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Civil War in El Salvador and United States Counterinsurgency Strategy

This paper examines the theories of counter-insurgent warfare as used during the Salvadoran Civil War 1980-1992.

Civil War in El Salvador and United States Counterinsurgency Strategy

By Tom White

The United States' counterinsurgency involvement in the Civil War in El Salvador was the most prolonged "costly endeavor since the Vietnam War"^[1] (until the Persian Gulf War). The United States provided material and advisory support to the Salvadoran regime in order to keep from it from falling to the communist supported Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The U.S. believed that if the FMLN, which was closely aligned and supported by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, Cuba, and the Eastern Bloc, were to overthrow El Salvador then the entire political security of the region would be threatened. In order to keep the FMLN from achieving victory, the United States believed the key to defeating the insurgency rested with employing the same hard-earned counterinsurgency strategies learned in Vietnam, namely winning over the popular support of the people. Learning from past experiences gleaned from the Vietnam conflict, the U.S. employed a counterinsurgent strategy in El Salvador which focused on the advancing of democracy, social reform, and the reform of the Salvadoran armed forces in order to not only gain the popular support of the El Salvadoran people, but also to defeat the FMLN.

To first understand why the U.S. advocated the specific counterinsurgency strategies that they did, it is important to understand the historical background of the insurgency itself. The elements which led to the outbreak of civil war can be traced to the "country's long-standing patterns of economic, political, and social exclusion"^[2] which had been in place since the 1930's. The main economic

opportunities of El Salvador since the 1930's had resided within the coffee industry, largely controlled by an oligarchy. Coffee was a labor intensive crop, and the oligarchy engaged in unfair, slave-like labor practices to ensure that they had an ongoing labor force. These unfair labor practices included a repressive migration policy and a debt peonage system, all intended to curtail the population's movements so that adequate workforce numbers were always available. If the workforce revolted, which they sometimes did, then the revolts would be quickly squashed with the aid of government forces. In fact the suppression of labor revolts "was ensured by the founding of the National Guard and other security forces"[3] who were created for the sole purpose of ensuring the private property rights of the oligarchy.

As the decades passed and El Salvador expanded its economic production into other commodities the "unequal distribution of land, income, and opportunity"[4] only increased, and the elites who benefited from these conditions viewed any type of unrest as subversion, which was brutally suppressed. By 1980 over 76%[5] of the Salvadoran population was living in poverty as a result of these unfair labor practices, according to a report from the Economic Commission for Latin America. Because of this political and economic disenfranchisement, a political mobilization began in mid-1970.

One key group which emerged from this environment was the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN was a coalition of five separate Marxist guerilla groups who maintained important alliances with the Salvadoran political opposition as well as "internationally with the Cuban and Nicaraguan governments." [6] The FMLN, motivated by the success of the "Sandinista revolution in neighboring Nicaragua"[7], dedicated itself to the overthrow of the Salvadoran government. The FMLN adopted economic sabotage as a strategy. The FMLN believed that by combining economic sabotage with other tactics intended to wear down the army, it could "erode the confidence of economic elites in the army's ability to protect their interests." [8] The United States, fearing another Nicaragua and the consequences of a victory by the Marxist FMLN, decided to intervene in 1980. From the beginning of America's involvement, starting with the Carter administration, the U.S. was more than aware of the abysmal human rights conditions which existed in El Salvador, and began promoting a counterinsurgency effort aimed at "reforms and 'democratization' to increase the regimes' legitimacy at home and abroad." [9] The U.S. understood that in order for the Salvadoran government to have any hope of gaining the support of the Salvadoran people it must first take measures aimed at political legitimacy.

One of the first areas that the U.S. sought to reform was the Salvadoran armed forces. This was deemed one of the areas which posed the biggest detriment towards gaining support amongst the population, because most of the population viewed the armed forces as part of the problem, not as part of the solution. The armed forces had a long history of corruption and incompetence. The military operated under a *tanda* system by which each graduating class from the military academy "moves up the ranks together, regardless of ability" [10], and as a result members within this system develop an unflinching loyalty to one another. The result of such loyalty amongst the officer corps is that officers "are not held accountable for their actions, no matter how egregious they may be." [11]. During the late seventies and the first years of the civil war, the armed forces engaged in a brutal

campaign against the insurgency, resulting in a huge loss of civilian life. David Gulula notes that when a counterinsurgent force engages in direct action against an insurgency they run the very real danger that their actions will appear “to the nation as out of proportion”[12], and will become counterproductive, which is exactly what happened in El Salvador. The El Salvadoran armed forces because of their long history of operating with impunity “killed tens of thousands of non-combatants in 1979 and 1980, before the civil war even began.”[13] Although the actions of the armed forces may have served as a temporary preemptive means of stopping the insurrection, it is also likely that the military’s actions resulted in strengthening the insurgency by creating, as the historian Mark Peceny referred to, “accidental guerrillas”, individuals who because of the government actions suddenly found themselves drawn to the insurgents cause.

