Ignoring Atrocities

The Reagan Administration Funding the Salvadoran Government, 1981-1984

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Introduction

Between 1979 and 1992 the small Central American nation El Salvador was embroiled in a bloody civil war pitting left wing guerrillas against a government largely controlled by a ruling economic elite and supported by groups of paramilitary right wing death-squads. The Marxist guerrillas sought to overthrow an oligarchy that had dominated the nation since its colonization by the Spanish, hoping to create a socialist economy and redistribute land to the severely impoverished peasantry. They opposed a government initially composed of both military and civilian leaders, eventually transitioning to an exclusively civilian body that had been picked by the military. Whatever efforts they made at reform or peaceful resolution with the guerillas were largely opposed by the oligarchy who used its influence in the military and paramilitary right-wing death squads to keep the existing economic conditions intact. Though not directly tied to the death squads, the government was heavily influenced by the military and the death squads were simply members of the armed forces in street clothes.

During the thirteen year long war a third of the Salvadoran population was displaced and 80,000 people died, 50,000 of whom were civilians. Despite the fact that government forces and right wing death squads were responsible for eight-five percent of the killings, the Salvadoran government received military and economic aid from the United States throughout the war. [1] Between 1981 and 1984 this aid was subject to biannual scrutiny in which the Reagan Administration had to certify to Congress that progress was being made on human rights concerns in the nation. This period is of unique historical significance because it was the only time in which Congress and the Administration were forced to consider the repressiveness of the

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[1] Equipo Nizkor, Derechos *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 1993), 132. Accessed November 28, 2017. http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html

While strategies and circumstance changed, what remained constant was a lack of true concern for the human rights of the Salvadoran people so long as reports of violations did not affect the Administration's ability to provide military aid to the government and those who violated human rights did not threaten to destabilize the government.

Background

Seeds of Revolution

Income inequality in El Salvador was not a 20th century phenomenon. The land ownership by a small group of people had its basis in the Colonial *hacienda* system, whereby the Spanish colonials seized land throughout Central America and set the native population to work on it, largely growing products for export back to Europe. While the products produced in El Salvador changed based on the ebb and flow of global demand, the economic structure by which they were produced did not. A small oligarchic group of elites, known as "*los catorce*" (the fourteen families,) owned sixty percent of the nation's arable land, controlling most industries and the entirety of the nation's banking.[2]

The second half of the 20th century saw Central America's stark inequality grow even more pronounced. By 1980 nearly half of El Salvador's rural population was employed. According to Christian Smith:

> Between 1950 and 1979 land devoted to sugar and cotton crops increased nearly tenfold. Meanwhile, the per capita amount of land used to grow basic food crops decreased dramatically. By 1978, ninety times more of Central America's land was growing export crops than basic food crops. Between 1975 and 1981 alone, the per capita production of corn and beans declined by 11 percent. The number

[2] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 34.

but falsely claimed that the security forces were making improvements and focused on what were perceived to have been "free" elections in 1982.

By 1983 the lack of improvement required a new strategic shift, and the Administration elected to reorient discourse around El Salvador away from human rights, refocusing the argument to be centered around the threat that a rebel victory in El Salvador would pose to regional security. 1983 saw President Reagan take a much more active role in congressional debate surrounding El Salvador, and his presence and popularity scared Congressional Democrats away from critiquing American policy to the extent that they could in 1981 and 1982.

As Reagan's presence dominated 1983, the end of the year saw the Administration take what was and has since been perceived as a firmer stand on human rights, with the Ambassador to El Salvador and Vice President of the United States both making speeches in El Salvador attacking the oligarchy for its support of right wing death squads. While this has been judged as a shift toward concern for the lives of the Salvadoran people, in reality the Administration only reacted so harshly to the death squads because at this point they were no longer killing people believed to support the leftist guerrillas, but political moderates– who the Reagan Administration supported. In addition, the end of 1983 saw an attempted coup by right-wing officers. To not crack down on death squad activity would have left a very real possibility of the overthrow of the Salvadoran government, leaving only far left or right wing militants as potential replacements. Furthermore, this period saw Reagan pocket veto an extension of the certification process, meaning he would not have to testify to non-existent improvements in El Salvador in in the next few months, and more importantly– effectively ending congressional debate surrounding human rights conditions in El Salvador.

time, "That incident– *La Matanza*... has even since defined the mentality of Salvadoran elites toward even moderate efforts to transform their social system. 'Today [1984] the same policy of extermination is in effect,' says Sol. 'They use the same expression: *Muerto el perro, se acabo la rabia* (Kill the dog and the rabies is gone.)' "[6]

The revolution in El Salvador was a product of both its history of inequality and the repression of peaceful attempts to change Salvadoran's wealth disparity during the 20th century. When the people of El Salvador attempted to respond to the severity of their circumstance with their political system they were soundly rejected by the oligarchy. In 1972, a moderate left wing reformist Christian Democrat, Jose Napoleón Duarte, ran for president against Arturo Molina, a right-wing candidate from the National Coalition Party (PNC), who held power under the previous president, Fidel Sanchez Hernandez. To ensure victory, the legislature arranged the election to be two weeks before the legislative election, so that even in the event of a Duarte victory, the seated legislature could overturn the election, ensuring the PNC would retain power. When radio broadcasts initially announced Duarte's impending victory all media was blacked out for three days. When coverage returned a Molina victory was announced. Duarte was arrested, tortured and exiled and all protests against the election were repressed brutally.[7]

Frustrated by failures within the political system, one of the main methods by which El Salvadorans attempted to peacefully make their societies more equal was through the church. Activist priests, inspired by the new doctrine of Liberation Theology, established "Christian Base Communities" that preached the equality of all people and emphasized the value of each peasant's life. This organization of peasants put pressure on landlords to move toward economic

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[6] Ibid., 13.

[7] Philip J. Williams and Knut Walter *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1997), 80-82.

inequality. In response, the landlords called on the military and death squads to suppress this movement quickly and severely. In 1977 the right-wing death squad, the White Warriors Union, threatened to kill all Jesuits in El Salvador for being communist, publishing leaflets saying, "Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest!" In March of 1977 a leader of the base community movement, Father Rutilio Grande, was shot to death. Two months later his home village was invaded by the army under "Operation Rutilio." The village was razed and 50 people were killed with hundreds more disappearing.[8]

In the next three years three percent of the Catholic clergy in El Salvador were murdered, including four American women church workers– three of whom were nuns– who were found raped and murdered by Salvadoran national guardsmen.[9] Most notably, Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated by a death squad the day after delivering a sermon pleading to the men of armed forces to stop killing their "peasant brothers and sisters." The American Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, was quoted as saying that there was compelling, if not one-hundred percent evidence that former Major Roberto D'Aubuisson of the Salvadoran National Guard ordered the archbishop's murder.[10] Three left-wing organizations, the Popular Liberation Forces, the Revolutionary Army of the People, and the Armed Forces of the Resistance, were formed in response to the lack of structural change or true agrarian reform. They quickly grew and began staging demonstrations, launching guerilla attacks in protest of the lack of structural change toward economic and political equality.[11]

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[8] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 38.
[9] Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 12.
[10] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 49.
[11] Ibid., 36.

General Molina's PNC party retained power until October of 1979 when a group of young moderate officers overthrew the sitting president, General Carlos Romero, in a peaceful coup, establishing a ruling junta. They managed to appease the radical left by highlighting the glaring issues in the regime they displaced– corruption, electoral fraud, and human rights violations– and by making promises to introduce programs to help the poor and prosecute members of the armed forces who were known to have violated human rights. These policies supporting human rights fit perfectly with the regional strategy of the current President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, and he supported the new government. However, fearing a second leftist government taking power in Central America, after the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Carter was unwilling to support integration of the radical left into the government. Without pressure from the radical left the revolutionary junta did not make good on its reformist promises immediately, often finding that the people most culpable for human rights violations were those at the very top of the military and police forces. The left, aggravated by this lack of change and their isolation from the political system, took up arms again.[12]

Soon the October junta was replaced by a new January junta. The new government immediately enacted a basic agrarian reform and nationalization of banking. While this appeared on its face to be progress, in reality the reforms were incredibly moderate and were largely dictated by the military, while the left was excluded from the decision-making process. Over the next six months right wing officers systematically stripped progressive officers of their posts and a number of progressive officers were assassinated by right wing death squads. Writing an article assessing transition from Carter to Reagan in 1981, William Leogrande argued, "While the

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[12] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 42.

October junta sought to create a political opening to the left, the January government has sought to defeat the left militarily."[13]

At the same time two more left wing groups, the Communist Party of El Salvador and the Central American Workers Party were formed. In response to the uptick of violence on the part of the right-wing, the two new groups and the three already active guerilla organizations joined together to form the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN), named for the leader of the revolt that led to *La Matanza.*[14] The revolution was on.

