

# El Salvador: War and Revolution

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*One of the more horrifying chapters in the history of American imperialism took place in the tiny nation of El Salvador in the 1980's. At least 75,000 civilians were killed in order to stop a revolution in an impoverished country. They died in massacres, were bombed with napalm, tortured, raped, assassinated and disappeared. They died to preserve a system where one in four babies died before age two from malnutrition or lack of access to medical care. In the 1983 only 6% of the population earned more than \$240 a month while satisfying basic needs would have cost \$344 dollars a month. A nation of peasants who lived in dire poverty even those with tiny plots of land struggled to survive by growing crops for food. 40% of the population were landless peasants starving while trying to survive as seasonal laborers. Amid so much horror and bloodshed no one even counted all the deaths from poverty and misery. This is the "Freedom" America fought to maintain during the cold war the freedom for a few to get rich off the misery of millions. In El Salvador they were called Oligarchy or the 14 families although by the 1980's there were between 40 or 200 rich families. They owned most of the land and ran the banks because their ancestors had stolen all the Indians lands and then founded banks in the 18th and 19th Centuries. They had created an army and police to enforce this unequal order.*

The oligarchy, the army, and the Church had traditionally controlled El Salvador, but by the late 1970's the Oligarchy and the Army had declared war on the Church and the United States was now the third part of the triad. The seeds of the horrors of the 1980's had been planted in the early 1960's when special forces some rotating from Vietnam arrived to teach counter-insurgency and the advantages of death squads. CIA agents under USAID cover arrived to train police intelligence units and equip them with computers to make lists of subversives. By the 1970's 200 people a year would be murdered union leaders, peasant organizers, teachers, protestors. Yet the masses were increasingly organized and radicalized and as fears of revolution spread the murders began to skyrocket.

The Carter Administration had a contradictory policy on El Salvador. Some in the State department wanted El Salvador to rein in the killing. However they were over ruled (or betrayed their own principles) by ruthless officials like **Zbigniew Brzezinski** who favored continuing to support brutal dictators to preserve capitalism. With the election of President Reagan contradiction was replaced with ever escalating full-scale support and an escalating bloodbath. Amazingly despite the flood of weapons and advisers coming from the US the revolutionaries of the FMLN managed to fight the massive killing machine to a stalemate. One day after the fall of the Berlin Wall the FMLN Guerrillas launched a massive offensive which the CIA believed was impossible capturing sections of the capital San Salvador. The new President Bush with other conquests in mind (The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Central and Eastern Europe, Panama and Iraq) finally decided to push for a negotiated settlement. The war would end with the left-wing opposition finally able to participate in politics without fear of their lives. Of course the war did not truly end but changed shape into a war on drugs a gang war as the fascist ARENA party ruled the country for 20 years. In 2009 the FMLN would

win the elections. Eventually destabilized by tactics similar to what happened in Brazil (a corruption investigation aimed at discrediting the left) they lost elections earlier this year and El Salvador is now once more ruled by a US puppet **President Nayib Bukele** (image below). The war for Latin America continues a war of liberation from capitalism and imperialism.



The war in El Salvador had its roots in the 18th and 19th century. Of course before that there were the horrors of the Spanish conquest and the system of forced labor in the colonial era. El Salvador was part of the governate of Guatemala in this period. However in the later phase of Spanish colonialism the Indians were allowed to live on their communal lands and were ruled through local native rulers as long as they produced their quota of tribute. After independence El Salvador's liberals decided to change all that they wanted to create huge plantations of cash crops namely coffee and this also required a huge influx of laborers. By destroying the communal land system and privatizing the country they would be able to steal the land they needed. By dispossessing the Indians they would also force them to work for the coffee plantations since they could no longer grow their own food. In 1846 the state coffee plantations were privatized and in 1881 communal lands were abolished. They also passed laws that basically forced Indians to work for the rich landowners.

They created an army and a rural police force to control the countryside with an iron fist. French advisers helped them create a modern army. The whole state was created to enslave and dispossess the majority of it's own people. Of course in the United States the Army had formed to carry out genocide and steal Indian land while the police had their origins in slave patrols to hunt runaway slaves. Out of the theft and enslavement of El Salvador were born the 14 families who became fantastically wealthy from the plunder. Naturally they viewed their countrymen and women as subhuman brutes who needed to be kept in line. The Indians revolted again and again with 5 major revolts during the 19th century but they were always spontaneous and localized and so easily crushed. The army and police kept the countryside under a constant state of martial law anyone who dared to resist risked murder

or imprisonment and the rich landowners treated their employees like slaves.

Jumping forward to El Salvador in the 1930's another pivotal moment in it's history. The last truly free election (possibly until 2009) was in 1931 and **President Arturo Araujo** was elected he was a mild reformer who allowed labor organizing in the city but not the countryside. The year before in 1930 the revolutionary **Agustin Farabundo Marti** had returned from an eventful exile. In the United States he had been active in the Anti-Imperialist league before being forced to flee by the New York Police, in Nicaragua he had fought with the revolutionary General Sandino against the US marines waging brutal war on the country that saw the first use of dive bombers. Farabundo Marti had founded the Central American Socialist party and Red Aid. Between 1930-1932 Marti and his comrades would organize the workers and peasants of El Salvador Marti would be arrested and released a few times. Even the American military attache Major Harris felt the country was ripe for revolution. However the revolutionary forces were still in their infancy.



