The United States’ Global Realism: US Policy in El Salvador as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Should the United States’ global mission be to make the world “safe for democracy”, as Woodrow Wilson said, or, in the words of John Quincy Adams, should the US be “the well-wisher of freedom and independence of all” but the “champion and vindicator only of our own”? The debate between Idealists and Realists in US foreign policy has been going on forever. Idealists hold that the US should make its internal political philosophy, namely Democracy, the goal of its foreign policy. Realists, on the other hand, esteem that the US foreign policy should be mainly oriented towards the protection and enhancement of “the National Interest”.

My line of reasoning is that the balance has always shifted towards Realism and, occasionally, aggressive Realism. U.S. interventions in Latin America offer telling case studies. They have taken the shape of a mixture of overt and covert interventions in conjunction with the significant political, economic and military pressures. Washington’s efforts to check hostile developments in the Americas necessitated the investment of considerable tax-dollars, political capital, and even American lives. To accomplish its political, strategic, and economic objectives in the area, the U.S. has devoted extensive human and material resources. The strategy to follow might differ depending on each country’s specificity or on the reactions of the U.S. Congress and public opinion. The big lines, however, remain unaffected, as we will try to find out through our study of the U.S. interventions in El Salvador.

KEYWORDS: American Foreign Policy / El Salvador / Idealism vs Realism / Global Realism

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES: Cultural Studies / Political Science / International Relations / History

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The social revolts, which suddenly alarmed Washington at the end of the 1970s and occupied the front scene of the US policy makers’ agenda for over a decade, represented merely another episode of a people’s longstanding fight for political freedom and social justice. The roots of El Salvador’s problems fit into the Latin American frame: social and economic inequality, fierce military repression, and lack of free political prospects, all of which progressively paved the ground for ever more overwhelming feelings of injustice and bitterness. With the successive governments at the service of the small elite of landowners, businessmen, and generals, and, thus, unable to meet the masses’ rising expectations, El Salvador suffered growing social discontent and tensions.

The struggle for political freedom and economic equality in El Salvador has a long history. The oligarchic-military governments long kept in place unjust institutions and policies that excluded the majority of the people from real participation in the decision-making processes that affect their social, economic, and political life. Since the 1930s, the Salvadoran army, supported by a handful of powerful families [the fourteen families], had ruled the country with little concern for basic human rights. The oligarchic-military hold on power was periodically but unsuccessfully challenged by a variety of reformist elements, including peasant groups, moderate civilian politicians, and occasionally reform-minded military officers. The challenge to the established order became acute when the military used massive fraud to deny the Christian Democratic candidate, José Napoléon Duarte, victory in the 1972 presidential elections. The revolutionary mood intensified after the military denied the people of El Salvador their right for a political change that promised to offer a reformist program of agrarian and social reforms. Despite popular demands for access to the political process, the military refused to create a political order it could not control. By that refusal, it produced instead political disorder which no one could control. Peaceful change being impossible, the government faced increasing opposition from the leftist guerrillas, and the chaos seemed to be interminable. Then, on October 15, 1979, a group of progressive young military officers, who were increasingly concerned by the rising civil conflict and the government’s inflexible response, overthrew the regime of General Carlos Romero and installed a civilian-military junta that incarnated political forces ranging from the moderate left to the right.1

2. CARTER’S POLICY

The Carter Administration welcomed the coup enthusiastically. It committed itself to supporting the civilian-military Junta, regarding it as a reformist centrist government which had to be protected from the extremes of the radical left and traditional right. The Carter Administration adopted a dual political-military approach: It restored military aid to the new...

government in order to give it the means to meet the leftist guerilla challenges and, at the same time, encouraged the Junta to adopt an ambitious set of economic reforms that it believed would weaken the oligarchy’s hold and improve the fate of the Salvadoran peasantry. Carter sought to devise a policy that would stimulate reforms and reduce human rights abuses. But while Washington favored social reform as well as negotiations with the moderate elements in the left, it opposed the Junta’s willingness to bring elements of the radical left into partnership with the government. Washington’s anti-leftist reflexes represented an obstacle to a large national consensus and, hence, complicated the task of a government which already had a lot of trouble with the conservative rightist group. The moderate October Junta finally fell apart in January 1980 to be replaced by a new one which moved sharply to the right. While the October Junta had tried to combine structural change with a political opening to the left in order to resolve the country’s crisis through dialogue and reconciliation, the new government’s strategy was to alleviate the right’s fear of reform by combining it with repression of the left. This strategy of ‘reform with repression’ was supported by the post-Nicaraguan Revolution Carter Administration. Professor William LeoGrande, from the University of Washington, explains the logic behind the Human Rights Administration’s controversial support for a government that was regularly violating its population’s basic human rights in this way:

Fearful that El Salvador was quickly becoming another Nicaragua, the Carter administration stood determinedly behind its rickety ally. If the admittedly weak regime could be sustained by the US in the short run, US officials believed its program of social reform would eventually attract support, rebuilding a political center where none now existed. The reforms would break the dominance of the oligarchy and then erode the Left’s popular base. Eventually centrist democratic politics would predominate. Washington’s strategy was designed to avoid repeating the mistakes it had made in Nicaragua, where the administration decided to replace Somoza with a moderate regime only after it was too late to prevent a leftist victory. Nevertheless, the reforms’ aspect of the strategy was criticized by American and Salvadoran conservatives as being ‘too socialist’, whereas the military aspect was perceived by American liberals as a serious damage to the administration’s human rights guiding principles. Within days before leaving office, Carter ordered a total of $10 million in military aid to the Salvadoran government. Nevertheless, military aid could not prevent El Salvador’s drift toward civil war; neither could it limit the Salvadoran government’s poor human rights performances. Two years later, private citizen Carter stated: “I think the government in El Salvador is one of the blood thirstiest in the hemisphere now.”

3. REAGAN’S POLICY

Whereas Carter sought to prevent a radical victory in El Salvador by political means, Reagan’s vision of fighting radicalism was to return to the policy of Containment. Reagan’s initial approach differed from Carter’s in four fundamental ways: it was globalist; it rejected negotiating with the left; it relied heavily on military power; and it deemphasized human rights. For Reagan and his advisers, the crisis in El Salvador was not a civil war in a remote country but a geo-strategic crisis of major global proportions. Contrary to Carter’s advisers, many of whom believed that “the war in El Salvador is not between the Soviet Union and the United States, it is among Salvadorans.” Reagan’s close aides approached the conflict with some East-West perspectives. “First and foremost”, Secretary of State Alexander Haig told Congress, “our problem with El Salvador is external intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign state in this hemisphere, nothing more, nothing less.” The Reagan Administration perceived a linkage between instability in El Salvador and a broader Soviet-Cuban plan to undermine US power throughout Latin America. President Reagan put it this way:

A determined propaganda campaign has sought to mislead many in Europe and certainly many in the US as to the true nature of the conflict in El Salvador. Very simply, guerillas, armed and supported by and through Cuba, are attempting to impose a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship on the people of El Salvador as part of a larger imperialist plan.

Under this global perspective, the US support for the Salvadoran government was a matter of support for national security. The tiny El Salvador was portrayed as the place where the US would draw the line against communist expansionism and

2 Thomas Carothers, In the Name of Democracy, op. cit., p. 15.
3 William LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, op. cit., p. 41.
5 Ibid., p. 43.
7 Dario Moreno, U.S. Policy in Latin America, op. cit., pp. 88-89.
8 Ibid.
9 Thomas Carothers, In the Name of Democracy, op. cit., p. 16.
12 Ibid, p. 65.
reassess US power. Scott Thomson, who would become a minor Reagan appointee, explained the administration’s perceptions in this way:

El Salvador is the place to take a stand against a further spreading of Soviet-Cuban influence within the US security sphere. […] The US can choose to win. Nations sitting on the fence will see merit in American policy. They will be heartened to see that the US has stopped abandoning even its poignmarked friends.13

Washington perceived El Salvador as a particularly tempting site for a demonstration of its determination and resolve. Winning a quick victory in El Salvador, Reagan and his aides believed, would pave the ground for future victories in the East-West struggle.

Reagan’s globalist approach to the Salvadoran crisis was shared neither by the US liberals nor by the Salvadorans. Ambassador Robert White, a moderate expert with no special sympathy for the rebels’ cause, observed that

The revolution situation came about in El Salvador because you had what was one of the most selfish oligarchies the world has ever seen, combined with a corrupt security force…Whether Cuba existed or not, you would still have a revolutionary situation in El Salvador.14

The Salvadorans themselves repeatedly acknowledged that the roots of the Salvadoran chronic tragedy were exclusively local. When asked about the causes behind the guerrillas’ revolutionary movement, José Napoléon Duarte, president of the ruling Junta supported by Washington, responded with the following terms:

Fifty years of lies, fifty years of injustice, fifty years of frustration. This is a history of people starving to death, living in misery. For fifty years, the same people had all the power, all the money, all the jobs, all the education, all the opportunities.15

In a 1983 Foreign Policy article, Guillermo Ungo, president of the Democratic Revolutionary Front of El Salvador, offered a larger analysis of the political, social, and economic roots of the Salvadoran crisis:

Making a mockery of Abraham Lincoln’s ideals, El Salvador’s rulers have created governments of the minority and for the minority whose survival has depended on institutionalized violence, on closing the channels of democratic participation, on ever-increasing violations of human rights. Over the years, the dispossessed majority and the political, social, and religious leaders have faced a dilemma: to fight back and risk death in resistance, or to submit and risk death from hunger, poverty, or political repression. It is not impossible in El Salvador to aspire peacefully to human rights and political freedoms; their pursuit is a reckless venture. This is the true cause of the present war.16

The analyses stated above take us far from the alarmist geo-strategic explanations presented by the White House. Indeed, Washington offered to protect its allies against an external threat which was actually not perceived in San Salvador.

On several occasions, the Salvadoran opposition expressed its desire for a negotiated settlement for the conflict. A negotiated power-sharing was perceived by the Salvadoran Left, the American moderates, and various international observers as the only way to end the war. Guillermo Ungo, civilian head of the guerrilla opposition, told reporters as early as January 1981:

We are seriously interested in talks with the US to find a political settlement. We are saying this to the Carter and Reagan Administrations. If we wait for a military victory, the extermination of the people will be so much greater.17

Robert White, Carter’s ambassador to El Salvador, urged the Reagan Administration to accept the Left’s offer to negotiate:

Now is not the time to emphasize military assistance. Now is the time…to emphasize a political solution. To the extent that you emphasize a military solution, you are buttressing one of the most out-of-control, violent, bloodthirsty groups of men in the world.18

16 Guillermo Ungo, “The People’s Struggle”, Foreign Policy, Fall 1983, pp. 51-52.
17 Cited in Dario Moreno, U.S. Policy in Latin America, op. cit., p. 91.
18 Ibid.
For the White House's hardliners, however, negotiating with a Leftist group was a non-option. When the moderate Assistant Secretary Thomas Enders floated the idea of publicly supporting the possibility of negotiations between the Salvadoran government and rebels, he was forced out of his job by the hardliners. For the Administration's ideologues, negotiating with what they identified as a Marxist-Leninist group would represent a betrayal of their global policy. As a result, Washington's ideological convictions diminished the chances for an early peaceful political settlement and prolonged the sufferings of the Salvadoran people.

Instead of working for a political solution, the Reagan Administration's energies were directed toward the military domain. In fact, the administration made the military defeat of the guerillas a policy cornerstone. Washington's policy makers believed that defeating the leftist guerillas would bring the stability indispensable for an environment of socio-economic reforms. Reagan defended his military policy in these terms:

"To give democracy and development a chance to work in the face of increasing attacks, we are providing a shield of military training and assistance to help our neighbors protect themselves."

In order 'to give democracy and development a chance', Reagan ordered a massive increase in the US military and economic aid to the Salvadoran Junta. Military assistance that amounted to $6 million in 1980 leapt to $35.5 million in 1981 and to $196.55 million in 1984, to reach a total of $879.48 million for Reagan's eight years in office. Actually, the US applied a large military assistance program, funding the remarkable expansion of the Salvadoran military and sponsoring a major training program for Salvadoran military personnel of all levels. Nevertheless, the military policy only intensified the war. The US policy architects assumed that they were pursuing a new approach when they were actually prolonging a decades-long policy that had helped radicalize the revolution.

The significant military assistance program accorded to the Salvadoran government reflected the administration's priorities. The Reagan Administration made it clear that it would place its emphasis on security, not on human rights. The Reaganites claimed that the previous administration's focus on human rights was misplaced and even dangerous. "You do not try to fight a civil war and institute reforms at the same time", President Reagan told Time magazine, "get rid of the war. Then go forward with the reform". Actually, many administration officials believed that human rights issues should be dealt with only when the civil war would come to an end. They did not want to hold back the Salvadoran military by 'burdening' it with human rights concerns. According to this 'Kirpatrickian' argument, "when your house is on fire you don't call a decorator." The Salvadoran house was on fire and the human rights issue was a decorative concern that would get attention once the important task at hand -defeating the leftist guerillas- was achieved. Influenced by the Kirkpatrick Theory, the Reagan team maintained that the US should not distance itself from the authoritarian government of El Salvador because of some shortcomings of the Salvadoran government and military. Consequently, Washington's de-emphasis on human rights did nothing to modify the Salvadoran military's behavior, and the number of victims attributed to political violence continued to escalate.

