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Twelve Years a Terror: U.S. Impact in the 12-year Civil War in El Salvador

Cara McKinney

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the impacts of the United States government and military in the civil war in El Salvador in a comprehensive historical study. Through the presence of monetary aid, a disregard for the human rights of people in El Salvador, and the presence of U.S. trained soldiers at the then School of Americas and the current Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, the U.S. prolonged and augmented the negative effects of the Salvadoran Civil War.

Those in power have maintained conditions that violate the political, cultural, and fundamental rights of all Salvadorans. It has been a decade of great pain for the Salvadoran people. We demanded recognition of our inalienable rights, and in response, thousands were tortured, murdered, arbitrarily jailed, or disappeared.

María Julia Hernández, San Salvador

El Salvador has been stricken relentlessly with violence and unequal rights in the country's nearly two centuries of sovereignty. As the struggle for human rights, democracy and equality in El Salvador, and many other countries in Central and South America, developed throughout the twentieth century, the United States became increasingly involved in the conflicts occurring within these countries. The United States' presence in El Salvador during the time before, during, and after the civil war crossed the line of respecting the sovereign rights of the country and had a negative impact on the human rights of all peoples in the country. Over the course of the Salvadoran civil war the United States sent more than \$4.5 billion in aid to El Salvador, trained many Salvadoran soldiers on U.S. soil in counter-insurgency tactics and torture techniques and is only now starting to have a positive impact on the country with its support of the most recent democratically elected government. The U.S. Cold War containment policy—

stopping the spread of communism and spreading democracy—at the expense of addressing human rights abuses is exemplified by the United States’ presence in the civil war in El Salvador.

A History Lesson

The country of El Salvador, located along the Pacific Coast in Central America, won its independence from Spain in 1821 along with Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. These countries formed the United Provinces of Central America and functioned as a sovereign body for eighteen years before splitting to become individual sovereign nations in 1839. After the split, the countries of Central America faced decades of foreign military and governmental presence, merciless dictatorships and oligarchies, as well as bloody civil wars and long battles for democracy. Today, many countries in Central America are still fighting for peace in their war-stricken states.

After El Salvador gained its independence, it experienced more than a century of control by a “liberal elite” (Booth 111): an oligarchy of a few wealthy families with little respect for indigenous and impoverished people. This liberal elite “advocated [for] free enterprise and economic modernization” in an attempt to “better link the country to the world economy” (Booth 111). In 1932, as the mestizo and indigenous populations came to be seen as a barrier to modernization as well as a cheap source of labor, there was an uprising against the oligarchy. The uprising—called the *matanza*, or slaughter, for its casualties of more than 30,000 non-violent, peacefully protesting peasants—was a reaction to a decreasing of wages that occurred as the impacts of the great depression made their way to Central America. The uprising was led by

Farabundo Martí, a communist intellectual. He planned the uprising to “coincide with an urban, working-class revolt” (Landau 69). The revolt was not well coordinated, and Martí and other organizers were arrested and executed by the Salvadoran government after the fact. As a result of the part Martí played in the uprising, and the lack of justice surrounding his execution, the name Farabundo Martí became internationally known and associated with social justice and independence (Landau 68). The people who were part of the insurrection movement in El Salvador began calling themselves the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN. FMLN became the name of the left-wing forces that many of the guerrilla fighters would adopt and would rally behind in the fight for human rights.

In 1980 the Popular Forces of Liberation (FPL), Salvadoran Communist Party (PCES), People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN), Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL) and the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC) joined together to fight against the government and military in what became the Salvadoran Civil War. These groups, amongst many other opposition groups in El Salvador consisted of trade unionists, students, scholars, teachers, professors, poor farmworkers, and urban workers all coming together to “[enable] mass organizations to arise outside the traditional party structure” (Human Rights Watch 5). Eventually, the opposition groups joined together with the military forces of the Communist party and took the name of the most prominent insurrection group: the FMLN. At the beginning of the war, the FMLN had only five thousand combatants, while the Salvadoran Armed Forces boasted fifteen thousand (Human Rights Watch 9). These uneven odds would force the FMLN to incorporate many different fighting tactics and techniques and gave the military forces a false sense of security.