The United States in Central America

In the late 1970s, the United States saw El Salvador, and Central America in general, as an area controlled by military dictatorships in need of serious reform. Taking over a country still recovering from the human loss and embarrassment that was Vietnam, Jimmy Carter promoted a foreign policy focusing on human rights and non-interventionism. While these principles were occasionally put aside in the interest of strategic goals, like in Iran, Korea, and the Philippines, when Carter took over office in 1977 there were no apparent threats to Latin America and he fully applied his policy of curbing repressive regimes in the region.[15]

Central America was a perfect testing ground for Carter's human rights policy, in addition to no apparent threat of tumult, four of the United States allies– Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador– were ruled by military dictatorships with histories of repression dating back to their colonization by the Spanish. Soon after taking office, Carter insisted that, if the Central American countries were to continue to receive military aid from the United States,

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[13]William Leogrande, "Splendid Little War," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (1981): 32.
[14] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.
[15] Ibid., 16.

they would have to undergo reviews of their human rights records. Instead of submitting to scrutiny on human rights, El Salvador and Guatemala declined U.S. military assistance. In Nicaragua, President Carter refused to continue sending military or economic aid because of the oppressiveness of the military dictatorship of the Somoza family.[16]

This policy of supporting human rights at the expense of funding the Somoza military government proved to be difficult to support. The nation descended into chaos during 1978, following the assassination of a popular opposition leader and editor of a major newspaper. For a year the country saw random violence and protests against the government while a socialist revolutionary group, the Frente Sandinista Liberácion Nacional (FSLN), popularly called Sandinistas, grew in power and support among the poor as moderate opposition to President Somoza increasingly radicalized.[17]

Caught in between his policy of supporting human rights and desire to maintain regional stability and keep Marxism out of the Americas, Carter floundered between competing interests and by late July of 1979 the Sandinistas controlled the Nicaraguan government. The loss of Nicaragua to communism "set in motion a full-scale review of U.S. policy toward Central America" to prevent similar leftist victories in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[18]

Unfortunately for Carter, only a few months later Nicaragua's neighbor, El Salvador, descended into a revolution based on many of the same principles. The Carter Administration

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[16] Ibid., 17.
[17] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 30.
[18] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 33.

was forced to reconsider their policy that failed in Nicaragua in El Salvador, restoring military aid to the country but still emphasizing the importance of governmental reform.[19]

Taking over from Carter in January 1981, Reagan was determined to defeat communism all over the globe. He had been incredibly anti-communist in his rhetoric during his 1980 election campaign against Jimmy Carter, hammering on the point that Carter's foreign policy of detente was allowing the Soviets to win the Cold War. Reagan was especially critical of Carter's policy in Central America, portraying the tumult in El Salvador as a result of Cuban and Soviet influence, as opposed to economic inequality and an ineffective political system.[20]

For Reagan, El Salvador was to symbolize a changing of the guard not just in Washington D.C., but all over the world. Where as Carter had allowed the FLSN to win in Nicaragua, Reagan would not allow an FMLN victory in El Salvador. There was pervasive belief within the Administration that the war would be easy to win. In an early National Security Council (NSC) meeting, Secretary of State Alexander Haig said of El Salvador, "Mr. President, this is one you can win."[21] While the country itself was not seen as important, it was to be a proving ground to establish the Administration's credibility all over the world.

The new Administration's policies would not be weighed down by concern for human rights as its predecessor had been. The sweeping changes in policy that accompanied the transition from Carter to Reagan are exemplified by a 1980 article in *Commentary* by an academic, Jeane Kirkpatrick, titled "Dictatorships and Double Standards." In it, Kirkpatrick argued that promoting democracy was ineffective in providing stability and instead only

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[19] Ibid., 46.
[20] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 53.
[21] Ibid., 81.

benefited insurgencies. She argued that focusing on human rights and reform in determining aid for countries in the developing world was "not only ineffectual but downright dangerous." Her argument was founded in the position that providing military aid to rightist dictatorships was just because traditional dictators were more "moderate" than revolutionaries.[22] The distinction she drew was between dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, arguing that right-wing dictatorships were more moral than communist "totalitarian" regimes because they did not seek to control all of their people's lives. While academics and historians criticized this argument as without base, it appealed to candidate Reagan. After having been shown the article by campaign adviser Richard V. Allen, Reagan brought Kirkpatrick on to his team and after his election named her as ambassador to the United Nations.[23]

Immediately upon assuming office, Reagan began to reverse policy in El Salvador. He increased economic aid by 63 percent and fired Ambassador Robert White, a Carter appointee who was a major proponent of human rights reforms. Shortly thereafter the Administration announced that aid to El Salvador would no longer be contingent upon either reforms or human rights.[24] The Administration found justification in February 1981 with the release of a White Paper document that alleged that Cuba and the Soviet Union were shipping arms into El Salvador through Nicaragua. While evidence for the paper has been questioned, it provided the Reagan Administration a clear justification to cast the conflict in El Salvador not as an internal civil war, but as a global conflict, pitting East versus West and fitting into Reagan's worldview.[25]

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[22] Ibid., 54.
[23] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 60.
[24] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 80.
[25] Ibid., 86.

With his justification, Reagan and his Administration jumped into action. In late February, the NSC approved $25 million in new military aid for El Salvador, more than the rest of Central America and the Caribbean combined. $20 million of this aid came in the form of emergency funding, not subject to congressional approval, setting the precedent for the Administration's relationship with Congress as one in which the executive sought to evade, not engage, the legislature. Two weeks later Reagan authorized a covert CIA operation supporting the Salvadoran government with a budget of $19.5 million.[26]

In March 1981, just after approving emergency aid and funding the CIA's operation, the State Department submitted its fiscal year 1982 budget, providing for massive increases in support for El Salvador to the tune of $26 million for the military, $51.2 million for economic development, and $40 million in economic support funds.[27] Shocked by the speed with which the Reagan administration was escalating the U.S.'s involvement in El Salvador, Congressional Democrats rallied together and Senator Christopher Dodd and Congressmen Stephen Solarz and Jonathan Bingham drafted an amendment to the foreign aid authorization bill that provided for a continuation of Jimmy Carter's policy of prioritizing human rights. According to William Leogrande, the bill:

> required that within thirty days after the foreign aid bill was signed into law and every six months thereafter, the president would have to certify to Congress that the government of El Salvador met five conditions (1) that it was not engaged in "a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights"; (2) that it had achieved "substantial control" over its armed forces; (3) that it was making "continued progress" in essential reforms, including land reform; (4) that it was committed to holding free elections at

[26] Ibid., 89.

[27] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 131.

> an early date; and (5) that it had "demonstrated its willingness to negotiate" an end to the war. If the president could not certify that these conditions were being met, military aid to El Salvador would cease.[28]

The bill did not seek to stop the United States' involvement in El Salvador, for to allow for a second Marxist revolution's victory would have been incredibly politically costly, but to control the United States' engagement and ensure a continued dialogue on the country's policy in Central America. It proved incredibly effective in forcing the El Salvador issue into the mainstream of political discourse every six months, demanding a more open discussion of the United States' priorities, both in El Salvador and across the world. Over the next three years the Reagan Administration used different strategies to circumvent the Certification process, but what remained consistent was that human rights abuses never mattered to the Administration so long as they did not threaten to destabilize the Salvadoran government or stop the flow of military aid into the nation.

Strategic Denial

By April 1981 the Reagan Administration knew that it would eventually have to certify to Congress that the Salvadoran government was making progress on human rights concerns, but it was not particularly worried about certification because it knew that Congress would not be able to override the President's report. Internal communications reveal an utter lack of concern for massacres so long as Americans were safe and Congress was not particularly concerned. Publicly, the Administration denied and questioned the validity of reports of atrocities in El Salvador, even when private records demonstrate they understood the veracity of these reports.

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[28] Ibid., 132.

Reagan's first year in office demonstrates almost total apathy toward the actual conditions in El Salvador and a willingness to consistently deny the truth of any reports that the situation was deteriorating.

The Administration's initial approach to human rights conditions is exemplified by their response to the early April 1981 murder of least twenty-four people in Soyapango, a suburb of San Salvador. International media, including an NBC news crew, immediately arrived at the scene and described it as a massacre. The Treasury Police claimed that a raid on a guerrilla meeting resulted in a firefight that led to the deaths of twenty-four "subversives." Contrary to news reports, the police denied executing anyone and claimed that "the bound and mutilated corpses were dragged in by guerrillas while the police were caring for their wounded."[29] In a meeting with a U.S. official President Duarte accepted the Treasury police version of the incident.

Publicly, the State Department Spokesman William Dyess diminished the killings in Soyapango in an April 10 statement, saying that without a full report it was impossible to "assess the blame." He charged the left as being just as much to blame as "extremist forces on the far right," misrepresenting an incident not committed by left or right wing extremists, but by federal police.[30] While right wing extremist groups definitely included members of the federal police, portraying this action by government forces as attributable to both left and right wing terrorists only served to diminish the government's role in the murders. The strategy of equating

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[29] Memo, Richard V. Allen to Ronald Reagan, April 16, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol I 1/20/81 - 5/3/81," Box OA30, Executive Secretariat NSC, Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[30] Juan de Onis, "Killings in Salvador Deplored by U.S.," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr. 10, 1981.

right-wing death squad and government violence to leftist rebellion was often employed to mitigate the damage of reports of excesses.

The private version of events is much more revealing. Four days before Dyess' statement, in a memorandum for the President, National Security Advisor Richard Allen wrote that he suspected that while the Treasury Police were initially conducting a "raid on what they thought to be a terrorist safe house...the operation got of out hand, and the police killed (more precisely executed) a number of innocent bystanders." Going on to state that these killings "differ only in 'scope and notoriety' from other similar incidents committed regularly in El Salvador by the extreme right and left, and (unfortunately) government security forces -- the Treasury Police in particular." He emphasized that whatever should come of any upcoming investigation, "it is likely its effect will make our position on El Salvador more difficult." Allen finishes his memo by warning that "more such incidents are likely to happen again. The damage done will be greater if American citizens are involved, particuularly [sic] newsmen. In short, our effort in El Salvador will succeed or fail first in the United State and not in El Salvador."[31] Allen's response to the Soyapango massacre is characteristic of the Reagan Administration's El Salvador policy; understanding that the Salvadoran government was responsible for, yet denied its culpability in, this massacre, the National Security Advisor's concern was not with the massacre itself, but with the impact it would have on the American public's perception of El Salvador. To lose the American public's support because of incidents like this would be to lose military aid, and losing military aid would mean losing the war.

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[31] Memo, Richard V. Allen to Ronald Reagan, April 16, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol I 1/20/81 - 5/3/81," Box OA30, Executive Secretariat NSC, Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

His lack of concern about the human cost of the massacre is likely because of how routine it was, for as he wrote, killings like this occurred regularly. What stood out was that this particular incident received international news coverage. Especially important is his emphasis that, among American citizens, newsmen's lives should be particularly prioritized. Six days later in a memo to Allen, the National Security Council (NSC) Director of Inter-American Affairs, Roger Fontaine, wrote that the United States' press coverage "of the war, and especially the Soyapango killings, have not endeared them to the security forces. The possible murder of a U.S. newsman (ala Bill Stewart, ABC News in Nicaragua, just before Somoza's overthrow) would be a disaster for our position."[32] The memory of the diplomatic disaster in Nicaragua, where members of the U.S. backed government's National Guard killed an American newsman on live television was chilling to the Reagan Administration. The incident intensified the American public's opposition to U.S. support for Antonio Somoza's regime and was followed shortly by the communist Sandinistas' take over of the government.[33] Deeply concerned that El Salvador could go the way of Nicaragua, the Administration was acutely aware of the importance of not repeating the same mistakes, of keeping stories of massacres quiet, and of paying special attention to protecting American lives.

