

Hotspots

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THE WAR THAT WILL NOT END

By Charles Lane

SAN SALVADOR

The struggle for power in El Salvador now vexes its third American president. Forgotten by most Americans, the ten-year-old war between the government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) is the focus of the United States' largest effort since Vietnam to save an ally from Marxist insurgency. Since 1980 the United States has spent \$4.45 billion on El Salvador, about \$900 million of it on military aid. Add \$850 million in unsubsidized credits, plus possibly half a billion for the CIA's doings, and the investment could be close to \$6 billion. Only five countries receive more aid each year than El Salvador, a nation of just 5.2 million people.

All that money has not yet bought success for U.S. policy here. Centrist forces led by José Napoleón Duarte have collapsed, and the former president is dying a tragic, unloved figure. The March presidential election was won by Alfredo Cristiani of the ARENA party, which is tied to the country's traditional elite and of which the most famous and influential member is Roberto d'Aubuisson, the extreme rightist and alleged political killer.

The guerrillas strike from one end of this miniature country to the other, and everyone is sick of the war, which has claimed 70,000 lives. Not long ago I visited the village of San Pedro Nonualco, set among green volcanic slopes just an hour's drive from the capital. Only 36 hours earlier, the town had been the scene of a clash between guerrillas and government forces that left several dead from each side scattered on the cobblestone streets. Afterward, both the army and the rebels peppered the area with propaganda leaflets urging people to take a side. Few shell-shocked residents seemed interested. "We don't know what this war is about," the local justice of the peace told me. "All we know is that it's hurting our town." Peace is the only political cause that commands a majority.

The guerrillas' latest offensive came on a diplomatic front. On September 11 the FMLN presented a three-stage plan to the government at a meeting in Mexico. Under the proposal, the rebels would negotiate a cease-fire and participate in municipal and legislative

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elections next year, in exchange for punishment of human rights violators, sweeping reforms of El Salvador's army, and changes in the constitution. They made no promise to disarm, though. The government agreed to talk again in Costa Rica in mid-October, the first in a series of planned monthly meetings.

The tantalizing new proposal and the promise of future talks raised hopes among Salvadorans that theirs would be the next Third World conflict to give way to negotiation. More likely, though, these events, following a bout of heavy fighting, herald a complex, volatile period that will be marked by both serious fighting and serious talking. The outlook should stir the United States to a reassessment of its policy here. It's overdue.

In large part, El Salvador is at war with itself today because it always has been. Overpopulation and a political culture tinged by extremism and violence have provided little basis for a just political order. In the 1970s El Salvador grew ripe for insurgency. There were widespread demands for political participation and social reform—a consequence, ironically, not only of poverty but also of a spurt of economic growth that had generated new social forces and raised expectations. The electoral fraud in 1972, in which the army stole victory from a center-left coalition led by Duarte, set off a cycle of repression that delegitimized the regime and pushed many to join armed Marxist groups with ties to Cuba.

A group of reformist army officers staged a coup in October 1979, hoping to head off a repeat of the Sandinista victory. The coup launched just enough reform to provoke the oligarchy and its rightist allies in the army into death-squad violence, while failing to satisfy militant popular movements linked to the insurgents, who sensed a chance to exploit the power vacuum. The army survived the rebels' "Final Offensive" of January 1981 thanks to repression and to the military weakness of the left's squabbling factions, which had just been brought under the FMLN banner by the mediation of Fidel Castro.

By now the United States had noticed El Salvador. From the outset, U.S. policy was marked by tension between those who emphasized military counterinsurgency and those who argued for reform and a democratic opening. In his last year as president, Jimmy

WAR. . . CONTINUED

Carter tried both tacks, waveringly backing the reform junta but also restoring military aid during the Final Offensive. The Reagan administration, however, vowed to "draw the line against communism" and leaned toward a military solution. Hard-liners in the White House and CIA talked of "winning the war first, then building a democracy." They ignored or apologized for death squads, which slaughtered some 25,000 people in Reagan's first three years.

By 1983 it was clear that this approach wasn't working. The FMLN, helped by fresh Cuban and Nicaraguan arms and training, mounted a fierce new offensive. "Pragmatists" in the State Department argued that the death squads were driving recruits into the FMLN, not to mention making it hard to sell military aid on Capitol Hill. They insisted that defeating the rebels depended on a legitimate political order based on elections, social reform, and respect for human rights.