During the time between the *matanza* and the beginning of the Salvadoran civil war in 1980, the country entered into a time of cyclical leadership purveying unjust power and civil strife. It began with governmental and military corruption, followed by an overthrow led by the “progressive young military officers,” and then over time, the “oligarchy would reassert themselves” creating more corruption, civil unrest, and repression as the cycle started over (Booth 113). As each *caudillo*, or commander, was faced with evidence of running a hostile government, he would escape to a foreign country and be replaced by an “equally abhorrent military ruler” (Landau 70). Throughout this cycle, there were “attacks on demonstrations” (Stanley 112) and wages lost purchasing power; prices of goods being exported were lowered while prices of goods in El Salvador were raised. The rich elite used violence, scare-tactics and force to remove peasants from their small, family owned, self-sustained farms so they could create large plantations for growing coffee beans and indigo dye. In many cases the military helped to forcefully remove the peasant farmers from their land, thus adding to the corruption of the military and the rich, ruling elite. As it is in any country, as the rich gained more money and power, the poor lost money and power at an exponential rate. When asked in an interview why he thought rebels were fighting, José Napoleón Duarte, who would later become the president of El Salvador, responded “Fifty years of lies, fifty years of injustice, fifty years of frustration. This is a history of people starving to death, living in misery. For fifty years the same people had all the power, all the money, all the jobs, all the education, all the opportunities” (National Security Archive, 39). Change for the better for the people of the country became impossible.

Presence of U.S. Before the Civil War

In 1977, after the United States voiced concerns about the increasingly frequent human rights violations, the Salvadoran government renounced all U.S. military aid “in a move to protest against U.S. expressions of concern” for the human rights situation (Gómez 127). Later in 1977 the U.S. Department of State voted to postpone loans to El Salvador through the Inter-American Development Bank and “block temporarily” more than \$1 million in sales of weapons and sidearms to police not only in El Salvador but Argentina, Uruguay and Nicaragua as well (National Security Archive 26). While the U.S. made claims of renouncing and denying aid, it never came through with its claims. During the late 1970s—the years leading up to the onset of the civil war—“international pressures [did]... mediate the state’s response to internal threats” (Gómez 130). El Salvador differs from other Central American countries in that it “remained free of U.S. *military* intervention until the 1980s (emphasis added)” (Landau 66).

As El Salvador fell back into the cyclical routine of corruption and violence, the military instigated a coup d’état in 1979, forcing out the then-current president, General Carlos Humberto Romero. While the military was distracted by deep-seated divisions amongst themselves, many Salvadorans believed democracy was in sight. The leaders of the coup promised a “just and peaceful future” for all Salvadorans (Gómez 131). The new leaders accused the previous government of “violating human rights, fostering corruption, causing economic and social disaster, and disgracing the country and the armed forces” (Gómez 131). They then:

promised to 1) dissolve ORDEN¹ in order to assure freedom for political parties of all ideologies; 2) grant amnesty to all political exiles and prisoners; 3) permit labor unions to organize; 4) end violence and corruption; 5) guarantee the observance of human rights; 6) increase the national wealth and distribute it more equitably; and 7) improve El Salvador’s foreign relations. (Gómez 131)

¹ ORDEN: Organización Democrática Nacionalista or the National Democratic Organization—a highly-militarized, right-wing political party.

Unfortunately, these promises were not kept. After the military coup, the U.S. “decided to enter the fray to avoid ‘losing’ El Salvador to a leftist insurgency” and in the thirteen years following would send incredible amounts of military aid to the country (Human Rights Watch ix).

Oscar Romero and the Outbreak of the Civil War

In the words of the movie *Innocent Voices*, the civil war began as an agricultural conflict and converted into a brutal confrontation between the Salvadoran army and the organizing farmworkers in the guerrilla movement of the FMLN.² After years of civil unrest and (mostly) non-violent protests the civil war finally began in 1980 and continued until 1992. During those twelve years more than 70,000 people died. Amidst “months of street demonstrations and increasingly militant protest actions by the opposition, including bloody actions by guerilla groups, polarization between the government and [the extreme] opposition,” the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero and other Catholic priests in the last half of the 1970s served as the catalyst that began the civil war (Gómez 130).