Allen's closing remark, that the war would be won in the United States before it was won in Central America, came to define the Administration's approach to the Salvadoran Civil War. To win the war, funding had to be secured, and this funding was reliant on the American public not constantly hearing stories of human rights abuses in El Salvador. This incident is noteworthy,

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[32] Memo, Roger Fontaine to Richard V. Allen April 21, 1981, "El Salvador Vol I 1/20/81 - 5/3/81 (4)," Box OA30, Executive Secretariat NSC, Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.
[33] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 25.

not because the government killed its own citizens-- as Allen said, these "incidents [are] committed regularly"-- but because the international news media covered it. Contrary to the public posture that was constantly maintained throughout the certification process, there was little progress in terms of regulating violence by government forces. Throughout certification the Administration had to mitigate the impact of news reports of government forces in uniform directly oppressing the Salvadoran people. While this was difficult in of itself, government forces did not account for a majority of the violence against the civilian population of El Salvador. The most frequent murderers in El Salvador were right wing death squads, often dubbed terrorists, who were responsible for countless incidents of kidnapping, torture, and murder.[34] During his first two years in office, Reagan's Administration repeatedly denied widespread speculation that there was significant involvement of government forces in the death squads. Privately, however, the Administration and the state department clearly understood the close relationship between the two groups.

This knowledge is exemplified in a telegram forwarded to the White House Situation Room from the American Embassy in San Salvador to the Secretary of State in Washington D.C. dated July 21, 1981. The telegram forwards a translated letter shown to the ambassador at a lunch with the Vatican's chief diplomat in El Salvador, the papal nuncio, relating a story told to the nuncio by a priest in a town outside of San Salvador called Chalatenango. The town of Chalatenango was the capital of the highly contested region of Chalatenango; throughout the war highly contested areas were often those that saw the harshest repression by the military. In the letter, the priest informed the papal nuncio that during the week of June 8, 1981, members of the

[34]Equipo Nizkor, Derechos *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 1993), 132. Accessed November 28, 2017. http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html

Salvadoran Army entered a parish house and stole almost all of the furniture. That same week human urine and excrement were found in the church. On June 14 the Ecclesiastical Governor Monsignor Modesto Lopez informed Defense Minister García and current President of the ruling junta, Jose Napoleon Duarte. The following day the two remaining Catechists in the city were told to stay in their house and a note was left outside their house reading "if you leave we are going to kill you," signed by a death squad. On June 24, "the people of Reubicacion were encircled by the military. To the center of the town came a group of armed civilians (supposedly members of the death squadron)." The death squads broke down the church's doors and destroyed the altar, threatening "with death those who continued to attend. That same day they took away two men and murdered them." When the eucharist was celebrated the following week the same "group of civilians returned and took away with them eight men, of whom they murdered seven." As a result the church suspended hosting of the eucharist.[35]

This letter details not merely the military's complicity in death squad violence, but direct involvement in it. Responding to the church's protests against unwarranted crimes and depredations by the members of the army, the army occupied the town while men dressed in civilian clothes– likely members of the army themselves– carried out the actual retributive murders. This incident exemplifies the relationship between the military and death squads, one in which the former enlisted the help of and aided the latter in day-to-day oppression of political dissidents.

Violence against and repression of the church was characteristic of the civil war and a continuation of the oppression of Christian Base Communities that began in the 1960s. As the

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[35] Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., July 21, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (1)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

war began the attacks on the church increased even more. Between January 5, 1980 and February 27, 1981, church institutions and personnel suffered approximately 300 attacks by paramilitary groups.[36]

The notion that the Reagan Administration knew well that the army was deeply involved in death squad activities is reinforced in a July 10, 1981, telegram to Secretary of State Alexander Haig from U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Deane Hinton discussing the overall state of affairs in El Salvador. Hinton described the issue of the dwindling numbers of officers and the problems this might pose. He wrote:

> Shortly the National Guard, the Treasury Police, and the National Police will begin commissioning senior non-coms, good from one standpoint as it should free regular army officers from field duty but most disturbing in another since these fellows have a reputation for brutality. Indeed, a continuing serious problem here-- despite some recent progress-- is officially tolerated, if not sponsored rightist terrorism and violence.[37]

Given that the Administration was already receiving stories from El Salvador detailing massive human rights abuses, the prospect of especially brutal non-commissioned soldiers being given leading officer positions was certainly not an indication that the human rights situation saw any chances of improving. Furthermore, Ambassador Hinton linked this issue of especially brutal soldiers to right wing terrorism, or death squads. This connection between the death squads and actual members of the military was to be publicly avoided at all cost, especially in certification, even if the Administration was totally conscious of its existence.

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[36] Margaret E. Crahan "A Multitude of Voices: Religion and the Central American Crisis," in *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and U.S. Policy in the 1980s*, ed. Nora Hamilton, Jeffry A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, Manuel Pastor Jr., (Boulder, Westview Press, 1988), 232.

[37] Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., June 10, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

The issue of ensuring continued military funding for El Salvador was paramount in the minds of Reagan's NSC staff. For them, the stakes could not have been higher. In a September 12, 1981, memorandum for National Security Advisor Richard Allen, staffers Roger Fontaine and Robert Schweitzer wrote that a loss in El Salvador would, "open up nearly unlimited opportunities for the Cubans and the Soviets -- at little cost to them -- in Mexico and Panama -- and from there northern South America." In addition it would cut off connection to oil rich Guatemala and "undermine this country's credibility in the future." This was especially troublesome, as the two believed:

> at present levels of effort, it is unlikely the Salvadorean [sic] government can remain out of the hands of the insurgents ... Moreover the situation in El Salvador will be made even worse as forces in this country-- particularly in Congress-- render the present, inadequate levels of assistance impossible to sustain much beyond 1982.[38]

The present fear that the repressive Salvadoran Junta would cause Congress to cut off military aid was echoed in an August 1981 letter from Secretary Haig to the President, writing that "we may not be able to hold the Congress for more than a year if massacre stories continue to be frequent."[39] Not having congressional support, and with it, funding, would be disastrous. As Fontaine and Schweitzer wrote, in order to turn the tide of the war, "military aid, especially additional helicopters (at least ten) must be delivered promptly."[40]

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[38] Memo, Roger W. Fontaine and Robert L. Schweitzer to Richard V. Allen, September 12, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (3)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[39] Memo, Alexander M. Haig Jr. to Ronald Reagan, August 11, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (4)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[40] Memo, Roger W. Fontaine and Robert L. Schweitzer to Richard V. Allen, September 12, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (3)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

Helicopters provided a significant tactical advantage for the Salvadoran Army over the significantly less sophisticatedly armed FMLN. However, the army did not exclusively use this advanced weaponry on the guerrillas. On March 17, 1981, a Salvadoran Army gunship helicopter, along with a group of Salvadoran soldiers, opened fire on a group of displaced Salvadoran peasants attempting to flee the violence in their country as they crossed the Rio Lempa into Honduras. American missionaries watched as the helicopter and soldiers, "rained the area with rockets, automatic weapons fire and grenades." A June *New York Times* article claimed that the attack left 20 dead and 189 missing.[41] A telegram from the American Embassy to the Secretary of State written in late November of 1981 described the incident and its potential fallout in light of an upcoming meeting with the Salvadoran Minister of Defense Jose Garcia. The embassy claimed that American officials were witnesses to the massacre, which is particularly disturbing as it begs the question of what American officials were doing there. It would not make sense for them to be aiding the Salvadoran refugees in their flight out of the country, which logically only leaves them alongside the army as they opened fire on their own people.

Also disturbing are the talking points suggested by the Embassy in light of this and other similar incidents. The first of which blames the "international communist propaganda effort" that "has accused the armed forces several times during its operations," writing that the embassy is "attempting to counter that propaganda."[42] While on one hand the embassy was given full details of the massacre and treated them as facts, they go on to claim that any reporting of this is

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[41] Warren Hoge, "Slaughter in Salvador: 200 Lost in Border Massacre" *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 08, 1981.

[42] Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., November, 23, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (1)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

communist propaganda that needs to be countered. The telegram further warns of the erosion of U.S. and congressional support. Clearly, the issue at hand was not the deaths of hundreds of Salvadoran citizens at the hands of their own government using sophisticated American weaponry, but the impact that it might have on America's ability to continue to give the Salvadoran military this same weaponry. Secretary of State Haig responded to the embassy, writing that a "disturbing aspect [of] the helicopter incident is the implication that GOES armed forces have operational free fire zones." The secretary's concern, however, was not that free fire zones would allow for the wholesale slaughter of non-combatants, rather Haig wrote, "Free fire zones would imply that the GOES recognizes the guerrillas totally occupy and control certain areas in El Salvador." [43]What Haig found disturbing was not the deaths of this mass of civilians, but rather that the guerrillas' had begun to occupy vast swaths of territory, posing a large political problem as the United States' position was based in the idea that the guerrillas had no legitimate base of power. This prioritization of political interests over the lives and wellbeing of the Salvadoran population was characteristic of the Reagan Administration's reaction to human rights abuses.

In the meeting with Minister of Defense García, United States Deputy Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci discussed the implications of continued security force excesses. A telegram to the Embassy in San Salvador from the U.S. State Department stated, "Secretary Carlucci followed up on this point by saying that the Reagan Administration desired to continue to provide as much assistance to El Salvador as possible but as Garcia could now understand, congressional support is essential. U.S. public and congressional opinion has been negatively

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[43] Cable, American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., November, 23, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/81 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library. (Though this and the cable cited above have the same citation, they are different cables.)

influenced by accounts of excesses committed by the security forces."[44] The Reagan Administration was not concerned with the excesses themselves, for they wanted to give as much military aid to El Salvador as possible, irrespective of whether this aid was being used against the Salvadoran people; the crux of the issue was that Congress, with a Democratic majority in the House, and the American people took offense to supporting a regime responsible for such heinous atrocities. Most disturbing in this distinction is that it was made to the man in charge of the entire Salvadoran Army, tacitly condoning his actions by saying that they are only reprehensible to the extent that they impact Congress.