Unfortunately in a pattern that would repeat many times even mild talk of reform proved too much for the oligarchy who began to plot a coup with the military. **General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez** (image on the left) seized power early in 1932. He was nicknamed El Brujo because of his obsession with the occult and was infamous for saying

“It is a greater crime to kill an ant than a man, for when a man dies he becomes reincarnated while an ant dies forever.”

He also claimed

“It is good that children go barefoot. That way they can better receive the beneficial effuvia of the planet, the vibrations of the earth. Plants and animals don't use shoes”

Despite his strange beliefs he was a ruthless and devious dictator modeling his country on Fascist Spain, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. In those days El Salvador had no need of American advisers or weapons it relied on the fascist powers to train its army and police and to supply weapons paid for with the profit from supplying coffee to the axis. Six weeks after General Martinez coup the peasants rose in an uprising demanding higher wages. Although 100 land owners and their private guards were killed it was relatively bloodless. Although the communists welcomed the uprising and joined it they were not truly responsible. Nonetheless the fascist General Martinez launched an anti-communist red scare and a bloodbath in the countryside.

Farabundo Marti was among the 32,000 victims of what is known as the Matanza which means massacre in Spanish. Some were killed for being blond and thus apparently suspected Russians. The vast majority of the people killed as part of a genocide against the Indians. Anyone wearing Indian dress or speaking an Indian language was killed and after 1932 Indian culture was largely wiped out people were so traumatized they abandoned their distinctive clothes and no longer dared to speak to children in their native language. Farabundo Marti would go on to inspire the revolutionaries of the 1970s and 80's. General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez would have a death squad named after him and his Matanza would be used as a model for the dirty war of the 70's and 80's.

At the same time he was crushing the peasants General Martinez also had to put down an uprising in the army. They had risen up in protest of his coup and since many were poor peasant conscripts they refused to massacre peasants. General Martinez was able to crush them but although a military man he never trusted the army. Instead he relied on what would later be known as the Security Forces the Police and the National Guard. Ironically the National Guard had been meant as a reform to replace the Army role in the countryside back in 1912. It was quickly transformed into a military/police hybrid charged with terrorizing the countryside more reliable than the army because better paid. He also relied heavily on the police to arrest and kill subversives. He created fascist paramilitary groups recruited from the rich and modeled on the black shirts the Pro Patria the National Patriotic League and the Liga Roja. During the Matanza he created Civic Guards which acted as death squads of the rich who hunted the poor for sport. Hunting peasants for sport remained a popular pass time in El Salvador well into the 1970's. Those who could afford the membership fees to join the leagues received certificates that put them above the law. Martinez would rule until 1944 when his crushing of a military uprising and execution of its leaders who were officers enraged the public and the military the US pressured him into resigning. His successor General Menendez a reformer who promised free elections, and allowed unions to expand, but also authorized the massacre of protestors. He lasted only 5 months before being overthrown by Martinez's former chief of the National Police during the Matanza Colonel Osmin Aguirre y Salinas. For the next decades the oligarchs and the military maintained power through fixed elections and the occasional coup. The presidency was handed off from one military man to his hand-picked successor. The people continued to live in poverty and fear.

It was after the fall of Martinez and the end of World War 2 that US influence began to grow in El Salvador and the rest of Latin America. The "Cold War" had begun or rather as the bloody examples of Greece, Korea, Vietnam, El Salvador and many other countries demonstrate calling it World War 3 is more accurate. Through a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements the United States gained increasing control over Latin American militaries. The mutual defense pacts the US signed in Latin America became the model for

NATO. As for the new American trained militaries through a long chain of coups they would eventually transform most of Latin America into fascist police states. The most infamous example being the Operation Condor countries of the 1970's and 1980's countries like Brazil, Chile, Parguay, and Argentina. Militaries were reorganized to focus on combatting internal subversion rather than national defense. Police were trained to hunt political subversives instead of combatting traditional crime. As we have seen El Salvador was already run along these lines so all America needed to do was provide weapons and training. There was no need to launch coups to overthrow reformers as in Guatemala, no socialist government to be destroyed as in Chile.

In 1960 the example of the Cuban revolution inspired a mass movement to overthrow the latest military installed President Colonel Jose Maria Lemus. By October 26 1960 he was forced to resign replaced briefly by a reformist junta which released political prisoners. The US now obsessed with combatting anyone in Latin America that might be sympathetic to Cuba refused to recognize the new government and a countercoup soon toppled it. Colonel Julio Adalberto Rivera seized power and stole the 1961 elections. The failure of the Bay of Pigs and the escalating war in Vietnam lead the JFK administration to an obsession with counter-insurgency that would have dire consequences for El Salvador, Latin America, and the world. There is a complex backstory discussed in Fletcher Prouty's "The Secret Team". In attempting to transfer responsibility for covert operations from the CIA to the military JFK was naively relying on sectors of the military that retained close ties to the CIA like counter-insurgency theorist General Maxwell Taylor or the special forces. The tentacles of the CIA were already inescapable. Whatever the motivations the results were disastrous a massive expansion of Special Forces, restructuring the entire military and National security state to fight Counter-insurgency wars and the creation of AID (replacing the ICA) and it's branch the Office of Public Safety headed by Byron Engle. The Office of Public Safety (OPS) would train police worldwide in torture assassination and even terrorism. Decades of mass murder, torture, terrorism, assassinations and coups would follow. Of course such tactics had been a part of US strategy since the beginning of the cold war in places like Greece where fascist death squads terrorized the populace to South Korea and South Vietnam where the military, police and death squads carried out torture and mass murder. In fact they had their roots much earlier in the Philippines at the turn of the century and the military men who carried out that bloodbath had learned their trade by carrying out genocide against American Indians. Thus what took place in the early 60's during the JFK administration was merely a further institutionalization of this long obsession with counter insurgency warfare.