Archbishop Romero began as an “aloof conservative” who was content to not get involved with the political aspects of the country (Brett 316). During the revolution he became the face of the revolution, spoke for the poor, and “used his influence to promote a political solution to the conflict” (HRW 9). In Romero’s last homily, which was broadcast throughout the country on the radio, he spoke directly to the military, asking them to disobey orders that were “contrary to the law of God... [that] ‘[t]hou shalt not kill.’” His sermon “marked a historic change in the role of the Church” and “[linked]... religious power with revolution” (Landau 87). He was then shot

² Found originally in Spanish in *Voces Inocentes*: La guerra “empezó como un conflicto agrario [y] terminó convirtiéndose en un brutal enfrentamiento entre el ejército salvadoreño y los campesinos organizados en el movimiento guerrillero FMLN.”

dead while presiding over mass one day later on March 24, 1980. On that day El Salvador “lost its most revered leader of peaceful resistance to political violence” (Human Rights Watch 9). As a Catholic Archbishop, Romero’s murder drew international media attention to the human rights abuses occurring in El Salvador. His actions and teachings were highly publicized worldwide and when he was assassinated Catholics, and in general Christians, around the world were affected by the lack of honor and respect due to someone in his position within the Church.³

Archbishop Romero became an important presence throughout the build-up to the civil war. Many of his ideas and teachings came from liberation theology, a Christian theology that originated in the Latin American Catholic Church during the mid-twentieth century. The main premise of the theology considers God to be a “God of justice and Jesus [to be] the savior of mankind” and the “liberator of the oppressed” (Gaztambide 1027). Many liberation theologians live among the poor in solidarity with their situations, “protesting the unjust conditions that afflicted them through political activism, community work and academics” (Gaztambide 1027). Many Catholic priests in El Salvador adopted this controversial mentality, while others preferred to remain “unbiased” and “uninvolved” in the civil war so as not to show favoritism to one group of people over another. While liberation theology “raised fears of grassroots opposition to capitalism” in Central America amongst the political elite, it functioned as a facilitator for the political opposition and offered a less violent approach to overcoming the injustices that Salvadorans faced (Liberation Theology).

³ While Oscar Romero was the most publicly known murder of a Catholic worker in El Salvador, U.S. nuns Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan were abducted, tortured, raped, and murdered in El Salvador. Salvadoran Catholic priest Rutilio Grande and many other Catholic lay people were also murdered leading up to the on-set of the civil war. Their presence is important so as to note that Romero was not the only Catholic person in El Salvador who believed in, and practiced Liberation Theology, and was murdered for his or her beliefs and calls for action. All such murders were important events that led to the beginning of the civil war in El Salvador.

The Salvadoran government, as well as the U.S. government, claimed that many of the human rights abuses and mass murders were being carried out by the FMLN. While the FMLN was very heavily a part of the violence, and was known for kidnapping high-level officials and their families, the FMLN did not kill as “indiscriminately or as excessively as did the Salvadoran State” (Gómez 137). The FMLN focused on destroying infrastructure and attacking outposts run by the military. Despite the FMLN’s efforts to spare the civilian population, their strikes and strategies “left no corner of the country untouched” and caused “hundreds of millions of dollars in damage and lost production” (Gómez 137).

In 1980 as the military junta came into power, an important character came to be prominent in the war: Salvadoran Army Major Roberto D’Aubuisson. According to Saul Landau, D’Aubuisson was “handsome and charismatic,” was “inspired by fascist ideologies” and had a “burning hatred of revolution” (85). D’Aubuisson advocated for a “military government with right-wing civilian cooperation” and founded the right-wing political party, the Nationalist Republican Alliance or, ARENA which would control the presidency for twenty-two of the next twenty-seven years (Landau 86). Throughout this time the United States attempted to support “the middle ground,” political groups that were neither far-left nor far-right, and to distance itself from D’Aubuisson. While this may have seemed like a good political tactic at the time, many critics of the United States claim that the U.S. was “trying to support the center when there [was] nothing there to support” (National Security Archive 1989). As D’Aubuisson became more confident in unyielding U.S. support, the military junta created “one provocation after another” (Landau 88). During Archbishop Romero’s funeral, which was attended by 50,000 Salvadoran