The Administration's constant refrain that progress was being made on human rights suffered a significant blow just two days before certification was due when the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* ran stories detailing a massacre of over 900 peasants. According to the Catholic Church, on December, 11, 1981, the Salvadoran Army's American-trained special forces Atlacatl Battalion, carrying American M-16 rifles, killed 926 people in the village El Mozote within the highly contested Morazán province. After capturing capturing the village in the early morning the army interrogated, tortured, and executed the men. By midday they began taking out the women in groups, separating them from their children and machine-gunning them.[45] Finally, they killed the children; over half of the dead found in mass graves were children under fourteen years old.[46] As the State Department dismissed initials reports of the massacre as

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[44] Cable American Embassy San Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., November 23, 1981, folder "El Salvador Vol II 6/1/81 - 12/31/8 (2)," Box 30 Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[45] Equipo Nizkor, Derechos *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 1993), 132. Accessed November 28, 2017. http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html

[46] Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Human Rights and Global Implications,* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2016,) 149.

not credible, the FMLN invited reporters and photographs from the *Times* and *Post* at the beginning of January 1982.

On January 27, 1982, the day before Reagan's certification was due, both newspapers published front page stories of the heinous massacre at the hands of the American-trained fighting forces. The Reagan Administration denied the reports as propaganda. While Under-Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders conceded that civilians died, he significantly diminished severity of the incident, arguing that "no evidence could be found to confirm that Government forces systematically massacred civilians. Nor does the number of civilians killed even remotely approach the number being cited in other reports about the incident."[47] While the timing of these stories was on the one hand incredibly embarrassing to the Administration, it also left them with the convenient excuse that the stories "could not be substantiated by any official (U.S. government) source on such short notice."[48] They passed off the reports as "impossible to prove" and two days later certified to Congress that the Salvadoran government was "making a 'concerted' effort to protect human rights [and] had achieved 'substantial control' over its security forces."[49]

Unfortunately for the Democrats in the House and those American people who did not support the United States' position in El Salvador, a large number of whom were beginning to organize protests across the country at this point, the foreign aid authorization bill did not allow Congress to vote to veto the President's certification that progress had been made on human

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[47] Barbara Crossette, "U.S. Disputes Report of 926 Killed in El Salvador," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 02, 1982.

[48] Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Human Rights and Global Implications,* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2016,) 60.

[49] Milt Freudenheim "The World in Summary; Seal of Approval for El Salvador" *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan 31, 1982.

rights. So when Reagan submitted his first certification on January 28th of 1982, he refused to acknowledge any government complicity in human rights violations, instead blaming the guerrillas for "creating the 'chaos' that prevented the government from ending abuses."[50] His report was shockingly short and unsubstantiated, stating that the body count in the war was down. His claim that there was a decreased death toll relied upon the embassy's report on political killings, or "grim-gram," which was assembled from Salvadoran media reports. The embassy's admission that these reports only accounted for "a tiny portion" of the killings because the newspapers "only report deaths in areas where they momentarily have correspondents," was not included in the certification report. Where the embassy only found 5,300 killings in 1981, the Catholic church recorded 13,000 and also contradicting the embassy, found that government forces and paramilitary death squads were by far responsible for a majority of the killings. Both Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union immediately took public stands against the certification.[51] But nothing could be done. Congress did not have any legislative veto power and El Salvador continued to receive American military aid. While the President successfully passed through certification with blatant mistruths, there was a realization within the Administration that this was not a sustainable practice and the specter of future certification required strategic change in mitigating the damage of human rights abuses on policy toward El Salvador.

Hunker Down and Take it on the Chin

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[50]Memo, Ronald Reagan to Alexander M. Haig, Jr., January 28, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (4)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[51]William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 153-54.

The State Department and Minister of Defense García

Moving forward into 1982, the Administration adopted a new strategy in approaching certification. Given the options of making substantial changes in the Salvadoran military structure or suffering through continued abuses while controlling other aspects of policy to ensure a continuation of funding, Reagan's Administration opted for the latter. 1982 saw the Administration seek mitigate the damage of repeated repression by the Salvadoran government by limiting American news media access to certain areas of the country instead of through instituting military reforms. In certification, the Administration used the 1982 election and proposed reforms by the new government to distract Congress from the present issue that substantive change had not been made in stopping the Salvadoran security forces and death squads from killing Salvadoran people.

The problem that human rights abuses posed to U.S. policy in El Salvador and potential solutions to this problem are outlined in a February 2, 1982, cable to the Secretary of State from the Embassy in San Salvador. The embassy wrote that the chances of "pushing through supplementary help for the Salvadoran economy and military" were dwindling as American policy makers are "hostage to malevolent forces seemingly beyond our control." The ambassador offered two potential solutions to the deteriorating situation in El Salvador, "hunker down and take it on [the] chin or try harder to get matters under control." The ambassador recommended that he be authorized to discuss the possibility of replacing Minister of Defense García, whom he "no longer [trusted] or [believed]," along with a handful of top military commanders who had

recently failed strategically.[52] Secretary of State Haig concurred, writing that "public and congressional reaction to these latest horror stories threatens to disable our current policy" and agreeing with the options of changing the situation on the ground or hunkering down and "[taking] it on the chin."[53] The Secretary of State was somewhat about replacing García and other commanders, questioning who a replacement could be and how these changes might affect morale.

Replacing García was a necessary step in improving the human rights situation. A stalwart of the traditional Salvadoran military elite, García was incredibly divisive in Salvadoran politics. When moderates within the October Junta pushed for his replacement as Minister of Defense in December 1981 the military refused, causing the Junta to split; the January Junta that succeeded it was pushed considerably further to the right.[54] The ambassador's lack of trust in García was well founded. When told to prepare for questioning on the El Mozote massacre in his upcoming visit to the United States, the Ambassador wrote to the Secretary of State again on February 2nd. He reported that García "was his usual cocky self" saying " 'I'll deny it and prove it fabricated.' " The Ambassador wished him well in this endeavor, adding that "he would have to explain away details provided be correspondents." The telegram is revealing of the American policy of hunkering down. Understanding all too well that the massacre had happened and caused a severely negative impact on the American public and also that García was going to act

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[52]Cable, American Embassy El Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., February, 2, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[53]Cable, Secretary of State Washington D.C. to American Embassy El Salvador, February, 2, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[54]William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 42.

of his own accord and deny it, the ambassador supported García to the extent that he understood he had no other option. Ambassador Hinton went on to write that in his discussion with García he told the Defense Minister that the "latest attack on the Jesuits was totally irresponsible... the Jesuits were cleaning house...were under new orders and commanders, including the local bishop...attackers had to discriminate not condemn all."[55] Even when attempting to rebuke an attack on the clergy by the armed forces, Hinton did not fully condemn the attacking of the church, simply asking that García urge his forces to make distinctions as to which members of the church to repress. Having already been told that the Reagan Administration was not particularly concerned with abuses so long as they did not affect Congressional approval, García would have no reason to believe his handlers in the White House placed much importance on human rights at all.

The extent to which the Reagan Administration understood García's willingness to circumvent rules of engagement is revealed in a telegram from the embassy to the Secretary of State dated the 14th of February, 1982. The memo describes a series of retributive actions in response to the FMLN's kidnapping of Salvadoran Army Colonel Alvarado. According to the telegram, Colonel Alvarado, Defense Minister General García, and Treasury Police Director Moran were all natives of the same city, San Vicente, and were all in the same graduating class from the Salvadoran military school. In a conversation with the ambassador, Minister García referred to the kidnapping of Alvarado and similar attacks as "dangerous tactics." Immediately following Alvarado's kidnapping, armed men, in the presence of uniformed National Police

[55]Cable, American Embassy El Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., February, 2, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

Guards, kidnapped Rafael Antonio Mata– a man connected to the political left wing– in front of his workplace. According to the telegram, when Mata's supervisor asked his friend in the Treasury Ministry for aid in finding Mata, security force officers responded, "the only one who knows whether or not we have Mata is General García."[56]

The next two weeks saw an additional five kidnappings and bombings that the embassy understood as "almost certainly armed forces actions," writing that, "kidnappings in broad daylight in the presence of uniformed soldiers, repeated use of same vehicles, and bombings are consistent with opportunities most easily available to the armed forces." The embassy believed that "the close ties of high level military commanders to the San Vicente kidnappings supported the theory that revenge was the motive for the kidnapings [sic] and the bombing."[57]

It is clear from the embassy's analysis that they believed Minister of Defense García to be not only knowledgeable of, but in all likelihood the impetus behind this retributive bombing and series of kidnappings. Still, only a few weeks later, in a March telegram to the Secretary of State, Ambassador Hinton wrote that, "[García] had come to understand the external dimension of El Salvador's problems. He knew, as I knew that world public opinion and congressional support were important."[58] The issue at hand was not human rights abuses themselves but instead the impact that these abuses would have on the global audience. So long as the international news media did not pick up on a story, and there was no reporting of the kidnapping of Colonel Alvarado or any of the retributive actions that succeeded it, it was not an issue in the minds of

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[56]Cable, American Embassy El Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., February, 16, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Cable, American Embassy El Salvador to Secretary of State Washington D.C., March, 29, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

American policy makers. With this in mind, the Reagan Administration decided in favor of "hunkering down and taking it on the chin" and García was not replaced until early 1983.[59]

As the Administration braced themselves for the blows that they might have to take there was pervasive concern that the war was going in the wrong direction. The guerillas struck a decisive victory with a surprise attack on Ilopango Air Force base in early 1982, destroying a majority of the Salvadoran Air Force.[60] In addition, initial intelligence reporting that the war would be easily won was being disproven. In a February 25th memorandum to National Security Advisor William P. Clark, Director of Inter-American Affairs Roger Fontaine wrote that:

> the guerillas are more numerous, better armed, and backed by more sophisticated infrastructure than we thought before. At the same time, the Government of El Salvador continues to be its worst enemy and demonstrates that it cannot come to grips with the excesses of its security forces...The deterioration of the war in El Salvador puts the President in a potentially vulnerable position and jeopardizes all of Central America."[61]

The guerillas progress territorial and strategic progress, exemplified by their destruction of the Salvadoran Air Force, meant that there was a heightened necessity for American funding. Fontaine's memo described a need for an additional 5-7,000 troops above the current 20,000 in the Salvadoran security forces along with more intelligence and special forces.[62] Still, the prevailing problem loomed over the Administration's head; the Salvadoran military was not making progress in reducing its "excesses," and the United States public was becoming more and more familiar with this. In order to win the war the Administration needed to find a solution.