In Latin America this brutal new reality would be disguised behind the facade of the Alliance for Progress. The Alliance for Progress falsely promised to bring prosperity to Latin America through reform and economic aid to spark development. In reality it was merely a PR stunt to compete with the appeal of Castro's Cuba. The promised prosperity never arrived. Although the US did pour hundreds of millions in economic aid it did nothing to improve the lives of ordinary people. the money ended up in the hands of corrupt politicians or American corporations. In El Salvador which received the most money as it was intended as a poster child 15 years later the people were actually worse off the wages had declined and the number of landless peasants had tripled. The hidden more effective side of the Alliance for Progress was the determination to train the military and the police to crush any potential revolutions. After JFK was assassinated any pretense of reform or development aid was abandoned along with the whole Alliance for Progress campaign. The military and police training however would continue.

In El Salvador in the early 1960's the already brutal police and military were trained to be even more brutal and efficient. A team of special forces advisers many fresh from tours in Vietnam arrived to train the military in the need to create Counter-Guerrilla's a euphemism for death squads and terrorists. At this time there were no Guerrillas in El Salvador and no civil war. After the fall of General Martinez the military had abolished his fascist paramilitaries. Now the Americans had arrived to advise El Salvador on the need to recreate them. In Colombia in 1962 Special Forces under General William Yarborough also arrived to teach the virtues of death squads and his advice ended up in the public record. He advised the creation of "Civil and Military structures" to "as Necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and or terrorist activities against known Communist proponents." General Yarborough unleashed a bloodbath in Colombia that has continued to our own day. In El Salvador things were more secretive but the results were the same the creation of death squads. The main reason for their creation was plausible denial allowing the government to blame death squads for their own crimes. In El Salvador the police and military didn't even bother to remove their uniforms when kidnapping and killing their victims but their crimes were blamed on shadowy death squads anyways. Plausible denial would extend all the way to Washington and the American media by the 1980's although the people of El Salvador were not fooled. While pretending it wanted to rein in the death squads America was actually running everything behind the scenes via the CIA, MAP (Military Assistance Program) MTTs ( Military Training Teams the Special Forces advisers) MILGP (US Military Group), and USAID.

Initially in El Salvador the counter-organization created called ORDEN was used primarily to spy on subversives and compile lists and intimidate voters into voting for PCN the military party of choice. It's members were strongly indoctrinated along fascist lines. It was in the 1970's that it began to carry out torture kidnapping and assassinations that would escalate throughout the decade. ORDEN was created by the one of the key CIA assets in El Salvador General Jose Alberto "Chele" Medrano in addition to heading ORDEN he was also the head of the brutal National Guard. In addition to Special Forces teaching Counterinsurgency and the need for Counter-Guerrillas, Counter-Terror, and Counter-Organization the other key element in US strategy was the need to create a massive centralized intelligence apparatus linking the police, military, and ORDEN to a centralized communications apparatus and a computer network to compile lists of subversive's that would later be used to supply death lists to military police and paramilitary death squads. The CIA and it's front AID and it's branch the Office of Public Safety (OPS) were used to construct this network. Although brutal and efficient the police had been using telegraphs now they would have state of the art technology to wage their war on the people of El Salvador. Operating under OPS cover the CIA created a special investigations division in every branch of the police. They were all networked together with SNI later renamed ANSESAL a sort of hybrid of the CIA and NSA based in the presidential palace. Linked with military intelligence, the police intelligence and ORDEN ANSESAL was the center of the counter-insurgency war and the brainchild of the CIA.

El Salvador's already brutal police which massacred even common criminals were taught to be even more brutal by OPS advisers. The National Police, The Treasury Police, and the Immigration Police would all become notorious for their war crimes. The CIA also created a special investigations unit of the National Guard. Traditionally the military had preferred to let the police and National Guard handle repression. Thanks to US special forces advisers they learned that they too must take an active role which would massively increase the bodycount during the Reagan era. By 1972 the entire security apparatus was complete centralized trained and indoctrinated to carry out the dirty war. El Salvador and other

Central American countries were also networked together as part of CONDECA (the Central American version of Condor) with the Americans who were based in Panama. Panama was also where the infamous School of the Americas was based training the El Salvadoran military and the rest of Latin America to carry out torture, assassination and coups. In turn Central America was only one of the regions covered by the US Military Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) run out of Panama and later Miami, Florida.