The bipartisan Kissinger Commission, named by the president to find a more politically salable and effective policy formulation, endorsed the pragmatists' position. It recommended spending millions on a program of "human development," and conditioning military aid on an end to official murder and punishment of past human rights offenders. While the commission was finishing its report, George Bush, then vice president, went to San Salvador to say that high-level U.S. tolerance of death squads was over, and to demand a purge of the army's worst offenders.

Reassured by the administration's pragmatic tilt, Congress responded with \$204 million in military aid to El Salvador in 1984. Later that year Duarte won the presidential election, defeating d'Aubuisson with the help of covert CIA money. The army, assisted by U.S. training and equipment, gradually ended massacres and stiffened militarily. Washington began to feel good about El Salvador. Nicaragua took over the headlines.

Since then, more has been accomplished than critics of U.S. policy usually concede. Though in deep financial trouble, the land reform program gave land to almost one-fourth of the rural population and politically undercut the guerrillas. The armed forces accept the necessity of civilian rule. The five most credible elections in the country's history have taken place despite guerrilla attacks. The presidency has been transferred from one elected civilian to another. The electoral process was opened to the leftist Democratic Convergence coalition, whose leading parties are allied with the guerrillas. On the right, ARENA has been obliged to adopt more moderate positions. Abroad, the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government is accepted.

Yet life here is still too hard and too violent to convince most people that the system works for them. The country has no working criminal justice system. Per capita income remains a third lower than it was ten years ago. Ninety percent of rural people lack access to potable water. Half the country lacks decent employ-

ment. Malnutrition and disease are rampant. Now young guerrilla recruits cite rural hardship rather than army atrocities as their reason for joining.

These failures are due in part to the difficulty, compounded by the 1986 earthquake and guerrilla sabotage, of building a viable economy in a backwater whose main cash crop, coffee, has faced bad weather and low prices. But corruption and incompetence under Duarte didn't make things any easier. Like many populists in Latin America before him, instead of mass political inclusion Duarte presided over new forms of cronyism. The new government recently obliged Duarte, while he lay dying of cancer, to return \$100,000 in foreign earthquake relief money he had placed in a "foundation" under his personal control.

In many ways, the United States itself quietly backed away from the kinds of reform called for in the Kissinger report. Though pleased to have an elected Salvadoran president to lobby for aid on Capitol Hill, the Reagan administration began to push austerity measures that made it difficult for Duarte to fulfill the "Social Pact" he had promised workers and peasants. Duarte's vision of a cooperative-based society coincided with the report's recommendation that land reform be expanded, but clashed with the administration's private-sector bent. The United States began to downplay land reform and pump money into projects aimed at promoting agro-industry. Hundreds of millions have gone to bail out a private sector unwilling to risk its own wealth on its own country. The United States has sponsored millions of dollars' worth of business-oriented studies, seminars, and training of doubtful necessity—including over \$3.5 million to teach Salvadoran "young enterprisers" the evils of government regulation.

Indeed, under Cristiani, the United States has aggressively and openly aligned itself with the Salvadoran business elite. Cristiani's economic plan was drafted by FUSADES, an ARENA-dominated think tank financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). In its first phase, the plan slashed credit and removed nearly all food subsidies and price controls.

The painful measures are supposed to help lay the groundwork for export-led growth based on a wider variety of cash crops. The free market model has given Salvador's traditional elite a plausible vision of modernization. But even many who agree that a financial housecleaning was a painful necessity have their doubts about the long-term objectives of the United States and ARENA. As long as the war continues, it is unlikely that El Salvador's wealthy will support the plan by bringing their money back from overseas. And the U.S.-backed plan is a political risk for a government based not on national consensus but on rejection of Duarte. Already the National Union of Workers and Peasants, linked closely to the Christian Democrats, has joined the National Union of Salvadoran Workers, an FMLN-leaning group, in a common front against

WAR... CONTINUED

ARENA economic policy. The FMLN has cleverly made lower prices a condition for a cease-fire.

The left will gain more ground if ARENA reverses land reform. (The ARENA-dominated court system has issued over 100 decisions awarding lands to their old owners, and the new economic plan raised land reform beneficiaries' interest rates.) Cristiani says that is not what he has in mind. He has made a show of giving individual titles to co-op members and says he simply wants to "privatize" the land reform. Few would argue that the neglect and corruption of Duarte's government have hurt production and left the reform's beneficiaries deep in debt. But "privatization" will protect them only if Cristiani and the United States follow up with credits, technical assistance, and other government services. Otherwise, many may be forced to sell out to big landowners.

