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El Salvador: Options for the 90s

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Introduction

The El Salvador conflict is nearing its tenth anniversary without any clear indication that the end is in sight. El Salvador is the focal point of U.S. policy in Central America and has become a test case of our will and ability to influence political and military events in the region.

U.S. intervention in El Salvador is a product of the broader conflict in Central America, initiated by the "fall" of Nicaragua to the Sandinistas in 1979. The Reagan Administration's decision to draw the line in El Salvador was intended as a signal that the U.S. would not "lose" another country in Central America. El Salvador became our test case because, in 1980, it appeared to be the next in line for Marxist takeover as the FMLN/FDR geared up for the "final offensive" in 1981.

It is arguable that without U.S. assistance, El Salvador would have fallen to the FMLN insurgents. Our influence and assistance were instrumental in organizing six fair and open national elections in El Salvador since 1980, including two at the presidential level. In that sense, we have succeeded in implementing our policy of promoting democratic reform. But the war continues--as evidenced by the FMLN's move into San Salvador late last year--and the ESAF continues to battle both its enemy and its image--as evidenced by the murder of six priests in response to the

FMLN action. In fact, the stalemate is now passing the five-year mark.

We have spent more than three billion dollars over the past ten years to promote democracy and respect for human rights in El Salvador and to fight the FMLN. Given the amount of aid and the noble cause, what went wrong? Perhaps it is fairer to ask, "What did not go right?" Before trying to answer this question, it would be helpful to outline some cultural/historical factors which relate to our objectives.

Culture and History

It is impossible to accurately assess the success of our efforts in El Salvador today without putting events in the proper regional and historical perspective. The history of our relations with Central America (and much of Spanish-speaking South America) is a series of misunderstandings, false expectations, disappointments and interventions. I believe it is worth indentifying some factors which have contributed to this long and bumpy relationship.

The U.S. - Latin American dialogue is like a discussion between a wealthy engineer and an impoverished philosopher. We are concerned with identifying and solving problems while our Latin counterparts are much more comfortable in the realm of ideals and abstract concepts. We worship optimism while they belong to the cult of the fatalist. Many Latin Americans truly admire what we have accomplished as a society, but few believe that it could be duplicated in their countries.

Latin Americans are masters in the art of rhetoric. We Americans like to "say what we mean" (although we don't always succeed). But even more important, educated Latin Americans are experts in telling us what we want to hear. We tend to take our charming Latin colleagues at their word, whether or not it relates to reality. It could be argued that this approach to dealing with us has been worth billions of dollars in U.S. aid to the region over the past 50 years.

Spanish-speaking societies in this hemisphere have a different concept of democracy and freedom. They are historically paternalistic and centralized in structure. As a rule, institutions have less of a role than do the individuals who run them. Little initiative is expected from average citizens and little initiative is given in return. Instilling American concepts of democracy is at best a long-term proposition. ✓

In Central America, the armed forces are a caste apart from civilian society. Although they traditionally shared power with the oligarchs and the church, the armed forces have always looked after their own and have never been held responsible to civilian authority. This tendency has increased since World War II as traditional sources of civilian authority have been weakened by urbanization and by ideological challenges from the left. It is worth noting that the only complete democracy in Central America--Costa Rica--has no army at all.

In most of Central America, corruption is an accepted way of doing business. Many politicians and military officers view their careers as a means of obtaining personal wealth. Personalized theft is bad, but the national treasury is open game. The cases of the Somoza family and Manuel Antonio Noriega may have been extreme, but they weren't exceptional. If they had been satisfied with just a few million, both Somoza and Noriega would probably be in power today. The level of corruption has increased in recent years and has much to do with upheavals in the region.

The list of cultural disconnects goes on and on. Of course there are variations depending on specific countries and circumstances. What is relevant is that--even after all these years--Americans seldom calculate their effect when making decisions affecting countries in the hemisphere. We are attracted by the collective political power vacuum in the countries to our south. We can't resist the temptation to "solve" their problems, which seem so clear to us. The Latins graciously encourage us, assuring us that success will cost just a few million dollars more. When we realize that our goals are unobtainable (and that our money has gone to secret bank accounts), we go home in a huff. If things really get out of hand, we often intervene politically, economically and/or militarily to set things right.

Political Considerations

In "American Military Policy in Small Wars: the Case of El Salvador" ("Small Wars"), LTC Bacevich and his co-authors correctly point out that the Reagan Administration began to articulate its justification for U.S. policy after the decision to provide assistance had already been made. The authors, however, failed to explore the significance of the political goal beyond labelling it "instant democracy." In fact, the military effort has consumed less than 30% of the total U.S. assistance to El Salvador. The U.S. military team is only one segment of over 400 official Americans assigned to San Salvador. Many aspects of MILGROUP operation--such as public affairs (psyops)--were run by the Embassy. While we mustn't underestimate the importance of our military effort, it is important to understand that military assistance is not the only element of U.S. policy.