In El Salvador by 1972 largely ignored in the rest of the world peasants were being “disappeared” kidnapped tortured and killed their mutilated corpses left out as a warning to others. In addition to the perfection of the apparatus of oppression the 1960’s saw history repeat itself as El Salvador’s oligarchs decided to start growing cotton as a cash crop along the coast those peasants who had been lucky enough to avoid losing their land to the coffee barons in the last century now lost their lands to the new Cotton plantations and the number of landless peasants skyrocketed from 12% to 40% fueling the revolutionary unrest of the 1970’s. A key safety valve to unrest in El Salvador was nearby Honduras which was comparatively much less densely populated. El Salvadoran peasants crossed the border to squat on lands or seek work. In 1969 the Honduran President decided to whip up a wave of anti-immigrant hysteria against these Salvadoran refugees leading to the “Soccer War” after Salvadoran refugees were murdered in riots and thousands were rounded up and deported. El Salvador won the war it’s invasion force was close to capturing the Honduran capital but Honduras barred any more Salvadoran immigrants from entering the country.

1972 was a key year in El Salvador the opposition had united and finally grown strong enough to win an election. The Christian democrats the socialists and even the communist tied parties were united into UNO. However Colonel Molina stole the election provoking a failed coup in favor of UNO that was crushed. UNO presidential candidate Napoleon Duarte was severely beaten. This provoked a wave of disillusionment with any hope for changing El Salvador by democratic means. By 1973 two revolutionary Guerrilla groups had been formed the FPL and the ERP and more were to follow. The FPL modeled it’s strategy on Vietnam’s Prolonged Peoples’ War (PPW). The ERP drew inspiration from the Cuban (and later Nicaraguan) model of hoping to spark an insurrection via a major offensive. Both groups carried out small attacks on the National Guard, bombed American corporations offices and assassinated war criminals.

In the countryside liberation theology was spreading. It’s origins were steeped in irony in 1968 Pope Paul VI one of the more corrupt and fascist popes spoke in Medellin Colombia later notorious as the home of an infamous CIA supported drug cartel. His message that catholics should work towards social justice unleashed a wave of liberation theology. Since his sinister history was largely unknown he inspired a new generation of idealistic clergy to try to improve the lives of the poor by organizing them as lay believers. In El Salvador Colonel Molina had announced that he would back land reform and the El Salvadoran church became involved in organizing the peasants. Molina angered the Oligarchs who set up ANEP and other right-wing lobby groups to oppose any land reform and so Molina quickly canceled any land reform. The church’s efforts to work for land reform had suddenly become extremely dangerous.



In 1976 President Molina was replaced by **President Carlos Humberto Romero** (image on the right) installed by the coffee barons. General Romero had studied Counterinsurgency at the School of The Americas worked in CONDECA and had been involved in expanding the

role of ORDEN under Molina and was a key link between the MILGP and the public safety advisers. Under Romero there were ten times as many assassinations and disappearances doubled. Under Molina around 200 political murders a year took place. Under Romero the numbers would double than triple. In 1977 General Romero issued the Law of Order which made it a crime to organize or criticize the government amounting to a license to kill. Yet the increasing repression only seemed to fuel the revolution during the 1970's. Teachers, Unions, Students peasants took to the streets in protest risking their lives. In 1975 dozens of students were massacred when the army machine-gunned protestors of a Miss Universe pageant there were 2,000 protestors. The next day 30,000 took to the streets. In the countryside the peasants were organized and demanding their rights inspired by liberation theology and radical school teachers. As the repression increased many were forced to join the guerrillas out of self-preservation once their names were on the death list the only way to stay safe was to take up arms in self-defense. Others joined to avenge their fallen family members, friends or lovers. Many more joined the popular organizations to demand an end to the killing, higher wages, land, free elections, and the right to organize without being killed.

1979 had been the bloodiest year since the Matanza and the country seemed on the verge of revolution. In nearby Nicaragua Somoza had fallen to the Sandinista revolution in July alarming the US, the Salvadoran Military, and the Oligarchy. President Carter was in the White House and had promised to clean up America's human rights record. His actual record in El Salvador would prove different. At the State department he put former civil rights activist Patricia Derian in charge of the new human rights division she was determined to force El Salvador to reform. She was always over ruled by the State Department Inter-American affairs division under Terrence A Todman which had long worked to turn all of Latin America into a mirror of El Salvador. However even the hint that it's human rights record might be examined caused General Romero to renounce military aid. It was a meaningless gesture as the American military mission remained to advise and supervise the ever escalating dirty war. Israel stepped in to take the US place as the main sponsor sending planes guns tanks and 100-200 advisers that would remain in the country throughout the 1980's. Israeli military advisers operated under the cover of an agricultural assistance program. However the fall of Somoza inspired the US to back a reformist coup to overthrow General Romero in the hopes of staving off a revolution.

