

# SUPPORTING REPRESSION: U.S. POLICY AND THE DEMISE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EL SALVADOR, 1979—1981

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## *Introduction*

The U.S. government has been the source of a vast programme of bilateral and multilateral economic aid and various forms of military assistance to the ruling classes of El Salvador since the early 1950s. Between 1953 and 1979, executive branch agencies channelled \$218.4 million in economic aid and \$16.8 million in military loans and credits to bolster and sustain a state apparatus compatible with American policy goals in the region. During the same period, some \$479.2 million flowed from the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and other U.S.-influenced multilateral financial institutions into the coffers of the dominant Salvadoran political and economic groups.<sup>1</sup> This long-term, large-scale involvement of the U.S. in El Salvador both economically and militarily, has been to a considerable degree responsible for sustaining in power repressive, autocratic regimes that refuse to deal with underlying social and economic problems that persist into the present period. External economic assistance has served to benefit an entrenched oligarchy and its penchant for speculative investments in pursuit of private capital accumulation.

Two general, interrelated crises confronted the U.S. government in El Salvador over the past two years: (1) the disintegration of right-wing power traditionally allied with Washington; and (2) the emergence of a revolutionary popular movement challenging for state power. The problem for both Carter and Reagan has been how to reconstruct and reconsolidate right-wing power and how to fashion a set of policies to contain and disassemble the mass opposition to this traditional authority.

These general crises grew out of a sub-set of conjunctural crises which were both cause and consequence of the efforts by U.S. policymakers and their conservative military allies to secure the latter's control over the Salvadoran state structure. These conjunctural crises manifested themselves on three levels: within the governing coalition; within the institutional leadership of society; and within the society at large. Each of these crises was precipitated by the right-wing military's single-minded effort—ultimately supported by Washington—to reassert and consolidate its political rulership. At the level of the governing coalition, the crisis was resolved through the purging of dissident civilian and military personnel. The crisis among the institutional leadership and within the society as a

policymakers to sustain the fiction that the regime was still a civilian-military coalition, that reforms were still being promoted and, on that basis, to continue to avoid the complete international isolation of the junta. Nonetheless, the defection of civilian officials continued and by mid-1980, at least ten senior non-military officials had resigned from the Salvadoran government. Increasingly, then, the U.S. became actively allied with the terror of the military, security forces and the paramilitary organisations—even as it continued to press the ultra right to share power with its compromised, impotent and isolated middle sector client groups.

The rightward shift within the civilian fraction of the coalition was paralleled by a concerted purge by the right-wing military of the reformist elements in the armed forces leadership, principally those centred around Colonel Adolfo Majano, a leading participant in the October 1979 coup. With the steady erosion of influence of the Majano faction during the first half of 1980, conservative officers began to take over more and more of the troop commands—a process which was facilitated by the rigid opposition of Washington to any rapprochement between the reformist military leadership and the Revolutionary Democratic Front. The Carter administration threw its weight behind the policy of 'extermination of subversion' promoted by the military right. The Majano forces, unable to develop ties to the popular movement and unwilling to accept the policies of their fellow officers, saw their influence within the military whittled down.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, because of developed institutional loyalties, they were unwilling to provoke a split within the armed forces until long after they had lost the levers of power which would have enabled them to carry substantial groups of supporters with them. The growing isolation of Majano facilitated his demotion; ultimately, his defection took place with little resonance among the officer corps. Washington's growing economic and military support of the junta (including Pentagon advisers who compensated for the loss of the reformist officers) further served to facilitate the consolidation of the right-wing military within the leadership echelons of the Salvadoran armed forces.

#### *The Carter Administration: From Human Rights to Military Rights*

During the Carter administration, the existence of a so-called human rights policy did not affect the preexisting economic relations between the U.S. and El Salvador that was, in large measure, responsible for creating the social and political unrest. Despite the enormous rise in the number of regime opponents assassinated and tortured by the military, security forces and paramilitary vigilante groups during 1980, for example, direct U.S. economic assistance to the junta totalled a substantial \$59 million. In addition to this government-to-government economic largesse, the administration at no point exercised its economic 'muscle' in the multi-lateral banking institutions to limit the gross human rights violations

taking place in El Salvador. On the contrary, between January 1, 1977 and December 31, 1980, the U.S. government supported multilateral development bank loans to the junta totalling \$228.4 million and merely abstained on two other loans totalling \$38 million.' In one of its final acts before leaving office, Carter representatives in the Inter-American Development Bank successfully flexed Washington's 'economic muscle' in support of a \$45.5 million agrarian reform loan to El Salvador to be drawn from the Bank's special operations fund in which the U.S. holds 62% of the **capital**.<sup>6</sup> During 1980, Washington also supported International Monetary Fund loans to the Salvadoran regime amounting to \$77 **million**.<sup>7</sup>

While U.S. economic policy remained consistent under Carter, there were some cutbacks in military aid to the junta—but of the sort essentially resulting from conflicts over discrete issues, of limited duration and which did not denote a clearly defined opposition to repressive military rule in El Salvador. Beyond that, the real impact of these actions was substantially minimised by the emergence of Israel—a strategic Washington ally and 'regional policeman' in the Middle East—as a major exporter of military hardware to El Salvador and other Central American dictatorships during the 1970s. Israel supplied 81% of El Salvador's foreign arms purchases between 1972 and 1977, and over the decade the junta obtained a significant number of tactical transport aircraft particularly suited to counter-insurgency from the state-owned Israel Aircraft Industries.<sup>8</sup>

The limited change in military aid policy under Carter reflected a variety of factors: the relative importance of the human rights lobby within the executive branch; the shifting nature of the bureaucratic debate over tactics and strategy; and the political changes taking place within the Central American countries. The human rights lobby was strongest in the early part of the Carter administration. In the years between 1976 and 1978 it was able to push legislation which successfully limited U.S. military support for specific regimes (Guatemala, El Salvador). By 1979, however, the more conservative forces within the State Department in alliance with the National Security Council had effectively isolated the human rights proponents within the foreign policy bureaucracy. The major change in Washington's policy was the recognition, in the aftermath of Somoza's downfall at the hands of a guerrilla-led nationalist movement in Nicaragua in July 1979, that a major effort had to be made to forge a coalition of civilian business groups and the Army to provide a political, as well as a military, solution in other countries in the area experiencing a resurgence of anti-dictatorial and class struggle. However, the central concern of U.S. policy was first and foremost to undermine the revolutionary popular movements and preserve the existing armed forces.