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[59] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 183.
[60] Ibid., 150.
[61] Memo, Roger Fontaine and Chris Shoemaker to William P. Clark, February, 25, 1982, folder "El Salvador (01/29/1982 - 03/01/1982) [Too Late to File]," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.
[62] Ibid.

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

As regulating the security forces proved to be less and less successful, a new idea emerged within the Administration; if security force excesses could not be stopped, American media reports of excesses could. On March 3, 1982, National Security Council staff member Carnes Lord wrote a Memorandum for National Security Advisor William P. Clark:

> In response to Bud McFarlane's request to think about ways of limiting access for American television reporters to El Salvador, I would simply suggest that we ask State to ask our embassy in San Salvador to raise the matter quietly with the Duarte government at an appropriate level. The predictable outcry of the networks and others could be somewhat dampened by proper handling by the Salvadorans. They should, for example, make as clear as possible that television coverage is welcome so long as it respects specific rules of engagement (e.g., restriction to San Salvador), and that restrictions on television coverage are unique to the medium and do not apply to coverage by the writing press.[63]

Clearly, the Reagan Administration did not want to appear as though they were attempting to restrict news reporters' access to El Salvador, for to do so would imply that the Administration had something to hide. Still, it was incredibly important that the administration limit the access of reporters, particularly television cameras, keeping them away from areas where they might come across the examples of repression that the White House so desperately wanted to avoid. It is logical that they would try to limit coverage to San Salvador, where there was solid loyalty to the government and thus was relatively without incident.

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[63]Memo, Carnes Lord to William P. Clark, March, 2, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

The concept of restricting news coverage in El Salvador so appealed to Clark that later that day he wrote to Secretary of State Haig. Clark's memo is as follows:

> In view of the concerns expressed by many over a repetition of our Vietnam experience through exposure of the American people to a relentless barrage of graphic war footage by our television networks, I believe it would be in the national interest for the Duarte government to institute restrictions on the access of television reporters to areas of guerilla activity within El Salvador. If you agree, Embassy San Salvador could be instructed to broach the matter quietly at an appropriate level.[64]

There are a few levels to this memo worth considering. First, he posits that it would be in the "national interest" to limit the American people's exposure to graphic war footage, so as to not replicate the PR nightmare that was television coverage in Vietnam. His point is that it is ultimately in the interest of the American people to not be exposed to the war that they are funding, for if they are, they may not end up supporting it. Clark's suggestion to keeping the news out of areas of guerilla activity is particularly noteworthy because areas of guerilla activity were those that were subjected to the most violent repression. It was common army practice, after having swept a village clear of armed combatants, to kill the civilians who were left behind. The El Mozote massacre, reported on just two months before, is a noteworthy example of this. The murders of churchgoers at Chalatenango and helicopter massacre of refugees at Rio Lempa are also examples of large scale atrocities committed in guerilla controlled zones. Clark goes on to reinforce the suggestion made in the previous memo to keep this censorship quiet and instruct the Salvadoran government to carry it out.

Early 1982 did see a major victory human rights victory for the Reagan Administration. On March 28, 1982 Constitutional Assembly elections were held in El Salvador. The election

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[64]Memo, William P. Clark to Alexander M. Haig Jr., March 2, 1982, folder "El Salvador Vol III 1/1/82 - 12/31/82 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

was a major success for the Administration. Fears that the guerrillas would disrupt the elections and delegitimize the Salvadoran government were quelled as 68% of eligible voters cast their ballots. Reagan was able to boast that the country whose government he supported held free elections; nevermind the fact that the Christian Democratic Party, who won a plurality of the seats, received $2 million from the CIA.[65]

In order to select a President, the Constitution of El Salvador held that the armed forces would nominate three candidates, with the new assembly deciding which would become President. Fearful of the violent right wing nature of the military and not looking to empower the ARENA party, with its leadership well known for their connection to death squads, Ambassador Hinton presented the Salvadoran military with nine candidates to nominate for president. The army was convinced that military aid was endangered and thus ordered the politicians to military headquarters where they ordered them to choose a president. A politician present described the situation as, "They said, 'Here are three names. Pick one.' " William Leogrande writes, "the officers made their preference clear, Alvaro Magaña, an apolitical mortgage banker with close ties to the armed forces."[66] On April 29, 1982 the newly elected assembly elected Álvaro Magaña to be the first President of El Salvador since the revolutionary Junta.

While the "free" Salvadoran elections ultimately led to a reaffirmation of the military's political control of the country, they were a PR success. The press did not know about the substantial effort that the CIA put into ensuring a Christian Democrat victory or the backdoor dealings and collusion between the army and politicians to elect Magaña as president. Moving

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[65] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 160.
[66] Ibid., 165.

forward, the Reagan Administration had scored a substantial victory in the battle for domestic support for the United States' role in El Salvador and achieved one of its certification criteria.[67]

Still, the specter of certification in July loomed. Within the Administration, frustration against the process was growing. As the certification hearings approached the country's foremost authority on human rights, the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Elliot Abrams cabled, "the certification process is ridiculous, a product of Congress's refusal to make decisions or to let the President make them… The debate over El Salvador is conducted entirely in terms suggested and then defined by the Left… We bear much of the blame for continuing to suffer this condition."[68]

Understanding that elections aside, very little progress had been made in terms of the oppression of the Salvadoran people and that the last six months had been full of publicized human rights abuses, both by the security forces and right wing death squads, the Administration turned to the newly elected President for assistance in preparation for the upcoming hearings. In a May 1982 cable from Secretary of State Haig to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, the country's leading diplomat wrote:

> You should engage Magaña and appropriate members, as well as the Constituent Assembly leadership, in a discussion of our general policy concerns. You should indicate that we need by the end of June, a program of concrete *proposed* GOES actions which we could use in defending certification and maintenance of requested...assistance.[69]

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[67] Ibid., 173.
[68] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 101.
[69] Ibid.

Understanding that the progress, or lack thereof, achieved in the past six months was not enough to satiate Congressional appetite for change in El Salvador, Haig instead elected to satisfy the legislative body with plans for improvement in the near future.

When certification rolled around on July 27, 1982, The Reagan Administration pointed to "tangible signs of progress" that justified the United States' continued support of El Salvador. Among these tangible signs was the transferring of military and intelligence duties from the National Guard and Treasury Police, known for their brutality, to the army and with it the formation of a truly civilian police force. Sticking with the strategy of using proposed actions to defend certification, this transfer of intelligence duties away from the violent sectors of the security forces was not actually completed until 1992.[70]

Unlike the first certification that denied all security force involvement in human rights abuses, the Reagan Administration realized that given all of the media coverage surrounding El Salvador they would have to approach the second certification with more candor. In striking contrast to the first report that was only seven pages long, the report attached to the second certification was fifty pages long and admitted that, "human rights violations and terrorism continue to be a major problem." Still, the report claimed that there were fewer deaths by political violence.[71] If one accepts the first certification as fact, this would prove contradictory as the first report purported that security forces were not responsible for any violations. That aside, the claim that there was progress was in of itself somewhat faulty.

To begin with, it still relied upon the State Department's "grim-gram" that counted deaths using local news reports. As was true during the first certification report, this metric was

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[70]Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 102.
[71] Ibid., 102.

inaccurate as it failed to take into account areas of guerilla activity. These areas, that the Administration wanted to keep the media away from, were responsible for the majority of human rights violations committed by the army. The Administration claimed that their measurements relied on "the Salvadoran press and...virtually every other Salvadoran source" but happened to ignore the Catholic Church and Human Rights Commission– two leading authorities on human rights abuses in El Salvador who counted the death toll as substantially higher than the Administration.[72]

Even if one accepts the embassy's "grim gram" as a valid data source for counting civilian deaths, the report was misleading in its portrayal of the "grim gram's" statistics. The report claimed that the first six months of 1982 saw fewer deaths than the first six months of 1981, failing to mention that the first six months of 1982 saw more killings than the preceding six months.[73]

As was expected, the certification focused on the success of the election, heralding it as a great victory. The certification report emphasized that the election was "the best guarantee" of human rights because it allowed the people to voice their own opinion, and "evidence that the military was being brought under control," ignoring that the military handpicked the new president.[74]

In spite of vocal opposition from Congressional Democrats, the certification passed through. Congressional Democrats faced a poverty of options; they could either allow the certification to pass through and accept statements from the administration that they knew to be

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[72] Bernard Weinraub, "Salvador Situation 'Bad' But Improving: [Interview]" *New York Times* (New York, NY), July 25, 1982.
[73] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 171.
[74] Ibid., 173.

lies, or they could cut the Salvadoran budget dramatically. If aid were cut the government's failure was almost assured, leaving either the Marxist guerrillas, or the right wing death squads to fill the vacuum. Knowing that they would face blame no matter which side emerged from a governmental collapse, Congressional Democrats were unwilling to take a political risk in withholding funding, and were thus powerless in the certification negotiations.