The Kissinger Commission argued that death squads were as inimical to U.S. goals as the guerrillas. But the Reagan administration avoided human rights confrontations with the army, which it was showering with arms and prestige. In 1986 the U.S. Embassy let Duarte drop a U.S.-assisted kidnapping investigation of a right-wing colonel who also had a notorious death-squad history after powerful colonels resisted. U.S. officials in San Salvador helped Ollie North run his *contra* resupply operation out of the Salvadoran air force's Ilopango air base. This entangled a hard-line branch of the Salvadoran military in the administration's hottest covert project—in spite of Duarte's belated objections that doing so would bolster the right and undermine his case against Sandinista help for the FMLN.

To be sure, U.S. military aid, and the leverage it affords, have also contributed to changes in the army's behavior. The Salvadoran army is now a modern 55,000-man force led by a politically sophisticated chief of staff, Col. Rene Emilio Ponce. It no longer routinely commits massacres. Though political killings rose over the last two years, they remain well below the sanguinary standard set in the early '80s. No one doubts that the army's firepower and numbers in the field are sufficient to prevent outright guerrilla victory.

Yet the army remains very much a Third World institution. Corruption is commonplace, and incompetent officers are protected by a system that promotes by seniority, not merit. In recent conversations with U.S. sources here, three colonels in important field commands were described to me as unfit; one, in an area full of guerrillas, was said to be "sitting out the war."

Heavy weapons and air power do little against small groups of rebels. About half of the conscript soldiery—riddled with FMLN infiltrators—is devoted to defending fixed installations. Fewer than ten percent are trained and equipped for commando-style warfare. At San Pedro Nonualco, the government's forces didn't even show up until three hours after the guerrillas hit. Troops came barreling down the road in a pickup—

smack into a deadly ambush. The unit's failure to take precautions was typical. By the time the army fought its way into town, the FMLN had slipped away. "It's inconceivable that we could be using such a stupid tactic that wastes both human and material resources," Col. Mauricio Ernesto Vargas concedes. "But change will be a gradual process." On September 2 the guerrillas killed 16 of Vargas's own men, their best day against the army in over three years.

The army's job would be easier if it could rely on a steady supply of intelligence from peasants. But it still behaves too roughly to win hearts and minds among the rural populace. Government forces and death squads were responsible for 55 targeted killings in the first half of 1989, according to the Roman Catholic Church's human rights office. Such killings appear to form a pattern of selective hits, sometimes gruesomely embellished by torture, aimed at FMLN suspects well-known to military intelligence.

On September 21, 1988, troops killed ten villagers in the hamlet of San Francisco, the first (and so far only) army massacre since late 1984. The U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, William G. Walker, seized on the case as a test of U.S. influence. Vice President Quayle was dispatched to tell the officer corps that such abuses jeopardize military aid requests. In response, the army took the unprecedented step of reversing its earlier denials. It turned over two officers to a civilian judge.

Yet the San Francisco case may also be viewed as the army's latest lesson for the United States in the limits of American pressure. One person present at the Quayle meeting told me that a colonel came out with a scrap of paper dotted with pencil marks. He had made a mark each time Quayle used the words "human rights." "Fourteen times," he laughed. The army reinstated the colonel in charge of the troops who carried out the massacre, and as the anniversary of the massacre passed last week, there has been little progress in the trial of the two officers. The fate of the case seems uncertain now that ARENA is in power. The influential air force chief, Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, recently said the military must take steps "guaranteeing officers and troop commanders that their actions will not be called into question," as those of Argentina's dirty warriors were.

In May there was a bitter fight over the powerful defense minister's job between Colonel Ponce, the choice of Cristiani and the U.S. Embassy, and General Bustillo, who is said to have been offered the job by d'Aubuisson. Bustillo sent jets to buzz military headquarters, and pulled his helicopters out of combat for a few days. Reportedly, his choices for vice ministers would have been two colonels who had been exiled for human rights violations at the United States' request. Thanks largely to U.S. Embassy mediation, this spat was calmed. But the issue could be rejoined in December. Though there has been no revival of ARENA death squads so far, and many analysts doubt there will be as

WAR... CONTINUED

long as the army maintains a monopoly on repression, such antics show the kind of trouble d'Aubuisson can create by making common cause with rightists within the army.

The FMLN, with 5,000 or 6,000 full-time fighters, has become the most tenacious guerrilla force in Latin America. The political conviction of its cadre seems to be greater than ever; only the truly dedicated could have outlasted the death squads and the prolonged hardship of clandestine military life—not to mention occasionally bloody internal strife.