It took place on October 15 1979 and would prove disastrous. It was led by the well-intentioned Colonel Majano and a clique of young officers who wanted land reform and to try war criminals. However to succeed they allied with right-wing military figures on the CIA payroll like Colonel Jose Guillermo Garcia and Col Jamie Abdul Gutierrez. The third faction was the civilian opposition that weren't yet allied with the Guerillas. Opposed to the new regime while secretly allied to the right-wing military were and also on CIA payroll was Major Roberto D'Aubusson who would go on to found ARENA a fascist party inspired by the Nazis, Taiwanese political warfare, Guatemala's MLN and modeled on the GOP. He was one of ORDEN founder Medrano's proteges and would use his World Anti-Communist league membership to forge close ties with the American new right. He had trained at School of the Americas, Office of Public Safety's International Police Academy in Washington DC, Taiwan's Political Warfare Academy, he received additional training from the Israeli's and was a close ally of the "Godfather of the Death Squads" Mario Sandoval Alarcon in Guatemala.

The reformist coup was doomed from the start Colonel Garcia was appointed minister of



defense, and instead of halting the repression it began to skyrocket yet again. More people would die in the first month of the coup than in the rest of 1979 combined. The Carter Administration used the coup as an excuse to restore military aid first under the cover of non-lethal aid. It sent Ambassador Robert White to work with the new junta. The civilian opposition demanded an end to the mass murder and civilian control of the military. Minister of Defense Garcia informed them the military would remain in charge on December 26 and on January 3-5 most of the civilians resigned in protest. The former agriculture minister would be brutally murdered while others decided to join the guerrillas or their political wing FDR.

Archbishop Romero had praised the civilians for resigning in protest. For most of his career he had been a conservative who played it safe leading Rome to appoint him to head El Salvador's church. However he had become increasingly radicalized by the military's repression of the church. His friend the priest Rutilio Grande and another priest were murdered 3 weeks after Romero became Archbishop as was the first priest he had ever ordained. A month after Grande was killed the military attacked the area he had been operating in massacring 50 peasants. The only newspapers in the country were right-wing supporters of the government the others had been bombed, their journalists murdered or forced into exile. Romero was the only public voice allowed to criticize the government beloved by the poor of El Salvador and increasingly respected worldwide. He had written to Washington begging them not to send military aid and urging them to negotiate peace. He created a legal aid office so that family members of the killed and disappeared could demand justice. The church's legal aid office soon became the key source documenting the ongoing massacre in El Salvador. The military launched its own PR campaign with the slogan "be a patriot kill a priest." because of the church's role organizing peasants and documenting war crimes. On March 4 1980 Romero would be the 11th clergyman murdered by a sniper while giving a memorial mass he became an international martyr. A When tens of thousands gathered to mourn his death the military opened fire on the crowd with machine guns another of the countless massacres that took place in the capital of San Salvador. Both Catholic and Protestant churches in the US would become deeply involved in peace and solidarity work in El Salvador.

Two months after the assassination of **Archbishop Romero** **Colonel Majano** arrested D'Aubuisson on May 7 1980 who was busy plotting a coup. D'Aubuisson had been circulating video tapes to military bases branding the government communists and now sought to seize power. When he was arrested along with his co-conspirators documents were seized proving he was behind the assassination of Archbishop Romero. However the arrest ended the career not of D'Aubuisson but of Colonel Majano who lost all real authority although publicly he remained part of the junta until December to please Ambassador Robert White. D'Aubuisson was released in a matter of weeks as the military and Defense Minister Garcia sided with him against Majano. The CIA had been busy buying off all the younger officers and the military made sure they were purged or began to participate in the massacres. For example the next month on June 26 1980 soldiers stormed the National University and killed 50 people.



As Majano's power waned Christian Democrat **Napoleon Duarte** (image on the left) had been brought in to provide a facade of civilian participation he had joined the junta in March 1980 and was appointed president in December 14 1980. He would cover up military war crimes and obediently obey the demands of his American advisers. He would lose the Presidency in the 1982 elections when D'Aubuisson's ARENA party won control of the constituent assembly and Alvaro Magana became president to avoid the PR disaster of a President D'Aubuisson a man former ambassador Robert White called a pathological killer but who was backed by Senator Jesse Helms and a network of new right lobby groups with links to fascists and the CIA like the American Security Council and the Committee on the Present Danger. D'Aubuisson had hired the powerful McCann-Erickson PR firm. The CIA would flood the country with money to insure Napoleon Duarte's 1984 election victory. The US had Duarte institute disastrous neo-liberal reforms while the military began to escalate the killing in the cities again in 1987-88. The Christian democrats were discredited as corrupt and ineffectual clearing the way for and ARENA victory in 1989 and the election of president Alfredo Cristiani with help from President George H. W. Bush's PR man Roger Ailes. The elections were largely a PR exercise for the American media in 1982 and 1984 voting was mandatory and failure to vote could get you killed all parties to the left of the Christian democrats were banned and their leaders on death lists. Freedom of speech and assembly were nonexistent. In 1989 ARENA won by getting rid of mandatory voting relying instead on voter suppression with the poor or internally displaced unable to register , voter intimidation with clear ballot boxes allowing ARENA poll watchers who were often death squad cadres to terrify voters into voting for them. ARENA also had a well-funded party machine to get out the vote.

