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EL SALVADOR AND THE PRESS:

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

by

JOHN D. WAGHELSTEIN

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Some years ago, so the story goes, an Army officer was ruminating with a newspaperman about the press and the biased reporting emanating from Vietnam. The correspondent, an old hand, acknowledged the occasional lapses in objectivity and admitted that the press too “had their Calleys and their My Lai’s.”

During my 25 years of military service, I’ve met a number of journalists, most of whom have served their profession well. They were not hopeless romantics enamored of guerrilla chic, nor did they see themselves cast in an adversarial role à la Watergate. The vast majority sought to “get it right” as opposed to getting something on somebody.

My experience in El Salvador, however, provided some examples of bad journalism, as opposed to bad press. The latter was something we lived with because of the nature of the insurgency in El Salvador and our flawed allies, but inaccurate or one-sided stories and bad reporting did add to our problems.

In El Salvador, the war is being fought by the government to retain popular support and is supported by the United States through economic and military aid. US public opinion and congressional support have therefore become key pressure points and targets for the insurgents’ propaganda efforts. This situation has given the press a good deal of leverage in influencing that support. At the time of my assignment to El Salvador in 1982 as Chief of the US Military Group, there was an obvious lack of balance in the press coverage. Many of the stories were written

from within guerrilla-controlled areas, and some of the eyewitness accounts had a pro-guerrilla bias. There was little coverage of El Salvadoran army operations and virtually no interviews with the US military trainers. The problem was exacerbated by a lack of cooperation by the El Salvadoran armed forces, which viewed the press as the enemy, and by the US Military Group’s penchant for avoiding the press like a plague. With the exception of the Ambassador, no one was talking to the press on background, for nonattribution, or for the record.

Steps needed to be taken to improve the sorry state of press relations, both with the Military Group and with the Salvadoran forces, as well as to achieve more balanced coverage of the war. Toward those ends, the Embassy Public Affairs Officer asked me to conduct a series of one-on-one back-grounders with a few of the more respected journalists. These meetings grew in number, and it soon became obvious that some other method had to be found to give the press corps what it wanted. An informal weekly press session evolved. My rules for working with the press were simple: always tell the truth and if a question was too sensitive, say so. These weekly sessions, usually an hour to an hour and a half in duration, were attended by 10 to 15 correspondents from both the print and the electronic media. Through these sessions, good Salvadoran commanders were spotlighted, problems were discussed candidly, tactics and strategy were examined, and the goals of military assistance in general

were outlined. Press coverage soon began to differentiate between various Salvadoran military leaders, and members of the press became more conversant with guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency techniques.

The El Salvadoran military's suspicion of the press took a little longer to overcome. An incident involving an NBC camera crew demonstrates the problem. I had attempted to get the crew into an operational area to talk to a departmental commander and film the Salvadoran forces in action. Several phone calls and a safe-conduct letter signed by the Salvadoran Chief of Staff seemed to have prepared the way for the trip. However, the commander kept the crew waiting for several hours, and finally, in frustration, the crew returned to San Salvador. Again telephone calls were made and again the crew headed north. This time it was permitted into the area, but its members were subjected to a long session of verbal abuse and accused of being "all a bunch of communists." The commander refused to cooperate, and the NBC crew left without filming the story, returning to the city in an understandably uncharitable mood. The commander was eventually transferred, and press relations with the Salvadoran military eventually improved, but the incident points out the problems faced by officers of El Salvador's high command who have come to understand the importance of better press relations but are dealing with officers who haven't seen the light.

It took months of work with the Salvadoran forces to begin to turn this attitude around. We tried another tack. By

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exposing the US trainers and the US training effort to the press, we were finally able to demonstrate to the Salvadorans the value in telling the real story. NBC specials aired in August 1982, April 1983, and August 1983; a *Life* magazine story in March 1983; several ABC and CNN reports; and a number of accurately written newspaper accounts of the war helped to alleviate Salvadoran suspicions. Additionally, changes in the Salvadoran Public Affairs Office helped considerably.

An example of the improved situation occurred in April 1983 when an NBC correspondent and a camera crew were permitted to enter the artillery brigade base at San Juan Opico to film the US Mobile Training Team at work. After some initial reluctance, the commander permitted the crew to film the training, as well as his own unit's activities in medical civic action including a maternity ward, outpatient clinic, and other activities in his small but well-run hospital. When NBC aired a balanced account as a result, it did much to assuage Salvadoran military fears regarding the press. This positive first step did not immediately undo the damage done by other, less-objective journalists. The list of real professionals is too long for inclusion here, but both the print and electronic media were well served by many correspondents who demonstrated a high degree of professionalism and objectivity, as well as healthy skepticism. They brought honor to their calling.