Reagan's concerns with security split with the US liberals concerns over human rights. The result was a ferocious debate over the morality of US military and economic aid to a government that was internationally famous for its brutality. Critics of the administration's plans argued that the US, which historically stands for human rights, should not be backing a regime whose security forces had little respect for human conditions. In contradiction of Washington's official line, the US liberals contended that social and political inequalities as well as political repression, and not Communism, were the true causes of the Salvadoran crisis. Accordingly, the US should not support the wrong side -an unpopular politico-military minority which had long exploited the poor. Moreover, the liberal critics, who regarded the Salvadoran military more as the problem than the solution, were fervently opposed to Washington's military options. They were indeed quite in favor of a negotiated agreement. They held that the Salvadoran left had a genuine base of political support and represented a part of the political spectrum that must be incorporated into any political solution. Furthermore, liberal internationalists expressed concern over the possibility of direct military involvement in the region and accused the Reagan Administration of creating the conditions for another Vietnam.

These views where quite popular within the post-Vietnam public opinion, which feared direct military intervention in Central America. In effect, "the US public was extremely wary of anticommunist crusades in obscure countries where the US was defending a government of dubious character and flirting with the possibility of an escalating military involvement". The constant reports of brutal political violence by the Salvadoran security forces, in particular the murder of four US churchwomen, ensured an extremely negative image of the Salvadoran government in the mind of many Americans. Consequently, Reagan's Salvadoran policy had to face a broad coalition of popular movements and of many oppositional organizations including human rights organizations, churches, trade unions, and academic associations.

The US Congress was the main battleground of the disagreement between the Reagan Administration and its critics. In effect, the Salvadoran issue caused one of the deepest Legislative-Executive crises of the post-Vietnam era. The
Legislative branch, with its control over the purse, was determined not to grant Reagan a carte blanche over the Salvadoran issue. Even though concerned about the possibility of a leftist takeover in San Salvador, many Democrats in Congress were reluctant to approve large sums of military aid for a government involved in political terror. Consequently, the administration’s policy became largely shaped by a recurring struggle to overcome legislative constraints.

In face of such strong public and congressional opposition, the Reagan Administration responded with a considerable public relations campaign intended to bring the White House’s plans under positive light. Actually, the public relations campaign was one of the three main cornerstones of Reagan’s approach to the Salvadoran conflict, the two others being the sharp escalation in the American military involvement and a recurring exercise in news management. Washington’s public relations campaign had two main objectives: First, to escalate the conflict into a global struggle, in order to make Americans realize that the Salvadoran crisis was a real US National Security issue. Second, to put a human face on the Salvadoran government and military in an attempt to gain the confidence of a skeptical public opinion and a watching Congress and, so, impose a consensus over the Executive’s plans.

The centerpiece of the administration’s campaign to prove the larger dimensions of the conflict was its White Paper on ‘Communist Interference in El Salvador’ issued only a month after coming to office. The White Paper purported to show conclusively -based on captured guerrilla documents and weapons- that “the insurgency in El Salvador has been progressively transformed into a textbook case of indirect armed aggression by Communist powers through Cuba.”

Briefly summarized, the White Paper pictured a pro-Western government struggling to resist a small but fanatically dedicated group of Marxist insurgents, directed and supplied by the Eastern bloc. Two months later, several analyses of the White Paper cast serious doubts upon its claims. Various journalists inspected and analyzed the captured documents and then published numerous articles which demolished the State Department’s arguments. The articles pointed to (1) mistranslations that distorted the original Spanish, always with the effect of demonstrating greater Cuban and Soviet involvement than the originals would suggest; (2) a large number of unsupported inferences; and (3) a high probability of forgery of some documents and the uncertain origin of others. Therefore, the State Department issued a second White Paper that acknowledged errors in the first, but reassessed claims about Communist involvement. The second paper convinced a few more observers than did the first. Nevertheless, the critiques of the Paper did not get as much attention as the report’s release. So, the White Paper initiative was a total success as it accomplished its public relations task: It changed the framework of the Executive-legislative debate at a key moment, that is at a time when Congress was not totally convinced of the need to approve military aid to El Salvador. From February 1981 onward, the issue was no longer whether the US should provide military assistance, but how much should be given and under what conditions. So, “the White Paper had done its job by helping smooth the way for a policy change, and once the new policy was established, no after-the-fact debunking of the White Paper could turn back the clock”.