I would agree with Bacevich, et al., that much of the economic assistance provided to El Salvador had much less impact than we had expected. Personally, I feel that we overwhelmed the country with more money than it could efficiently absorb and therefore wasted much of our effort. Other money did not bring immediate results because it was invested in long-term programs such as scholarships and professional exchanges. This is an oversimplification, however, and the overall question of U.S. aid to El Salvador is worthy of further analysis than can be given in this paper.

What is important is that our non-military aid directly has successfully advanced the goal of democratic reform in at least two ways. To begin with, U.S. aid enabled the GOES to organize the successful presidential elections in 1984 and 1989. Secondly, much of the aid money was used to rapidly replace power lines, bridges and other necessary infrastructure to maintain GOES credibility in the face of FMLN attacks against economic targets.

These political successes parallel what Bacevich describes as the "American-sponsored metamorphosis" of the ESAF (where the caterpillar changed into a larger caterpillar instead of a butterfly). That is, we provided the form of democratic government, but added little to its content. Although a democratically elected president rules El Salvador today, he does not have at his disposal a functioning court/criminal justice system. Many disputes are still settled by violence--an age-old tradition in El Salvador--and justice differs for the rich and for the poor. There is little citizen participation and little hope for improvement in the quality of life. But most seriously, President Cristiani does not have real authority over the ESAF. All our money and arm-twisting have failed to break the old pattern of power.

At a couple of points in the "Small Wars" article, the authors imply that we concerned ourselves with democracy at the expense of the war effort. While a degree of frustration is understandable, this assertion fails to take

into account critical political realities. First of all, the U.S. Congress would never have approved any funding for an effort that did not take immediate action to promote respect for human rights and to promote democracy in El Salvador. Secondly, many people in El Salvador viewed their government and army as part of the problem, not as means for a solution. Without democratic reforms, there would have been inadequate support for the war effort both in Washington and in San Salvador.

After reviewing some of the applicable historical factors, we can see that even strong U.S. support for democratic reforms does not guarantee their success. The main obstacle is neither the FMLN or its leftist supporters. What we are confronting is several hundred years of tradition and resistance to change. In short, our task was--and remains--to make our political goal the goal of Salvadoran leaders.

The War

The military situation in El Salvador has changed little since LTC Bacevich, et al., wrote "Small Wars." Neither side can claim victory, although the GOES lives under the constant threat of a U.S. aid cut-off. The ESAF response to the FMLN guerrilla actions in late 1989 has focused attention once again on the ongoing human rights question and has given Congressional foes of our Central American policy another opportunity to express their indignation.

If we had considered historical precedent before promoting the El Salvador military build-up, perhaps we would have known better what to expect. As noted in "Small Wars," we succeeded in increasing the size of the ESAF, in improving the level of training and in beefing up logistical support. We have been much less successful, however, in changing the command structure, the attitude of commanders and their sense of purpose. Simply stated, El Salvador's 55,000 man armed forces still think and act like the old 11,000 man militia. ESAF leaders will not promote U.S.-trained reformers to levels where they can change military doctrine and practice. Reforms that have been instituted appear to have been calculated to "please the gringos" in order to keep the money coming.

Furthermore, by taking the "rich man's approach" to the build-up, the ESAF are now accustomed to a level of logistical support that cannot be sustained without continued U.S. funding. This, in my view, is a critical weakness because their foe has shown an incredible ability to survive with a minimum of formal infrastructure. It is difficult to see how the ESAF can go beyond "phase one" of the war--avoiding defeat--without first conceding to fundamental changes.

In "Small Wars," the authors note how an effective civil defense organization could have contributed to consolidating government rule in areas taken from the guerrillas. This approach makes sense and was effectively

applied under similar circumstances in Guatemala. The Guatemalan case also provides a useful baseline for assessing the effectiveness of the ESAF.

Guatemala entered the 80's with an insurgency problem similar to that of El Salvador. Guatemala also had an abysmal human rights record which had resulted in the loss of all U.S. military assistance. Yet, under the leadership of the Rios Montt government, Guatemala undertook a successful--if controversial--campaign against its guerrillas.

The Guatemalan armed forces aggressively employed about half the troops and only a fraction of the modern equipment possessed by the ESAF. They organized an effective civil defense organization with whatever old weapons could be scraped together. Their hard-line military approach was part of a "beans and bullets" program to help rebuild destroyed villages in the war zones in exchange for cooperation. Although the program had many shortcomings, it did succeed in undercutting support for the guerrilla groups and swung the tide of battle in favor of the Government of Guatemala.

Why can't this scenario be repeated in El Salvador? I believe the answer lies in the will--and willingness--to fight. The Guatemalans never questioned whose war they were fighting. The Salvadorans, on the other hand, have relied on our assistance to postpone hard choices on how to fight "their" war. No one doubts that the Guatemalan Army will

fight with or without our aid. Many believe that the ESAF would crumble if our aid were drastically reduced. To those with experience in Central America, the assertion that the ESAF are the most powerful forces in the region is ludicrous.