The U.S. faced an uphill battle in trying to reform the armed forces, especially since the first law of counterinsurgency is for the counterinsurgent to gain the upper hand by winning the support of the population. The noted counterinsurgent expert David Galula argues, the “primary role of the counterinsurgent’s military and police forces”[14] is to protect the population, so the U.S. began a series of reformative actions aimed at changing the military’s repressive image. One such action included the use of coercion, pressure, and the withholding of aid in order to stop human rights abuses being committed by the military. Other reformative actions taken by the U.S. included eliminating the *tanda* system in 1983, and instituting small unit tactics and civil defense programs to help improve the armed forces’ image amongst the populace.

The success of the U.S. reform strategies were readily apparent, as human rights abuses which numbered in the thousands per year in the beginning of the war, soon dropped roughly to one hundred per year by war’s end. The U.S. was also instrumental in seeing that conventional counterinsurgent tactics were also employed by the armed forces. One example of a conventional counterinsurgent tactic was the National Campaign Plan in San Vicente province instituted by the U.S. military advisor Colonel John Waghelstein. Waghelstein was instrumental in getting the Salvadoran military to adopt the counterinsurgent strategy of combining “a strong military presence with comprehensive civil affairs to win allegiance of the local population.”[15] The goal was to convince the population that they are just as important to the counterinsurgent as they are to the insurgent. Although the success of this counterinsurgent strategy was limited, it did begin to have a fundamental impact on the Salvadoran military way of thinking “as reflected in Defense Minister General Rene Emilio Ponce’s often-quoted remark that ‘90 percent of the war is political, social, economic and ideological and only 10 percent military.”[16]

Another aspect of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy was in the Salvadoran political arena. Under David Galula’s Third Law, the support of the population is conditional, so the U.S. pressed for political reform in order to try to shore up popular support. The U.S. understood the challenge it faced, and for its part pressed for free and fair elections in order to create a more popular and legitimate government. U.S. advisors under the auspices of the Reagan administration were successful in getting the Salvadoran government to hold elections. In 1982 the electoral process was re-instated, followed by a presidential election in 1984 when the Christian Democrat’s Jose Napoleon Duarte was elected president, resulting in “increased popular support for the government.”[17] Duarte

campaigned on a platform which advocated negotiation as a key to resolving the conflict, as well as the belief that the military needed to respect human rights.

After Duarte assumed the presidency “the Salvadoran military’s human rights record improved dramatically.”^[18] Duarte’s presidency enjoyed the support of the Reagan administration, especially in regard to the administration’s success in reducing human rights abuses at the hands of the military. The United States understood that the “ultimate role of counterinsurgency is to create a legitimate government that the people will support.”^[19] Under Duarte’s tenure, the element of reform was best expressed by Duarte’s own “Defense Minister Vides Casanova himself, [who stated] ‘We know that improving our image is worth millions of dollars in aid for our country’”^[20], a point not lost on the U.S. The U.S. government for its part did everything within its power including utilizing a carrot and the stick approach in order to help create a legitimate government that they believed would foster support and political allegiance amongst the population. The U.S. believed that employing a counterinsurgent strategy aimed at promoting democratic norms and lending a voice to the disenfranchised would help to isolate the FMLN and inch them closer to prevailing over the insurgency.

Additionally one of the most important areas the U.S. sought to target in their counterinsurgent strategy was the issue of social reform. Social reform in El Salvador figured prominently as one of the most important factors behind the insurgency’s cause. Therefore as a counterinsurgent strategy the U.S. set about developing a strategy which would diminish the FMLN’s cause, while at the same time preserving the regime’s power in the process.

One of the areas of particular concern was landlessness amongst the Salvadoran peasantry. The unequal distribution of land was a glaring example of the inequality which existed in El Salvador, and had become a powerful political tool used by the FMLN. When the civil war broke out in 1980, “over 70 percent of the land was owned by 1 percent of the population, while over 40 percent of the rural population owned no land at all.”^[21] This unequal distribution of land resulted in a “gross maldistribution of wealth”^[22], highlighting the political disparity between peasants and landowners. U.S. experts, realizing the political benefits of land reform, went about designing a land redistribution program as a means of winning the hearts and minds of the peasantry, while weakening the cause of the FMLN. U.S. experts believed by addressing land reform, the El Salvadoran peasantry would gain confidence in their government, and start to view their efforts as a vehicle for positive change. While violence from land reform opponents was intense, many of those who participated in the land reform program as cited in the Orellana survey of 1991 expressed a marked improvement in job security, education, and income as a result of the program. The U.S. ambassador at the time Robert White described the land reform effort as “a revolutionary means to counteract a revolution.”^[23] The ambitious land reform program which targeted half of El Salvador’s farm land for redistribution was designed to win the support of the population.