and international mourners, a bomb was set off, shots were fired, and panicked mourners were trampled (Landau 88). Different sources offer casualty numbers between twenty-six and forty people; the National Security Archive of 1989 states that seventy were wounded while other sources cite more than 150 (Gómez 133). At the time, the U.S. Embassy, soon-to-be-President Jose Napoleon Duarte, and Roberto D'Aubuisson denied the government/military part in the killing of Romero and the massacre at his funeral, but soon after the attacks D'Aubuisson was tried and found guilty thanks to a "significant quantity of weapons and documents... found implicating [D'Aubuisson and his troops] in the organization and financing of death squads allegedly involved in Archbishop Romero's murder" (UN Truth Commission 1993).

D'Aubuisson was later released from prison and continued to organize and lead the death squads that terrorized El Salvador over the next twelve years.

As a direct result of the FMLN's "final offensive" in 1981 that was a coordinated attempt to take control of many towns throughout the country, the Reagan administration responded by sending more "direct military aid [that] translated into new hardware and expensive training for Salvadoran forces designed to improve their capacity to 'take the fight to the guerilla'" (Pedersen 127). Throughout the decade of the 1980s, nearly 60 percent of U.S. military aid was "not approved by congressional appropriations committees" and was financed through "presidential discretionary funds" (Pedersen 127). The Reagan administration was essentially funding the entire war in El Salvador.

In 1989, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were all murdered by "troops from the elite Atlacatl Battalion, [who were] created, trained, and armed by the United States"

(Human Rights Watch ix). For months after the fact, the Salvadoran military denied any role it might have had in the murders, but eventually the hard evidence “made the army’s role impossible to ignore” (Human Rights Watch x). The United States Embassy often worked in collusion with the Salvadoran military to “cover up” the Salvadoran military’s involvement (Human Rights Watch x). This atrocity was viewed by the international community as reinforcement that El Salvador “was still immersed in violence” (Gómez 147). After the murder of the Jesuits, the U.S. Congress voted to decrease the military aid by half, but within months President George H.W. Bush had reinstated the aid. Once again the U.S. showed that its security concerns overrode the need to address human rights abuses and imperatives (Human Rights Watch x); in its own words, the United States was supporting a war on terrorism, not protecting human rights (Landau 85).

In 1987 the Central American Peace Agreement was being written amongst talks between the FMLN, the government, and the military. These peace talks were well underway during the 1989 presidential elections, elections in which the FMLN was not allowed to participate as a political party, and thus, launched a military offensive that targeted high-level government and military officials. The attacks “infuriated the military leadership” who responded with indiscriminate aerial bombings, and attacks against civilians in San Salvador and San Miguel. The military attacks led to “death, injury, [and] displacement of thousands of persons (Gómez 148). In 1990 there was an increase in death squad murders, showing a “two-fold increase in killings” when compared with the previous year (AI Annual Report 1990). Needless to say, the negotiations for peace ended, necessitating the involvement of the United Nations Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, who had “gained the trust of individuals on both sides of the conflict” (Gómez

150) during his involvement in previous peace talks. De Cuéllar negotiated a peace accord that was signed on December 31, 1991 called the Act of New York. The civil war ended officially in 1992 with concessions occurring on both sides of the war between the Salvadoran government/military and the FMLN. The final peace accord was signed in Mexico City and incorporated many of the provisions put forward in the Act of New York; it suggested “a timetable for the implementation of a cease-fire, plans for the gradual demobilization of the FMLN, and included propositions for democratic reform” including very specific measures written for the protection of human rights (Gómez 150).