Just before certification, President Reagan replaced Secretary of State Haig, largely because of an internal dispute over support for Israel's invasion of Lebanon, with an economist who had served as Secretary of Labor under Nixon, George Shultz. Inheriting a world of diplomatic conflicts, Shultz was not particularly focused on Central America. The Central American transition report prepared for him argued that current policies were leaning in the United States' favor. The only serious obstacle was Congressional focus on "human rights concerns" and fear of a repetition of Vietnam, as the policy could be derailed if funding was cut.[75]

Ambassador Hinton and Public Diplomacy

After certification passed, Shultz's State Department turned its attention to working with the newly elected Salvadoran government to find a way to include the left in the political process. In September, President Magaña created a peace commission, opening talks with the FDR-FMLN in an attempt to negotiate a peace and include them in the upcoming elections.[76] While Ambassador Hinton publicly praised the progress and hope that the left might participate in the 1984 election, the right wing was livid. Roberto D'Aubuisson, a former army Major and

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[75] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 174-76.
[76] Ibid., 177.

leader of the right wing party ARENA, called the peace talks "the most vile treason and an unqualifiably absurd policy." [77]

The right wing response was not only verbal. William Leogrande writes, "as rumors of negotiations increased, so did the ghoulish activities of the death squads." The country was plagued by a string of murders, mutilations, disembowelments and beheadings, culminating in a two day period in October in which seventeen left wing labor leaders and politicians were kidnapped. Every major leftist leader still left in the country was swept up in the raid. The right was making it clear that the war was not going to end by negotiating with the left any time soon. [78]

While Ambassador Hinton proclaimed that "this is not what the government wants to have happen," two days later the armed forces revealed that they were holding eight of the kidnapped politicians for "conspiracy against state security." The rest of the leftist leadership was never heard from again.[79]

The string of violence was incredibly polarizing. For the left it reinforced the notion that the possibility of peaceful dialogue was a farce and any momentary trust of the armed forces would lead to their death. On the other hand, the right wing consolidated their position against peace within the government, and President Magaña, given the presidency because of his selection by the armed forces, rejected the FDR-FMLN's peace proposal, closing the door to peace talks.[80] The termination of peace talks at the hands of right wing political violence demonstrated that while the moderate Christian-Democrats were theoretically in control of the

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[77] Ibid., 178.
[78] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 178.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

political system, the far-right wing could still use violence to control governmental action. Not only was the political violence a major blow toward a negotiated solution to the war in El Salvador, the string of killings flew in the face of the notion that there was progress being made in human rights in El Salvador.

In late October Ambassador Hinton struck back in a speech to the right-wing ruling elite as they gathered in a meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce in El Salvador. Hinton approached the problem of persistent human rights abuses getting in the way of legitimate political solutions to the unrest in El Salvador in a very honest way. He attacked the right wing for leaving the issues that plagued the Salvadoran people "in eloquent silence" saying that "as many as 30,000 people have been MURDERED, not killed in battle, MURDERED [emphasis in the original]."[81] Hinton referred to the right wing as a mafia, rebuking them, saying, "the 'Mafia' must be stopped. Your survival depends upon it. The gorillas of this Mafia, every bit as much as the guerrillas of Morazán and Chalatenango, are destroying El Salvador"[82] Hinton finished his speech by saying that unless El Salvador made human rights progress American financial support would be cut off irrespective of strategic concern about a communist takeover.

Not surprisingly, the Salvadoran right wing did not take this reprimanding well and the Chamber of Commerce denounced the speech that called for a greater concern for the lives of the Salvadoran people as "a slap in the wounded and bloodied face of our country." Tellingly, the Reagan Administration also rebuked Hinton for his the direct manner by which he addressed the Salvadoran oligarchy. Hinton had cleared his speech by the State Department but never

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[81] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 104.
[82] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 179.

presented it to the White House and Reagan was angry. William Leogrande writes that "The White House was especially unhappy about Hinton's explicit threat to withhold military aid unless the human rights situation improved. Never mind that the certification law *required* such conditionality." Hinton was reprimanded and told to not publicly criticize human rights abuses. National Security Advisor William Clark, particularly taken aback by the speech that he considered "leftist propaganda" leaked word of this reprimand to the press.[83]

Speaking to the *New York Times,* an Administration official, speculated by Leogrande to be Clark, described a concern with Hinton because, "the Reagan Administration wanted to avoid 'going public,' especially while pressing for human rights and an end to rightist terrorism." He continues to say that while just as concerned as any previous administration about human rights, the Reagan Administration "learned in prior administrations that high public rhetoric frequently was counterproductive." Equating the Reagan Administration's concern for human rights to that of previous Administration's is laughable when one considers that immediately upon taking office Reagan removed all human rights based restrictions on military aid to right-wing regimes and only made reports on human rights concerns under congressional mandate. While the Administration official certainly took issue with the public nature of Hinton's scolding of the Salvadoran elite, it was not for the reasons he gave. The issue with publicly highlighting the lack of progress in regulating the death squads was not that it would be ineffective in causing human rights reform, but rather that it revealed a major policy fallacy. While the Administration had to certify to Congress that El Salvador's record on human rights was improving in a matter of months, its chief Diplomat in the nation was complaining of a lack of progress.

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[83] Ibid.

Seeking to soften its impact, when the State Department released a copy of Hinton's speech to Washington D.C. politicians they removed his words that 30,000 Salvadorans had been "murdered, not killed in battle, murdered!" substituting the phrase, "Since 1979 perhaps as many as 30,000 Salvadorans have been killed illegally, that is, not in battle."[84] Furthermore, in the same interview where Reagan condemned the kidnappings, he went on to explain that he was still planning to certify that progress had been made on human rights, nevermind that certification was not due for another three months.[85] Initially frustrated by Hinton's condemnation, the Salvadoran right wing was reassured by the White House's position and this served to undermine Hinton's authority in threatening the Salvadoran military. Clearly, the political position of supporting the Salvadoran government was more important than any concern for the country's people, as the Reagan Administration admonished the first diplomat to truly address the source of the country's violence, stripping him of any power to enforce the theoretical policy of supporting human rights.

At the same time things were changing in El Salvador. The rebels launched a successful fall offensive, capturing a few towns. Initially the Army attempted to recapture these towns in the countryside, but faced heavy rebel resistance. After taking heavy casualties, Minister of Defense García followed his American advisor's guidance and elected to not attempt to recapture these countryside towns, focusing forces on the more strategically valuable cities.

While this may have been a strategically sound decision, it came at a political price. Right wing officers, allied to Roberto D'Aubuisson and the ARENA party, claimed it was a

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[84] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 104.
[85] Bernard Weinraub, "U.S. Sends Official to Warn Salvador on Rights Abuses: Aid Cutoff is Threatened" *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 27, 1982.

demonstration of weakness and demanded a counter-offensive. García succumbed and launched an all-out offensive but failed to claim any strategic victories. When the notoriously brutal right wing Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa Pérez declared a mutiny against García, Washington D.C. refused to take a side. While García had proved valuable before, at this point his military failures outweighed his leadership value. The mutiny ended when Ochoa Pérez took a diplomatic post in the United States on the condition that García resigned, which he did thirty days later.[86]

García's replacement was Colonel Vides Casanova, a man with both ties to García's friends in the military and to D'Aubuisson's in the security forces. Publicly the American Embassy praised him as a moderate who cleaned up the National Guard, ignoring the fact that his time leading the National Guard saw his soldiers rape and kill a group of American churchwomen as well as kill a group of American labor advisors and innumerable Salvadorans. Contrary to press releases that characterized Casanova as a reformer, the Embassy privately referred to Casanova as a political shift to the right.[87]

As the Salvadoran military resolved its internal turmoil the FMLN went on the offensive. By January of 1983 they captured Bérlin, a city with a population of over 40,000, their largest victory of the war. This victory combined with the dissent within the military command was incredibly concerning for Washington D.C., who saw the war slipping out of their grasp.[88]

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[86] William Leogrande, In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992 (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 182.
[87] William Leogrande, In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992 (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 184.
[88] Ibid.

In 1982, as the rebels progressed, Washington saw major infighting as the State Department failed to achieve policy goals set by the President. There were two main causes. The first was an ideological disagreement of how to defeat the guerrillas. In December 1982, Under Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders drafted a "two-track" proposal that suggested combining negotiations with the FMLN while increasing, or at least sustaining aid levels. The policy was incredibly unpopular with many members of the Administration, including the Ambassador to the UN, the Undersecretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, Director of the CIA, and President Reagan himself, all of whom were vehemently opposed to any negotiation with communists.

Enders' "two-track" policy was even more of a failure because the Administration failed to secure additional funding for 1983 when Congress froze funding at 1982 levels through failing to pass a new foreign aid authorization bill and instead passing a continuing resolution that significantly reduced the Administration's military aid request.[89] As the Administration approached the war in El Salvador as a conflict that simply needed to be fed money and waited out, failure to increase the defense budget was incredibly dangerous as the guerillas gained ground. Opposition within the Administration anonymously leaked Ender's policy to the press and publicly criticized the strategy once it had been publicized.[90]

Enders' diplomatic failures would come be incredibly impactful in the coming year, but for the time being the Administration had to get through the bi-annual circus that was the certification process. By this third round of certification hearings the process had become

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[89] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 117.
[90] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 192.

relatively routine as both sides tended to present the same type of evidence. Congressional liberals would bring witnesses who testified to outrageous human rights abuses, the Administration and state department would dispute these claims and present statistics suggesting political violence in the country was down, and the liberals would turn around and question the evidence behind the Administration's numbers.[91] The Administration had become very talented at picking and choosing the statistics they presented, still arguing that in spite of some widely publicized shortcomings, progress was being made and the Salvadoran government needed support. The process had the same issues it had always had, Democrats had no option to limit funding without cutting it entirely, and to do so was too politically dangerous. Certification passed as it had twice before, to congressional acquiescence.

The White House Takes Charge

Frustrated with the State Department for not achieving the funding deemed requisite to continue the war in El Salvador, 1983 saw the White House take a much larger role in directing American policy in Central America. This reorientation manifested itself in two ways. First, National Security Advisor William Clark and Ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick were given control over policy in El Salvador while Undersecretary of State for InterAmerican Affairs Enders and Ambassador to El Salvador Hinton were relieved of their positions; while Enders and Hinton were not fired until April, in the beginning of 1983 their State Department

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[91] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 119.

lost control of policy in favor of Clark's National Security Council.[92] In addition to giving people who were more directly under his purview more control of policy, President Reagan took a much larger role in public affairs with Congress and the nation as a whole. As Reagan took control, he diverted focus away from particulars of the conflict in El Salvador, like the imbalanced socio-economic conditions and frequent atrocities, and onto the pretense that the Salvadoran Civil War represented Soviet expansionism into the Western Hemisphere.

While the war in El Salvador continued to escalate, the Reagan Administration lacked the requisite funding to support it and the Salvadoran army was running low on supplies.[93] With the foreign aid budget having already been set, the Reagan Administration had two options through which it could funnel additional money to El Salvador: emergency funding or reprogramming. Neither was ideal. In order to reprogram money the Administration would both have to reallocate money from other approved money sources and have this approved by congressional committee. On the other hand, Reagan feared significant backlash from the growing bipartisan opposition to his policy in Central America that had been responsible for the diminished funding for 1983. Circumventing congress to use emergency funding as he had in 1981 was deemed too politically risky so the administration elected to reprogram funding, seeking $60 million in emergency aid and $50 million in supplemental appropriation.[94]

In order to have his reprogramming requests approved, Reagan had to have them pass through the Senate's Foreign Operations and Foreign Relations committees and the House's Foreign Operations Subcommittee, none of which were immediately in favor of Reagan's large

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[92] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 201.
[93] Ibid., 190.
[94] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 202.

