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978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

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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.

Russell Crandall is a professor of American foreign policy and international politics at Davidson College in North Carolina where he has received its two student-selected teaching awards. His previous books include *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (Cambridge, 2014); *The United States and Latin America after the Cold War* (Cambridge, 2008); *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy toward Colombia* (Lynne Rienner, 2002). Interwoven with his academic career, Crandall has held various U.S. government appointments, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Office of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon, and the National Security Council at the White House. He is a writer for *The American Interest* magazine, editorial board member at *America's Quarterly* magazine, and contributing editor and book reviewer for the London-based journal, *Survival: Global Politics & Strategy*.

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To Britta, my forever love

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Russell Crandall

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“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

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>List of Organizations</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
1 Introduction	1
PART ONE. EL SALVADOR IN THE COLD WAR	
2 Farabundo Martí, La Matanza, and a Stolen Election	15
3 The United States in Latin America	25
4 American Military Mission in El Salvador	36
5 A Divided Nation: Military Traditions, Democratic Third Way, and Liberation Theology	46
6 Guerrillas Are Born	65
PART TWO. JIMMY CARTER	
7 Revolution and Counterinsurgency in Guatemala	79
8 Mass Organizations	90
9 Carter Arrives	102
10 Carter and the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, 1979	114
11 An October Coup	122
12 Carter Engages Salvador	132
13 Archbishop Romero	140

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
14	Land	149
15	The American Churchwomen	160
16	Arming the Rebels	167
17	Guerrilla Final Offensive, January 1981	176
18	Death Squads	183
PART THREE. RONALD REAGAN		
19	Reagan Arrives	201
20	Reagan and Salvador	213
21	El Mozote	223
22	Another Vietnam	232
23	Solidarity	239
24	Troop Cap and Certifying Human Rights	251
25	Reagan Gambles on Elections, 1982	261
26	The Shultz Doctrine	275
27	Human Rights	287
28	Henry Kissinger	300
29	Contras	306
30	“Elections Yes, Dialogue No,” 1984 Presidential Election	317
31	La Palma	331
32	Esquipulas	340
33	Counterinsurgency I	346
34	Counterinsurgency II	362
35	Zona Rosa	371
36	Air War	377
37	José Napoleón Duarte	382
38	Iran-Contra	397
PART FOUR. GEORGE H. W. BUSH		
39	Elusive Justice	405
40	Pessimism	409
41	Bush Arrives	415
42	Bush, Cristiani, and the 1989 Vote	421
43	Guerrilla Second Final Offensive, November 1989	431

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992
Russell Crandall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents ix

44	Jesuit Killings	442
45	SAMs	453
46	United Nations and Peace	461
47	Demobilization	472

PART FIVE. POSTWAR

48	Postwar Salvador	487
49	Concluding Thoughts	496

	<i>Notes</i>	507
	<i>Bibliography</i>	645
	<i>Index</i>	677

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992
Russell Crandall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of Figures

4.1	Map: Guerrilla Fronts in El Salvador	<i>page</i> 37
5.1	Father Rogelio Poncel	59
5.2	Graduating Cadets in Full Uniform	62
6.1	Salvadoran Revolutionary Left	67
7.1	Classified Map of Guatemalan Guerrilla Fronts, Early 1980s	85
7.2	Exhumation at a Mass Grave Near Comalapa, Guatemala, 2003	87
8.1	Bodies of Murdered Civilians	96
8.2	Collecting Contributions for Families of the “Disappeared” in Front of the Metropolitan Cathedral	100
11.1	Members of the Revolutionary Government Junta of El Salvador	130
13.1	Archbishop Óscar Romero	144
15.1	Exhumation of Four American Churchwomen, December 1980	163
16.1	Map: Clandestine Arms Shipments to the FMLN in El Salvador, 1982	173
18.1	Roberto D’Aubuisson	189
18.2	Death Squad Victim	193
19.1	Map: Lampooning U.S. Conservatives’ View of the Soviet Threat	205
19.2	“Si, President Duarte”	208
21.1	El Mozote, Morazán Province, December 1981	226
21.2	Radio Venceremos	231

xii	<i>List of Figures</i>	
22.1	Foreign Correspondents	236
23.1	Peace Pledge	246
23.2	Guerrilla Medical Brigade	248
25.1	FMLN Fighters	273
26.1	Elliott Abrams, Richard McCormack, and George Shultz	278
27.1	Jeane Kirkpatrick and Thomas Pickering	292
29.1	Map: The Contra War, 1980s	311
31.1	Rebels at La Palma	335
31.2	Journalists Covering the Peace Talks	338
33.1	Dead Rebel Fighter	351
33.2	Atlacatl Battalion	353
34.1	Wife Mourns Her Dead Husband Soldier	365
34.2	Salvador Soldiers in Combat	369
37.1	José Napoleón Duarte	384
37.2	Duarte Sketch	386
37.3	Jose Napoleón Duarte and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova	395
42.1	Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora	422
42.2	Anti-war Rally in Chicago	426
42.3	Roberto D'Aubuisson and Alfredo Cristiani, 1989	427
43.1	Guerrilla Fighter, San Salvador, 1989	434
46.1	Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Álvaro de Soto	465
46.2	Ceasefire Day in San Salvador	470
47.1	Weapon Disarmament Ceremony	477
47.2	Guerrilla Fighters in a "Zone of Concentration"	478
47.3	Ambassador William Walker in Rebel Territory	479
48.1	Joaquín Villalobos	492
48.2	FMLN Leadership	494
49.1	Romero Assassination Anniversary March	506

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of Organizations

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)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

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)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of Organizations

xv

Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification (Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática, PRUD)

Salvadoran Anti-communist Army (Ejército Salvadoreño Anticomunista, ESA)

Salvadoran Institute for Agrarian Transformation (Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria, ISTA)

Salvadoran National Security Agency (Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadoreña, ANESAL)

Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN)

Treasury Police (Policía de Hacienda, PH)

Unified Popular Action Front (Frente de Acción Popular Unificada, FAPU)

White Warriors Union (Unión Guerrera Blanca, UGB)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992
Russell Crandall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Acknowledgments

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13459-1 - The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992

Russell Crandall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xix

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T. Henry Wilson, Jr. Field, Davidson, North Carolina,

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