In late 1979, as the civil war in El Salvador began to assume the proportions of a struggle for state power, the Carter administration decided to reopen the military 'spigots' to the terrorist junta in San Salvador.

Between October 1979 and January 1980, Washington shipped \$205,541 worth of riot control equipment and reprogrammed (with Congressional consent) some \$300,000 in International Military Education and Training funds to El Salvador.<sup>9</sup> In January 1980, the National Security Council tentatively approved a plan to provide additional military assistance to the junta in the form not only of loans and credits but also of combat advisers and training personnel. Residual opposition to this policy change within the State Department was limited to particular individuals and was unable to counter effectively the National Security Council-Department of Defense advocacy of the restoration and deepening of ties with the Salvadoran armed forces. There was also little opposition to the new policy drift at the highest echelons of the State Department. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs William Bowdler reportedly informed a closed session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in late January that the new security assistance programme was the only alternative to a 'marxist government' in El Salvador.<sup>10</sup> The desire to prevent 'another Nicaragua' where it was impossible to create alternatives in an open revolutionary situation was a crucial factor shaping the thinking of senior policymaking officials at this time.<sup>11</sup>

In April 1980, the White House 'pressured' a pliant Congress to re-programme \$5.7 million in military aid to the Salvadoran junta. Carter also submitted a request for a \$5.5 million military assistance package to help sustain the junta's position during Fiscal Year 1981.<sup>12</sup> In its efforts to maintain the existing state structure intact, the armed forces were allocated the central role in Washington's re-arranged priorities. 'If you eliminate the army in El Salvador', one U.S. official at the time declared, 'then nothing stands between the armed left and a government takeover.'<sup>13</sup> Within the foreign policy bureaucracy, the growing debate over the efficacy, nature and extent of future U.S. relations with the Salvadoran armed forces reflected the extent to which the human rights forces had now been marginalised inside the policymaking process. The National Security Council, Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department's Latin American Bureau were all forceful advocates of the position that 'military assistance is an essential component of any strategy in El Salvador. . . . Support for the primacy of the diplomatic option, *but not to the exclusion of military assistance*, was largely confined to some State Department officials and the American Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert E. White. Notwithstanding these tactical differences of opinion, however, there was a general convergence on the part of all involved executive branch agencies in opposition to the assumption of state power in El Salvador by the mass-based movement under the organisational direction of the Revolutionary Democratic Front.

While committed to the basic notion that support for the junta must be the focus of U.S. policy, Carter initially opted to limit the open and

visible involvement of U.S. military personnel on the side of the junta in the Salvadoran social conflict. Whereas, the 'hardliners' in the administration proposed in early 1980 that some thirty six military training teams be immediately dispatched to El Salvador, Carter preferred to make provision for the acquisition of discipline skills and combat training by the junta officer corps at locations outside of the country. By October, as many as 300 Salvadoran military officers were undergoing training in counter-insurgency warfare at various U.S. military schools in the Panama Canal Zone.<sup>15</sup>

On December 5, the White House announced the suspension of new military and economic assistance to the junta pending clarification of the role of the Salvadoran security forces in the murders of three American nuns and one lay missionary. In mid-January, the suspension was lifted despite Ambassador White's categorical assertion that the regime had refused to undertake a 'serious investigation' into the assassinations.<sup>16</sup> The decision to resume military aid was made with the concurrence of Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and was supported by the executive branch as a whole.<sup>17</sup> The overriding consideration shaping this action was the 'survival of the military' imperative. On this issue, even the 'dissident' American Ambassador lined up with his imperial state colleagues: 'The first priority of our policy is to support a reform-minded government that rejects the extremes of the left and of the right and to preserve the Salvadoran military as an institution. The military is the final barrier against a Marxist-Leninist threat.'<sup>18</sup> On January 17, 1981, Carter authorised an emergency \$5 million package of lethal military assistance to the junta (grenade launchers, rifles, ammunition, helicopters), invoking special executive powers in order to circumvent the need for Congressional assent.<sup>19</sup> His term of office ended before further consideration could be given to operationalising a proposal drawn up by the State Department's Policy Planning Office (with White House approval) to send \$50 million in economic aid, up to \$7 million in military sales and credits, and thirty eight U.S. army advisers to El Salvador.<sup>20</sup>

The Carter administration continued to proclaim the viability of the regime while the Salvadoran ruling class withdrew \$1.5 billion in the midst of the 1979-1980 political crisis.<sup>21</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development officials continued to insist that the junta's agrarian programmes were designed to help the poor while economic resources were channelled to a government controlled by large landholders and financial groups who siphoned off the bulk of the funds for their own use. During 1980, more than 8,000 peasants, workers, students, trade unionists, professionals and churchpeople were assassinated in *non-military* confrontations with the security forces, paramilitary groups and Salvadoran troops commanded by U.S.-trained officers.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds more opponents of the regime 'disappeared' after being arrested.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, in the absence of the

prosecution of a single military official, the White House perversely continued to label the regime a 'moderate', 'reformist' and centrist government and to engage in a determined effort to focus the blame for the violence on non-governmental paramilitary organisations. Select cutbacks in U.S. military aid were in no way designed to undermine the internal discipline and cohesion of the armed forces. While on occasion condemning the 'extremists on the right', the 'human rights' administration continued to support the military which practised the violence and provided the recruits for the right-wing terrorist groups.