The White Paper represented only the first piece of the government’s public relations puzzle. The following piece would take the shape of a barrage of official declarations and interviews. The Reagan administration systematically misinformed Congress to get the money it needed to prop its allies. Under Secretary of Defense Fred Iklé noted that, in El Salvador “we do not seek a military defeat for our friends. We do not seek a military stalemate. We seek victory for the forces of democracy.” Such statements were typical of the Reagan Administration’s campaign. Iklé considered the Salvadoran army as “our friends” as if the U.S. citizens had close ties to such a violent group. Such a familiarity made it seem inevitable that Americans had a natural duty to help their ‘friends’. Besides, the American Under-Secretary of Defense labeled the military Junta, which was [partly] responsible for the loss of 70,000 civilians, as a “force of democracy”. At a time when Amnesty International and various other humanitarian organizations reported that they were receiving “regular, often daily, reports identifying El Salvador’s regular security and military units as responsible for the torture, disappearance and killing of non-combatant civilians from all sectors of Salvadoran society” U.S. officials were urging Congress for more aid to “the forces of freedom”.

In an attempt to rescue a sinking campaign, the White House’s policy architects decided to make use of Reagan’s personal charisma. Accordingly, the head of the Executive took the lead in the public relations campaign in favor of his administration’s Central American policy. In early 1983, Reagan commenced a long series of public statements claiming that “unless Congress at least doubled military aid to El Salvador, Mexico could ultimately be affected and Soviet-supported governments would then be on the doorstep of the United States.” In April 1983, Reagan gave a major address on Central America before a joint session of Congress -which is rather an exceptional event- declaring that “the national security of all the Americans is at stake in Central America.” The White House’s tacticians exaggerated the threat in order to gain the support of the masses by making them fear for their own security. Having realized that most

27 William Blum, Killing Hope, op. cit., p. 358.
31 William LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, op. cit., p. 89.
33 William Blum, Killing Hope, op. cit., p. 361.
35 Cited in Thomas Carothers, In the Name of Democracy, op. cit., p. 28.
Americans were not interested in the events taking place in the far-away El Salvador and were, hence, unenthusiastic to finance their government’s policy there. Washington resurrected the ambiguous dominoes theory to have Americans feel deeply concerned. In addition to the heavy emphasis on national security, Reagan’s April address contained a new theme: the threat of blame. The president closed his speech with the following terms: “Who among us would wish to bear responsibility for failing to meet our shared obligation?” The message was clear: if Congress did not grant Reagan the resources he needed for Central America, then he would blame it for the policy’s failure.

The campaign intended to rein vigorate the administration’s Salvadoran policy was based mainly on security. It also progressively included some emphasis on democracy -more out of concern for congressional support than for the Salvadoran political scene. In a March 1983 address on El Salvador, President Reagan stated:

> Despite all I and others have said, some people still seem to think that our concern for security assistance means that all we care about is a military solution. That’s nonsense. Bullets are no answer to economic inequalities, social tensions or political disagreements. Democracy is what we want.\(^{37}\)

And before Congress in April, Reagan set out promoting democracy as the first and foremost of his goals in Central America.

The administration’s strategy also planned to silence the human rights advocates. US officials defended their Salvadoran allies either by denying that human rights violations were taking place, or by blaming the violations on extremists on both the left and the right. When the international human rights organizations continued to issue reports condemning the Salvadoran military and police for the ongoing political violence, the administration promised to pressure the Salvadoran government to improve its human rights performances—which it did only episodically.

Despite its significant public relations efforts, the administration failed to impose a national consensus over its Central American policy. Faced with the prospect of endless Executive-Legislative disagreements, Reagan appointed in July 1983 former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to head a National Bipartisan Commission to suggest new options for the Central American policy. The Kissinger Commission’s report tried to establish a consensus between the administration’s concerns over security and the congressional concerns regarding human rights. The report reproduced the administration’s policy stance on El Salvador, as it confirmed the existence of national security interests and emphasized the need for a sharp increase in military assistance:

> While important US interests are engaged in El Salvador, and while we pay a high political price at home and abroad for assisting the armed forces there, the US has not provided enough military aid to support the methods of counterinsurgency we have urged. […] There might be an argument for doing nothing to help the government of El Salvador. There might be an argument for doing a great deal more. There is, however, no logical argument for giving some aid but not enough. The worst possible policy for El Salvador is to provide just enough aid to keep the war going, but too little to wage it successfully.\(^{38}\)