On the other hand, a few correspondents were slipshod in their reporting, were advocates for a point of view, or became dupes of a very sophisticated enemy. For example, on 11 January 1982, just prior to my arrival, *The New York Times* published an "exposé" of alleged US Army Special Forces' involvement in the torture of guerrilla prisoners by the Salvadoran military. The story was based on a single source who claimed to be an eyewitness to the torture. The story was categorically denied by the Embassy, but the image of US military involvement in torture continued to haunt us. European left-wing

newspapers and FMLN press releases continued to repeat the account; even as late as mid-1983 we were still seeing *The Times* quoted as a source for the charge. From everything we could determine, the story was just not true. The US Military Group commander during the alleged incident has repeatedly stated that no member of the Military Group or the Mobile Training Teams ever participated in any such activity or taught the Salvadoran military any interrogation techniques that involved torture.

The same reporter later parroted the charge that the March 1982 elections were a fraud. The charges were originally made by a Loyola University philosophy professor in a letter carried by *The New York Times* on 3 June, which cited a study that had been conducted by the Jesuit-administered Central American University. Despite testimony from OAS Election Observers, the Freedom House Delegation, the German Christian Democratic Union, the European Popular Party, the Argentine Christian Democratic Party, and scores of other groups, *The Times* and its reporter perpetuated the election fraud charges in three subsequent articles.

Another example of the same reporter's work was his "exposé" of a US trainer who was allegedly leading combat patrols in violation of the Embassy's restrictions regarding the carrying of weapons. He also charged that this NCO had fired a mortar against guerrilla base camps. The story was carried in the 24 June 1982 issue of *The New York Times*. The NCO in the story was part of a two-man Strategic Site Survey Team. The team's responsibility was to visit each bridge, dam, refinery, and airfield; to make recommendations regarding the defense of each site; and to train the defenders in the use of the various weapons at the sites. One of the sites that the NCO had been charged with upgrading was the Rio Lempa railroad bridge. This bridge had become critical since a nearby bridge had been destroyed. The NCO's efforts to harden the site involved setting up mortars at the bridge so illumination and defensive fires could be employed should the bridge come under attack. He also, with the Salvadoran commander, walked the perimeter wire of the

defensive position. This was the "combat operation" *The Times* reported. Papers throughout the United States carried the story on 24 and 25 June 1982. Regarding the allegation about carrying weapons, the Terms of Reference permitted US military personnel to carry M-16 rifles in vehicles and aircraft but not on ground operations (one officer had been sent home in February 1982 for violating this restriction). We investigated this charge and found no grounds to support the allegation.

This was not the only time that an eager journalist believed he had caught US military personnel in violation of the Terms of Reference. On another occasion, an Associated Press correspondent had requested an opportunity to accompany the Strategic Site Survey Team. A reporter for UPI previously had been given the opportunity and had filed three stories on the US military's role in training the Salvadorans; all were non-controversial and, incidentally, all were "spiked" by UPI editors. After an entire day with the team, however, the AP reporter returned and filed a story alleging that the same NCO cited in *The Times* was in violation of the Terms of Reference by carrying a bag containing an Uzi sub-machinegun.

The networks, too, had good and bad reporting. NBC specials on El Salvador were invariably well balanced and, if not always favorable, at least always objective, but NBC also had its problems. The West Coast Director of NBC's network news was responsible for a film story on 25 April 1982 in which a Salvadoran air force helicopter passed over an NBC press truck and fired on the camera crew standing nearby. Earlier that day in San Salvador the NBC crew had requested an opportunity to show "once and for all the kind of people we were advising." The Defense Attaché and I saw the film in the Embassy PAO's office. The tape began with the camera crew standing around a recently destroyed bridge. Some small-arms fire was heard in the background as the camera focused on the helicopter. The "Huey" made a sharp turn and circled back toward the camera crew and the bridge. As it passed

overhead, the door gunner opened up with his M-60 machinegun and fired 60 to 80 rounds at the crew, who fortunately sought and found cover. The helicopter continued on, and as the members of the camera crew got back to their feet, one of them nervously asked, "Was that the helicopter or the *muchachos*?" (*Muchachos* is the local slang for the guerrillas.) There the tape ended. We were in complete agreement that the helicopter indeed had fired upon the crew, despite the presence of the clearly marked press van parked nearby. But the NBC crew also was told not to be in too big a hurry in branding the pilot as a war criminal. The crew had happened to be at a bridge destroyed by the guerrillas while the Salvadoran army was conducting a major operation in the area. Also, the small-arms fire heard in the beginning of the tape was probably coming from guerrillas firing at the helicopter. Most important, it was obvious from the crew's own comments that they at least suspected guerrillas might have been nearby. Adding all this up, it was easier to understand the pilot's reactions. These mitigating circumstances were pointed out to the NBC crew, and it left the Embassy without the denunciation of the Salvadoran military it had been seeking.

What makes this incident so unsavory is that US viewers saw and heard only the helicopter firing at the camera crew, and their diving for cover. The facts of NBC's presence in a hostile area, the outgoing small-arms fire, the chopper banking in response and, most damaging, the news team's questions as to who fired at them were omitted. Adding insult to injury, the NBC West Coast Director wrote an outraged letter to *The Los Angeles Times* about the incident, again omitting these facts.