Presence of the U.S. in the Civil War

Why has the United States been so deeply involved in the civil wars of Central America? Was it an overarching need to quell the human rights abuses and the inequalities within each nation? While the U.S. has argued that its presence was necessitated by the terrible conditions and lack of democracy in each country and “vehemently denied the extent of [human rights] abuses by Salvadoran government forces,” the facts still remain that the U.S. sent more than \$4.5 billion⁴ to support the Salvadoran government and military throughout the course of the war (Hayner 49). The amount of military aid sent to El Salvador during the 1980s and 1990s is the “clearest indication that the United States was helping to fuel the war [and] hoping for a decisive victory for the anti-socialist parties” (Howard 93).

While the U.S. made many threats to stop sending aid to El Salvador during the war, it was well-known amongst the government and military officials that the aid would not be halted because the United States feared the rise of communism and the political left. According to David

⁴ Other sources say nearly \$6 billion. See Howard, 2008.

Pedersen the “massive buildup of U.S. conventional forces... was needed to counter ‘Soviet and Soviet-inspired’ conflicts around the world” (120). The United States was pouring money into El Salvador, and Central America as well, out of fear of communism running rampant in its own backyard. The United States did not want to look weak or show fear, but in getting involved so heavily in Central America, the U.S. showed its deep-seated fear of communism and Marxist ideology. In a 1984 speech welcoming the new Salvadoran President José Napoleón Duarte into power and discussing U.S. policy in Central America, United States President Ronald Reagan stated his belief that communism in Central America “poses the threat that a hundred million people from Panama to the open border on [the U.S.] south could come under the control of pro-Soviet regimes.” As a result of the fear of “pro-Soviet regimes” Reagan suggested in the same speech an “increased [level] of U.S. security assistance to defend against violence from both the extreme left and the extreme right.”

In contrast to the U.S. view that communism would soon emerge in Central America, Landau claims that in the 1980s Soviet leadership was “completely uninterested” in events occurring in El Salvador and believed that the Western Hemisphere was a “U.S. sphere and therefore beyond the scope of Soviet power” (87). The threat of Soviet-influenced communism in Central America was minimal, and if anything, the left-wing ideologies were coming from pre-colonization, indigenous mindsets rather than the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In essence, the Salvadoran military and right-wing government was “[hiding] behind a polarizing Cold War rhetoric and the image of protecting El Salvador against a communist insurrection... while continuing to slaughter the rural poor” (Gómez 139).

In her book *Human Rights in Cuba, El Salvador and Nicaragua: a Sociological Perspective on Human Rights Abuse*, Mayra Gómez presents graphs that categorize U.S. aid to El Salvador between 1980 and 1989 into five subcategories. That aid came as direct aid, indirect aid, aid for reforms and development, commercial and food aid and aid given for earthquake damage; over the course of nine years the U.S. sent \$3.72 billion to El Salvador (138). \$3.72 billion was sent before the war was more than three-quarters of the way over; *in only nine out of the twelve years* it took to complete the United States sent \$3.72 billion to a country with less than 21,041 sq. km of land. That number does not include the amount of money sent in the form of military training for Salvadoran soldiers on U.S. soil or money sent from Salvadorans living and working in the U.S.

In assessing the significance of the amount of money sent to El Salvador from the U.S. government, it is also important to consider the impact Salvadorans living in the U.S. had on the war. In El Salvador during the civil war, the likelihood of boys over the age of fifteen being “forcibly conscripted” to fight for the right-wing military/government was incredibly high (Pedersen 130). In an effort to escape being forced to fight in the war many young boys ran away to the guerrillas and to join the FMLN or fled the country. With the number of wars and dangerous conflicts occurring in Central America at the time, the safest place for anyone fleeing the country to go was north, to the United States. This “mass exodus” (Reagan) created a large population of Salvadorans in the U.S., some with work documents and some without the proper legal documentation. Throughout the 1980s, money sent as remittances from the United States to El Salvador became the most common source of national wealth (Pedersen 116): monetary aid sent via the U.S. government and monetary aid sent via the Salvadorans living in the U.S.

dominated the Salvadoran economy. As more and more money was sent to El Salvador, the interconnectedness between the two countries continued to increase; the war in El Salvador became continually dependent on U.S. military and economic support as the economic means of the Salvadoran military decreased and the general U.S. public started using liberation theology and their outrage over human rights abuses in El Salvador to fuel the protest movements in the United States.