The Kissinger Commission supported the Reagan Administration’s general line. It made, however, a special emphasis on the human rights issue. The members of the commission, who were fully aware that their foremost mission was to silence congressional critics, sided with Congress on the necessity to condition military assistance on the Salvadoran government’s aptitude to enhance its human rights records:

> The US government has a right to demand certain minimum standards of respect for human rights as a condition for providing military aid to any country. With respect to El Salvador, military aid should, through legislation requiring periodic reports, be made contingent upon demonstrated progress toward free elections, freedom of association, the establishment of the rule of law and an effective judicial system, and the termination of the activities of the so-called death squads, as well as vigorous action against those guilty of crimes and the prosecution to the extent possible of past offenders. These conditions should be seriously enforced.\(^{39}\)

The Kissinger Commission’s report did not create a new policy. It did, however, shift the balance toward the moderate wing within the Reagan team. With the purpose of acquiring a larger national consensus, Reagan, as a talented tactician, decided to distance himself from the hardline option and take on a more moderate approach. The shift did not affect the goals but the means of the administration’s policy. Instead of a blind focus on a military solution, the new strategy would include some focus on democracy and human rights and work for a political solution. Having failed, both in Washington


\(^{37}\) Cited in Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, op. cit., p. 28.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
and in San Salvador, to assure a military victory for its allies, the White House would seek a less controversial victory in the political domain.

A key aspect of the administration moderates’ policy was to seek to legitimize the Salvadoran regime by encouraging it to hold general elections. After the disappointments of the 1982 legislative elections, which were to the disadvantage of Washington’s allies, the White House strategists actively worked for an uncontroversial victory for the Christian Democrat José Napoléon Duarte in the 1984 presidential elections. The administration developed a large election assistance program, provided Duarte both overt and covert assistance, and supplied $10.5 million in assistance for the 1984 presidential election. Furthermore, the US Embassy lobbied very actively on Duarte’s behalf in El Salvador, making sure that all major political sectors understood that the US government favored a Duarte victory and that any other alternative would imperil the US economic and military assistance.

Duarte’s victory strengthened the White House’s case for assistance to El Salvador. Yet, some observers questioned the validity of the election, because of the intense US involvement in the electoral process and the nonparticipation of the Left. Former CIA official Philip Agee, for example, argued that

Under the guise of exporting democracy, the CIA and other US agencies in El Salvador promoted ‘demonstration elections’ as public relations exercises to cover their clients’ atrocities. The military-controlled civilian government could then be renamed a ‘fledgling democracy’. Nevertheless, most congressional democrats and US liberals accepted the idea that the new Duarte government was legitimate and deserved to receive strong US economic, political, and military backing. In effect, Duarte’s victory and his pledge to improve human rights conditions silenced the congressional critics and paved the way for the consensus that Reagan had been looking for. Consequently, from that time on, Congress approved almost every request for military and economic assistance the Reagan Administration made, and El Salvador gradually disappeared from the political agenda during the remainder of Reagan’s second term.

4. Bush’s Policy

George Bush had been in office just two months when the Salvadoran issue reappeared. El Salvador’s March 1989 presidential election brought to power Alfredo Cristiani, the candidate of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) the far right party founded by Major Roberto D’Aubuisson and long linked to the death squads. Cristiani’s victory marked the collapse of Duarte’s Christian Democratic Party and, with it, a decade of US policy. In effect, whereas Washington had tried to frame its policy around the political center, the right had finally emerged triumphant.

Liberal critics linked ARENA to the Salvadoran upper class and expressed their fears for the future of the social and economic reforms. They also expressed their concern that the far Right extremists would see Cristiani’s electoral triumph as a mandate for political repression. For the Bush Administration, however, Cristiani was a sincere moderate who was truly committed to improving the human rights situation and who should, therefore, not be abandoned by the US.

The test of the Cristiani government was not long in coming. In November 1989, the military responded to the rebels’ violent offensive by a vast mass of arrests, a tightening of political rights, and an unexplained tolerance of death squad killings. Actually, the late 1989 events demonstrated that not so much had really changed since the dirty civil war in the early 1980s. The murder of six Salvadoran Jesuit priests and hundreds of innocent civilians by the Salvadoran security forces shocked international opinion. It proved that the Salvadoran army’s vaunted human rights improvement was evaporating, and undoubtedly wrecked the regime’s pretense of democracy.