The FMLN acts as a de facto local government in about 30 percent of the country. Though it probably enjoys some sympathy from no more than ten percent of the population, it has organized its base into an effective source of support. I recently visited an FMLN stronghold in eastern El Salvador. Food was grown for the rebels by peasants in what they called "the cooperative." Local boys ran messages to guerrilla hideouts. People helped make weapons, print propaganda leaflets, and tend the rebels' wounded; they regularly attended political meetings and even community dances arranged by the FMLN. Troops rarely entered, and were likely to encounter peasant members of the FMLN "clandestine militia" when they did. Probably only a massacre could root out this type of organization.

Over the last year the rebels have penetrated San Salvador itself. "Urban commandos" based on a volcano overlooking the city have mounted a campaign of sabotage that has cost the government millions and forced it to launch an extensive, and mostly futile, urban security operation. (Some U.S.-created "immediate reaction" units have been pressed into service guarding upper-class areas.) This poses a long-term problem; even the best armies find it hard to root out urban terrorism.

Also, the guerrillas have undergone their first substantial rearming in several years, smuggling in perhaps 1,500 AK-47 assault rifles and millions of rounds of Cuban ammunition. They also have received Dragonov sniper rifles, which they are using with some results against government helicopters. The FMLN claims that it has bought these weapons from the Nicaraguan *contras*, but few believe that, since the AKs the army has captured from the guerrillas are of East bloc manufacture and the CIA issued Chinese weapons to the *contras*. Still, the United States cannot prove its counterclaim that the guns come from the Sandinistas. In any case, the FMLN still has access to outside support, despite interdiction efforts.

The rebel army put its new firepower to use in a military offensive that began a year ago and peaked in the weeks just before and just after the March election. The FMLN undertook the campaign in the apparent belief that the double presidential transition in the United States and El Salvador provided a unique chance for insurrection. Joaquín Villalobos, a leading member of the rebel general command, repeatedly

predicted a "social explosion" in El Salvador in 1989. One reason the general command went abroad last year (they have yet to return) was to be ready for crisis diplomacy as FMLN troops drove the army to its knees, according to a source close to the rebels.

The rebels made an imposing display of violence. They assassinated eight rural mayors. They killed five civilians with car bombs placed near military sites in San Salvador. Urban commandos assassinated five prominent rightists, and are widely blamed for the murder of another. They knocked out the capital's water and electricity supply during election week and hit army positions in 20 towns on election day. All told, the Catholic Church says, the guerrillas were responsible for 26 targeted killings of civilians the first half of this year, and killed another 24 people with explosives.

Yet as the offensive plods along inconclusively, it is apparent that the rebels too recognize that military action is yielding diminishing political returns. Their actions turned off the public, hurt the democratic left in the election, and alienated potential supporters abroad. The FMLN had to apologize for indiscriminate attacks in which civilians were killed, and took heavy casualties in its own ranks.

The FMLN's failure to generate new popular support at home follows untoward trends abroad. *Perestroika* has undermined Marxism and brought the end of Soviet backing for new Third World revolutions. There is an evident lack of sympathy for violent revolution among democratic Latin nations. And there is the example of the Sandinistas' ruinous clash with the United States. The Sandinistas and Castro remain friendly, but their capacity to help may be limited in the future by their own serious domestic troubles. A senior diplomat from a Latin country friendly with both the rebels and Cuba recently told me that the AK-47s, which will last for years, may be "a last gift" from Fidel.

Thus the FMLN is seeking to recast its politics to regain domestic and international support. The rebels haven't abandoned the war. They have shrewdly shifted emphasis to political and diplomatic arenas. Villalobos is the protagonist of this process of rethinking, known among leftists as "Vatican II." He has a deserved reputation as the rebel most dedicated to armed struggle, yet he has discovered the uses of moderation. "Insofar as the FMLN shows it carries the banners of peace, the banners of democratic change, and that its initiatives move the whole society," he told journalist Marta Harnecker in March, "there will be a greater foundation of the justice of its having risen in arms and maintained itself in arms."

In an article for *Foreign Policy* he promised to respect both political pluralism and U.S. security interests. He helped draft the guerrillas' peace proposal released last January 23. In it, the FMLN for the first time said it would support the presidential election if the vote were postponed six months and if the government met a series of other conditions, including the reform of

WAR... CONTINUED

the judicial system, reduction in the size of the armed forces, and the punishment of past human rights violators.