*Crisis II: Institutional Leadership of Society*

The second crisis was located in the institutional leadership of Salvadoran society. Among church organisations, civic associations, peasant unions, trade unions, universities and even among some large landholders, a vast movement emerged, led by a group of men and women increasingly committed to deep-going structural changes in the economic and political institutions of the country. With the coup of October 1979, Washington sought to coopt and promote those sectors of the new institutional leadership viewed both as amenable to external pressures and supportive of efforts to limit the scope and depth of change. Because U.S. policymakers simultaneously promoted the terroristic right, the social reformers were unable to realise the changes which they sought. The end result was to push the social reformers into an alliance with the revolutionary democratic left and deepen the institutional crisis. With the emergence of the alliance of the centre and the left, the military regime was left with only a small and institutionally weak right-wing Christian Democratic faction. Incapable of incorporating popular support or subordinating the new institutional leadership to the governing coalition, the regime extended and deepened its terror activities; 'extended' it to include the most prominent members of civic society and 'deepened' it to include indiscriminate attacks on peasants and workers. The regime hoped through massive terror to regain the security it was unable to obtain through political means.

One of the major fictions systematically propagated by the U.S. government and the bulk of the American mass media has been the notion that the 'violence' against the Salvadoran people is perpetrated by anonymous right-wing terrorists, who apparently are so clever that they can commit thousands of killings in broad daylight throughout the country and never be apprehended by a junta which claims great military success in ferreting out guerrillas from jungles and rough mountain terrain. The statistics compiled by the Legal Aid Commission of the office of the Archbishop of El Salvador (which has engaged in the most sustained and comprehensive monitoring of human rights in El Salvador), however, tell quite a different story. In the period between May and December 1980, official junta

controlled military and police units were responsible for 4,868 (approximately 80%) and the paramilitary organisations for only 1,083 (approximately 20%) of all documented political assassinations.<sup>24</sup> The combined forces of the National Guard, National Police, Treasury Police, Security Forces and the Army killed four times as many civilians as the 'anonymous' right-wing death squads. Moreover, there is clear and precise evidence demonstrating that the death squads and the government forces actively collaborated in carrying through their grisly missions. The Archbishop's Legal Aid Commission provides numerous reports that reveal a pattern of coordinated and complementary operations involving the army, security forces and the paramilitary groups such as ORDEN. Several examples may be cited:

April 17, 1980. Hundreds of members of the paramilitary organisation ORDEN, protected by the National Army and Agents of the National Guard, militarily invaded the Christian peasant communities of 'El Pajal, Tehuiste arriba, El Salto, San Lucas, Ulapa, Santa Lucia, Tepechame', of the jurisdictions of San Vicente and La Paz, departments located in the eastern side of the country, (sixteen assassinations).

April 24, 1980. At least 100 agents of the National Guard, the Army, and the paramilitary organisation ORDEN, protected by two helicopters with guns and by small tanks invaded the adjacent communities of 'El Campanario, San Benito, Angulo, Llano Grande, El Obrajuelo, Las Lomas, La Joya, La Pita, Santa Amalia', all belonging to the departmental jurisdiction of San Vicente (66 km. west of the capital). Many eyewitnesses declared having seen grenades being thrown at peasant homes, as well as thorough machine gunning, (nineteen assassinations).

July 7, 1980. The town 'Ojo de Agua', jurisdiction of Cojutepeque, department of Cuzcatlan (35 km. east of the capital) was again invaded by agents of the National Guard and members of the paramilitary organisation ORDEN, (eleven assassinations).

Afterwards, the invaders went to the neighbouring towns of San Marin, San Andario, Soledad, El Carmen, San Andres and Candelaris. As they marched they destroyed crops and looted the homes of peasants.

July 10, 1980. At least 1,000 strongly armed and masked men, equipped with bullet-proof vests and identifiable as members of the 'death squad', invaded the 'Mirador' farm with the aid of members of the Army and agents of the National Guard. The majority of the peasants in the farm belonged to the *Union Comunal Salvadorena*. The farm is located in 'Isletas', jurisdiction of Coatepeque, department of Santa Ana, in the west of the country. Eyewitnesses reported that masked men and agents of the National Guard executed sixty peasants, who were selected from among three hundred cooperative peasants. Aid institutions were not allowed to enter the area, which was completely surrounded by members of the army.<sup>25</sup>

The particular savagery that distinguished these 'law and order' operations derived, in part, from the military's adherence to the notion of collective guilt: whole families and villages have been attacked and

destroyed because of the activities of particular individuals. The Legal Aid Commission provides a graphic description of this type of 'retribution' carried out by the junta between May and October 1980 which deserves to be quoted in detail:

May **14, 1980**. Massacre in the Sumpul River. The army and military bodies (National Guard, Hacienda Police), along with members of the paramilitary organisation ORDEN, surrounded villages in a broad rural area. The peasant community remained totally incommunicado for four days. From flame-throwing helicopters, the army burned the homes of peasants. When the villagers ran away they were riddled with bullets by the guards and members of ORDEN. In many operations as it can be seen throughout this report, whole peasant families, including children under five years of age, were executed. The collective deaths of at least **600** peasants, men, women and children, at the shores of the Sumpul River, marks the beginning of the stage of 'Total Cleaning' of the rural areas. The operations were characterised by coordination among the armies of El Salvador and Honduras, which, together with the Guatemalan army, began to extend the 'Sanitary Belt' over Salvadoran territory.

Starting in the month of June, broad rural areas of El Salvador became actual 'stages of military operations of total extermination' against the civilian population ('El Trifinio', **130** km. northwest of San Salvador; extensive areas of the north in the department of Morazan, **170** km. northwest of San Salvador; Aguilares and Guasapa, 35 km. north of San Salvador; and extensive areas of the south, in the department of San Vicente, **60** km. southeast of San Salvador).

Indiscriminate bombings carried out by the airforce and the artillery of the Army have been the principal characteristics of this stage of intentional and systematic extermination. The Association of Humanitarian Aid has calculated that in the area bombed by the Salvadoran army in the Eastern department of Morazan during the month of October and the beginning of November, at least **4,000** people died.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the depth of the institutional crisis led the regime to violate the sacred and the profane. The Legal Aid Commission reported:

During **1980**, the persecution of the Church which surpassed all previous experiences in relative and absolute terms as well as in cruelty, was extended to sectors which had not been attacked before. And this has all been done with total impunity. Priests, seminary students, gospel teachers and other direct members of the Church have been assassinated. They have machine-gunned and bombed ecclesiastical institutions such as schools, universities, religious residences, and religious facilities. (Twenty eight assassinations, January to ~~October~~).<sup>37</sup>

These actions, together with the murder of the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, and the four American churchpeople, indicated the degree to which the regime had gone down the road to 'total war' by the end of 1980.