While there is no evidence that the end of the civil war in El Salvador had any direct correlation with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, it is extremely important to note that the end of the civil war could very easily have been heralded by the fall of communism and, thus, a dwindling threat of “pro-Soviet regimes” in Central America. After the fall of the USSR the United Nations and the United States pushed for closure in the Salvadoran peace talks by decreasing the amount of monetary aid to El Salvador. The decision to reduce aid was made by George H.W. Bush—the newly elected president of the U.S.—who quickly pushed the peace talks forward because the Salvadoran armed forces no longer had the economic means to continue to fight (Howard 93).

WHINSEC, a History

As previously discussed, during the civil war large amounts of military aid were sent to El Salvador. To the incredibly large monetary amount of aid sent to El Salvador one must add the economic value of training Salvadoran soldiers on U.S. soil. Many of the military personnel who committed the atrocious human rights violations in El Salvador were trained by the U.S. at the School of the Americas.

Many of the human rights violations that have occurred in El Salvador have stemmed from military personnel that came from the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) formerly known as the School of the Americas. The military personnel who killed Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter, Father Rutilio Grande, and the four U.S. Catholic nuns in El Salvador (amongst others) were all trained at the School of the Americas (SOA Watch). The Jesuit priests were torn from their homes in the middle of the night, forced to lie on their fronts while they were kicked and prodded by the soldiers surrounding them, and then shot at point blank range in the head. The four U.S. Catholic nuns in El Salvador were kidnapped, tortured, brutally raped, and then left in a shallow grave to be found days later. Many other cases of SOA graduates in El Salvador show Salvadorans with cigarette-butt sized burns on their breasts and genital areas, signs of abuse inflicted with machine guns before being shot and signs of dismemberment before they were actually killed.

The School of the Americas (SOA) was opened in 1949 in Panama as a military training school for Latin Americans. Students were sent to the school from all over the Western Hemisphere with a specific interest put on students from Central America and South America; all classes were taught in Spanish. In 1984, after being removed from Panama as a direct result of the Panama Canal Treaty, the school opened at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the United States. After the school was moved to the U.S. in 1984 the president of Panama, Jorge Illueca, described the SOA as the biggest base for the destabilization of Latin America (Archivo de Chile).⁵ In 2000

⁵ Found originally in Spanish: “Archivo de Chile: El presidente de Panamá, Jorge Illueca, describió al SOA como ‘la base más grande para la desestabilización en América Latina.’”

the school was shut down as a result of international claims of its graduates being human rights violators, as well as a curriculum that taught torture and counter-insurgency techniques. The school then reopened a few months later in 2001 as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). WHINSEC currently resides in the same location as the SOA, has many of the same advisors, instructors and curriculum and is now less transparent than it was as the SOA.

The original rationale for funding such a school on U.S. soil seemed positive and while there are many aspects of WHINSEC that provide strong enough evidence for its closure, it does have its positives. The school strengthens ties between the United States and the countries that send students to be trained; it shows good intentions, and a willingness to work with Central and South American countries in the movement for democracy and equality. WHINSEC also trains students with top-notch instructors, using U.S.-developed curriculum. This guarantees that the students who receive training at WHINSEC will receive a better caliber of education than they would in their own countries; that they will learn their duty well and that they will “do a damn good job of it” (Gonzalez). WHINSEC encourages inter-cultural communication and acceptance and shows that the United States has a deep-seated interest in peacekeeping in the Western Hemisphere. The mission statement of the school reads:

The WHINSEC shall provide professional education and training to eligible military, law enforcement, and civilian personnel of nations of the Western Hemisphere within the context of the democratic principles set forth in the Charter of the Organization of American States (Reference (d))... The WHINSEC shall foster mutual knowledge, transparency, confidence, and cooperation among the participating nations and promote democratic values, respect for human rights, and knowledge and understanding of U.S. customs and traditions. (US Army)