$60 million request. To do so, Reagan took a much more active role in Central American affairs in general, making speeches on the topic for the first time in his presidency.

A New Handle

Reagan's goal was to change the discourse surrounding debate over the United States' role in El Salvador from an emphasis on human rights abuses to the United States' national security. This strategy was suggested in a March 7th letter from the Director of the Bureau of Public Information, Charles Wick, to President Reagan's new number one on Central America, National Security Advisor William Clark. The letter was so impactful for future policy that I am attaching it in whole:

> I would like to share with you some thoughts I had while watching this morning news show this past Sunday, March 6. "David Brinkley" featured Ambassador Hinton and Senators [Christopher Dodd and [Henry] Jackson. Jeane Kirkpatrick was a guest on "Meet the Press."
>
> In watching these programs, it occurred to me that we are overlooking a terribly simple "handle" that hopefully a majority of Americans, as well as others, could understand thoroughly. This "handle" could take us out of the debate as to whether the El Salvadoran Government is a worse violator of human rights than the guerillas.
>
> This debate, many times with some meritorious arguments against us, in my view could become totally irrelevant for the majority of people whom we seek to influence with a correct perspective on the facts as they are, and the threat as it is.
>
> The handle I am talking about is this:
>
> The simple facts are that the El Salvadoran Government is not-- repeat, is not-- seeking to destabilize other governments and other countries in Central America. Thus it poses no threat to the United States, and therefore, no domino theory, whether it is believed to be valid or not, can have incipience.
>
> The guerillas, however, <u>do</u> seek to destabilize not only El Salvador, but the various Central American countries around it. The El Salvadoran government gets no help from the Soviets, from Cuba, from Nicaragua or other elements that are opposed to the free world and democratic institutions. By contrast, the guerillas are supported by external forces of totalitarian regimes that are pouring in materiel and resources to spearhead the destruction of the El Salvadoran

> government and the further destabilization of governments in the Central American underbelly of the United States.
>
> In my view, the above should be hammered home again and again. Americans and other nationalities have always narrowed very sharply their perspective and interpretation of human rights coextensive with a perceived threat to themselves, their families, and their country. An extreme example of this was the human rights repression experienced by the internment of the Japanese in the U.S. during World War II. However, this great democracy recognized with such intensity that there was an immediate threat to its survival that it did whatever was necessary, broad ethical concepts notwithstanding, to ensure our survival. Therefore, the response by a country to a perceived threat to its existence can correlatively focus on whatever has to be done with an intensity appropriate to the perceived threat.
>
> In sum, I would think that Americans and others would recognize that whatever human rights violations are going on on the El Salvadoran Government side, while matched or exceeded by those of the guerrillas, should not be an operative factor in our doing whatever is necessary to divert this threat to our existence, i.e., the destabilizing of Central America with the consequent dominino effect through Mexico and into the underbelly of the United States.[95]

Director Wick's strategy was simple: in order to win the debate surrounding human rights, stop debating human rights and tell the American people the serious danger that they will be put in if El Salvador is allowed to become Communist. Wick acknowledged that there was a valid argument that the U.S. was supporting the more repressive side in El Salvador, but argued this ultimately did not matter because the broader issue of the expansion of communism was more important and in the case of halting the domino effect, the ends justify the means, however brutal. Essentially, Wick was arguing for a conversion of the private reasoning behind policy of supporting the government and ignoring human rights abuses into a palatable public rhetoric. Clearly, Wick believed what he said, even using Japanese internment as a positive example of

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[95] Letter, Charles Z. Wick to William P. Clark, March 7, 1983, folder "El Salvador vol II 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

how the country could be swayed into abandoning its values when security concerns are desperate.

This rhetorical strategy was nearly immediately put into effect. Three days later in his first ever speech about El Salvador, given to the National Association of Manufacturers, President Reagan used the strategies outlined in Wick's letter. His speech began by emphasizing the geographical proximity of El Salvador to the United States, saying that El Salvador "is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts, and thus "the strategic stakes are too high for us to ignore the danger of governments seizing power there with ideological ties to the Soviet Union." Reagan warned that if the United States let El Salvador slip to the rebels then it "will join Cuba and Nicaragua as a base for spreading fresh violence to Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica…" The President went on to claim that what is at stake "is the U.S. national security." He cautioned that communist control of Central America could end the United States' access to the Panama Canal, meaning the Pacific fleet could not easily pass to the Atlantic. This would have much broader implications and Reagan posited that "Soviet military theorists want to destroy our capability to resupply Western Europe in case of an emergency." Having established the foundation that stability in El Salvador was crucial for both American national and global security, Reagan turned his attention to the battle at hand, saying that the military situation is degrading because the guerillas "have taken the tactical initiative just when the sharply limited funding so far is running out," essentially putting blame for any more guerrilla success with whatever congressmen decide to not continue to fund El Salvador. He finished the speech by specifically asking for the passage of the reprogramming for El Salvador. Throughout the entire speech he only made one nod to human rights abuses, never mentioning the role of security

forces, simply claiming that "the key to ending violations of human rights is to build a stable working democracy."[96]

In focusing on this perceived threat to national security, Reagan turned focus away from issues of human rights, putting more pressure on congressional opposition to support his policy, lest they face blame for leaving the American people vulnerable to the meddling of Soviet military theorists. Initially, the strategy was only somewhat successful; after intense battles in committee Reagan got half of his $60 million reprogramming request approved. In early April, the Western Hemisphere Committee rejected the Administration's request for $50 million in supplemental military aid for El Salvador in 1983. After rejecting the proposal the committee went to work on the foreign aid budget for 1984 by cutting the budget for El Salvador from $86.3 million to $50 million. Even worse for the administration, the committee passed a bill written by the man responsible original certification amendment, Congressman Solarz. The bill provided for specific accomplishments for certification to pass and provided for an override if Congress found the certification unconvincing.[97]

In this context, on April 27, 1983, Reagan delivered a speech to Congress because, as a White House official put it, "he thinks that the fate of American policy in the region hangs in the balance."[98] Reagan's speech returned to the rhetoric suggested by Wick, once again emphasizing the close distance between El Salvador and the United States, arguing its strategic importance and the threat that Soviet influence in the area represents. The speech focused on the

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[96] Speech, Ronald Reagan to National Association of Manufacturers, March 10, 1983, folder "Central America - Briefing Book Democracy, Peace and Development Initiative (3 of 3)," Box 33, Whittlesey, Faith Ryan: File Series III: Subject Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[97] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 203.

[98] William Leogrande, In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992 (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 213.

wrongdoings committed by guerillas, while avoiding any by government forces. It lamented the government's inability to respond to guerrilla advances because of a lack of funding and advisors, highlighting the superiority in training that the guerrillas had over government forces. Reagan's most poignant moment in the speech came at the end when he claimed that "the national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America," asking "who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?"[99]

The speech was incredibly effective. The House Foreign Affairs Committee quickly reversed their rejection of the $50 million supplemental military aid request, with Chairman Clement Zablocki saying, "I certainly don't want to be accused of losing El Salvador by voting against more aid." The House Foreign Affairs Committee passed an increase in military aid for 1984-85 up to $65 million from the $50 million approved before Reagan's speech. Attached to the increase was the previously drafted certification bill, giving Congress the power to override the Administration.[100]

After debate in both chambers of Congress, neither elected to enact a foreign aid authorization bill, instead aid for El Salvador was funded with continuing resolution, providing for $64.8 million in military aid. This represented a large victory for the Administration-- they had their full supplemental military aid request, three quarters of their request for fiscal years 1984 and 1984, and most importantly because military aid was passed as a continuing resolution

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[99]Speech, Ronald Reagan to joint session of Congress, April 27, 1983, folder "Central America - Briefing Book Democracy, Peace and Development Initiative (3 of 3)," Box 33, Whittlesey, Faith Ryan: File Series III: Subject Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[100] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 215.

instead of as a foreign aid authorization bill neither the 1981 certification requirements or Congressman Solarz' new certification bill were attached to Salvadoran funding.[101]

The shift of focus on human rights policy to the broader cold-war conflict was reflected in the certification hearings in July. This shift was important for the Administration that was reckoning with the fact that, according to a State Department briefing paper, by June 9, 1983 there had "been little change in the human rights situation in El Salvador in recent months."[102] A State Department briefing of the President stated that with a "resurgence of right wing terrorism… human rights abuses are largely ignored or winked at."[103] While intelligence emerged revealing that "a number of Salvadoran security force officers [were] directly involved in [death squad] activity," there was even more indication that recent increases in death squad violence would "get worse during the forthcoming election campaign."[104]

With the recent success in changing congressional decisions through flexing executive muscles, the fourth certification was significantly more honest than the ones that had preceded it. The report acknowledged that the record fell short of "the broad and sustained progress necessary for the evolution of a just and democratic society in El Salvador, " blaming the Government of El Salvador for not "establishing discipline over the security forces or punishing those, "military of civilian, who commit gross violations of human rights."[105] In spite of the direct affirmation that

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[101] William Leogrande, In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992 (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 216.

[102] Briefing Paper, Department of State, June, 8, 1983, folder "El Salvador Vol IV 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (3)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[103] Memo, James H. Michel to George Shultz, June 17, 1983, folder "El Salvador Vol IV 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (3)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[104] Memo, James H. Michel to George Shultz, June, 14, 1983, folder "El Salvador Vol IV 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[105] Letter, George P. Shultz to Thomas P. O'Neill, July 20, 1983, folder "El Salvador Vol IV 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

the government was involved in all manner of human rights abuses and not doing much to change it, the report concluded that the criteria for certification were met and refused to suspend any military aid.[106] Thus, the debate surrounding El Salvador had shifted drastically from the first certification period, in which the Reagan Administration denied all knowledge of government involvement in human rights abuses in order to secure funding, to the point that the Administration was able to acknowledge a serious level of repression and still maintain congressional approval.

Concern for Human Rights?

