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Russell Crandall

Excerpt

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Introduction

Winning the Cold War is not a pretty thing when you look into it.

– Jefferson Morley, novelist and *Washington Post*
correspondent, 1992¹

“Unimaginable Sight of a Sea of Black-and-Red Guerrilla Flags”

The civil war between El Salvador’s government and Marxist guerrillas began in 1980 and endured for 12 cruel years. Even for Central America’s violent ways during the Cold War, the Salvadoran conflict was exceptionally bloody; it took roughly 75,000 lives and displaced more than a million people in this tiny, impoverished Central American nation of 5 million. Unwilling to tolerate an advance of apparent Soviet and Cuban-backed communism in its geopolitical backyard in what turned out to be the last phase of the Cold War, three successive U.S. presidential administrations (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush) provided more than \$6 billion in military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government. The goal was to check the most formidable guerrilla insurgency – collectively known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) – in Latin America’s modern history. This effort was America’s largest counterinsurgency and nation-building campaign after Vietnam and before Iraq and Afghanistan.

At a 19th-century castle in Mexico City on January 16, 1992, after a couple years of exhausting and sporadic UN-led negotiations, the Salvadoran government signed a peace deal with the Marxist rebels. To the surprise of many observers, the 1992 peace pact led to a complete ceasefire and demobilization over the next year that formally ended the civil war. Equally striking, the agreement reduced the Salvadoran military's size and budget and authorized the guerrillas' transformation from a Marxist insurgency into a democratic political party. Because many of the key measures of the peace agreement involved drastic reforms to the Armed Forces of El Salvador (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador, FAES) and state intelligence services as well as the guerrillas' acceptance of the democratic system they had fought against, the Salvadoran peace agreement was dubbed a "negotiated revolution."² This propitious outcome was even more dramatic in the aftermath of a ferocious guerrilla offensive in late 1989 that led many observers to conclude that the brutal war had no end in sight.³

In San Salvador in January 1992, foreign correspondents described the theretofore-unimaginable sight of a sea of black-and-red guerrilla flags and supporters filling the main plaza in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral to celebrate the peace accord. Most journalists reminded their readers that although it was now a symbol of peace and reconciliation, the cathedral had been the site of often violent anti-government protests and harsh security force reprisals during the late 1970s, leading up to the start of the civil war.⁴ The cathedral itself was "adorned with an enormous banner" of the murdered Archbishop Óscar Romero, revered around the world for his gospel of non-violence amid El Salvador's savagery.⁵ A few weeks later, in the ceremony to mark the beginning of the ceasefire, guerrilla commanders and army officers together sang the Salvadoran national anthem.⁶

"Today El Salvador Is a Whale of a Lot Better"

Given the Salvadoran civil war's remarkable resolution, it is easy to understand how many concluded that El Salvador appeared to be an American victory in one of the last battles of the Cold War. Washington had spent a decade and large sums in aid to the Salvadoran government to ensure that the Marxist guerrillas did not seize power. But to what degree can the outcome in El Salvador be attributed to American

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intervention? And what lessons can be learned about the effectiveness and limitations of U.S. intervention in Third World proxy wars during the Cold War?

A decade later, these questions became more than the subject of historical interest. In the darkest days of the Iraq War, U.S. policymakers and commentators looked to the lessons of El Salvador to provide a path forward in the face of a vicious insurgency that seemed to be winning. To Vice President Dick Cheney and many others, the U.S. campaign to save El Salvador represented one of the most dramatic successes of Cold War–era U.S. counterinsurgency and nation-building. In this telling of the story, not more than a few dozen U.S. military non-combat advisors in El Salvador at any given time helped professionalize the once hapless Salvadoran military, resulting in reduced human rights abuses and “ultimate success” on the battlefield against the guerrillas.⁷ In addition, Washington aggressively pushed political and economic reforms, including a series of “free elections endorsed by the majority of the people,” which demonstrated to the world that Marxist insurgents had little support and that the Salvadoran government was legitimate.⁸ Economic policies, such as support for bank nationalization and an ambitious land reform program were surprisingly “leftist” given that Washington’s impetus for becoming involved in El Salvador was to save it from communism. These sorts of reforms, the interpretation goes, are what ultimately forced the guerrillas to “seek victory through a political solution” because a military victory was no longer possible. Indeed, the campaign in El Salvador was seen as such a success that it became the “anti-Vietnam” template: using a light U.S. military presence to train the indigenous forces to do the actual fighting while simultaneously legitimizing the local client government through economic reforms and democracy.⁹ And the Pentagon even gave it a name: the Salvador Option.

This book uses the term “Salvador Option” as easy shorthand to describe U.S. policy in El Salvador from the late 1970s until the early 1990s when the war officially ended. This is not intended, however, in any way to endorse the U.S. military’s subsequent understanding of it as a successful counterinsurgency and nation-building model.