Between January 1 and December 31, 1980, in addition to the six hundred peasants killed in the Sumpul River massacre and the thousands exterminated in the course of bombing missions carried out by the

Salvadoran airforce, the Legal Aid Commission documented 8,062 assassinations by the junta and its paramilitary allies. These victims included a wide array of social forces: peasants (3,783); students (692); workers (418); professionals (44); small businessmen (134); and unknown occupations (2,306). Other facets of the regime's activities during this period might also be enumerated. Between January 1 and August 31, some 211 prisoners 'disappeared' following their arrest by members of the regime. Further, between January and July, the army and security forces invaded working class areas on 120 occasions, searched and ransacked trade union, church and civic organisation offices on 90 occasions, and machine-gunned, sabotaged or bombed these same offices on 133 occasions.<sup>28</sup>

Political labels to be meaningful should reflect political realities. Nonetheless, Washington policymakers, determined to sustain the military in power, continued to rationalise their support of its repressive policies on the grounds that it is a centrist government caught between the extremes of right and left. While the most reputable sources of data on the situation in El Salvador speak to the existence of an extreme right-wing terrorist regime, the White House has persisted in its Orwellian deception in which genocide is repeatedly defined as 'pragmatism'.

Each murder that violated a new set of taboos created a crisis, international as well as national, and at each point Washington provided the crucial political support to sustain the regime through the particular crisis—not necessarily because the administration supported each of these murders, but because executive branch officials were more concerned with defeating the revolutionary movement and consolidating the military state apparatus than with preventing political murder. Hence, after expressing ritualistic statements of concern, U.S. policymakers quickly refocused the issue *away* from the regime's crimes to the 'struggle against the Marxist guerrillas' or 'Cuban involvement'. The willingness of Washington ultimately to accept the brutal murders of its own citizens and Archbishop Romero is the best indication of the paramount importance attached to consolidating right-wing rulership. The same pattern was observed in the murder of the seven leaders of the Revolutionary Democratic Front in November 1980—Washington attempted to 'cover-up' the public involvement of the regime and to attribute it to anonymous right-wing terrorists, even though hundreds of government soldiers encircled the building where the initial kidnapping of the opposition leaders took place. The deeper meaning of U.S. complicity is to be found in the profound commitment on the part of both Carter and Reagan to the reconstruction of a network of stable and unconditional allies linked to American global and regional military-corporate and financial interests. In this context, the lives of missionaries and archbishops and social democratic leaders counted for little. Through its arms and military advisory programme, Washington has

become an active accomplice in the destruction of the institutional leadership of Salvadoran society.

### *Crisis III: Society as a Whole*

Parallel to the support for the 'military solution' of the institutional crisis, Washington has sought to build up a social basis of support within Salvadoran society for the remaining faction of the Christian Democrats still supporting the regime. The principal focus of this strategy has been an 'agrarian reform' programme announced by the junta in March 1980. To date, the bulk of the financial, technological and advisory support for the programme has been provided by the State Department's Agency for International Development and the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labour Development.

The most striking characteristic of this so-called agrarian reform programme is an essentially negative one: even its full implementation will in no way benefit an estimated 65% of the rural population in El Salvador who lack any access to land whatsoever.<sup>29</sup> Even the proposed beneficiaries of the programme have experienced minimal gains during its first year in operation. The key 'Land-to-the-Tiller' law (Decree 207) of April 1980, for example, stated that all current tenants on rented plots of less than seven hectares shall become immediate owners of those plots of land. Some twelve months later, less than 1,000 'provisional' titles had been allocated among 150,000 families eligible to become landholders under the law.<sup>30</sup> The exclusionary nature of the programme, its origin in an 'outside and above' development strategy, and the lack of adequate planning and implementing regulations are all discussed in considerable detail in a recent report prepared by two U.S. agricultural experts, based on careful field research and access to unpublished State Department and El Salvadoran government materials.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the flaws in the programme itself, however, the authors also address themselves to the larger political and social context within which the 'agrarian reform' is being promulgated: 'The land reform programme has been implemented in the context of increasing and unrelenting levels of violence against the rural population.'<sup>32</sup> They specifically single out the 'Land-to-the-Tiller' programme:

The regions most directly affected by Decree 207 coincide almost identically with the areas of greatest repression against peasants by government security forces. It is precisely the Departments of Chalatenanga, Cuscatlan, Morazan and Cabanas that has the highest percentage of renting, as it is also those same Departments which have been the victims of the most brutal repression.<sup>33</sup>

Simultaneous with the implementation of the 'agrarian reform' programme has been the appearance of a combined effort on the part of the armed forces and the paramilitary organisation ORDEN to extend the

state's control over rural life, primarily through the occupation of large landholdings and their transformation into collective prisons. This process of the militarisation of the rural productive units has at times conflicted with the efforts by Christian Democratic unions and even the American Institute for Free Labour Development to retain a minimum semblance of civilian influence in the decision-making structure. The resultant intra-bureaucratic struggle has led to periodic assassinations of union members and peasant cooperative leaders. ORDEN, in particular, has been engaged in purging the state controlled 'cooperatives' of any leadership responsive to peasant interests.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence, the efforts by the Agency for International Development and the American Institute for Free Labour Development to harness a peasant-based apparatus to the junta has been stymied by the 'spread effects' of the terror generated from an increasingly homogeneous totalitarian military.