This was but one of many instances in which crucial parts of a story were edited out. Perhaps the worst case of network editors deciding what is news occurred not in El Salvador, but in Nicaragua. The night before the Pope was to hold Mass, the Sandinista police broke up a peaceful march by the faithful in Managua. This event was covered by an ABC camera crew and correspondent. The American public never saw the story, nor did they know that the crew was manhandled,

the correspondent beat up, and the film confiscated. The whole story of what happened was never mentioned on ABC or any other network. It apparently wasn't considered newsworthy. It's difficult not to ask whether ABC would have considered the incident unimportant if it had been the Salvadoran government's troops instead of the Sandinistas who had committed the outrage.

One final vignette concerns my confrontation with a *Washington Post* reporter, an event covered by *The Columbia Journalism Review* (September-October 1982) and cited as an example of the Embassy's general hostility to the press. In one of the weekly press sessions, questions regarding the 55-man personnel limit arose. I discussed the restriction, citing *on background*, not for attribution, all the problems inherent in limiting the number of trainers, the genesis of how we had got ourselves in that predicament, and the US public's preoccupation with another Vietnam. The correspondents were then asked to understand that this was a touchy area involving US policy and that the Ambassador would be particularly upset if any reference was made to the 55-man limit which cited anyone in the Embassy as a source. Only one reporter did not honor this request. Predictably, when his story broke in *The Post*, the Embassy Public Affairs Officer and I were summoned to the Ambassador's office for a "counseling session." After the PAO, Don Hamilton, explained the situation, the Ambassador was somewhat mollified and the matter was dropped. An opportunity to confront the *Post* reporter occurred at a Fourth of July reception at which I was probably less than friendly. My pique was not with the reporter's point of view, but with the lack of professionalism he had displayed in not honoring a source. *The Columbia Journalism Review* in its account lamented the status of Embassy-press relations; but the problem, in my view, was a particular reporter, not the press generally. Most of the correspondents were professional, open-minded, and honest.

In my opinion, the basic problem was the absence of balance by some reporters. In addition to a lack of understanding of

guerrilla warfare, some reporters exhibited a lack of criticism of the guerrillas and a lack of skepticism regarding the guerrillas' prime source, "Radio Venceremos," which, along with the guerrillas' military leaders, has never been subjected to the kind of cross-examination US and Salvadoran officers have encountered. As Don Hamilton has pointed out, aggressive journalists have yet to ask the following questions of the political frontmen in the FDR (Revolutionary Democratic Front):

- What authority do you have over the FMLN?
- How do you explain the murder of legislative deputies elected by their fellow citizens?
- How do you justify the death of passengers on civilian planes?
- What is the nature of your relationship with the PLO?
- Are any or all of the FMLN leaders communists? Which ones? When can I meet any one of them?
- How do you explain the FMLN's killing of 23-year-old Linda Cancel as she and her family traveled through your territory in a converted school bus?
- How would the government you want be different from that of Nicaragua or Cuba?
- Do you agree with the strategy of destroying El Salvador's economic infrastructure? How will you replace what you have destroyed?

The US press has come a long way toward more objective reporting in El Salvador, but still has a long way to go. The problem of bias may lie in the political tinge of some editors who accentuate the bias of a few reporters and negate the balance of the majority. It may be a result of the adversarial role in which some journalists see themselves cast, or it may simply fall to what

one journalist told a group of observers during the March 1982 elections, "Good news isn't news." Perhaps another contributor is the cultural contempt, tinged sometimes by racism, so often unconsciously expressed by North Americans. The cartoons in the US press certainly are ethnocentric. In an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "Latin America—A Media Stereotype" (February 1984), Mario Vargas Llosa, a respected Peruvian writer, criticized intellectuals and journalists for advocating political options for Latin American countries that they would never countenance in their own societies. By doing so, they betray their doubts about the ability of Latin Americans to achieve liberty, democracy, and respect for human rights.

De Tocqueville said of the press, "I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does." If the press can help prevent human rights abuses, it will have performed a noble service. Whatever balanced reporting can do to deromanticize the guerrillas, it will help to prevent an even greater evil. In addition to a need for the press to be critical of all the players, there is a need to apply some self-criticism to their own "Calleys." The US Army went through the process of a board of inquiry regarding Calley. A little of the same is in order for the Fourth Estate.

The people of El Salvador deserve better than what they've had for government, and they deserve better than what the insurgents have planned for them. Our press is a watchdog, and as a citizen I applaud that role. A free press is also one of the primary differences between a totalitarian state and a free society. Our press has a duty to perform, and by and large it is performing that duty well. Our press can also continue to contribute, through solid, unbiased, professional journalism, to giving democracy a chance to work in El Salvador.