Given how successful some observers perceived this model to be, it is not surprising that many military experts believed that the elements of the Salvador Option could be exported to far-flung and

seemingly incongruous theaters like Iraq. One of the Iraq War's most visible intellectual advocates, Max Boot, wrote that the Salvador Option was "tremendously successful" and therefore the model for Washington to follow in Iraq.¹⁰ Boot also attempted to obliquely address some of the controversy over the legacy of U.S. involvement in El Salvador: "I can tell you what is not meant by the El Salvador option, death squads."¹¹ Eliot Cohen, a military historian and State Department official in the George W. Bush administration, agreed, "We did counterinsurgency very well in Salvador."¹² During his October 5, 2004, vice-presidential debate with Democratic candidate John Edwards, Cheney responded to a question about the status of the seemingly dire situation in Iraq by referencing the Salvador Option:

Twenty years ago we had a similar situation in El Salvador. We had a guerrilla insurgency [that] controlled roughly a third of the country, 75,000 people dead, and we held free elections. I was there as an observer on behalf of the Congress. The human drive for freedom, the determination of these people to vote, was unbelievable. And the terrorists would come in and shoot up polling places; as soon as they left, the voters would come back and get in line and would not be denied the right to vote. And today El Salvador is a whale of a lot better because we held free elections. The power of that concept is enormous. And it will apply in Afghanistan, and it will apply as well in Iraq.¹³

"The Sick-Sweet Stench of Carnal Refuse"

In contrast to Dick Cheney's rosy interpretation, many critics of the Salvador Option told a much less honorable tale, one filled with some of the worst stories of Cold War atrocity and abuse.¹⁴ From this viewpoint, the United States either knowingly supported or conveniently overlooked the barbaric Salvadoran government's death squads that hunted down innocent civilians. Instead of pushing for a negotiated settlement between the warring factions that could have ended the war soon after it broke out, Washington embraced a "military solution" that made the violence and suffering worse. Via often nefarious and deceptive means, U.S. officials took what was a domestic and popular insurgency fighting a repressive Washington-backed government and painted it as a Moscow-and-Havana-manufactured communist insurgency.¹⁵ Any positive outcomes of the Salvador Option, they contended, occurred despite U.S. policies. If anything, Washington

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took credit for developments that its policies – until perhaps the very end of the war – in fact had little to do with. They also charged that U.S. officials claiming victory failed to consider that the cost of “success” was the deaths of 75,000 Salvadorans and an untold level of human suffering.

Considering this human toll and the belief that U.S. policies were directly or indirectly responsible, Robert White, former ambassador to El Salvador, called the Salvador Option “one of the most disgraceful chapters in the history of U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁶ Not surprisingly, years later these same critics condemned reports of the Pentagon endorsing the Salvador Option as a model for Iraq.¹⁷ One of these critics, Christopher Dickey, wrote in 2007:

Having watched the slaughter in El Salvador first hand during the 1980s, having lost many friends and acquaintances to the butchers there – among them nuns, priests and an archbishop who will someday be sainted – and having been targeted myself, I have something of a personal interest in this notion. I’m not about to forget the bodies lying unclaimed in the streets, the families of the victims too afraid to pick them up lest they become targets as well. When I heard talk of a Salvador Option [for Iraq], I can’t help but think about El Playón, a wasteland of volcanic rock that was one of the killers’ favorite dumping grounds. I’ve never forgotten the sick-sweet stench of carnal refuse there, the mutilated corpses half-devoured by mongrels and buzzards, the hollow eyes of a human skull peering up through the loose-piled rocks, the hair fallen away from the bone like a gruesome halo.¹⁸

In 2005, another writer, Jason Rowe, took issue with Cheney’s assertions in the vice-presidential debate: “As years of continuing abuses attest, the 1984 Salvadoran elections Cheney praises were little more than an attempt to provide window dressing for one of the world’s most repressive regimes, giving it a veil of fake democratic respectability. Many opposition leaders were already imprisoned, exiled, or murdered, leaving them unable to mount much of an electoral campaign.”¹⁹ Writing in the Catholic magazine *America* for commemoration of the 25th anniversary of Archbishop Romero’s assassination by rightist death squads, Rowe further reflected:

To both American Catholics and Americans in general, the witness of these martyrs revealed the dark underbelly of the policies pursued by the United States in Latin America. As the region’s poor suffered extreme deprivation and inequality, the United States lent its support to their oppressors, backing the