The escalating militarisation of the countryside ('agrarian reform') is eloquently illustrated by the abrupt rise in peasant assassinations in the months immediately following the announcement of the 'agrarian reform' programme. During the first quarter of 1980, assassinations took place at the rate of approximately 150 per month; between April and December, they averaged 370 per month.<sup>35</sup> These figures do not include the hundreds murdered by junta troops in May 1980 as they attempted to flee across the Sumpul River or the thousands killed during the counterinsurgency-air bombing campaign carried on during a large part of the year. Furthermore, there has been, and continues to be, a direct constant relation between the flight of refugees from the countryside and the areas designated for 'agrarian reform'. A recent special report by the Legal Aid Commission conclusively demonstrates that the greatest proportion of rural refugees are from those areas targeted by the military junta for the 'agrarian reform'. At the end of 1980, the departments of Cuscatlán, Chalatenango and La Paz, for example, were the areas of origin of over 70% of all the refugees at the *Seminario San Jose de la Montana*, for 64% of those at *El Despertar*, for 100% of those at *Iglesia de Soyapango*, for almost 65% who had taken shelter at the *Noviciado Somascos*, for over 80% in *La Basilica*, and for almost 100% of the peasants who had sought safety at *Parroquia de San Roque*.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, the junta's activities have had less to do with transforming land tenure relations and more to do with exterminating any and all forms of independent rural organisation. Yet, American policymakers continue to propagate the pernicious myth that the militarisation of the countryside, including the physical occupation of productive units, is tantamount to agrarian reform and has directly benefited the Salvadoran peasant population.

From supporting terror as a mechanism for securing political rule, as U.S. policymakers sought, the Salvadoran military has turned to terror as

the mode of rulership, subordinating all sectors to its domination, violently repressing even those attached to the political apparatus of the regime. The incapacity to distinguish between armed and unarmed opposition, between opposition and allied peasant associations, is explained by the dynamic tendency of the regime to concentrate all power in its hands, based on the view that a state of war exists and only the military and paramilitary organisations can be trusted to fulfill the mission of 'exterminating communism'. According to this view, those peasants who are not members or collaborators of ORDEN are suspect and potential allies of the enemy. Thus, the efforts by the Christian Democrats and the American Institute for Free Labour Development to create a social base for the regime 'outside' of the state apparatus have failed. The increasing use of terror by the regime is thus a cause and consequence of political isolation: unwilling to allow even a limited autonomy to the Christian Democratic peasant movement, it is condemned to generalising repression to all peasants who manifest the least interest in social organisation. In sum, the rhetoric of agrarian reform, the peasants as beneficiaries, and the transformation of land tenure relations have given way to the reality of escalating repression, the peasants as victims and the militarisation of the countryside.

Having committed itself to the military solution, Washington had no choice but to press on with their support, even as it takes them down the blind alley of totalitarianism. As the number of assassinations in the rural areas increase, and as executive branch policymakers continue to insist that the agrarian reform will become an historical boon to the peasants, we can infer that the U.S. government once again—as in Indo-China—perversely believes that peasants must be saved, even if they have to be killed in the process. This bleak spectacle stands as a monument to those pragmatic and even adaptable liberal policymakers in the Carter administration who chose to stay in Washington and proffer their liberal counsels to the efforts to eliminate revolutionary democratic alternatives in El Salvador. This process of extending the military state's control throughout Salvadoran society, using the vehicle of the 'agrarian reform', has been wholeheartedly supported by the Reagan White House. The ideological utility of 'defending reformers' perfectly serves the new administration's policy goal of exterminating the opposition to the junta: the repressive organisational apparatus, ostensibly implementing agrarian reform, serves to rationalise an all-pervasive police-state apparatus.

*The Reagan Administration: El Salvador and the Militarisation of Civil Society*

The transition from Carter to Reagan has been accompanied by a remarkable degree of continuity in terms of overall policy toward El Salvador at the same time as there have been some discernible shifts in strategy and

tactics. As part of its overriding goal to revitalise U.S. capitalism both at home and abroad, the incoming administration announced its intention to further marginalise human rights criteria as a factor shaping foreign policy decision-making in pursuit of a related goal which was to seek closer ties with autocratic military regimes in the Third World that supported U.S. political-strategic interests and were willing to open their economies to long-term large-scale flows of foreign capital and commerce.

One of the major recommendations contained in a report prepared by Reagan's State Department Transition Team on Latin America was the following: 'Internal policy-making procedures should be structured to ensure that the Human Rights area is not in a position to paralyse or unduly delay decisions on issues where human rights concerns conflict with other U.S. interests.'<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, the head of the Transition Team, Ambassador Robert Neumann, put it more bluntly in an address to a group of Foreign Service Officers, declaring that such 'abstractions' as human rights had no central part in a foreign policy that wished to give priority to 'American national interests'.<sup>38</sup> In the lexicon of the new policymakers, allied dictatorial regimes were now described as 'moderately repressive' and even 'pre-democratic'.<sup>39</sup> Referring to the terrorist military junta in El Salvador, United Nations Ambassador-designate Jeanne Kirkpatrick declared: 'I think that the degree of commitment to moderation and democratic institutions within the Salvadoran military is very frequently underestimated in this country. And I think it's a terrible injustice to the Government and the military when you suggest that they were somehow responsible for terrorism and assassination.'<sup>40</sup> In late November 1980, Reagan's senior Latin American policy advisers personally 'assured' leading representatives of El Salvador's business community 'that the new administration will increase military aid, including control equipment, to security forces fighting leftist guerrillas'.<sup>41</sup>

The State Department Transition Team Report designated El Salvador as one of the 'immediate crises' that the Reagan presidency would have to deal with once it assumed political office.<sup>42</sup> Within days of taking over as Secretary of State, Alexander Haig 'actually became the desk officer for El Salvador', according to one executive branch official. 'All reports were going directly to him.'<sup>43</sup> The Report also included a 'hit list' of 'social reformer' envoys to be swiftly removed from their ambassadorial posts.<sup>44</sup> In early February 1981, Robert E. White, the Carter-appointee as American ambassador to El Salvador—and one of the prime 'hit list' candidates—became the first career officer to be removed from his post by the Reagan administration. Both Secretary of State Haig and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Walter Stoessel informed White that he had been recalled at the express orders of the White House.<sup>45</sup>