The Jesuits case revived the debate in the US over military aid to El Salvador. Congress condemned the Salvadoran military’s brutality and issued serious reservations about the US indirect role in the massacre. The Bush Administration rejected any suggestion that military aid to El Salvador be reduced or made subject to conditions because of the killing of the Jesuits or the ferocity of the army’s activities. Yet, the late 1989 events represented a turning point for the Salvadoran conflict and for Washington’s strategy to resolve it. After a whole decade of a bloody civil war, the various components of the Salvadoran political scene were fed up with a never-ending conflict. The November revolts also definitively convinced the US policy makers that a fair, long-lasting solution could not be military.

In February 1990, General Maxwell Thurman, head of the US Southern Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Salvadoran army would not be able to achieve a military victory over the FMLN and that the war should be ended at the negotiations table. Rather than oppose, and furtively bloc peace talks, as had their predecessors, Bush’s advisers were coming around the idea that a negotiated solution was desirable. “El Salvador needs peace, and the only path to peace is at the negotiating table,” Assistant Secretary Bernard Aronson told Congress. In a changing international environment, the US policy makers no longer perceived the Salvadoran conflict from global East-West

40 Dario Moreno, U.S. Policy in Latin America, op. cit., p. 119.
42 Ibid.
angles. With the end of the Cold War, the US security concerns, which made it prop up its Salvadoran allies regardless of their human rights records, simply faded away. In the absence of clear security threats, Washington was no longer prepared to stand the moral and financial costs of supporting the Salvadoran regime. A negotiated settlement would thus satisfy the various actors of the Salvadoran conflict.

The war ended in January 1992, after the UN, with significant US assistance, helped negotiate a truce between the Cristiani government and the FMLN. El Salvador soon disappeared from Washington’s agenda.

CONCLUSION

While evaluating Washington’s approach to El Salvador’s 1979-1992 conflict, the supportive observers maintain that the US policy was an example of a successful policy of democracy promotion. For Washington’s detractors, however, the US policy was the example par excellence of US misunderstanding of the Latin American social revolts. According to the critics, the US should assume moral complicity for the Salvadoran tragedy. A brief evaluation of a decade of American involvement will help us affirm that Washington’s approach had more perceptible shortcomings than indisputable successes.

President Carter’s reaction to the 1979 coup was quite positive. In fact, the Carter Administration encouraged the new government to apply some basic reforms in order to attack the socio-economic roots of the conflict. For the reforms to be effective, however, El Salvador had an urgent need for political and social stability. Such stability was impossible in the absence of a national peace agreement that gathered the various political factions of the country. Washington’s opposition to the radical left’s participation in the political negotiations weakened the chances of a national peace agreement which might have reinforced the moderate October 1979 Junta and prevented its fall. When the October Junta was overthrown by a rightist repressive group, some observers expected a shift in the Human Rights Administration’s policy. But the Carter White House went on with its assistance for the Salvadoran government’s policy of ‘reform with repression’. Because of some national policy considerations [the 1980 presidential election and the concern over negative reactions to a second Nicaragua], Carter simply renounced his international affairs principles.

With an ideological team in command, the Reagan White House’s approach to the Salvadoran conflict soon became one of the most controversial foreign policy issues. Reagan saw the Salvadoran war as a Soviet meddling in the US sphere of influence and dealt with it within a National Security frame. The Reagan officials’ ideological passion led to their failure to realize the significance of the socio-economic roots of the conflict and prevented them from developing an appropriate strategy. Instead of positively participating in a war against poverty and social injustice, the Reagan ideologues took part in what they perceived as a ‘holy war’ against the ‘evil empire’. The Salvadoran rebels were identified as communist insurgents -even if they themselves denied being communists- and the regime combating them as an anti-communist ally, which had to be supported, no matter what its shortcomings were.

The Reagan Administration worked passionately for a sterile and dangerous military solution instead of a less controversial political one. The US policy makers perceived the military victory of their allies as a necessary condition for stability and for democratic development. Therefore, they blocked all initiatives of negotiated settlements between the Salvadoran government and the Salvadoran Left. Had they left their ideological fixations aside, the US policy makers would surely have realized that a political agreement would have created an environment favorable for the socio-economic reforms that the country desperately needed. Instead of encouraging a peace plan in the 1990s, the US had the possibility to support a similar plan a decade earlier. A negotiated agreement signed in early 1981 would have saved thousands of Salvadoran souls and millions of US dollars. On the other hand, Reagan could not claim that he was working hard to promote democracy in El Salvador while he was strengthening the Salvadoran military, historically an antidemocratic institution. Defeating the rebels, not promoting democracy, was an unambiguous objective of Washington’s military assistance program.