At the end of his time in office, the George W. Bush administration made the list of graduates from the school unavailable to the public because of national security. This school is funded by U.S. taxpayer dollars (\$18 million/year), has trained more than 60,000 students in its 65 years of existence, has been known to train soldiers in counter-insurgency, as well as tactics for overthrowing democratically elected governments, and most U.S. citizens do not even know it exists. The school trains soldiers from throughout the Americas, but many countries, such as Panama and Venezuela, have openly stated that they will no longer send soldiers to WHINSEC because of the known human rights violators that have come from the school. The fact that the U.S. keeps it open when many countries have openly acknowledged its misuse of training techniques damages U.S. credibility as a proponent of human rights.

While there have been many governmental proceedings that encourage transparency around the WHINSEC, many of the court rulings have been ignored or are deep in litigation and paperwork, and have not been upheld. The Freedom of Information Act, signed by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966, “provides that any person has a right, enforceable in court, to obtain access to federal agency records” (Freedom of Information Act). There are exemptions to what information can be released, such as information that has been “classified to protect national security” or “information that, if disclosed, would invade another individual's personal privacy” (Freedom of Information Act), and each organization has the right to deny giving out information if appropriate explanation is given.⁶ In a 2007 Congressional meeting in the House of Representatives, Massachusetts Representative Jim McGovern brings up the point that “[f]or the first time in the history of the WHINSEC, including the 40-year history of its infamous

⁶ A definition of what would be considered “appropriate explanation” is unclear upon research; either no definition has been established intentionally or the definition is hidden away, deep in a 200-page governmental bill stating the laws surrounding the WHINSEC.

predecessor, the School of the Americas, Freedom of Information Act requests are being denied.” McGovern goes on to discuss a request made of the WHINSEC for names of graduates; when the information was received, every single name on the list was blacked out. He claims that the lack of information shows a direct lack of transparency and was a “deliberate decision to keep information secret, to avoid any kind of independent scrutiny or oversight.” If the school would offer more transparency, the opposition may find that it is a completely legitimate institution, but because of the secrecy and unwillingness to reveal information, the school appears to be hiding something; it knows the results of investigation will return negatively and the school will be held accountable for its negative impact on the Western Hemisphere, and, especially, Latin America. To stand up to the WHINSEC is to “stand up for human rights... honor our principles and send a strong message to the world” (Rep. DeLauro) that the U.S. will put human rights ahead of military education and prowess.

In every Congress since 1994, there has been a bill pushing for the closure of the then SOA and the current WHINSEC. The current bill is HR 2989, the Latin America Military Training Review Act. This act would temporarily suspend the school while a joint-congressional task force investigated the curriculum, the instructors and the graduates of the school. After proper investigation the task force would report their findings back to Congress and offer a strong suggestion to keep the school open or to close it. If the leaders of the WHINSEC had no worries about what results the investigations would return, they would have no qualms about the investigation occurring. If the school were adequately training its students it would have nothing to fear in the course of a congressional investigation.

Today in El Salvador

The ruling elite stayed in power in El Salvador through “intimidation, violence, and fraud” that was “carried out on a massive scale by the government and military forces” (Human Rights Watch 6). In the 1970s specifically, the police showed violence against demonstrators who protested against voting results. Finally, seventeen years after the end of the war, Mauricio Funes of the FMLN became president in 2009. On the eighteenth anniversary of the peace accords he gave a speech announcing the creation of special commissions that would address reparations, search for children disappeared during the war, and give assistance to veterans injured in the war (Funes 2010). On the behalf of the Salvadoran state, Funes “pleaded forgiveness for the crimes of the war” (Hayner 51).