Another U.S. instituted program aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the population was the development of the civil-military pacification programs. The idea behind these programs was that once the military would go into an area and clear it of insurgents; they then would rebuild the areas

infrastructure making it ready for civilian habitation. Once the infrastructure rebuilding was complete, the civilian population would then move back in and form civil defense organizations, securing the territory from insurgent reoccupation. The goal of this counterinsurgent strategy was intended to consolidate territorial control, involve the people in the government's cause, and to create an intelligence network where one previously did not exist. Although this was a sound counterinsurgent strategy, the civil-military pacification programs like the land reform program, met with only limited success because of the distrust which existed amongst the population towards the Salvadoran military.

However, one counterinsurgent strategy that did achieve most of the desired results of winning the support of the population was the social reform program known as *Municipios en Accion* (MEA). This program provided funding directly to the mayors of local communities who then could spend the funds on programs as they saw fit. This program enjoyed much more popular support amongst the populace than the land reform program, or the civil-military pacification programs. Although years of government corruption and oppression cannot easily be wiped away amongst the populace due to any one particular reform program, the success of the MEA program as reported by the Research Triangle Institute in 1988 concluded that the MEA was “the *most* effective counterinsurgency strategy”[\[24\]](#) used in El Salvador.

Throughout the dozen years that United States was involved in the El Salvadoran, El Salvador, much like Vietnam, experienced the same inspirational causes which spurred their insurgency, namely the resistance from those in power to political, economic, and social reform. The FMLN, like other insurgencies throughout the world, were able to effectively exploit these weaknesses until they were able to acquire the strength necessary to become an effective force, while the U.S. tried to enact a counterinsurgent strategy aimed at negating the FMLN's cause.

The U.S. counterinsurgency strategy aimed at democratic and socioeconomic reforms was the key to achieving success within El Salvador, according to many U.S. policy makers. Chief amongst these policy makers was former Vice President Dick Cheney, who heralded the U.S. experience in El Salvador as a success story, and an example of how a counterinsurgency war can be “won at arm's length, through training and military aid rather than through direct intervention of U.S. troops.”[\[25\]](#)

While there is some validity to the U.S. policy makers claims, their claims fail to tell the entire story. The evidence seems to suggest that counterinsurgent strategies employed by the Salvadoran military were often inconsistent and poorly formulated. The most glaring of these policies occurred during the first stages of the civil war when the FAES “launched wide-scale repression against perceived civilian supporters of the Left, killing tens of thousands of civilians between 1979, through 1981.”[\[26\]](#) The punitive action committed by the FAES, often played right into the hands of the FMLN, who as the terrorist Carlos Marighella noted in his 1969 influential terrorist handbook if “as a result of terrorist attacks”[\[27\]](#) the government is forced to intensify its repressive tactics it will make them unpopular. Consequently, the tactics used by the FAES did in fact result in a climate of mistrust, making them unpopular amongst the populace, and also resulting in “thousands of new recruits”[\[28\]](#) for the FMLN. So while El Salvador did provide an excellent opportunity for the U.S. to apply counterinsurgent

strategies based on the creation of legitimate government, social and armed forces reform, and the results of these efforts was mixed.

So while the Salvadoran civil war did end in 1992, it can be argued that many other factors besides the counterinsurgency efforts of the U.S. may have been just as responsible for bringing that war to an end. Chief amongst these contributors was the end of the Cold War, the diminishing financial support of the insurgency which resulted, and the declining fear of El Salvador falling to Marxist insurgents suddenly being less of a concern as it had twelve years prior. Finally it can also be argued that the U.S. financial burden of trying to compel an often unenthusiastic Salvadoran government to implement an effective counterinsurgent strategy was no longer worth the price. Salvadoran society simply had too long a history of corruption, political intolerance, and a national characteristic of mistrust to allow for the timely implementation of a meaningful counterinsurgent strategy to take hold. In describing the precarious relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador, and the keys to a successful counterinsurgency the historian Benjamin Schwartz sums the situation up best when he stated "it is one thing to have the key; it is an entirely different matter to force another to use it to unlock a door through which he does not wish to enter."^[29]

El Salvador provides some excellent examples of a counterinsurgency strategy predicated on winning over a population based on enacted reform policies and the advancement of democracy. However it is obvious that other factors such as the long established national characteristics of El Salvador also played a pivotal role in the successful implementation of these counterinsurgency strategies. Despite the best efforts at applying the counterinsurgent lessons from Vietnam, had the Cold War not come to an end it is quite conceivable that the U.S. very well could still be an active participant in the counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador.

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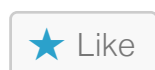
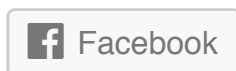
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