

Human Rights: A Review of America's 'Investment' in El Salvador

By [Olga Bonfiglio](#)

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On November 16, 1989, six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter were murdered execution-style by the right-wing Salvadoran military government. The priests were killed for teaching their students ideas about liberating themselves from the oppression of the rich families that owned most of the country's wealth. The cook and her daughter were killed because they were on the premises and potential witnesses to the crime.

The perpetrators were trained at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), a.k.a. the School of the Americas where Latin American military officers learn the latest methods of murder, rape and torture. Every year since 1990, Father Roy Bourgeois and the SOA Watch lead a weekend demonstration outside Fort Benning near Columbus, Georgia, to demand closure of this U.S. program. The execution of "the martyrs," as the Salvadorans call them, finally put an international spotlight on the ugly civil war that had already cost 75,000 people their lives, including Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980.

Congressman Joe Moakley (D-Massachusetts) investigated the situation in El Salvador, which began a process to end the 12-year civil war-and to reveal the U.S. government's role in it as well. Eventually, the United Nations helped the warring sides to sign a peace agreement in January 1992.

Here is an eye-witness report of my visit to El Salvador last November. It illustrates the legacy of our government's \$6 billion "investment" in that war after 15 years of peace-and provides a sample of what we can expect from our \$1.6 trillion and counting "investment" in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A shoeless boy wearily weaves his way down the street, alone, in a limp pair of soiled shorts and a torn t-shirt. Heaps of trash pile up in the vacant corners of neighborhoods and on grassy medians on the city's streets. Dogs, comprised of many breeds, some of them obviously sick with disease, listlessly amble through the streets avoiding the path of a strutting rooster or a mother hen with her perky and curious chicks.

A shabby, dazed, young man slumps on his rump over one of the benches of a busy community laundry. As the women scrub their family's clothes or those they've put out for hire, the man cuddles a greasy, white, plastic canister of glue with his nose stuck down deep in it as much as his face will allow.

Two men with sawed-off shotguns stand in front of a Burger King. The police, who work long, boring hours and lack the public's respect, are unable to guarantee order consistently so business owners hire private guards to protect themselves, their customers, and their

property.

Even on Saturdays the young women of the sweatshop factories, the maquiladoras, rouse themselves to report to work at 6 a.m. where they will spend the next 14 hours sewing fashion clothing soon be sold in stores all over the United States.

It's dark at 6 p.m. in November and by 8 the streets of La Chacra, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the capital city of San Salvador, are deserted because the 30,000 residents close up their shops and lock the doors of their homes in order to secure themselves against the vagrancies of warring youth gangs with guns and drugs.

The polluted Rio Acelhuate runs through La Chacra but the kids who play in it and their families who use it for watering animals lack an understanding of basic public health principles. This means that they typically suffer physical ailments from their poverty: dermatitis and fungus (skin diseases caused by wet feet and close contact with garbage), gastro-intestinal conditions (from parasites), diabetes, arthritis, and hypertension.

It's easy to see why upper respiratory diseases are so prevalent in the city. A thick, black cloud constantly hovers over the city due to all the diesel emissions of cars and especially the buses. At rush hour you can hardly breathe the air it is so polluted. Even the rain offers no relief and summer must be awful when the seamy, humid tropical air adds to this noxious soup.

While most Salvadorans obtain a sixth grade education, one of the lowest rates in the world, only 50 percent complete the ninth grade and 25 percent make it through high school. Unemployment or underemployment in the country is about 50 percent and the illiteracy rate stands at 60-70 percent. Most of the elderly cannot read. Consequently, education is highly valued and desperately needed to help this country improve its future economic and social outlook.

High school graduates in El Salvador have a chance to get jobs in shops and offices. If they go on to the university, they can be teachers, translators, businesspeople, health care workers, doctors, lawyers, professors, priests-and middle class parents.

Students realize that they are the future of El Salvador, however, they also know that without an education they will go nowhere. So they make the necessary sacrifices. Some of them take three buses to get to school. Most work during the day and study late at night while their parents-and sometimes their extended family-have two and three jobs at low pay to help their children obtain an education.

With a national population of nearly 7 million, it's estimated that hundreds of Salvadorans struggle to cross into El Norte to join over 2 million of their countrymen who are already here. They are the ones who wash dishes, wait tables, and clean toilets in American cities, slaughter and slice carcasses at the meat packing plants of the Midwest, or perform endless hours of stoop labor as migrant farm workers in the Southwest, Florida, New York and Michigan.

In a recent study by the University of Central America in San Salvador, 42 percent of Salvadorans said they would leave their country to go to the United States if they had the chance. These people, who make \$1-3 per day, are so desperate to feed their families that they are willing to risk a crossing. Some pay \$6,000-7,000 for a coyote's help, which

requires a 50 percent down payment and must be paid back within three years at 20 percent interest. To raise this money, they put up their land, farm and house as collateral. When they finally make it to the United States (sometimes it takes two or three tries), all members of the family from both sides of the border face being separated from each other for unknown periods of time.

The current right-wing ARENA government denies that the country has a poverty problem; it wants the country to look good after getting such bad press during the 1980's war. It also makes a lot of promises to improve health and education but then fails to follow through. Consequently, funds that poured in from abroad during and since those terrible war years are drying up as needs elsewhere in the world take priority.

Before the war started in 1980, 14 families of El Salvador owned most of the country's wealth. Now the remaining eight families are privatizing the country's resources and making trade agreements like the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which greatly advantages U.S. corporations.

President Bush's call for a Coalition of the Willing in 2003 yielded only El Salvador's participation from Latin America despite negative public opinion, according to the Council on Hemispheric Affairs. (Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic sent a small number of troops at the beginning of the war but pulled them out in spring 2004.) Of the 1300 Salvadoran troops sent, five have been killed. Last March when President Bush visited Latin America, he didn't even bother to stop by in El Salvador to thank them for their service.

Olga Bonfiglio is a professor at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and author of Heroes of a Different Stripe: How One Town Responded to the War in Iraq. She has written for several national magazines on the subjects of social justice and religion. Her website is www.OlgaBonfiglio.com. Contact her at olgabonfiglio@yahoo.com.

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