On November 4, 1980 Reagan was elected President an event greeted with joy by the oligarchs and the military who celebrated by getting drunk and firing their weapons. Reagan had criticized Carter for being too soft in Central America. Even before the election the Reagan team had promised Guatemala and El Salvador that they would be free to pursue their dirty wars with full US support. Thus his election was a green light to the military in El Salvador to further escalate the dirty war which was already bloodier than ever that year. The first American killed in El Salvador had been back in 1976 a black American Ronald J. Richardson had been arrested and disappeared. The American ambassador at the time was Ignazio Lozano jr had demanded answers. Ironically Carter would replace him with Frank

Devine which was seen as a green light to El Salvador's military to act with impunity. Carter's reputation for softness had more to do with the rage that ensued when he failed to re-appoint George H. W. Bush to head the CIA then his actual policies like provoking the war in Afghanistan. The new CIA director **Stansfield Turner** purged some of the more notorious CIA operatives and they launched a PR campaign to destroy Carter in revenge. Between 1946 and 1979 El Salvador had received only 16.7 million dollars in Military aid from the US. In his final year in office Carter would send 10 million in military aid 5 million just before Reagan was inaugurated thanks to Zbigniew Brzezinski. Carter had also approved a huge San Lorenzo Dam loan at a time when General Romero was escalating the repression. Ambassador White embodied these contradictions he supported reform and opposed D'Aubusson and ARENA who plotted to kill him. He also opposed the Guerrillas however and in the end signed off on the last-minute military aid despite the wave of high-profile murders that were to follow Reagan's elections. In other Carter's concern for human rights was mostly rhetorical in practice the machinery of empire functioned the same old way.

All the same the Salvadoran military decided to use the time between Reagan's election and inauguration to conduct a shocking wave of killings in which even american's were targeted. On November 26 1980 they tortured and killed Enrique Alvarez 4 other FDR leaders and a sixth victim eliminating the political wing of the opposition and making any negotiated settlement impossible. Their killings received little international attention. On December 4 1980 the bodies of four american nuns and lay workers Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford and Dorothy Kazel were found. Some had been raped and all had been executed after being stopped at a roadblock on the way back from the airport. They were killed for doing charity work in an area that was believed to be sympathetic to the Guerillas. One of them was a personal friend of Ambassador White and the next day aid to El Salvador was suspended. The Carter Administration waited weeks to make a statement and even tried to charge one family thousands of dollars to bring the body of a murdered nun back.

The Reagan administration would top him when Jeane Kirkpatrick who had met with El Salvadoran business leaders promising unlimited military aid days before the murders called the nuns FMLN activists to justify the killing. Secretary of State Al Haig called them "pistol packing nuns" and claimed they were killed running a roadblock a blatant lie as they were shot execution style at point-blank range. On January 4 1980 more Americans would die this time employees of the CIA/USAID front the AIFLD. The American Institute of Free Labor Development had trained 300,000 union members to wage an anti-communist pro corporate attempt to take over latin american unions and was used to overthrow Goulart in Brazil and Allende in Chile. However even controlled opposition was too much for the El Salvadoran fascists and 2 AIFLD advisers Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman were gunned down while dining with the head of El Salvador's land reform Jose Rodolfo Viera who was also killed and was the main target. Hammer was probably CIA and not just working for a CIA front. Many Salvadorans were also killed for joining the AIFLD created union UTC. In both the AIFLD and the nun murders it was quickly revealed that the murders were ordered by high-ranking Salvadoran military officials their names public knowledge yet throughout the 80's they would be promoted instead of punished while the Reagan administration pretended that El Salvador was making progress on their cases. As for the murder of El Salvadorans no one was ever charged the military punished drunkenness or lateness mass murder was rewarded. To give one example 90 primary school teachers were killed between January and October 1980. On January 16, 1981 Carter sent 5 million in military assistance despite the dead Americans. On January 20 1981 Reagan was Inaugurated, On February 1 1981 Ambassador Robert White was fired replaced by Ambassador Deane Hinton who would

cultivate a father son relationship with D'Aubuisson. On March 2 1981 Reagan would ask for 25 million in military assistance. Eventually Reagan would pour 6 billion dollars into funding the slaughter in El Salvador and would increase the size of El Salvador's military from 5,000 to 50,000. Reagan hoped a quick victory in El Salvador would dispel the "Vietnam Syndrome" instead it proved a costly stalemate. In spite of all these weapons and advisers the FMLN would fight on.

During the escalating violence El Salvador's Guerrilla factions had been united first as the DRU and then as the FMLN thanks to the efforts of Fidel Castro who personally negotiated their merger. As Reagan's inauguration neared they launched a massive "final offensive" that they hoped might spark a revolution. They failed in that goal but it helped give the Guerrillas valuable combat experience. In 1982 they would launch a daring attack on Ilopango airbase (later infamous for it's role as a drugs and weapons smuggling site during Iran/Contra) they managed to severely damage most of El Salvador's air force. Unfortunately the US simply used this as an opportunity to double the size of the El Salvadoran air force. Despite the flood of weapons for the Salvadoran military the Guerrillas would steadily gain strength in the first half of the war from 1980-1984. Other major victories would be the assault and capture of the supposedly impregnable base at El Paraiso on December 30 1983 and the destruction of the Cuscatlan bridge on January 1 1984. The FMLN controlled between a third and a fifth of the country setting up their own local government's in the areas they controlled. Unfortunately these victories would force the military to rely increasingly on airpower to carpet bomb the countryside and the second stalemate phase of the war would last from 1984-1989 with helicopters machine gunning villages and American bombers bombing the countryside. In addition to Air Power US advisers created new forces called PRAL small mobile units that ambushed and terrorized the FMLN in Guerrilla held territory. Since most reporters stayed in the cities this bloodbath received a lot less international attention then the wave of death squad killings in the cities during the 1st half of the war. The FMLN countered this by rebuilding their network of supporters in the cities which had been decimated.