The FMLN's new proposal takes the January 23 plan several steps further. Now, instead of merely offering to support candidates of the Democratic Convergence in a vote, the rebels offer to convert themselves into a legal political party and run in elections next year, after a cease-fire. But a key purpose of the plan is still to cast the government in the role of political heavy, both within El Salvador and internationally. Brilliantly, the FMLN added to its conditions for an initial cease-fire a demand for the prosecution of the assassin of the former Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. This is a demand so plainly just that even the United States has sought it in the past—but now ARENA must refuse since d'Aubuisson is a prime suspect. "If [our plan] is rejected, fine, our war is more legitimate," Villalobos told Harnecker, referring to the January proposal. "If it is implemented, we are the guarantee that the process will be waged cleanly." This is why he pooh-poohs the idea that the FMLN should disarm, even after a cease-fire.

Not surprisingly, hard-line military officers dismissed the rebels' offer as a ploy. The FMLN is asking the army to reduce its forces by over 75 percent before it will put its weapons down—something no government would do. However, Cristiani wisely decided not to dismiss the offer out of hand, and it would be wrong for the United States and the Salvadoran government to refuse to talk further with the FMLN. In part, this is just political necessity. No government in El Salvador can afford to disappoint the country's longing for peace.

But it would also be irresponsible not to explore all possibilities for genuine progress. The guerrillas have conceded that elections may be a way for them to move back into the political system, and have outlined their terms. These aren't acceptable to the government, and it is unlikely that mutually acceptable terms can be found by next year. But there is plenty of time before the scheduled 1991 and 1994 elections. Perhaps the government could develop a set of security guarantees that would cajole the FMLN to put down its arms and participate during that time frame. Some leaders of Salvador's business elite, worried that their economy can't take another decade of war, support talks. Whereas they did not trust Duarte to defend their interests in dealings with the left, Cristiani is one of their own.

U.S. officials have always argued that the FMLN uses the idea of peace talks to gull Democrats and thus destroy the bipartisan consensus for aid to Salvador. Those fears seem even more exaggerated now. The consensus in Congress has held despite ARENA's victory. The rebels are likely to pay a high price if they try a double cross, especially if the government is seen to be talking in good faith. Trends that nag the FMLN—*perestroika*, the end of guerrilla romance in Latin Ameri-

ca—strengthen the hand of a U.S. administration willing to devote time and ideas to negotiation, perhaps even by enlisting the cooperation of the Soviets or other Latin American countries.

In the meantime, the war is likely to intensify. The army is still bent on the guerrillas' defeat, and the guerrillas, at a minimum, want to show that they are dealing from strength. The United States should still push for better combat performance from the army, at least in part by making more of its aid contingent on the ouster of the most incompetent and abusive military commanders. One place to start would be the powerful air force, which needs an overhaul of its helicopter fleet but is also due for an overhaul of its notorious officer corps.

But as the guerrillas' own peace proposal seems to suggest, social reform and fair, effective government—not the army's clumsy might—would put the most pressure on them. One U.S.-funded program, Municipalities in Action, demonstrates this point. The program provides funds directly to mayors to build roads, bridges, schools, and provide electricity in rural towns, with better results than pacification programs that placed authority in the hands of military officers and bureaucrats. With a minimum of corruption, it brings jobs and services to people who need them most. The rebels don't like it, but attacking the mayors, or the works they build, backfires politically.

The program is no substitute for broader economic growth, and questions remain about how far it could be extended into guerrilla strongholds without getting the military involved. But ideally, the United States would reverse some of its current priorities and expand the money it spends on similar grass-roots health, education, and agricultural efforts. It would condition economic aid on laws forbidding the resale of land reform properties for a generation. And as it phased out subsidies to well-heeled businessmen and would-be junior enterprisers, it would fund credits and technical support to help peasant-run farms become more competitive.

For now, reforms that directly benefit the rural poor occupy too small a share of U.S. aid. ARENA and the army are unlikely tribunes of change. The guerrillas gamble that if they keep up the military and diplomatic pressure, the government will fail to better the people's lot—and be forced to repress. A surprising number of leading Salvadorans have told me recently that they think the guerrillas may yet have their day. If ARENA disappoints as Duarte did, they say, people may move left, voting for the Democratic Convergence in the next elections. Such a turn of events would lead to either a power grab by the FMLN or, more likely, a pre-emptive military coup—or a violent combination of the two. "This isn't almost our last chance," a retired army major said. "It is our last chance." If El Salvador's rulers will not make the most of it, there is little the United States could—or should—do to save them again. •