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dirty wars, coups and human rights abuses of some of the world's most repressive regimes. These sobering realities, to which people like Romero testified, cut through the popular American mythology of the cold war, in which the United States stood as a beneficent beacon of freedom in a world darkened by the threat of totalitarian Communism. It was not the Soviet Union that was on the scene in El Salvador, but the poor. For years, the United States supported a Salvadoran regime that threatened both those in need and those who ministered to them in the name of God.²⁰

In addition to this criticism that Washington's policies in El Salvador were morally reprehensible, others contended that they simply did not work. An April 2005 editorial in the left-of-center *New Republic* magazine explained how "contrary to conservative conventional wisdom," U.S. policy in El Salvador was "ultimately ineffectual" other than "contributing to the death of tens of thousands of civilians."²¹ According to this school of thought, it was the winding down of the Cold War and the mutual understanding of the Salvadoran military and the Marxist guerrillas that neither side could win outright that was responsible for the ultimate outcome.

We must also remember what a massive and controversial role "Salvador" held in American society at the height of the war in the early to mid-1980s. It divided Congress and the American public into pro and con camps at a time when the wounds of Vietnam had still not healed. Churches and other solidarity groups became mobilized and influential. Indeed, El Salvador was a Rorschach test for seeing where people came out on post-Vietnam foreign policy. Partly because Salvador never became the next Vietnam, the Salvador Option, other than receiving a surge of attention at one dire moment in the Iraq War, is mostly forgotten today – despite the many important lessons its unfiltered story holds for understanding U.S. foreign policy past and present.

The Least Worst Salvador Option

So which Salvador Option narrative is right? Dick Cheney's shining model of U.S. steadfast resolve or the critics' moral shame and strategic dud? Given how oppositional these two competing descriptions appear, it would seem that only one or neither could be correct. This book attempts to get beyond these incomplete and rigid polar positions

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to better understand the reality of the Salvador Option. This third-way interpretation does not aim to simply split the difference between the two conventional narratives; rather, it offers a thorough and fair-minded evaluation based on the available evidence.

Washington's lengthy campaign in El Salvador rested on the pervasive belief that sustained U.S. involvement there would bolster moderate civilian and military elements at the expense of the rightist oligarchs and death squads on one side and the Marxist insurgents on the other. For its proponents, this grin-and-bear it approach – what can be called “engagement” – was seen as a “least worst” option compared to a host of unappealing alternatives that included a direct U.S. combat mission or disengagement to leave El Salvador to its own devices. And, by the same token, it was the winding down of the Cold War in 1989–90 that led the Bush administration to seek to disengage from what it increasingly viewed as its Central American ulcer.

This is not to say that this engagement was always effective or appropriate morally or strategically; yet understanding its Cold War logic – a dichotomous, “we-they” logic axiomatic to most officials during these three presidencies – allows us to put the Salvador Option in the necessary historical, ideological, and even psychological context over this protracted period.²²

This book argues that much of the actual implementation of U.S. policy in El Salvador was in fact carried out in a largely ad hoc fashion in country without strategic guidance from Washington. Yet, while the Salvador Option was never an actual “strategy,” if this is defined as a specific plan of action, U.S. involvement occurred within the overarching Cold War-era anti-communist frame of reference that we call containment. The Salvador Option was also squarely part of the post-Vietnam era – where even the U.S. military was wary of repeating such a protracted, expensive, and controversial war – which helps explain why Washington opted for the light footprint, counterinsurgency, and nation-building by proxy versus a full-scale campaign.

Yet, as we will see, there was much that various key U.S. officials and agencies did not agree on in terms of how the Salvador Option should be implemented. Skeptics were not convinced by Washington's self-serving pronouncements to justify raw U.S. ambition, what French leader Charles de Gaulle called “power cloaked in idealism.”²³ Ambassador White once asked rhetorically about El Salvador: “How can a

country the size of Massachusetts – where you can see the entire country from 9,000 feet from a helicopter – how can a homegrown revolution in that country threaten the security of the United States?”²⁴ It is a legitimate question, and one that could have applied to numerous cases of American involvement in putative geopolitical sideshows during the Cold War. But the answer in part is that, rightly or wrongly, legions of American policymakers believed that the “Salvadors” of the world mattered to U.S. global strategic interests – and especially so close to home in the Western Hemisphere. If we define success narrowly, there is little question that the Salvador Option achieved its Cold War strategic objectives. Much more difficult, however, is determining at what human price – a toll suffered almost entirely by Salvadorans, not Americans.

Another key argument is that, contrary to what is sometimes assumed by both supporters and critics alike, U.S. policy in El Salvador was not solely military, even during the relatively hawkish years of the first Reagan administration. In addition, the Carter administration’s hastily formulated policy to engage El Salvador but stay well short of a full-scale American commitment endured through the end of the war in 1992.