While the Guerrillas were gaining in strength in 1980-1984 the United States was busy with it's own strategy which involved the creation of rapid response battalions the most infamous being the Atacatl Battallion. They were used to conduct vast search and destroy sweeps meant to clear whole areas believed to be sympathetic to the Guerrillas in 1981-82 they conducted a massive sweep of the Morazan department massacring village after village and forcing the survivors to flee as refugees. This would result in the El Mozote massacre when 1000 men women and children were murdered and journalist Raymond Bonner of the New York Times managed to expose it at the cost of his career. After a brief period as an assistant to Jeane Kirkpatrick at the UN Elliot Abrams had been put in charge of Human Rights at the State Department. Under Reagan all pretense of objectivity had been abandoned and Elliot Abrams job was to cover up the crimes of allies like El Salvador while loudly exaggerating the minor offenses of enemies like Nicaragua. He and the head of the Latin American Division Thomas Enders tried to cover up the El Mozote massacre. Ambassador Dean Hinton worked with Reed Irvine of Accuracy In Media (founded to attack journalists who dared to expose the crimes of the empire) to discredit Raymond Bonner. This in turn was part of a the massive Reagan era "Public Diplomacy" program where CIA veterans worked with PR firms to sell empire to the american public through "Perception Management" in the process destroying investigative journalism. Ironically the El Mozote massacre like the Mai Lai massacre was one of hundreds. Whole areas of the country were targeted by search and destroy sweeps and an American anthropologist would witness the

aftermath of the Morazan “sweep” of which El Mozote was merely one episode when he spent weeks fleeing with hundreds of refugees who were repeatedly bombed and strafed week after week as they tried to flee.

The border with Honduras became a killing field as refugees were targeted by both the Honduran and El Salvadoran military. Honduras had become a base for both the dirty wars on El Salvador and Nicaragua. Over 100 special forces advisers operated there to get around limits on the number of advisers allowed in El Salvador. Ambassador Negroponte ruled there as a sort of proconsul as Honduras began to expand its own death squad Battalion 316. His work covering for death squads would later get him appointed Ambassador to Iraq during the occupation while the former head military adviser in El Salvador Colonel James Steele would arrive to set up death squads for the “Salvador Option.” Elliot Abrams would also return to power during the war in Iraq.

The war in El Salvador was planned on the model of Vietnam and would then serve as a model for Iraq. All the major elements of the Phoenix program had been replicated in El Salvador in the 1960’s and 70’s centralized cooperation between the police and military linked by a computer network that would be the model for the internet. By the 1980’s they were openly bragging about the connection and claiming Phoenix aka CORDS would be the blueprint for victory. Counterinsurgency theory was back in vogue also known in the 1980’s as IDAD Internal Defense and Development. They even brought back the architect of Vietnam’s land Reform Ray Posterman of USAID to create the El Salvadoran land reform program although predictably it was never fully implemented. The Vietnam parallels were quite open with El Salvador and its CIA and Special forces advisers launching Operation Phoenix. And the Phoenix Programs cover program of CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development) was used as the model for El Salvador’s counterinsurgency strategy the NCP (National Campaign Plan) and promoted openly in the press as the key to winning the war. The strategy was clear, (send in the military to conduct bloody sweeps) Hold (Set up Civil Defense militias to keep the populace in line) Build (engage in public works for PR in practice the military preferred to embezzle the money). El Salvador would then be used as the template for the War in Iraq although this was absurd because El Salvador was only “a success” from the ruthless imperial perspective because it allowed the empire to wage a bloody war via a local proxy with minimal loss of American life because there were only a hundred US military advisers and a similar number of CIA men in the country.

In 1989 the war would enter its third and final phase. George H. W. Bush was the new President in the US and he had helped ARENA (the party of the death squads and oligarchs) to win the March 1989 elections. He had ignored the chance to peacefully end the war in exchange for a few minor democratic reforms demanded by the FMLN and the Democratic Convergence the new opposition party. Bush also got Congress to agree to still more military aid to El Salvador. Beginning in 1983 the countries of Central America as the Contadora group had been slowly working on a peace plan to end the wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Eventually this would evolve into the Esquipulas. The US worked to sabotage the process even trying to use the NED to defeat the Costa Rican President at election time. In 1984 Duarte had begun talks with the FMLN that never went anywhere thanks to constant US interference. Since 1984 the FMLN had been forced to pursue a defensive strategy to preserve its forces from Salvadoran air power and PRAL teams. However it had also been rebuilding its network of urban supporters who had been killed or forced to flee in the first half of the war. In 1987-1988 the El Salvadoran military had responded by reactivating the

death squads who went to work in a campaign of selective terror targeting the leaders of the popular movements.