After years of corrupt and unfair democratic elections, El Salvador’s most recent election has been deemed fair by international election observers. In February 2014 no one candidate won a clear majority of the votes cast, necessitating a run-off between the top two candidates in March. The original five candidates in February were Salvador Sánchez Cerén, Norman Quijano, Antonio Saca, René Rodríguez Hurtado and Oscar Lemus. The run-off between Salvador Sánchez Cerén or the ruling left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and Norman Quijano of the right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) resulted in less than a 1% win by Sánchez Cerén. Sánchez Cerén won 50.11% of the vote while Quijano won 49.89%; a difference of only 6,000 or so votes. “Extraordinary Results: El Salvador’s Election,” an article in *The Economist*, states “[t]ensions... have been exacerbated by the seething mistrust that lingers between both parties 22 years after the end of the civil war in 1992” (web). After the March results came in, Quijano called for a recount, and he declared after the recount by the

Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the governmental organization that counts the votes, that the Tribunal had an “institutional bias” towards the FMLN (“Extraordinary Results: El Salvador’s Election” web.). Despite claims of an unlawful election, the United Nations has declared their support of El Salvador and the peoples’ dedication to promoting democracy, reviewing statements from international election observers that the elections were transparent, efficient, and conducted in a timely manner for all parties involved (Naciones Unidas).

Salvador Sánchez Cerén is the only the second FMLN president to be elected in El Salvador since the party changed from a guerrilla rebel group during the civil war to a legitimate political party in the 1990s. He is the “first former rebel commander to rise to the presidency” after being a leading commander for the FMLN during the civil war (Archibold). Of the eight presidents since 1979, five were from ARENA. For four presidencies in a row, starting in 1989 and continuing until 2009, ARENA maintained control of the government amidst countless claims of corrupt and unfair elections. This election “defied the projections of almost all opinion pollsters, who expected Mr. Sánchez Cerén to... [win with] an even bigger margin than the ten percentage-point lead he took in the first round...” (“Extraordinary Results: El Salvador’s Election” web.). “Extraordinary Results: El Salvador’s Election” also claims that the lesson to be learned from this election and the nearly 50/50 split between ARENA and the FMLN is that half the Salvadorans still live in fear of the FMLN and the political left.

Between the first election in February and the run-off in March, many critics opposed the idea of Sánchez Cerén as president, citing his presence in the civil war as part of the guerrilla FMLN as reason enough to not allow him the presidency. Critics even went as far as to claim that if he

were elected to the presidency El Salvador would “turn into a gang haven that [would] act as a transit point for drugs [thus] plunging America’s inner cities further into crime and despair” (Demint). Jim Demint, an international politics writer for *the Miami Herald* and former U.S. Senator from South Carolina, goes on to say that the FMLN as a party has “growing ties to [El Salvador’s] ruthless street gangs,” and with these growing ties, El Salvador “would become little more than a narco-principality.” Then the gangs, who have a strong presence in the U.S. in northern Virginia and Los Angeles, would harm the U.S. with their increased drug trafficking and drug-related violence. In contrast with these claims, Sánchez Cerén ran for president as a moderate, he worked with the gangs in El Salvador to create a truce so that there might be less violence, and he served as Vice President to the previous president (Mauricio Funes of the FMLN) working to decrease violence and increase democracy and wealth equality in the country. According to Lukas Wiedemann, an international election observer present for the February elections, Sánchez Cerén’s actions attempted to address areas that ARENA never planned to address. To say that President Sánchez Cerén would increase drug violence and trafficking in the U.S., as well as harm political relations within the country, is to say that a democratically-elected official is unlawful because his ideas do not match up with the ideas of U.S. conservatives like Demint. If the U.S. were to interfere in El Salvador because of these claims it would be over-stepping the lines of sovereignty and would discredit the United States in any of its foreign military ventures from now on.

In Conclusion

In the past century the United States has played a large role in many countries and their struggles for political independence and democracy. It is safe to say that without U.S. assistance in El

Salvador the twelve-year civil war would have ended much sooner. The United States presence in El Salvador demonstrates a fear of appearing weak not only in the Western Hemisphere but in the world as well. The United States sent more than \$4 billion in aid to El Salvador, trained many Salvadoran soldiers on U.S. soil in counter-insurgency tactics and torture techniques and is only now starting to have a positive impact on the country with its support of the most recent democratically elected government. While the United States has provided many excuses for its involvement in El Salvador during the civil war it is time that the U.S. government formally apologizes to the people of El Salvador and admits that in many of its foreign ventures human rights were consciously sacrificed in the name of military security and anti-communist governments.

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