In Pentagon lore, the Salvador Option is remembered as a mission where U.S. advisors beat into shape the formerly listless “9-to-5” Salvadoran military. Yet, ironically, the self-imposed and congressionally mandated severe restrictions on U.S. military (and especially combat) involvement – born out of the fear that El Salvador would become another Vietnam – meant that the U.S. *military* campaign was far less significant than the viceroy-like *diplomatic* and *political* role played by a series of American ambassadors and other civilian officials. That is, the real story of the Salvador Option is the tremendous significance of the involved U.S. civilian officials – what I label “imperial diplomats” – when compared to what was in fact a limited U.S. military advisory mission carried out by “imperial grunts.” It is also the case that U.S. imperial diplomats and imperial grunts, often acting quite independently or extemporaneously, represented more of the totality of the Salvador Option than was normally understood.

Some leading U.S. officials and private actors and groups did not always cooperate with the engagement, which they viewed as antithetical to their beliefs. In some cases influential anti-war solidarity organizations circumvented what they viewed as immoral U.S. policies

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by protesting and sending humanitarian funds directly to the FMLN. Conservative political circles in Washington that most visibly included Republican Senator Jesse Helms worked directly with hardline conservative politicians – at least one of whom was linked to death squad activity – to encourage them to ignore U.S. pressure on human rights or economic reforms. Public acceptance of U.S. engagement was hindered in the early years by the Reagan administration's often muddled rhetoric describing its Salvador policy – sometimes even by Reagan himself – which implied a more singularly militarized and unyielding approach than what it eventually settled on.²⁵

Part of this stems from the fact that, on El Salvador at least, Reagan's hardliners were either eventually sidelined or were never as influential as their public bluster suggested. That these same foreign policy hawks successfully pursued a more aggressive approach toward the Marxist "Sandinista" regime in Nicaragua has sometimes allowed us to assume that they were equally hawkish on Salvador policy. Make no mistake, the Reagan administration's moderation on El Salvador did not mean that it had somehow abandoned its broader anti-communist ideology or goals of preventing Marxism's spread in Central America. Rather, echoing Carter's conversion to a more hawkish foreign policy in Central America late in his administration, Reagan's "Cold Warrior" advisors tacked the opposite way, from hardline to moderate – or simply vanished from the debate – and came to see engagement as the most preferable means of achieving its goal of containing communist expansion in Central America.

Undemocratic Means to Save Salvadoran Democracy

One of the main critiques of U.S. policy in El Salvador was that throughout the decade Washington intentionally ignored opportunities for "honorable and constructive engagement" that could have ended the war sooner. In this depiction, epitomized in an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* in 1992, from the beginning rebel leaders made "repeated offers" to negotiate only to have the Reagan administration reject them as "attempts by guerrillas to shoot their way into power."²⁶

We will see, though, that the Reagan administration in fact both privately and publicly acknowledged the need for a political solution to the war even in its initial more hardline years. The rub, however, was that Reagan's (and Carter's and Bush's) concept of negotiations

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and peace was drastically different from the concept held by the guerrillas and their supporters inside and outside El Salvador, which made progress virtually impossible. And ultimately, the format of the UN-brokered negotiations that led to the war's dramatic resolution entailed the guerrillas giving up their long-standing demand for power sharing and instead competing for political power through elections – exactly what Washington had insisted on from the beginning as a precondition for a settlement.

A related finding is that much of the most controversial involvement came in the political and economic – not military – realm. For example, contrary to what we might otherwise assume, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) covert operations did in fact attempt to bolster centrist Salvadoran political forces at the expense of what at the time could be considered the country's death squad or oligarchic right. Parts of the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy even repeatedly resorted to “undemocratic” means to save Salvadoran democracy. Thus, America's century-old paternalism in the Western Hemisphere was alive and well in El Salvador – but in a way that unexpectedly promoted moderation over rightist and leftist ideology and violence.

Another point of consideration is whether it could indeed be the case that Washington's decision to engage El Salvador meant that while the Salvadoran military never totally eliminated its abusive ways, U.S. involvement helped to dampen its reflexive and deeply held authoritarian tendencies. A related element in the Salvador Option story is that over the course of the 1980s, the growing dependence on U.S. assistance combined with first episodic but then more sustained pressure on human rights helped belatedly tear the reformist elements within the Salvadoran military away from the oligarchy's most intransigent actors. Despite what it at times appeared to be, engagement was never solely about defeating the FMLN militarily but rather preventing it from taking over the country, as the ideologically aligned Marxist insurgents had successfully accomplished in neighboring Nicaragua in 1979. As one U.S. diplomat pithily put it during the war's early years, the U.S. campaign was to “save the economy, stop the violence, have the elections and ride into the sunset.”²⁷

It is important also to understand that the Salvador Option was not solely an American story. Too often the undeniably deep U.S. involvement is given credit for either causing or hindering peace