After refocusing congressional attention on matters of national security and away from human rights in the beginning of 1983, the second half of the year saw the Reagan Administration take unprecedented interest in death squad activity in El Salvador. While at the time this was represented as a move toward concern for the human rights of the Salvadoran people by the media, and this narrative continues in more contemporary historical analysis, in fact the Administration's concern was not with the natural rights of Salvadorans, but rather with the threat that the death squads posed to the Salvadoran government.

Entering the fall of 1983, President Reagan had near complete control of Congressional policy surrounding El Salvador. After successfully securing additional funding with his April speech to a Joint Session of Congress, Reagan scored another victory with the October invasion of Grenada. The invasion of the small Caribbean island in the name of rescuing American students was quick and enormously popular. Though completely unrelated to the United States'

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[106] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 138.

role in El Salvador, it provided a tremendous increase in domestic approval of Reagan's foreign policy, particularly in Central America.[107]

While the political climate was improving, the situation in El Salvador was continuing to deteriorate. A successful government invasion of the strategically crucial guerilla stronghold of San Vicente was initially encouraging to Washington D.C., but was quickly countered by the largest guerilla operation of the war. The FMLN captured towns and villages across the country, scoring a massive morale victory at El Paraíso base, a stronghold designed by U.S. engineers and deemed impregnable. According to Leogrande, "By December 1983, the army controlled only the largest towns and the main roads, and only in daylight."[108]

As the army lost control of the country, right wing death squads went on a massive offensive. Their action was triggered by debate surrounding the encoding of land reform, dispossessing the oligarchy of land and turning it over to the peasantry, into the Constitution. As the muscle of the landed elite, the death squads quickly went to work, targeting reformists in Salvadoran political society, like "centrist peasant unions, the Catholic church, university professors, and the Christian Democratic Party." In addition, right wing officers attempted a coup against the government in early November, but were stopped by moderate officers.[109] Their agitation and violence was successful, constitutional land reform was extremely limited, exempting nearly ninety-nine percent of privately held land.[110]

This string of death squad violence, like none that had preceded it, set off outrage in Washington. Most of the targets were moderates and the violence threatened to push the

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[107] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 216.
[108] Ibid., 226.
[109] Ibid., 227.
[110] Ibid.

remaining moderates left. In addition, the threat of a rightist coup and the violence that would necessarily ensue threatened to flip the United States' policy on its head. For the first time, right-wing violence threatened the Reagan Administration's policy beyond how it might affect Congressional approval of military aid.

It is in this context that one must view the Administration's reaction. Newly appointed Ambassador Thomas Pickering made his first speech in El Salvador to the Chamber of Commerce, the same group to whom Ambassador Hinton had delivered a speech deriding death squad activity just a year before. Pickering's speech echoed Hinton's, calling the death squads "murderers, torturers, and kidnappers," questioning why the private sector had not condemned the violence, and threatening to cut off aid if improvements were not made.[111] However similar the points they made, unlike Hinton, Pickering was not cast out for reprimanding the Salvadoran oligarchy. In fact, two weeks later Vice President George H.W. Bush echoed his statements in a trip to San Salvador that was meant to symbolize the stand the Administration was taking against right wing violence. In a speech given at a dinner with President Magaña, Bush supported Pickering's speech, claiming that he and the President fully endorse Pickering's remarks, for Reagan, Congress, and the American people all found "these cowardly death squad terrorists" as "just as repugnant...as the terrorists of the left," and that continuation of death squad murders would result in loss of support from the United States.[112]

Pickering and Bush's public stands against the death squads have been claimed to be a turning point in the Administration's human rights policy. In *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America 1976-1992*, Cynthia Arnson refers to Bush's speech as the point

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[111] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 141.
[112] Ibid., 143.

when after three years of Congress "insisting that human rights were the key to a successful policy in El Salvador, the highest levels of the Reagan Administration had come around."[113] To refer to this moment as the point when the Reagan Administration realized the importance of human rights abuses is to misunderstand their motivation in this action.

The difference in response is directly correlated to the difference in the groups who the death squads targeted. When Hinton derided the oligarchic support for death squads it was coming in response to their wholesale murder of politicians associated with the guerillas. In contrast, Pickering was retaliating against the death squads attacks on political moderates within the Christian Democratic party.

To not take a stand against the death squads here would have been incredibly dangerous. The government of El Salvador was losing the war against the FMLN while right wing officers with ties to the death squads were seeking to overthrow the same government. At the same time death squads were picking off the remaining moderates as they sought to implement a lasting Constitution. Where the death squads had once served to uphold the regime, killing far leftists dissidents and inspiring fear in those who supported the FMLN, it was now undercutting moderates and threatening the government that the United States supported.

Further supporting the argument that the end of 1983 did not constitute a paradigm shift in terms of the Administration's concern for the human rights of the Salvadoran people, in November Reagan elected to not continue the certification process for the coming years. Certification was originally attached to the foreign aid authorization bill that was passed in 1981 and only applied to fiscal years 1982 and 1983. While early 1983 saw Congressman Solarz draft

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[113] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 143.

a certification bill, when Congress elected to give El Salvador aid through ongoing resolution instead of with a foreign aid authorization his bill was killed. As 1983 came to an end Congress realized that certification was not due to continue in the coming years and quickly passed a bill with bipartisan support extending the certification process for an additional year. The bill did not include the provision allowing for a Congressional override of the President's certification, as Solarz earlier bill had proposed, simply providing for a continuation of the process as it had been.[114]

In spite of the fact that the bill to extend certification did nothing to truly endanger Reagan's policy other than provide a platform under which conditions in El Salvador were put under bi-annual review, he killed the bill with a pocket veto, never returning the bill as Congress went on their winter recess. It has been suggested with some credence that perhaps Reagan killed the bill because of the stark level with which the human rights situation in El Salvador was deteriorating, a diplomat in El Salvador at the time said of the situation, "it would have been a joke to certify."[115] And while it is true that the recent increase in death squad violence and intrusion into the constitutional reforms were glaring signs that there was not progress being made in El Salvador, they were no worse than the countless atrocities that preceded them.

The decision to end the certification process was not because of special circumstance in the past six months, but a pattern of repeated circumstances over the past three years. Human rights abuses had not decreased, the army continued to be repressive, and the certification process simply drew public attention to this every six months. Certification provided domestic impediment to foreign policy and this issue is reflected in the groups who supported Reagan's

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[114] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 229.
[115] Ibid.

veto, as the Office of Management and Budget, Department of Defense, CIA, and National Security Council were all in favor of ending certification, while only the State Department saw it as too politically costly to circumvent Congress in this manner.[116] For Reagan, repeated human rights abuses distracted the United States public from the issue at hand: the threat of Soviet expansion into the Western Hemisphere. Even more so, with 1984 as an election year, Reagan could not afford to have the midyear certification hearings drag on into the late summer and early fall, as they had in the past. As a top Senate Republican aid put it, "Republicans didn't want to go into 1984 supporting a bloody kind of government."[117] Desirous of ending congressional debate surrounding human rights in El Salvador, Reagan vetoed the bill extending certification.

Conclusion

Reagan's vetoing the bill to extend the certification process into 1984 and beyond effectively ended congressional debate surrounding human rights conditions in El Salvador., Congressional Democrats made one more effort to revive the certification process in 1984, when Congressman Solarz proposed an amendment to the foreign aid authorization for fiscal year 1985 that would force the President to certify that the Salvadoran government had achieved control over the military and death squads while making a good faith effort to negotiate an end to the war. The amendment was opposed by another amendment written by William Broomfield, a leading Republican Congressman, who proposed leaving full unencumbered control of policy to Reagan.[118] After lengthy debate, the battle was ultimately solved in the same way as the debates

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[116]Memo, Robert C McFarlane to Ronald Reagan, November 29, 1983, folder "El Salvador Vol IV 1/1/83 - 10/31/83 (2)," Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

[117] Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 142.

[118] William Leogrande, *In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 254.

over funding for fiscal year 1984. In the midst of debates in the House, "Reagan delivered a prime-time television address to the nation, asking Congress and the American people to support his policies in Central America" while invoking fear of the domino theory and threats to national security.[119] Once again, Reagan was successful. Leading moderate Democrats sided with the President and supported the Broomfield Amendment. Reagan was given his full request for supplements to the 1984 budget and $123.25 million of his $132.5 million request for 1985.[120]

This truly represented the end of debate in Congress surrounding even if human rights abuses in El Salvador should be discussed. While death squad activity continued, albeit at slightly lower numbers, it was never a contested point in Congress again. The foreign aid bill for fiscal year 1986 was originally written with conditions stipulating that for the Salvadoran government to receive funding it had to be willing to engage in dialogue with FMLN, be in control of the armed forces, and make demonstrated progress in implementing agrarian reform and establishing a judicial system, but these conditions eventually became "expectations" without need for report. In 1986 and 1987, Congress approved the Administration's full aid request without significant debate or condition beyond the stipulation that aid would be cut off in the event of a military coup.[121]

Reagan's got what he wanted– full control of the congressional purse to support the Salvadoran government no matter what abuses they may have committed. His strategies changed: going from ignoring human rights conditions completely, to trying to suppress reports and discussion of them, eventually throwing himself in the debate to reorient discussion away

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[119] William Leogrande, In Our Own Backyard: The United States In Central America, 1977-1992 (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 253.
[120] Ibid., 257.
[121] Ibid., 275.

from actual rights and toward matters of national security, to finally ending the debate altogether; what remained the same was his steadfast determination to stop the spread of communism into Central America no matter what the human cost.

The war in El Salvador did not come to an end until 1992. Over the 13 years 80,000 people died– 50,000 of whom were civilians. In spite of three billion dollars in U.S. economic aid, by 1991 90% of country lived in poverty and third of the population was unemployed.[122] Today it is the murder capital of the world, largely due to an extremely gang founded by members of right wing death squads– MS-13. Politically, the two parties in charge of the government remain the ones that vied for power from the government throughout the civil war: the FMLN and the right-wing ARENA. Reagan's policy never truly addressed the problems at the root of the civil war– dire poverty and wealth disparity– only seeking to curb their revolutionary symptoms, and the ailments that plagued El Salvador through the 1980s continue to this day.

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[122] Equipo Nizkor, Derechos *Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 1993), 132. Accessed November 28, 2017. http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html

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