Lack of will is also the basic reason El Salvador has no civil defense organization. Does the ESAF really want a competitive force in the countryside? If the civil defense forces were to succeed, it could make the ESAF look bad. My guess is that the ESAF always viewed this proposition as a threat to its turf and power. Any successful effort to build a civil defense force will have to be initiated outside the ESAF.

I would not deny that our assistance and training have improved the capability of the ESAF. It is obvious, however, that the five-fold increase in size has not brought a corresponding improvement in effectiveness. I think the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we could have bought the same degree of security for less. That is, has the 55,000 man ESAF done more to win the war than a 30,000 man ESAF could have done?

On the other side of the picture, the FMLN has hardly enjoyed complete success. Their failure to produce a "final offensive" after several tries has damaged their battlefield reputation. Their terrorist tactics and economic warfare have also turned many Salvadorans against them. Their strength, however, lies in their ability to survive and to

persist in making life difficult for the GOES. The remaining FMLN fighters are hard-core zealots who are willing to die for their cause. They still have the capacity to shut down transportation and to intimidate the population. The U.S. Embassy estimates that their war against the GOES cost 1.75 billion dollars from 1979 to 1988.

The existing stalemate puts enormous pressure on the Salvadoran Government. Salvadorans are giving up hope and many are leaving the country (an estimated 100,000 live in the Washington area). Most informed observers agree that the ESAF cannot win a military victory. And while the FMLN cannot win either, it loses proportionally less than the government by prolonging the conflict. It doesn't have to bear the burden of governing nor does it have to hold territory to carry out its hit-and-run war.

Conclusions

I believe that Bacevich and the others who contributed to "Small Wars" correctly identified the problems of intervention without prior consideration of goals and objectives. Unfortunately, this pattern is the rule, not the exception when we choose to intervene. I would add that when we eventually get around to determining our goals and objectives, we do so without putting them in the proper historical perspective.

For better or for worse, we are committed to keeping El Salvador out of the hands of the FMLN. We have put too much

prestige and effort into this undertaking to pack up and go home. On the other hand, the longer we remain, the more "their" war becomes "our" war. U.S. public support for massive assistance continues to dwindle. It is time to adjust our strategy, based on what we have learned in the past ten years.

I believe that the way to victory in El Salvador lies not in maintaining a large army, but in undercutting support for the FMLN. The Guatemalan experience has shown that this can be done. Furthermore, the Sandinista defeat in recent Nicaraguan elections has created a political atmosphere in which we can afford to take some calculated risks.

We must begin reducing the size of the Salvadoran Armed Forces now. The current numbers are unsustainable over the long run because U.S. aid will eventually decrease. Furthermore, it is clear that the war will not be won by an outright military victory. The ESAF should build down to a level that can prevent victory by the FMLN and retain some quick-response capability.

Now is also the time to build a civil defense network. This could be done by diverting funds from the ESAF for this purpose. We should help the GOES set up a command structure for the civil defense forces that includes adequate civilian control. Such a force would be helpful in controlling the countryside, but unlikely to plot a future coup d'etat.

An effective civil defense would give the campesinos a stake in the war effort. A smaller army would free up

manpower for civil defense. The permanent presence they would provide should help blunt the FMLN's economic warfare. An economically stable population would represent a major victory for the government.

ESAF commanders will undoubtedly resist our moves to build down. However, it must happen sooner or later and our influence on events in El Salvador will never be any stronger than it is today. I believe these measures--a leaner military with civil defense support--would strengthen the government in its battle against the FMLN. They would also help prevent the ESAF from becoming a powerful obstacle to democracy at some future date.

It is impossible to pursue this revised military strategy in a political vacuum. We have to continue to support GOES moves to consolidate power in elected civilian hands. We have proved that we can organize elections. We must now prove that we can help the Salvadorans establish a reasonably fair system of justice. The GOES must include left-of-center political leaders--such as Ruben Zamora and Guillermo Ungo--in the process. In the long run, this is the best way to undercut support for the FMLN.

It is in our interest to engage the other Central American countries and the United Nations in the peace process. The Central American presidents have been moving in this direction since 1987 and we should encourage them to continue. Success in the multi-lateral arena would make

this less "our" problem. It would also help consolidate shaky democracies elsewhere in the region.

On the domestic front, the White House and the Congress should work together to see that the war in El Salvador is not fought along Pennsylvania Avenue. Although we will probably reduce our level of assistance, we should do so gradually so as not to demoralize our ally. If Salvadoran leaders are properly engaged and informed, they can plan accordingly. If we make deep, unexpected cuts then the effect could be devastating.

The U.S. intervened in El Salvador at a stage of the conflict when crisis management was our only option. After ten years of partial success, we must move on to a long-term strategy. The proposals outlined above build upon what we have done and what we have learned. They also take into account some of the factors noted in the "Small Wars" article that must be considered before we eventually withdraw.

Equally important, the proposals begin to shift the burden of responsibility from our shoulders to those of the Salvadoran leadership. Unless we are willing to commit U.S. troops to this conflict--and we are not--no victory can be won until the Salvadorans can take control of their own destiny. It is better to begin this process now than to wait until conflicting priorities and budget limitations force it upon us later.