In mid-February, the President inaugurated a two-pronged strategy to mobilise domestic and international support for expanding military

relations with the Salvadoran junta as the most effective strategy for defeating the popular revolutionary movement. The rationale for this new policy was contained in the so-called 'White Paper' on El Salvador which contended that 'the insurgency in El Salvador has been progressively transformed into another case of indirect armed aggression against a small Third World country by Communist powers acting through Cuba'.<sup>46</sup> The most notable feature of the 'White Paper', apart from the chasm that separated its 'evidence' from its assertions, was the complete absence of any account of the numerous political, social and civic movements, representing a wide range of political views and social strata, that had developed over the last decade in opposition to the existing state structure.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the American mass media, liberal and conservative, were virtually unanimous in their acceptance of the 'White Paper's' conclusions which they proceeded to disseminate in the most uncritical fashion.<sup>48</sup> At the level of official Washington, the executive branch, through press conferences, public statements before congressional committees, and confidential briefings of key congressional 'influentials', was able to mobilise legislative support for its position with relative ease. The overwhelming majority of elected officials were basically willing to agree that El Salvador was 'the place to draw the line' against international communist influence in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere around the globe.<sup>49</sup> Following a closed door briefing by Secretary of State Haig on February 17, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Charles Percy, spoke for most of his colleagues when he declared: 'I think those outside forces should be put on notice that this nation will do whatever is necessary to prevent a Communist state takeover in El Salvador. . . The Administration is reaching out for Congressional support. They will have that support.'<sup>50</sup> Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker thought it 'entirely appropriate for this country to dispatch noncombat advisers in small numbers—50, 100, 150—to tell these people how to defend themselves against Cuba.'<sup>51</sup> Opposition to increased military assistance to El Salvador was confined to isolated members of the House and Senate who willingly conceded that they lacked the capacity to block any Reagan initiative in this area.<sup>52</sup>

In a concerted and comprehensive attempt to organise worldwide support for the military solution in El Salvador, the State Department sent high-level missions to Western Europe, Southern Europe and Latin America in what one official described as a 'full court press' to line up America's allies behind the Reagan policy.<sup>53</sup> This global 'offensive', however, proved to be a diplomatic disaster in terms of its primary objective. Social democratic and conservative governments in Europe remained hostile to the U.S. position, or neutral at best, generally favouring a negotiated political solution involving all parties in the social conflict.<sup>54</sup> In Latin America, even such staunch supporters as the military governments of Brazil and Argentina, and the Social Christian regime in Venezuela,

expressed opposition to *any* type of external intervention in El Salvador. The Mexican response was more pointed. In the aftermath of his meeting with the head of the American 'mission' to the hemisphere, General Vernon Walters, President Lopez Portillo reaffirmed Mexico's fraternal relations with Cuba, warned against the 'unscrupulous arrogance of military power' and decried the fact that Central America had been 'elevated to the undesirable rank of strategic frontier.'<sup>55</sup>

While allied governments preferred to emphasise social and economic reforms over military assistance, the Reagan administration pointedly declared that the survival of the junta was the main order of business and that, henceforth, military and economic aid would not be conditioned, even formally, by regime efforts in these areas. Neither would future assistance be contingent on the outcome of the joint U.S.-Salvadoran investigation into the murders of the American clergy in December 1980. 'I know of no linkage', remarked State Department spokesman William Dyess, beyond the requirement that U.S. aid be used 'efficiently and effectively'.<sup>56</sup> Having 'delinked' the question of aid from the issue of the murder investigation, the administration was sending a clear signal to the junta. As one American official privately admitted, 'the military men know they're off the hook' as far as any pressure for social and economic reforms are concerned.<sup>57</sup>

In devising U.S. policy toward El Salvador, an array of strategy options were considered by the Reagan White House, ranging from the provision of military advisers and equipment on an initial limited scale to reported Pentagon plans that included the training and arming of a helicopter-borne air cavalry unit of 2,000 men.<sup>58</sup> In choosing the most appropriate option at this particular moment, the new administration preferred the strategy of a cumulative indirect military buildup of the junta resources and capabilities instead of a larger-scale, more direct U.S. intervention in the Central American conflict.<sup>59</sup> The benefits accruing from a 'carefully calibrated' strategy were viewed as potentially substantial, while the risks were deemed minimal.<sup>60</sup> 'We're not talking about tanks and missiles', one executive branch official noted. 'There's not even any plan at this stage to send American combat advisers there. What's involved is small arms, ammunition, maybe some helicopters and coastal patrol boats. It's a game we can buy into relatively cheaply, and there's clearly a consensus emerging within the administration that the risks are worth the potential payoff.'<sup>61</sup> Having shaped its policy in terms of a commitment to the survival of the military junta and its Christian Democratic allies, the White House was therefore unwilling to respond to rightist leader Robert D'Aubuisson's call for a right-wing military coup—even though the administration refused to place itself on record as being unalterably opposed to such a development.<sup>62</sup>

In early March, Reagan announced that the U.S. government would

provide an expanded package of military assistance to the junta: some \$25 million in new military aid and an increase in the number of American military advisers from twenty-five to forty-five. In addition to small arms, radar equipment, military vehicles and helicopters, U.S. naval and military advisers would train their Salvadoran counterparts in the use and maintenance of helicopters and communications equipment and complement Salvadoran naval patrols in the country's coastal waters.<sup>63</sup> The Congress speedily approved the military aid request which included \$5 million that the appropriate House and Senate subcommittees voted to 'reprogramme' from already appropriated foreign aid funds.<sup>64</sup> By the end of March, total Fiscal Year 1981 U.S. military authorisations for the Salvadoran junta stood at \$35.4 million while the number of Pentagon advisers to be dispatched to El Salvador had been increased to fifty-six, including a number of special forces personnel experienced in counter-insurgency warfare.<sup>65</sup> \*

Efforts by Congressional liberals to limit or terminate military aid, but not economic assistance, to the junta continue to be ineffectual. Proposed amendments to end or attach conditions to military funding, and to authorise the withdrawal of U.S. military advisers from El Salvador have elicited minimal support from among the legislative body.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the small number of Congressional critics of administration policy are basically engaged in a tactical disagreement with the White House—over the most appropriate means to achieve a settlement to the conflict that prevents the transfer of state power to the opposition forces represented in the Revolutionary Democratic Front. In the main, they still cling to the fiction that the formal civilian leadership of the junta headed by Napoleon Duarte is 'responsible' and 'reformist' in contrast to the right-wing terrorist groups acting outside the control of the central government in San Salvador. The major recommendation contained in a report by a 'liberal' member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee following a visit to El Salvador in early 1981 is instructive in this respect:

**The United States should suspend military sales, training, and assistance to the security forces of El Salvador on the grounds that those forces are operating independently of responsible civilian control (i.e. Duarte), and are conducting a systematic campaign of terrorism directed against segments of their own population.**<sup>67</sup>

Direct U.S. bilateral economic and military assistance to El Salvador in Fiscal Year 1981 has now reached \$143 million. This escalating financial commitment to the junta could, however, skyrocket by a further \$380 million during the current fiscal year if various projects currently under

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\* During March 1981, it was reported that a contingent of Israeli military advisers (perhaps as many as thirty) were providing on-the-spot training in anti-guerrilla tactics for Salvadoran military personnel. See 'Latin Letter', *Latin American Weekly Report* WR-81-13, March 27, 1981, p. 8.

consideration by Washington and the multilateral banking community (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, International Monetary Fund) come to fruition.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, the Reagan administration has apparently let it be known that it is prepared to apply considerable pressure on allied governments in Western Europe, Canada and Japan to support the 'international bank' programmes for El Salvador presently on the drawing boards.<sup>69</sup> For Fiscal Year 1982, the administration has already requested \$26 million in direct military aid for El Salvador and an additional \$40 million from the misnamed 'Economic Support Fund' which, in practice, operates as a weapons assistance 'support fund'.<sup>70</sup> These current and projected increases in military assistance to the junta are indicative of Reagan's decision to completely jettison the Carter strategy of attempting to disassociate the regime itself from responsibility for the terror—preferring, instead, to support the militarisation of civil society if that is what is required to defeat a revolutionary movement that has put the issue of state power on the immediate political agenda. At another more important level, however, there was continuity, not rupture. Reagan touched on this shared perspective at the point of overall policy goals:

**I didn't start the Salvador thing (Reagan said). . . I inherited it. (And in any case, he noted, while the previous administration campaigned with warnings that Reagan would be a threat to peace) they were doing what we're doing (in El Salvador), . . . sending aid. . . of the same kind we're sending.**<sup>71</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Like the Carter administration, the Reagan White House is escalating the military build-up of repressive forces in El Salvador to make it a test case for U.S. policy towards the Third World: it demonstrates U.S. willingness and capacity to 'project power', to defend right-wing allies and to put all revolutionary movements on notice regarding Washington's intention to enforce its policy of sustaining docile vassals within its sphere of influence. The new administration continues to propagate the myth of the junta as a 'reformist government' under siege by 'the forces of the extreme right' and 'the forces of the extreme left'.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, the military buildup of the junta being carried out with the express authorisation of the White House has served to increase the level and scope of regime repression.

During the first three months of 1981, the Legal Aid Commission reported a total of 5,469 people killed by the regime—2,644 in January, 903 in February, and 1,922 in March—a rate which, if sustained, will at least double the number assassinated by the junta in 1980.<sup>73</sup> Peasants continue to account for the vast majority of the regime's victims. In a single week (March 7-13), for example, the Commission documented 798 political assassinations by government forces and the paramilitary groups,

of which **681** were peasants killed in bombing raids by the 'centrist' regime's airplanes and helicopter gunships.<sup>74</sup> The high proportion of peasants among the victims of junta violence in recent months strongly suggests that the 'agrarian reform' remains a misnomer for government terrorism—the reform rhetoric serving to mask the widespread and destructive use of force to intimidate the rural population. In addition, the rural refugees themselves are constantly attacked in their makeshift camps and on church property which is under siege by the military. Apart from the peasant population, religious, educational and cultural institutions continue to be other focal points of the ongoing regime terror. Military and paramilitary forces killed 170 teachers and **39** Church people between January **1980** and March **1981**. Of the three hundred documented acts of violence committed against religious institutions and persons during this period (assassinations, machine gunnings, bombings, beatings, etc.), regime forces were responsible for 224, another 47 were the work of unidentified groups, and only **23** were undertaken by the paramilitary 'death squads'.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, monitoring organisations such as the Legal Aid Commission and Amnesty International continue to find no evidence whatsoever of right-wing terror groups operating independently of the state repressive apparatus. Clearly, the increased political linkages and military aid sponsored by the Reagan administration are *increasing* the level of repression in El Salvador today, not lessening it. The growing professionalisation of the armed forces is not moderating the Salvadoran military but contributing to its extremism.

The build-up of U.S. interventionary capacity in El Salvador is necessarily accompanied by a well-coordinated and orchestrated campaign through the America mass media which portrays this policy as defensive action to counter a mythical Soviet-Cuban intervention in the conflict. Massive U.S. arms flows and the intrusion of Pentagon military advisers are 'legitimated' by the media through the purported discovery of Soviet-bloc arms shipments in the possession of the guerrillas. The fact that most of the weapons used by the insurgents are U.S., Israeli, West German and Belgium-made is explained away by their supposed origin in Vietnam and their transfer via Cuba and Nicaragua to El Salvador.<sup>76</sup>

Intent on creating an interventionist syndrome among the American public and sustaining Congressional support for U.S. intervention in favour of a right-wing dictatorship fighting against the majority of its own people, the mass media focuses on three interrelated themes: (1) the conflict in El Salvador is part of an East-West conflict; (2) the adversaries of the U.S. and the junta are a minority of Marxist guerrillas; and (3) the policy of the guerrillas is to terrorise the majority of 'uninvolved' or hostile peasants into submission, to seize control of the state and pave the way for a new Soviet gateway on 'our doorstep'. What is absent from these accounts is any consideration of the scope and nature of the polyclass opposition to

the regime, the downplaying of the large-scale military and economic support that the U.S. government has provided the junta, and the avoidance of any serious consideration of the terroristic nature of the Salvadoran government's policies. This media propaganda effort to legitimise terror by casting the victims as executioners finds further elaboration in the discussions of the growing numbers of peasants fleeing the countryside: these victims of regime repression are presented as objects of guerrilla depredations. In the refugee camps of Costa Rica and among those that we interviewed in Mexico, however, each and every peasant, whether social Christian, leftist or apolitical, spoke clearly and directly to the issue of the junta. Without exception, military repression was the basic reason for abandoning the country.