The United States and El Salvador believed they were winning the war and that the Guerrillas were incapable of launching any more major offensives. On November 8, 1989 to the shock of the CIA analysts who had declared it impossible the FMLN launched a major offensive the day after the Berlin Wall fell which aimed at capturing the cities and provoking a full-scale revolution. It was either the last great battle of World War 3 or the first battle of World War 4. Gorbachev's treachery was destroying the Soviet Union but in Latin America the struggle for Communism and Socialism would continue. The FMLN would manage to capture part of the capital San Salvador even occupying the rich neighborhoods. Unfortunately exhausted by 10 years of bloody civil war the people failed to rise in revolution and the military was able to counter-attack forcing the FMLN to retreat. It was a military defeat but a major political victory as it destroyed the illusion that the military was on the verge of victory. The US was forced to allow peace negotiations to go forward. The infamous Atlacatl battallion had created another PR disaster by murdering 6 jesuit priests and two housekeepers causing congress to cut military aid in half although President Bush would later full restore it while the world was distracted by the Gulf War. On January 16, 1992 the El Salvadoran Government and the FMLN finally signed a peace agreement that officially ended the war. The opposition was finally granted the right to participate in politics without being tortured and executed for it.

However despite being allowed to participate the FMLN was forced to compete with a well-funded party trained in PR by corporate specialists. ARENA managed to hold onto power from 1989-2009. They privatized everything and launched a brutal anti-gang war. This new war predictably had American roots thousands of El Salvadoran gang members had been deported in the 1990's as part of a racist anti-immigrant wave in the 1990's and it was probably intended to destabilize El Salvador as the LA gang unit was infamous for it's many scandals and likely has close ties to the CIA. Just as in El Salvador US police forces have divisions with intelligence functions that liaison with the CIA Red squads, Organized Crime and Gang Units are important partners in the counterinsurgency war at home. However regardless of the motives of sending MS-13 to El Salvador ARENA was able to seize on the issue to become increasingly repressive while gang wars within the country lead El Salvador to become the murder capital of the world for a few years. Given ARENA's close ties to Taiwan it's links to the Iran-Contra scandal and reputation for corruption they doubtless had a hand in the drug trade they pretended to fight.

In 2009 the FMLN were finally able to win an election joining the wave of left-wing governments inspired by Venezuela's example. The first FMLN President was Mauricio Funes. In 2014 FMLN won another election electing President Sanchez Ceren a former Guerrilla leader and member of the Andes 21 teachers union which had been a major target during the dirty war. ARENA threatened a coup after the 2014 victory. However years of struggle had made the FMLN overly cautious and they no longer sought to transform society. President Funes relied on centrist advisers and pursued neo-liberal policies. Despite this fact the FMLN did engage in an ambitious program of reform building hundreds of community clinics, doubling the minimum wage, providing free school supplies, free university education and launching a literacy campaign that taught 330,000 people to read mostly elderly women. They also negotiated a secret gang truce which the media ruined by exposing.

El Salvador's wealthy right wingers with american advice set out to discredit the FMLN via

their control of the media, the legislature and the judiciary. They launched a corruption probe to discredit the FMLN and a scare campaign about crime in the media. Although gang violence was actually declining the media gave the impression it was out of control. The FMLN angered their radical base by refusing to reaffirm their commitment to radical change. The FMLN suffered a disastrous loss in the 2018 constituent assembly election and in 2019 one of their former centrist allies Nayib Bukele was elected President. ARENA came in second with the FMLN a distant third. Another of the pink tide countries had fallen into the imperial orbit joining Paraguay, Honduras, Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador. Bukele has cultivated close ties with Trump helping him wage war on immigrants inside El Salvador itself and joining his schemes to overthrow the governments of Venezuela and Nicaragua. He plans to privatize the water supply. The struggle for a better world continues in El Salvador, Latin America and worldwide. As I write the people are rising up in Haiti, Chile and Ecuador. Repression is again on the rise across Latin America and sadly the brutal horrors of El Salvador's dirty war demonstrate the ruthless lengths the empire will go to crush the dreams of peoples of the world in defense of capitalism.

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## Sources

Michael McClintock's *The American Connection Volume one State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador* is a masterpiece providing a detailed history of the war into the mid 1980's. I also highly recommend his book *Instruments of State Craft* for anyone interested in the US history of terrorism and counterinsurgency.

*Weakness and Deceit U.S. Policy and El Salvador* by Raymond Bonner provides a detailed and vivid description of the war. Bonner was recalled from El Salvador after exposing the El Mozote massacre and being attacked by the State department and Reagan's "public diplomacy" propagandists.

*The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992* by Brian D'Haeseleer offers a great overview and analysis of the war highlighting the resilience of the FMLN. He also provides a brief history of US counterinsurgency warfare and discusses the "Salvador Option" in Iraq.

*The Empire's Workshop: Latin America The United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* By Greg Grandin is alternately brilliant and criminally naive. It provides background on the economic dimension of what he refers to as the third conquest of Latin America and connects the Reagan administration war in El Salvador with the Bush administration invasion of Iraq.

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