The Salvador Option

The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

The civil war between the government of El Salvador and Marxist guerrillas began in 1980 and endured for 12 cruel years. The conflict 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 backyard, three successive U.S. administrations provided more than $6 billion in military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government in order to check the most formidable guerrilla insurgency in Latin America’s modern history. This effort was America’s largest counterinsurgency campaign after Vietnam and before Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to formally ending the war, the 1992 peace agreement brokered by the United Nations reduced the Salvadoran military’s size and transformed the guerrillas from a Marxist insurgency into a political party. To backers, the U.S. campaign to save El Salvador represented a dramatic success of Cold War–era U.S. counterinsurgency. The Pentagon even gave it a name: the Salvador Option. Critics, on the other hand, have contended that U.S. support for a bloodthirsty Salvadoran regime resulted in untold violence and a moral black stain for Washington.

Despite the important lessons its story holds for understanding U.S. foreign policy past and present, the Salvador Option is largely forgotten today. Relying on thousands of documents from U.S. and Salvadoran archives as well as interviews with participants on both sides of the war, The Salvador Option offers a thorough and fair-minded third way interpretation of the available evidence. If success is defined narrowly, there is little question that the Salvador Option achieved its Cold War strategic objective of checking communism. Much more difficult, however, is to determine what human price this “success” exacted – a toll suffered almost entirely by Salvadorans.

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1977–1992

RUSSELL CRANDALL

Davidson College
To Britta, my forever love
“Nothing is black and white, darling,” Alice remarked. “Not even in so just a cause. Here, too, those confused grays appear that cloud everything.”

– Novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Dream of the Celt*

When you go digging in the past, you always find what you’re looking for.

– Journalist Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig
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Anti-communist Liberation Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Anticomunista – Guerra de Eliminación, FALANGE)
Anti-Imperialist League (Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas, LADLA)
Armed Forces of El Salvador (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador, FAES)
Armed Forces of Liberation (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación, FAL)
Armed Forces of National Resistance (Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional, FARN)
Broad Opposition Front (Frente Amplio de Oposición, FAO)
Central American Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Centroamericano, PSOCA)
Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, PDC)
Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (Comité en Solidaridad con el Pueblo de El Salvador, CISPES)
Communist Party of El Salvador (Partido Comunista Salvadoreño, PCS)
Communist Party USA (CPUSA)
Democratic Convergence (Convergencia Democrática, CD)
Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR)
Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí Para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN)
Guatemalan Labor Party (Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo, PGT)
Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, EGP)
List of Organizations

Labor Party (Partido Laborista de El Salvador, PLES)
Military Youth Movement (Movimiento de la Juventud Militar, MJM)
National Broad Front (Frente Amplio Nacional, FAN)
National Commission for Reconstruction (Comisión Nacional de Restauración de Áreas, CONARA)
National Conciliation Party (Partido de Conciliación Nacional, PCN)
Nationalist Democratic Organization (Organización Democrática Nacionalista, ORDEN)
National Liberation Front (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, MLN)
National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Opositora, UNO)
National Republic Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA)
National Resistance (Resistencia Nacional, RN)
National Revolutionary Union (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, URNG)
Nicaraguan Democratic Force (Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense, FDN)
People's Liberation Movement (Movimiento de Liberación Popular, MPL)
Popular Forces of Liberation (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación “Farabundo Martí,” FPL)
Popular Leagues of February 28 (Las Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero, LP-28)
Popular Liberation Forces (Movimiento de Liberación Popular, MLP)
Popular Revolutionary Block (Bloque Popular Revolucionario, BPR)
Rebel Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes, FAR)
Revolutionary Coordinating Committee of the Masses (Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas, CRM)
Revolutionary Government Junta of El Salvador (Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno, JRG)
Revolutionary Movement 13th November (Movimiento Revolucionario 13 Noviembre, MR-13)
Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas, ORPA)
Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos, PRTC)
List of Organizations

Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification (Partido Revolucionario de Unificaci´on Democr´atica, PRUD)
Salvadoran Anti-communist Army (Ej´ercito Salvadore˜no Anticomunista, ESA)
Salvadoran Institute for Agrarian Transformation (Instituto Salvadore˜no de Transformaci´on Agraria, ISTA)
Salvadoran National Security Agency (Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadore˜na, ANESAL)
Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberaci´on Nacional, FSLN)
Treasury Police (Polic´ıa de Hacienda, PH)
Unified Popular Action Front (Frente de Acci ´on Popular Unificada, FAPU)
White Warriors Union (Unión Guerrera Blanca, UGB)
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