The attempt to interpret the Salvadoran revolutionary movement as an outgrowth of Soviet-Cuban machinations is so flimsy and fanciful that even close Western allies in Paris and Bonn, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City, remain singularly unconvinced. In the first place, it overlooks at least fifteen years of social history, in which socialist, democratic, and social Christian groups have been actively organising various strata and classes of society to demand improved living standards and representative government. School teachers, peasants, rural wage workers, factory workers, public employees, health workers and others have been organised in public associations by a variety of political groups. These non-violent, popularly based organisations have been the principal target of repression by the combined military and paramilitary forces of the junta, accounting for the great majority of the thousands thus far killed. The principal point of cleavage is not East-West, but between peasants, landholders, workers, employers and professionals on the one hand and the military junta on the other. To attempt to superimpose above this historical reality a mythical Big Power conflict is nothing less than a cynical manipulation and rewriting of the past in order to justify present and future intervention.

The growth of the guerrilla and popular resistance paralleled the regime's savaging of the legal, open mass movements: regime repression did not eliminate the popular organisations but forced them underground and into other forms of struggle. The armed resistance grew into a coalition of social Christian, Marxist and social democratic forces linked to a wide array of social groups in society. To portray this plurality of political and social forces as a monolithic military force is an exercise in deliberate deception.

The capacity of the popular organisations to grow and sustain their memberships, despite the severity of the repression, testified to the close relationship between the opposition and the rank-and-file peasants and workers. The widespread disenchantment of all sectors of the peasantry with the military controlled 'agrarian reform' creates ample basis for the growth of the resistance movement. The movement's principal recruits are

drawn from the countryside, and much of its support has been drawn from the rural villages. It is precisely for that reason that the junta has engaged in 'search and destroy missions' throughout wide regions of rural El Salvador and has applied the notion of 'collective guilt' to whole families and villages suspected of harbouring individual resistance members.

The popular resistance movement has passed through several phases in which political conditions have shaped the level and scope of activity. Between the mid-1970s and late 1979, mass public mobilisations were the primary focus of activity: the demands for democratic rights and structural changes were spearheaded and openly expressed by non-violent spokespersons. The armed struggle was largely on the periphery of the movement, essentially a defensive organisation, to counter paramilitary groups in the countryside. During this phase, repression was 'selective'—several hundred were killed by the regime and its paramilitary forces. Beginning in 1980, and accelerating thereafter, the regime launched a campaign of mass repression throughout the society, directed almost exclusively at the mass of local church, factory, community and cooperative leaders and activists. The purpose of this extermination campaign was to destroy the organisational support of the mass movement, atomise and terrorise the rank-and-file and drive a wedge between the political leadership and the mass of sympathisers and supporters in the town and country. This task was facilitated by the public activities of the popular organisations, whose members and activists were easily identified by the secret police and other regime officials at large public gatherings.

Strategically, the repressive regime and its backers in Washington hoped that by debilitating the mass organisations, they would eventually isolate the guerrillas and then proceed to a straight military confrontation, in which the heavier fire-power of the U.S.-armed state forces would be decisive. This strategy, when applied, resulted in forcing many members of the mass organisations to join the armed resistance. Those that remain participants in the popular struggle maintain a low profile—the alternative is instant death. The trajectory of mass movement activity which had proceeded upward until 1979, in other words, began to decline in 1980, while the curve of guerrilla activity began a steep ascent. This pattern was evident during the January 1981 revolutionary offensive when widespread guerrilla activity did not coincide with an urban insurrection. The process of reconstructing and sustaining the linkages between urban mass and rural guerrilla struggle is on the present agenda, but under the most difficult imaginable circumstances.

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whole was resolved through mass terror.

### *Crisis I: Governing Coalition*

In October 1979, U.S. policymakers took advantage of the coup which ousted General Carlos Humberto Romero from office to promote a marriage between rightist security forces, their paramilitary allies, ORDEN, progressive reformist military officials and representatives of social democratic and Christian Democratic groups. This strategy had several complementary purposes: (1) to preserve the state apparatus and the capitalist mode of production by sacrificing particular individuals (General Romero) and sectors of the land-holding oligarchy; (2) to divide the civilian opposition and subordinate reformist army officers to right-wing military domination; (3) to regain credibility for the repressive apparatus of the state and consolidate the power of a pro-U.S. regime capable of eventually destroying the mass revolutionary movement; and to isolate the anti-junta opposition internationally, especially from its growing government and non-government supporters in Western Europe and Latin America. The outcome of this strategy was to deepen and extend the levels and forms of repression throughout the society which, in turn, alienated reformist social and Christian Democratic elements who began to defect in growing numbers to the revolutionary movement. The internal logic of this struggle under the hegemony of the right, and supported with unflinching consistency by Washington, was to escalate the level of repression while simultaneously drawing U.S. government and quasi-government agencies into providing greater quantities of economic assistance, military aid and the accompanying manpower expertise. And once committed to preserving the right-wing military and paramilitary forces as the ultimate arbiter of the political future of El Salvador, American policymakers, with the ready complicity of the mass media, had no choice but to accept and defend the junta's repressive policies—explaining away the legion of documented examples of massacres and terrorism (by the International Commission of Jurists, the Organisation of American States, the El Salvador Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International and the Legal Aid Commission of the Office of the Archbishop of El Salvador) as the products of anonymous and uncontrollable right-wing violence.

The escalating repression by the right-wing forces in the state apparatus precipitated a major conflict within the post-Romero regime, provoking a rupture between the military and reformist civilians who began to abandon the coalition.' With the collapse of the civilian-military junta in January 1980, the U.S. government's immediate response was to try to convince the reformists to stay on—so as to provide a modicum of legitimation for the regime at the international level. When this failed, Washington then sought, successfully, to 'capture' and reinsert a small conservative faction of Christian Democrats into the governing coalition, thus allowing U.S.