d'Aubuisson. The party's macho 1984 presidential nominee and its leader in the National Assembly, d'Aubuisson is widely believed (by top officials of the U.S. government, among others) to have organized death squad violence in the early 1980s, including the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Penetrating ARENA reportedly is a top priority of U.S. intelligence here, but it is said to be more difficult than penetrating the FMLN. Relations between ARENA and the United States have not been good. Even moderate ARENA politicians, such as San Salvador Mayor Armando Calderon Sol, are furious with the United States for using its money and influence to defeat d'Aubuisson and elect Duarte in 1984 and for supporting Duarte's economic policies since then. They also accuse former U.S. Ambassador Edwin Corr, correctly, of favoring Chavez Mena over Cristiani. They acknowledge this has changed under the current ambassador, William Walker. Quayle pledged U.S. neutrality in this year's elections, but informed ARENA that it was "in a suspect category" and would be watched closely for signs of renewed death squad activity, in case it won the election.

At the moment, most polls and political guesstimates suggest an ARENA victory. The Democratic Convergence presidential candidate, Guillermo Ungo, admits that polls conducted for the left by an American firm show it would draw somewhere between seven percent and 17 percent if the election were held now, and that ARENA would get 36 percent and the Christian Democrats, 28 percent. The Convergence, which is politically allied with the FMLN but condemns some of its violence, claims it could finish second behind ARENA if the elections were postponed until September, thanks to a "hidden preference" for the left among the urban poor and the rural peasantry. Practically no one else here credits this estimate, however. Despite the desperate poverty of the countryside, it constitutes ARENA's base because of the traditional conservatism of the peasantry. The Christian Democrats' base is with workers and government employees in San Salvador.

ARENA seems to be ahead because of the economic failures of the Duarte regime, superior ARENA campaign orga-

nizing, and weak campaigning so far by Chavez Mena. The Christian Democrats have tried to discredit Cristiani with the slogan "Freddy Can't" (as in "can't" handle Roberto d'Aubuisson) and to unveil new evidence about d'Aubuisson's role in the Romero assassination. But Chavez Mena has been unable to decide whether he wants to distance himself from Duarte or to claim credit for his experience as Duarte's planning minister. One hope for Chavez Mena is that he can convince voters that he is more capable than ARENA of negotiating peace with the FMLN.

One source of worry is that ARENA might purge the current moderate top leadership of the armed forces and install a hard-liner such as air force chief Juan Rafael Bustillo as defense minister. Bustillo, Vides Casanova's leading challenger in his six-hour confrontation with air force officers, is believed to favor unrestricted bombing as a means of fighting the guerrillas. The army has served notice that it will not support such a policy (tried before and found counterproductive). It has further served notice that it would not accept the appointment of Roberto d'Aubuisson or Sigifredo Ochoa Perez, another hard-liner, as defense minister. As elsewhere in Latin America, army respect for civilian authority has its limits in El Salvador. Vides Casanova and army chief of staff René Emilio Ponce have practically promised that there will be a coup if the political parties agreed to postpone the elections in an unconstitutional manner. That may be just what the FMLN is hoping for.

There is one final danger facing Salvador—that the loser of the presidential election will claim fraud and refuse to accept the result. Christian Democrats contend that ARENA officials have prevented 350,000 voters from receiving registration cards. ARENA spokesmen say they are so convinced of victory that only fraud could keep them from winning. Vides Casanova says his job is to hold the army together to keep order in the event of violence. He says this means he will move against right-wing death squads if they reappear in force.

THE LAST THING this problem-ridden country needs is for the support of the United States to be in doubt. If the worst were to happen, and massive repression resumed, the United States presumably would want to cut off military aid regardless of the consequences. Quayle delivered a message to that effect. Short of that, however, the United States should be patient, even if ARENA wins. We should encourage free market economic reforms, and if budgets will not permit more economic aid, then we should at least pass legislation to give temporary legal status to Salvadoran immigrants in the United States, whose remittances back home are a major source of income to the country. We should not force Salvador to postpone its elections, but urge negotiations to let the FMLN into the political process if it's really willing to abandon warfare, doubtful though that prospect is. Above all, we shouldn't give in to pessimism and give up hope for democracy in El Salvador. It's a hard case, but we've made a good beginning. □