The battle which absorbed the administration’s energies was not in San Salvador but in Washington. In effect, Reagan and his aides were concerned more about the US Congress than about the Salvadoran people. When Reagan accepted to include some emphasis on democracy and human rights in his strategy, he did it mainly out of concern for congressional support. Although the congressional opposition was successful in its efforts to moderate the administration’s approach, Reagan managed to get his main resolutions voted. His popularity and the massive public relations campaign that he put in place helped him surmount legislative constraints and pursue his hard line policy.

President Reagan often certified to Congress that the Salvadoran government was “making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights”. 46 The 1993 report of the UN Commission of the Truth and the declassified documents on El Salvador would later prove that Reagan and his aides had been constantly misleading Congress and public opinion. In March 1993, the UN Commission of the Truth on El Salvador presented its report in which it certified that

The military forces, supported by the government and the civilian establishment, were plainly the main perpetrators of massacres, executions, torture and kidnappings during the civil war. These acts could not be blamed

46 Cited in William Blum, Killing Hope, op. cit., p. 360.
on the excesses of war but on premeditated and ideologically inspired decisions to kill.\footnote{Ibid., p. 366.}

Members of Congress, outraged by the findings of the Commission of the Truth, called for the declassification of State Department, Defense Department, and CIA files on El Salvador. The thousands of documents released by the Clinton Administration confirmed that the Reagan Administration had concealed evidence from Congress about widespread human rights abuses by its Salvadoran allies. The documents proved that every US diplomat, military officer and intelligence operative who worked with El Salvador’s military and political leaders in the 1980s knew that most of those individuals were directly involved in organizing death squads.\footnote{Daniel Mayorga, “Shame and El Salvador”, The Nation, November 29, 1993.} The papers offered overwhelming evidence that the Reagan and Bush Administrations collected detailed information about assassinations conducted by right-wing leaders in El Salvador but continued to work with them nonetheless.\footnote{Ibid.} Instead of seriously pressuring their Salvadoran protégés to improve their human rights records –by reducing military aid in response to human rights violations, the US officials offered them dollars as well as trainings and, then, took their defense before US Congress. Therefore, it would be difficult to escape the ‘moral complicity’ charge.

Trying to evaluate Washington’s policy, I would argue that the US anticomunist policy was successful in the limited sense that it helped prevent a victory by the leftist rebels. The whole approach failed, however, because it was much more destructive [to prevent a victory by the left] than constructive [to help better the socio-economic conditions]. In 1991, and in spite of $4 billion of US economic and military assistance\footnote{Thomas Carothers, In the Name of Democracy, op. cit., p. 41.}, ninety percent of the Salvadoran population lived in poverty and a third of the population was unemployed.\footnote{William LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, op. cit., p. 583.}

At the political level, U.S. officials and many observers usually pointed to El Salvador as an example of a successful US policy of democracy promotion. Political analyst Howard Wiarda, for instance, offered the following assessment of Washington’s Salvadoran policy:

U.S. policy in El Salvador has had three basic purposes: to weaken and isolate the guerillas; to pressure the Salvadoran Right and military into accepting some reforms; and to encourage a moderate, democratic political opening, process and system. The costs were significant but, with patience, blandishments, and what we now call ‘coercive diplomacy’, US policy succeeded in achieving all three goals. [...] The US policy in El Salvador, frequently controversial, was surprisingly steady, pragmatic, and consistent.\footnote{Howard Wiarda, “From Reagan to Bush: Continuity and Change in U.S. Policy in Latin America” in U.S. Policy in Latin America: A Decade of Crisis and Challenge, John Martz (ed.), op. cit., pp. 47-49.}

Such affirmations demonstrate the US political elite’s misunderstanding of the functioning of the Third World’s political scene. US officials interpreted promoting democracy in the very narrow sense of fostering the emergence of an elected civilian government. The transition to elected rule represented for sure an improvement over the decades of military rule that preceded it. Nonetheless it failed short of the achievement of democracy. An elected government within the Latin American context is not necessarily a reliable government which guarantees the majority’s participation and watches after national interests. Pushing for an electoral transition to civilian rule was not a means of altering the military’s dominant position. What emerged from such an electoral process was some kind of formalistic military-dominated civilian rule. Indeed, it is hard to label a government whose security forces were famous for their atrocities and human rights violations as ‘a fledgling democracy’.

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